

Photos Courtesy of
Lexington Zen Center

New Retreat Center to be Built in Kentucky Mountains

After years of search, a beautiful mountain property in Kentucky has been found for the site of a new retreat center for the Kwan Um Zen School. Robert Genthner, Abbot of Lexington Zen Center, recently purchased the 110 acre site, located on one of the highest elevations in Kentucky. The land consists of fields, woodland, streams and springs, and cliffs from which spectacular views of the Kentucky countryside may be seen. Unoccupied for 20 years, the property has long been recognized by local people as a site of natural beauty and power. Zen Master Seung Sahn declared that he had never seen a more perfect place. "Many great men and women will be born from this spot," he said.

Soen Sa Nim held a dedication ceremony on March 29 for the new retreat center, which will be called Kwan Seum Sang Ji Sah, or "perceive world sound high land temple." Planning for a retreat building is already underway. The following account was sent to us by Bob Genthner.

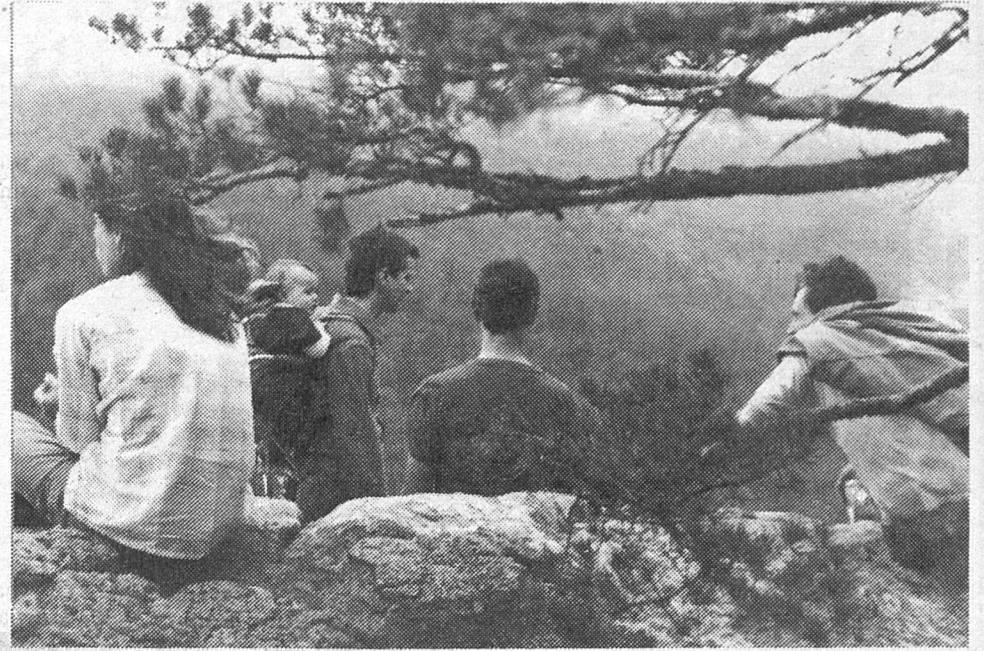
Sitting here on the edge of a mountain. Buddha fairies masquerade as dogwood blossoms flickering everywhere. Do Haeng Su Nim and I are sitting in the "Nest." The spring sun is warm and golden. Above we can hear the sound of Buddhas rappelling off the cliffs of "Amitabul Rock." They are hanging like children on the clothes of their parent.

We are somewhere in the bowels of America, deep in Kentucky in what is called southern Appalachia. Concern has rung across America, not because of its spectacular springs, dogwoods, redbuds and fruit trees that rival any Asian ritual, but because of its poverty, mountain people, Appalachians children. Here we sit on the edge of it in the Golden Chicken's Nest. Welcoming Spring and ourselves. Welcoming our true selves in this wonderful power spot.

On March 29, Soen Sa Nim and 20 of us dedicated the land by chanting Kwan Seum Bosal into the Pure Land. The Pure Land traditionally is West, which is the direction that the great Amitabul Rock faces, looking down a long valley and overseeing the great Power Spot.

Korean geomantic lore [geomancy is the study of wind and water geography] says that power spots must have certain ingredients. Like the human body, mountains and geography have meridians that work to protect the "womb of power," the Tandien. Arms, legs and body trunk all support the "energy garden" from which new life is created and born. In geomancy, the head is called Turtle (Amitabul Rock), the north arm White Tiger, and the south arm Blue Dragon. In the distance a mountain called Red Bird holds the energy in, with Golden Chicken hatching Golden Egg in the womb-nest of his multi-armed, multi-legged earth beast.

What is wonderful about this land is that



it has all the essential ingredients prescribed by geomancy for a power spot, with its many mountains near and far supporting this one spot. Residents of this area already know its power and hold it in reverence. People visit the rock regularly since the land has been mostly unoccupied for 20 years, and they are happy that we will not restrict their coming to visit. Public access to the top of the rock does not cut through the farm so it should not interfere with retreats.

Soen Sa Nim named the land Kwan Seum Sang Ji Sah (Perceive World Sound High Land Temple). In the headdress of statues of Kwan Seum Bosal is Amita Buddha, the Buddha of the Pure Land (High Land). Also in this land a huge rock sits in the crown of the mountain farm below.

On the farm is 110 acres of fields and woodlands. There are some old outbuildings and a small log cabin. Caves and cliffs

where American Indians roamed are abundant and there are lots of trails with spectacular views. "This land is very holy," Soen Sa Nim said, "a very special place. We must build a temple for people to come and get energy, not just for sitting and formal practice but for healing of all kinds: psychotherapy groups, a school for children, workshops for the sick and dying, and so forth."

So this has become our vision and direction to use the land for others. Currently the cabin, equipped with electricity and free natural gas (the land has its own well), is habitable. We are clearing land for the temple site, fixing the road and improving the water system. There are several natural springs. Solo retreats are possible and camping sites abound. Currently we are planning to build a retreat structure in the Nest. Please come and visit if you can. □

Kwan Seum Sang Ji Sah Temple Dedication Poem



Great Energy,
No name, no form.
Only follow situation. Make everything
The sun, the moon, the mountain appear.
Earth, Air, Fire, Water merge.
Dharma appears.
Name and form appear.
Energy, name and form interpenetrate.
Energy coming, going.
Everything appears, disappears.
Big energy, great things.
No energy, nothing.

Turtle, White tiger,
Blue dragon, Red bird,
Golden chicken hatches golden eggs.
Big energy comes, get enlightenment.

Where is big energy?
Do you understand?

KATZ!

Kwan Seum Sang Ji Sah Temple
In Kentucky.
Tree grows up, water flowing.
Just Do It!

Zen Master Seung Sahn
March 29, 1987

The Third Interview

by Jerry Shepherd

My heart is pounding in the palms of my hands as I come into the interview room, make my bows and take my place before Zen Master Seung Sahn.

Entering my third and final interview of the retreat with this man, I am again stricken with awe and, this time, something more: Fear. Fear of failing a test I have read about but never faced...till now.

I settle my legs, calm my hands, take a deep breath, and wait.

"What is your name?" the Master says.

My third interview came on the second full day of a three-day Zen retreat that a friend and I attended—the first full retreat for either of us. Wendy Swenson and I had been sitting weekly with an Indianapolis Zen group for three years; but that did not prepare us for the remarkable experience we were about to have...an experience that for me would climax in that third interview.

We had arrived Friday evening at Bob and Mara Genthner's home, which serves as the Lexington Zen Center.

When we arrived the others had already begun the evening chanting. Knowing nothing about the rituals, practices and protocols of this particular group we went down the stairs and took our places, trying to be unobtrusive.

It was then that I saw Zen Master Seung Sahn for the first time.

The Master was seated on his red mat, eyes closed, singing powerfully, his face gleaming with sweat in the warm room. He accompanied the singing with a percussion instrument that he struck with such skill that he made the sound come and go in waves, ebbing, flowing, and reverberating through the room. I was moved by the sound.

The Master was seated at one end of the room, facing the figure of the Buddha at the other. Between these two spiritual poles, lining each wall in rows facing each other, sat some thirty retreatants, all chanting.

We were handed chanting books and joined in, watching everyone else to know what to do.

I was struck by the chanting, and as the

days passed I came to appreciate its beauty more and more.

After chanting we meditated for two hours in 40-minute sittings. During our sitting meditation the interviews began. As the Master's bell sounded from the interview room we left the room (called the Dharma room) one by one in a prescribed order, to meet him. Interviews continued through the retreat.

That evening during meditation I tried to calm my mind amid the tempest of new sensations and experiences, both within and without me. So much was new, so much was different....

After meditating, we had a brief orientation; then it was time for bed. We made our beds wherever we could. Lights went out at ten; then all I could hear was the soft breathing in, breathing out of the other retreatants throughout the house.

Just breathe in, just breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, in, out....

"What is your name?" he asks as my third interview continues.

I hit the floor as I have learned to do in the earlier two interviews: An action to cut off thought at the moment it arises.

"Only that?" he asks.

"Jerry Shepherd."

"How old are you?"

I hit the floor.

"Only that?"

"Thirty-eight."

He nods. Clad in his robes, seated on his red mat and cushion, he is a powerful, imposing man—centered, solid, resolute. He has been sitting here, legs crossed, for nearly two hours.

Before him on the floor lies a varnished gnarled wooden stick, a foot and a half long. To the right, in front of the stick, sits his bell. His hands are poised, one on each knee.

He now picks up the stick and holds it before him.

"Unnum* said the Buddha is a dried shit stick," he says. Then he points at the stick. "Is this a dried shit stick?"

*Zen Master Unmun (c = yun-men: 862-949)

A bell sounded: Saturday morning, 4:30: Time to wake. Not used to such early rising, I forced myself to get up, roll up my sleeping bag and prepare for the day...though I had no idea yet what the day would hold.

I waited and watched the others for cues as to what to do next.

A gong sounded. We silently assembled in the Dharma room. There we sat on our mats and awaited Master Seung Sahn, whom his students called Soen Sa Nim.

He arrived. After making our ceremonial bows to him, we began our morning's calisthenics of the spirit: 108 prostrations.

I found the prostrations very invigorating; not only did they awake my body and mind, but doing them as part of a group made me feel that I and all the other retreatants were coming together. This feeling grew throughout the retreat.

Around 5 we finished our prostrations. Then an hour and a half of meditation, followed by chanting for an hour led by the Master. Through it all I watched the others closely and tried to follow along.

Seven forty-five: Breakfast, and with it my first experience with "four-bowl style" meals.

By itself, I could have eaten the food easily enough. By itself, I could have handled the form. It was doing both at the same time that threw me. But by watching others closely, I managed to avoid making a complete fool of myself.

I was amazed at how quickly the meals were conducted. Ten minutes were spent in setting out the food and serving it, and five—if that many—were spent in eating it and cleaning our utensils.

I watched the Master out of the corner of my eye, trying to follow his lead without seeming to do so. I couldn't keep up with him. When he had finished his food I was still straightening my bowls. When I had finished my food he was calmly sitting, waiting for tea. When the tea came he drank his down, scalding hot, with one gulp. I needed three swallows, and still my eyes stung from the pain.

By the end of the retreat I not only had learned the ritual but had begun to appreciate its beauty and simplicity.

Through the meals, and through all the other activities of that day, I began to feel my mind becoming calmer, more centered and more clear.

After breakfast, one hour's work. We pulled weeds. Cleaned the gutters. Scoured the bathrooms. Washed dishes. Swept the driveway. Raked leaves.

Ten o'clock. Once again the gong called us to the Dharma room for another two hours of meditation. Forty minutes of sitting, then walking, then sitting, walking, sitting.

Meanwhile, interviews continued. The bell called to us one by one to the interview room. I had never had an interview with a Zen Master; but as the other retreatants went and returned to the room, one by one in the prescribed manner, my turn grew closer and closer, and the anticipation charged me.

The bell rang again: My turn had come. Actually it was my turn and two others' as well, for we three beginners were to see the Master at one time. We rose and proceeded in.

For years I had looked forward to this moment with the most profound desire. I had read many books about historic, crucial interviews between Zen masters and students—interviews that ended sometimes in triumph, sometimes in disaster; interviews that altered the course of Zen and changed lives. I had read so much of this that I was now both excited and terrified: fearfully eager.

At that moment, as we stood outside the door of the interview room, my heart pounding, I had a sudden, crazy comic vision:

A fleeting, slapstick image of the three of us marching into the interview room, all in a row like cartoon characters, and bumping heads as we bowed, and knocking things over, stepping on the Master's foot: A scene straight out of *The Three Stooges* in "Zany Zen Monks," maybe, or *The Marx Brothers* in "A Night at the Monastery."

We entered; and my flash of comic vision faded just as quickly as it had come. I was in the presence of the Master now. I was there. It was time.

We bowed and took our places. The Master smiled and said good morning. The interview began. It lasted about five minutes, I know; but it seemed to be over instantly, so great was my attention, so keen my enjoyment.

He dismissed us; we withdrew. That was my first interview. It had been fun; it had been easy; it had gone smoothly, predictably. The Master was friendly, even jovial, and seemed more like an older brother than a Zen Master as he gently taught us about clear mind and hitting the floor and blue skies.

But now, in my third interview the next day, he seems different. The Master is less brotherly, more masterful now. He seems serious, never forbidding as he continues the line of questioning:

"Is this a dried shit stick?"

I answer with a gesture.

"No." He taps my knee with his stick in reprimand: a symbolic thirty blows. "No,



no smell," he says. "It is a dried shit stick. Is it a dried shit stick?"

I hit the floor.

"Only that?"

I hesitate, then answer in words.

He nods. "Buddha say all things have Buddha nature. Joju says a dog does not have Buddha nature. Does a dog have Buddha nature?"

I bark.

"You say woof." Joju said Mu. Which answer is right?"

I hesitate again, then answer.

"Only that?"

Another answer.

"Yes." He nods. "The sky is blue. What color is the sky?"

Answer.

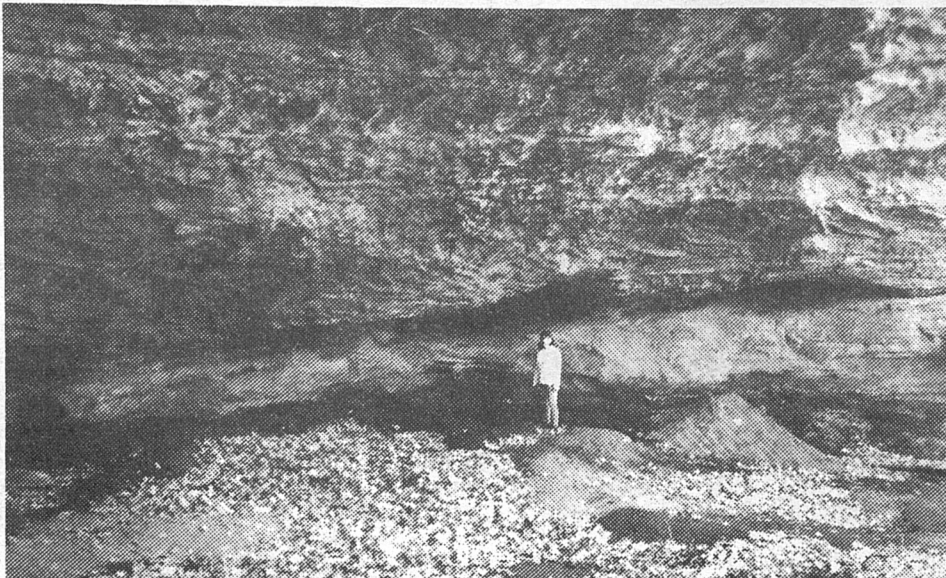
"Yes. The walls, what are they?"

Answer.

He laughs and taps my knee again with his stick: Second reprimand. "No."

Another answer.

"Good." He nods, then leans forward on his stick. "Now, a man comes into the temple, smoking a cigarette. He begins to drop ashes on the statue of Buddha. He



says if you try to stop him he will hit you. What do you do?"

My heart thumps once, hard. Then I suddenly know what clear mind is: I have no answer at all.

Saturday moved on. We sat Zen from 1:30 to 4, enjoyed some free time at 5, worked or wrote or read or walked around or napped. Dinner came at 5:30, then chanting, then sitting Zen again from 7 to 9. The day

closed with chanting from 9 to 9:30. This evening singing was both calming and invigorating, subduing and at yet exalting. The singing seemed to penetrate me.

Lights went out at 9:30. My first full day of Zen living came to an end. I lay in bed listening to my own breath come in, go out, smooth and slow as time itself. Then sleep.

Sunday came. Waking, prostrating, meditating, eating, working. A second interview, equally easy, equally swift as the first.

Through the course of the day's activities I came to feel sharper and clearer in everything I did.

I felt myself penetrating deeper and deeper through the everyday world where I usually lived, and into the true world beneath it, the world of mind. Everything I did partook of this change—meditating, working, eating, walking, chanting. Indeed, it was in walking meditation and chanting Sunday afternoon that this feeling manifested itself in a remarkable way.



We were chanting "Kwan Seum Bosal" and were walking in very close quarters, because of our numbers; the closeness seemed to concentrate the feeling of community. We were walking very slowly, much more slowly than we walked at our Indianapolis group. The whole activity had a calming yet energizing effect on me.

Suddenly I found myself weeping. I had the feeling that I was everyone in that room: I was myself, and yet I was also the woman in front of me whose back I was gazing at...I was the man behind me whose voice and rustling robes I could hear...I was everyone there, and yet none of us.

I had the idea that what I was doing at that moment was reflected in an endless series of mirrors...as if I were chanting not just at that moment in that place, but chanting for all time, everywhere...chanting since time began...then, now and forever.

That moment exploded outwardly for all time: An eternity packed into an instant.

"Kwan Seum Bosal" is the name of the Bodhisattva of compassion, often used as a repetitive chant.



Sunday drew on, and time for my third interview approached. Eating, sitting, working, resting, napping, working kongans, listening to the daily Dharma talks: each of us filled his day.

The Master continues my third interview: "This man is dropping ashes on the Buddha. What do you do?"

I answer.

"No, no." He shakes his head and taps my knee with his stick: Third offense.

He holds the stick up. "This man says he is already enlightened and he will hit you if you try to stop him. What do you do?"

Another answer; confusion.

"No." He shakes his head. "No, he will hit you if you do that. You will start a fight. Do you understand what I mean by hit?" And he puts his stick over his right shoulder as if preparing to swing at a pitch. "Hit. Hit."

Monday. The last day, a day of summing up and celebrating. In the morning four retreatants took the Five Precepts* in a ceremony led by the Master.

*The first five lay vows of Buddhism.

Then one of his Dharma teachers gave a talk.

Afternoon came, and the retreat neared its end. Our silence began to lift in the middle of the afternoon; I talked for the first time to many people whom I felt I already knew. And we closed with a circle talk in which everybody shared an insight, a thought, a moment remembered.

Monday evening. One by one, or by carloads, we said goodbye to the Master and to our hosts and headed back to the busy world of office and factory we had left three days before...each of us carrying a little spark back into that darkness.

"What do you do?" he asks me again, resting his stick point down on the mat in front of him.

I give another answer, starting to feel disheartened now.

"No." he says softly, shaking his head, then taps my knee again with the stick, another thirty blows. "No. You must have clear mind. When your mind is clear it is like a mirror. When red comes, what do you see?"

I answer.

He nodded. "When white comes, what do you see?"

Answer.

Nod, eyes closed. "Must have clear mind."

His hands form a hapchong*, he makes his dismissal bow, rings his bell: The interview is over.

I bow and leave the room, very discouraged.

Halfway back to the Dharma room I suddenly understand.

*Palms pressed together.

The man who left my home and went to Lexington Zen Center and the man who returned to my home three days later were the same man, and not the same man: Not one and not two.

For at the retreat I met myself.

During the retreat a powerful feeling grew and continued to grow after I had returned home and resumed my everyday life: A feeling that I had connected briefly with a source of infinite power...a feeling that I had stuck my finger in a cosmic light socket.

During the retreat I seemed to be living in a world of more than the usual number of dimensions. Life had more depth than usual, and yet it was depthless...the world around me was more varied than ever, yet simpler...and everyday objects—a bowl, a cushion, a polished stick—took on a wondrous new substance, and yet remained the same. Everyday acts took on a subtle power: The ordinary became extraordinary.

The simple act of raising a bowl to my lips became wonderfully charged, indescribably real...walking, working, bowing, eating, all suddenly made sense in a way they had never made sense for me before.

To take delight in picking lint from someone else's zafu*: I understood then what was meant by the words "Chopping firewood, carrying water—marvelous activity!"

For three days in Lexington I touched that marvelous activity in everything I did. I found how rich a single second can be. □

*meditation cushion.

Jerry Shepherd works as a communications consultant for Blue Cross-Blue Shield in Greenwood, IN. He has been practicing Zen for about five years and describes himself as an amateur fiction writer, pianist and photographer.