

Famed Korean Woodcarver at Providence Zen Center

On a late September morning in Korea during 1982, the leaves were turning gold in the crisp mountain air. The centuries-old temple complex of Sudoksah, the monastery where Soen Sa Nim did his early training, hummed with activity. Busloads of Korean school children milled about in the courtyards, gawking at the ancient buildings and the handful of Western Zen students accompanying Soen Sa Nim on his biannual tour of Korean temples.

Alerted by the unmistakable sound of wooden mallet on chisel, the then Abbot of Providence Zen Center, Lincoln Rhodes followed the sound to a small underbuilding in the temple complex. He was greeted by an incredible sight. There a Korean man wearing a short grey bowing robe was carving a massive mural in wood, twenty feet by six feet high and filled with intricate designs of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The man was Sang In Kim, a master carver of such unusual talent that he is on Korea's Registry of National Treasures at the age of thirty-nine. The mural, destined to grace the Buddha hall at Sudoksah's new nun's temple, was three years in the making, and Mr. Kim's most accomplished work.

Linc took some pictures and then hurried out to find stonecarver and fellow Providence Zen Center resident, Ellen Sidor to share his discovery. They were so impressed by Mr. Kim's skill that they became deter-

mined to bring him to America some day to share his mastery with American artisans. After two and a half years their efforts were successful and Mr. Kim arrived at Providence Zen Center in late March.

Mr. Kim was accompanied from Korea by Hae An Sunim, the Vice Abbot of Jung Hae Sah, a small temple up the mountain from Sudoksah that was built by Zen Master Mang Gong, Soen Sa Nim's grandteacher. Hae An Sunim, a longtime Dharma friend of Soen Sa Nim's, is eager to help Western students. He has now returned to Korea to help Soen Sa Nim make preparations for an international sangha ninety-day retreat at Jung Hae Sah sometime next year.

Mr. Kim will be in residence at Providence Zen Center until midsummer, working on a large altar and side panels for the new Diamond Hill Zen Monastery. Soen Sa Nim, who has known Mr. Kim for some years, explained that Mr. Kim wants to create a "great treasure" for the School and its American sangha.

Mr. Kim estimates the project will take about five months to complete. Assisting him are apprentices Bodhisattva Monk David Klinger, a woodcarver, who will be working with him full time, and Primary Point editor Ellen Sidor, a stonecarver, who will be working part time. The wood has already been purchased, planed,

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photo by Diana Clark

INTEGRITY AND FAMILY LIFE

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and there's one thing he does that's clearly his specialty. He'll be sitting at the table not particularly paying attention and he'll knock over his milk. As soon as it happens he says, "It's not my fault. The cup just went and fell over and I didn't do it. Mommy, I didn't do that!"

It's like a tape that comes on. You see something like that in a kid and you laugh. He's seven years old, learning how to get by in this world, how to please people, how not to spill milk, and he's trying his best. We all have adopted things from our growing up that are ways of dealing with messes or with things we don't like. These ways have a certain exaggerated quality to them.

But we also each have our own integrity. "Oh gee, I spilled the milk," we say and laugh about it, that's all. If the little kid in that situation says, "Oh gee, I spilled the milk," and we say "Get a sponge and clean it up," that's all that's called for with anyone at any age or time. But somehow we've learned other procedures, so we don't have that integrity.

Integrity comes and goes. We have it in some areas of our lives and not in others, at some times and not others. It has the quality though, just like you can't be half pregnant, that either you have it or you don't.

I used to be very good at the parts that people saw me doing at the Zen Center. I was on time. I went to sitting. I chanted without looking out the window. I did the forms correctly. But there were a lot of times when I was on my own, when no one was around, and I goofed off. I didn't pay attention. In fact I did the opposite. Over the years it slowly dawned on me that I kept having this opposite mind and kept suffering from it.

It doesn't matter whether you're in the Dharma room or in your own room. Integrity is anywhere, whether people see you or not, whether they know what you're doing or not. Then if you say you're sick and someone else says, "Hey, why are you going back to bed?" you can say "I'm sick" and the rest of it is their problem.

But you can't pull that off if you're not sure of yourself, or if there are parts of your life where you're not paying attention. It just doesn't work. We all have at least one backseat driver. It's alive and well and is going to be there all the time, in interviews, everywhere. If we're really working



photo by Mike Olak

"Integrity is when your speech and actions are not two, but one."

on integrity, we can tell the backseat driver to shut up.

Soen Sa Nim talks about having our speech and actions be the same. One, not two. That really strikes home for me. We can speak about many kinds of things, understand and agree and even believe in them, and still have our actions not be the same. Integrity or sincerity is when speech and action are not two, but one. There are several ways to attain that. You can try to make your actions agree with your speech, or you can decide your actions are fine and you'll have to make your speech fit them. Just seeing where we're at, a lot of the problems go away. When we see what we're holding onto, we don't have to hold. I haven't been at this very long, but I think maybe if you do this practice for 30 years, you'll see enough of this "mind" and will know yourself clearly.

People come to practice with a lot of likes and dislikes, and then they try to put

them down. There's a period during which you try to figure out that the river's a mountain and the mountain's a river. You don't know what's yours and what isn't. You don't know which is your backseat driver and which is your frontseat driver. You don't know what is integrity and what is not.

That period was very difficult for me. But one thing that comes out of it is a joy in what is real, *for you*. Everyone is different. For me, joy is a bird feeder and pruning the trees in the orchard. You have to find that and nourish it, whatever it is. Find out what you can do that helps others, and is also fun and joyous.

It's interesting that Soen Sa Nim has been doing this for so long that it's very matter of fact for him. I've been getting a little taste of what it's like for him because I've been doing interviews often. People come to him with every manner of problem or confusion and he acknowledges that. He doesn't say, "Oh, that's insane!" but rather, "That's a wonderful letter." Then he tries to give people a question to stop their confusion. "Yes, you have all these problems, but when you die, where will you go?" That is the most important thing to help people stop the whole cycle they're in. Then they think, "Oh, maybe my opinion isn't the whole story," and then there's a little space for having a question that helps them find out what's really going on.

Soen Sa Nim is in a hurry. He's flying around the world giving everybody he sees a question. He says, "The wall is white, the rug is brown," so matter of factly that it may not seem exciting or interesting to us. It's so real to him, so simple and matter of fact. He doesn't make anything of it at all. Unbelievable!

He says things like, "It's so not special that it's special." For him that is true. He sits there and hits the floor with his stick. "Hear the sound, your mind and the sound become one," he says over and over. I don't know how he repeats it with such energy and enthusiasm. The only way someone can do that is for it to be real and important and not boring. He does it so effortlessly and simply that we sleep through his Dharma talks or go to the movies, thinking we've heard it all before because he talks like that all the time.

A lot of things are happening right now in my life, in my house, that are a tremendous upheaval. It boils down to the question, what should we do with the Zen

Center? What should we do with families and practicing? We don't know yet how it's going to work in some long term way, trying to practice with kids. It's something we have to work on together, just doing it.

Another interesting thing that's happening is that Soen Sa Nim is spending much less time here. When new students come, they want to learn about Zen. They want to be at the Zen Center, so they just follow directions and go to interviews and find out. Older students came here because of Soen Sa Nim, because they consider him to be their teacher and they wanted his teaching. Now Soen Sa Nim has said, "These Master Dharma Teachers are going to do more of the teaching and I'm going to travel a lot more."

None of you asked us to be your teacher. I didn't even ask myself to be in this situation. It just happened to us together. It takes time for people to want that and be able to use that. Maybe they'll decide they don't want to, and that's okay too.

It also takes time for the people who are put in the position of being teachers to be able to do it. Just because Soen Sa Nim gives someone permission to teach, it doesn't mean all of a sudden you're a great teacher. By analogy, maybe you can fix your own car, but you've never done Toyotas, and now it's interesting because you *have* to work on all kinds of cars. Soen Sa Nim has been teaching for 30 years in 17 countries and in five languages, so he has lots of experience with many different models.

That's where I am, working on Toyotas. It's hard because I don't have enough time to do it. Last weekend, for example, I had a wonderful experience. On Friday I moved myself, my wife, and two children from one set of rooms to another in the same house. I was finished at 6 o'clock and drove to Cambridge Zen Center to lead a two day retreat. There were 27 people and I gave interviews twice a day. I had a bad cold. It was a wonderful retreat and a wonderful experience, but one of the things it taught me was that I was at the limit of my endurance.

It's fantastic to get pushed to your limit and find out where that is. If we never come up against these limits, it's difficult to grow, to expand them, to move on past them. Sometimes we are afraid to approach our limits, but we also don't grow. Everyone must find that balance point that is not too much or too little, that place which is our integrity.

PRIMARY POINT

PRIMARY POINT is published by the Kwan Um Zen School, a non-profit religious corporation under the direction of Zen Master Seung Sahn. The School supports and arranges the world-wide teaching schedule of Zen Master Seung Sahn and his senior teachers, issues publications on contemporary Buddhist practice, and supports dialogue among religions.

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Wood Carver

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joined, and the carving is underway in the woodshop of the Artisans Cooperative at Providence Zen Center.

Mr. Kim explained that this carving, as all of his temple carvings, will be done as a retreat. He carves in a curtained off area not accessible to casual visitors or photographers, wears his bowing robe, and abstains from meat and alcohol for the duration of the project. His apprentices also must wear short robes while carving.

He is a warm and energetic teacher. Although he came with very little English, he is improving rapidly. His skill as a carving teacher is such that few words are necessary as his apprentices have already discovered. He works at a furious pace with great self-confidence and guides his students' hands with assurance.

In one day after his arrival at Providence Zen Center, Mr. Kim hand-made several dozen wood-carving tools for himself and his students. Since then he has done a half dozen carvings, including a Bodhidharma and a very life-like snarling tiger. Using well-dried native cedar rescued from the Providence Zen Center woodpile a few years ago, Mr. Kim has made some strikingly beautiful Zen sticks as gifts to Soen Sa Nim and the Master Dharma Teachers.

In Korea there are only four carvers on the National Registry, of whom Mr. Kim is the youngest. The son of a Korean architect who designs and builds old-style houses, Mr. Kim became acquainted with tools at an early age. He loved to draw and often copied pictures from magazines. His first woodcarving was done in the sixth grade.

Much to the disapproval of his parents, who wanted him to become an artist, Mr. Kim quit school at seventeen to study fulltime with a famous Korean master carver, O Kyum Kim. When his parents say how good their son's carving was, they finally gave their approval. Kim stayed with his teacher for three years.

Although Mr. Kim and his family are Buddhists, his first carvings were not of Buddhist subjects. He became very well known for his Christian carvings, particularly a lifesized Crucifixion and a ten foot by four foot high relief carving of the Last Supper, both of which were commissioned by American clients and presumably brought to the United States.

At that time no one in Korea was carving Buddhist subjects in wood, only in stone. Mr. Kim liked going to the Buddhist temples, and when he was twenty-four, someone asked him to carve a Buddha. Since then he has concentrated on Buddhas. He has done pieces for more than thirty different temples in Korea, of which twelve were large murals like the masterpiece at Sudoksah.

Through the generosity of some individuals, the Kwan Um Zen School and the Providence Zen Center, this wonderful project to help finish our monastery buildings is well underway. The chance to have an altar built and carving done in the traditional manner is truly extraordinary. Any donations to this project will be greatly appreciated, so that the work can be finished during Mr. Kim's stay. David Klinger left his millworking job in order to take advantage of this unusual opportunity to apprentice with Mr. Kim, and this opportunity exists for others also.

Woodcarvers with some skill (not beginners) who are interested in joining the



photo by Diana Clark

apprenticeship should contact David Klinger at Providence Zen Center. Due to the magnitude of the altar project, Mr. Kim will not be offering workshops for the general public as was previously assumed. He will be glad to discuss commissions to be carved after hours, or when the monastery project is finished.

As happened already in the case of the large cement Buddha carved last fall by Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, word has gotten out and there is a steady stream of visitors to Cumberland to see the new "treasures": the sixteen-foot high cement Buddha, the new monastery, and soon, Mr. Kim's altar carving. □

PRIMARY POINT

WELCOMES LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: your agreements, disagreements, and alternative viewpoints on the articles we run; as well as statements you may wish to make on issues you feel will interest other readers.



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FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

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Attain utmost emptiness;
Hold firm to stillness.
The ten thousand things stir about;
I only watch for their going back.
Things flourish,
But each returns to its root.
Returning to the root is peace.
And peace is a going back to reality.

Lao Tse

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