



Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity

Soko Morinaga , Belenda Attaway Yamakawa (Translator)

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Everybody loves *Novice to Master!* As you'll see in the glowing endorsements and reviews included below, this modern spiritual classic has been embraced by readers of all types.

In his singularly humorous and bitingly direct way, Zen abbot Soko Morinaga tells the story of his rigorous training at a Japanese Zen temple, his spiritual growth and his interactions with his students and others. Morinaga's voice is uniquely tuned to the truth of the condition of the human mind and spirit and his reflections and interpretations are unvarnished and succinct. His great gift is the ability to lift the spirit of the reader all the while exposing the humility and weakness in the lives of people, none more so than his own.

Read on to see what everyone from *Publishers Weekly* to well-known Buddhist figures and even *New York Times* bestselling author Anthony Swofford have to say about this one of a kind book!

Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity Details

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From Reader Review Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity for online ebook

David Buckley says

This is one of the great spiritual biographies. As a teacher, I especially appreciated the opening chapter which provides a highly unusual and illuminating view of the mindset of a young Japanese man (teenager) in the closing months of WWII.

Morinaga's prose is lucid and accessible; his story, and his message, simple but not simplistic.

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"From the first in people and in things, there is no such thing as trash." --- 29

"There is no way you can exert yourself in this world without that exertion being of value." -- 39

"Information collected on the subject of religion is worthless. Religion is, to the very end, something you must verify for yourself through actual practice." -- p. 115

Will Simpson says

"From the first, in people and in things, there is no such thing as trash." This comes across in the writing. Really moved by the encouragement to live by the spirit of "one chance, one encounter." Living and dying in every moment. He makes a great case for this with the explanation the we already don't meet every encounter with the same personhood. We look to a lover one way and to a friend a different way. Where did that person go that was looking at the lover? He died and was born looking at the friend. Wonderful. Each moment is a chance to encounter just this! This is a strong lesson for me.

Nice history of how rigorous Zen training is like. A soft and sentimental story at the end left me in a kind spirit.

Steve says

A portion of the Daitoku-ji temple complex in Kyoto, where Soko Morinaga (1925–1995) trained and lived

For a person strong in his cravings, clinging to his narrow experience and knowledge as the supreme law, caught in a ravine between feelings of superiority and inferiority, between building and destroying an ideal self-image - to uncover one's own misconceptions is a task more easily described than accomplished.

What a lovely book!

Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity (2002) is a translation of Soko Morinaga's spiritual autobiography - presented to encourage the ordinary human being that also he/she can attain enlightenment - and the iconoclastic, direct and pointedly humorous nature of Zen practice and pedagogy suffuses the text to guarantee the reader's great pleasure and profit from this description of an unexpected trajectory from a totally disillusioned, defeated young soldier at the end of World War II to an internationally renowned Renzai Zen master, head monk at the venerable Daitoku-ji and head of Hanazono University, affiliated with the Rinzai sect. Morinaga Roshi was also closely engaged in the growth of Zen Buddhism in the United States and Great Britain.(*)

In a simple, direct and very telling manner Morinaga portrays the unusual life of a practicing Zen monk with an emphasis on the travails and challenges of a novice along with the curious and often apparently cruel rites of passage of Zen training and on the unique relationship between a master and his disciple. What is striking is that Morinaga makes these seem to be natural to the reader by personalizing every bit of it from his own experience; one grasps the internal logic of it all not in the abstract but in the very concrete and personal. The austerities of the strict practice Morinaga describes are remarkable, and one wonders how widely they are observed, for in Japanese literature Buddhist priests and monks often are evoked in quite a different light indeed.(**) Remarkable also are the compassion and concern manifested in this text. No fire and brimstone here.

One of the famous rock gardens at the Daitoku-ji

Whether one is interested in the goals and practice of Zen or not, this text does contain elements of quite general interest, as suggested in this passage:

Inevitably, the person who has taken special pride in their work meets the onslaught of old age - which renders them incapable of working as they have up to now - with special dread. The person who boasts of an exceptionally sharp intellect will be especially intimidated by a progressive dimming of the mind. The person who has lived an exemplary life as a member of society will be especially frightened to witness the siphoning sway of their own physical and mental power.

The Buddhist way to meet these facts of life (and others) is to posit the nonessential nature of all beings, who arise out of the essential and dynamic No-Form, strut across a stage for a while and return to that churning void, only to generate yet more impermanent forms, all proceeding according to immutable laws.

All being is without fail exhausted. But the voidness or emptiness, which is the very foundation of all being, is inexhaustible.

The Buddhist vision is awe-some and hardly comfortably reassuring.(***) Nonetheless, even Zen Buddhism turns back to life and the world of ten thousand things out of compassion, like the Bodhisatvas who have attained enlightenment but have chosen to remain on the Wheel of Life to help others.

Enlightenment is liberation from the dross of learning and experience that, without one's being aware of it, has accumulated and settled like so much sediment, or like cholesterol into one's arteries. It is the vivid, lively manifestation of the heart with which one is born - the heart that is no-form, no-mind, nonabiding, attached neither to form nor to thought, but in dynamic motion. Consequently, enlightenment is not an

endpoint, but rather a starting point.

(*) I recently reviewed *The Ceasing of Notions*, a translation of the Buddhist dialogue *Jue-guan lun* that includes a very useful commentary by Morinaga as well as excerpts from *Novice to Master* that convinced me I wanted to read this book.

(**) Morinaga writes "This style of training is found particularly in monasteries of the Rinzai sect as opposed to Soto Zen monasteries." Long ago, I practiced in a Soto Zen *dojo*, but excepting the *dojo* leader we were all laypeople. Austerities were only sampled during retreats, and those were held within bounds.

(***) There are more popular forms of Buddhism in which salvation and eternal life in the Western Paradise are promised if, for example, one repeats the name of Amida Buddha.(!) Of course, most human beings everywhere have struck their own bargains with the awe-some.

Laura says

a great read. not what i was expecting (Joan Halifax claims she laughed til she cried....i did not laugh). lots to mull over. Rinzai Zen is definitely not my path! my huge ego could not withstand the shaming or boot camp aspect of things, but i definitely found much that resonates with most spiritual disciplines.

A1b5jj says

108 bows

Jim Kinkaid says

A short but wonderful book on the life of Soko Morinaga Rossi, a Japanese Zen master on his transformation from a lost literary student to a Zen master and the lessons he learned on the way. Insightful and thought provoking for anyone with a shred of self-awareness. I highly recommend.

Tjibbe Wubbels says

A nice book that has a calm feel about it. You can easily read this in one day. Preferably in some bamboo grove besides an ancient shrine while sipping green tea. In the end your heart will have become a mirror reflecting only what is directly in front of it at the present moment. Morinagasei also provides some excellent cleaning tips.

Vince says

Not bad as Japanese Zen monk biographies go. I won't say that if you've read one you've read them all, but there tends to be some common themes: I was an idiot when a novice, I was abused by my master, I learned to appreciate the abuse given me by my master, I became a master, now I abuse my novices who have come to love me, etc. Maybe you have to be Japanese.

Carlton R. says

My oldest daughter gave me this book a couple of years ago for Christmas. She is not a Christian, she is a Wiccan. She gave me this Zen Buddhist master's book. If you're confused by this turn of events I am too. But no matter the book came to me by someone's G-d's providence. I'll accept that because I've learned not to put G-d in a box. He won't stay there.

I first came across Buddhism in 1976 while in Korea. I was intrigued by the Buddhist monk, Head of the largest monastery in Korea begging for a meal. I struck up a conversation. Well now this book showed up and I just had to read it. Insights galore. Wonderfully presented, in a pleasing and captivating way.

I'll only relate one insight from his book. I finally understand the full(?) meaning of the phrase "When the student is ready the teacher will appear". It amazes me that there is insight within insight like gazing into a pool. First the surface, then the colored fish, next the camouflaged life, the bottom and finally the reflection of the trees.

The book is like this; and oh, by the way, the phrase is a koan.

Be sure to read this one maybe you'll begin to see the reflection of the koan staring back at you. (I have a smile at the last when you read the book you may understand this—gibberish(?).

Oh, and gratitude to my daughter who in her Wiccan way did my G-d's will. By the BY you and the teacher/student are one.

Carlton R. Smith, Author, The Ignorant Grandfather

website: <http://www.theignorantgrandfather.org>

Brian Wilcox says

Excellent translation. Filled with captivating anecdotes. Wisely practical, transcending sectarianism, shows Mahayana Buddhism is about life, including the many births and deaths we each undergo, not merely about Buddhism itself. Highly recommend for persons not interested in Buddhism, yet in wisdom to live joyfully and sanely and die prepared to die. Especially enjoyed the selections on death, as well as the treatment of the *samadhi of play*.

Moira says

Bought on impulse, entirely on the strength of that title. Got angry and dismissive more than once, finished it with something like disdain. Was drawn to re-read because I couldn't understand what had pissed me off. Found wisdom the second time around. Ego, man. It's a thing.

Tyler says

I am actually a little ashamed at how much I enjoyed this book. As if I'm the first educated Westerner to have his mind 'totally blown' by reading about Zen Buddhism and shit. Maybe that's just the kind of guilt that a liberal arts education can give a white boy.

Guy Newland says

I have used many books to teach Zen in my Buddhism class at the university. This one works the best because it combines a tight and compelling personal narrative with deep insight into the "great matter" of life and death. It shows the authoritarian nature of traditional Zen training in Japan, yet through the particular it opens the universal human encounter with death. From beginning to end, it is a book about facing death--beginning in kamikaze desperation and ending in joy. One student e-mailed me, " I have been anxious lately, but upon completing this book, I immediately felt a sense of peace and understanding to what life really is, to the point where I started crying out of joy: something I've never experienced before." Well I don't get many e-mails like this. It will probably remain on my syllabus for the rest of my career.

Robb says

Phenomenal. What an incredible narrative of a life dedicated to contemplation and connectedness. I loved it and I will certainly read it again.

Emma Berg says

A humorous and engaging autobiography. Ms. Morinaga's writing is insightful and lighthearted.
