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PERCEIVE UNIVERSAL SOUND

An Interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn

This interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn appeared in "The American Theosophist" (AT) in May 1985. It is reprinted by permission of the Theosophical Society in America, Wheaton, Illinois. The interviewer is Gary Doore. Zen Master Seung Sahn is now referred to by his students as Dae Soen Sa Nim. (See note on page 3)

Gary Doore: What is Zen chanting?

Seung Sahn (Dae Soen Sa Nim): Chanting is very important in our practice. We call it "chanting meditation." Meditation means keeping a not-moving mind. The important thing in chanting meditation is to perceive the sound of one's own voice; not hear, but perceive.

AT: Are you using the word "perceive" in a special sense?

DSSN: Yes. Perceiving your voice means perceiving your true self or true nature. Then you and the sound are never separate, which means that you and the whole universe are never separate. Thus, to perceive our true nature is to perceive universal substance.

With regular chanting, our sense of being centered will get stronger and stronger. When

we are strongly centered we can control our feelings, and thus our condition and situation.

AT: When you refer to a "center" do you mean any particular point in the body?

DSSN: No, it is not just one point. To be strongly centered is to be at one with the universal center, which means infinite time and infinite space.

The first time one tries chanting meditation there will be much confused thinking, many likes, dislikes and so on. This indicates that the whole mind is outwardly-oriented. Therefore, it is necessary first to return to one's energy source, to return to a single point.

AT: In other words, one must first learn to concentrate?

DSSN: Yes. Below the navel we have a center that is called an "energy garden" in Korean. We eat, we breathe, and this area becomes a source of power. If the mind becomes still, this saves energy. The mind, however, is constantly restless. There is an endless stream of desires for various kinds of experience; sights,

(continued on next page)

Mt. Fuji in the Mist and Rain

by George Bowman, Master Dharma Teacher

This talk was excerpted from a Dharma Talk given at the Providence Zen Center in January 1988.

During this retreat we have been sitting short, twenty minute rounds with the intention of not moving. Ordinarily, we sit much longer and allow people to stand behind their cushions when they are in great pain or uncontrollable sleepiness. Perhaps we have been fearful of scaring new students away from their cushions when they feel overwhelmed with pain or boredom. There is, however, great wisdom to be found in stillness.

Before each round of sitting we are vowing not to move, to sit with whatever appears in this moment and to relate to it as our teacher and friend. Of course, some friends are quite challenging, but nevertheless we are committed to a full relationship with them!

Why should we try this experiment? We can enjoy the flowers only if we stop long enough to look at them. What stops moving? First, our body stops moving; next, our scattered thinking stops moving; then, our dispersed and confused awareness stops moving; and finally, we come into full relationship with this flower. This full relationship and clear experience of the flower is not a meditation upon something that is separate from us. Rather, in stillness, we forget ourselves and become intimate with the flower, we enter the boundless world of prajna.

In sitting still we are able to receive what this moment has to offer. We see that this moment, regardless of what our idea about it may be, is entirely trustworthy—not only can we trust it, we are it. So we are not trying to amputate pieces of ourselves to fit some arbitrary image of what is acceptable. (That would be

(continued on page 6)

INSIDE PRIMARY POINT

FIRST KYOL CHE

By Do Won7

SOUNDS OF THE WORLD

Right Livelihood—

Our Readers Respond8

HARMONIZING IS #1 PRACTICE

By Dae Poep Sa Nim10

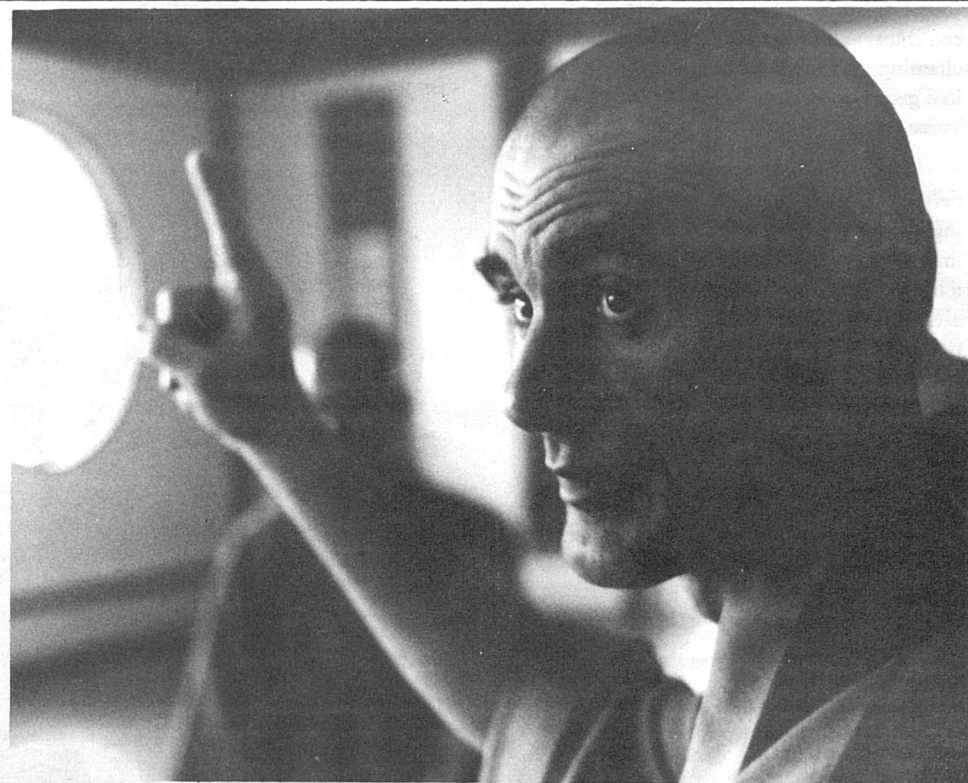
BOOK REVIEWS 11

AN AMERICAN MONK IN KOREA:

Mu Ryang Sunim 12

KWAN UM ZEN SCHOOL

INFORMATION 14



Master Dharma Teacher Do Am Sunim

Do Am Sunim Becomes Poland's First Master Dharma Teacher

Zen Master Seung Sahn is now referred to by his students as Dae Soen Sa Nim. (See note on page 3)

[Editor's note: excerpts from the inka ceremony given below were translated by Dorota Krzyzanowska and edited by Susan Phillips.]

On June 4th of this year Do Am Sunim became the first Master Dharma Teacher of Kwan Um Zen School of Poland. Over one hundred fifty people came to the Warsaw Zen Center to see Dae Soen Sa Nim give inka—the authority to teach kong-an practice and lead retreats—to Do Am Sunim. The inka ceremony took place one day before the Polish Sangha's ten year anniversary celebration. Master Dharma Teacher (and honorary Polish KUZS President) Jacob Perl joined Dae Soen Sa Nim there for these major events. Representatives from all the Buddhist sanghas in Poland attended, reflecting the very close ties that the groups have.

The Polish Sangha had its beginnings in 1978, when Dae Soen Sa Nim and Jacob Perl visited Poland at the invitation of a former member of Chogye Zen Center in New York who had returned to his native land. During that visit, Dae Soen Sa Nim and Jacob first met Do Am Sunim or, as he was known at that time, Andrzej Czamecki.

In 1978, Andrzej was a self-employed artisan producing mosaic tiles. After the visit he became deeply involved in Zen practice and started a Zen Center in his home in Krakow. A couple of years later Andrzej moved to War-

saw, and, as often happens among Zen students, he switched careers: his experience with Zen practice enabled him to use meditation techniques to counsel drug addicts.

In Warsaw, Andrzej started a second temple which was given the name Do Am Sa, from its founder's Dharma name, Do Am (Sa means temple). The Polish Kwan Um Zen School was formed as a separate entity from the North American Kwan Um Zen School. Andrzej has been Abbot of that body since its inception. As Dae Soen Sa Nim often tells his students, the Polish school is very strong and is growing. In addition to the centers in Warsaw and Krakow already mentioned, there is a center in Gdansk and approximately fifteen affiliated sitting groups throughout Poland.

In December of 1986, Andrzej took traditional monk's precepts at Providence Zen Center, and would thereafter be called Do Am Sunim. Now, less than two years later, he would participate in another momentous ceremony that would profoundly affect his life.

Traditionally, inka ceremonies include an explanation of the procedures to the audience, a period of Dharma Combat in which members of the audience challenge the initiate, a speech by the new Master Dharma Teacher, and congratulatory speeches. In this the first Polish inka ceremony, Jacob Perl, who was born in Poland and speaks the language fluently, explained the ceremony and invited members of the audience to engage Do Am Sunim in Dharma combat. The following are excerpts from the Dharma combat exchanges, Do Am Sunim's Dharma Talk, and congratulatory speeches by Jacob Perl and Dae Soen Sa Nim.

(continued on page 4)

Soen Sa Nim Interview

(Continued from front page)

sounds, smells, tastes, feelings. This turning outward of the mind in search of sensory experience dissipates one's energy until finally there is nothing left in the energy garden. Thereby one becomes subject to control by outside conditions or influences, and so loses control over his or her life.

For this reason, our meditation practice means: Do not think anything. In other words, do not use your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind. By doing this our center gets stronger and stronger, and there is an experience of growing clarity.

AT: How does Zen chanting differ, if at all, from the recitation of mantras?

DSSN: In mantra practice there is no (audible) sound. It is only internal. One merely concentrates on repeating the mantra to oneself. In chanting, on the other hand, we chant out loud in a group and just perceive the sound of our voice.

When we talk about perceiving sound during chanting we mean having a clear mind. This is different from a mind that can be lost, and also different from a one-pointed mind.

For example, consider two people having a good time together, enjoying each other's company, laughing, feeling good and so forth. Suddenly a man appears with a gun and demands money. Instantly the good feeling evaporates and there is only fear and distress. "Somebody please help! Don't shoot!" The mind, the centeredness is completely lost.

But suppose that a person is walking in the street concentrating on a mantra with a one-pointed mind. Then a man appears with a gun and demands money there will be only "OM MANI PADME HUM" or whatever. "Hey, are you crazy! I said give me your money." Then there is still only "OM MANI PADME HUM." Nothing else matters. "I will kill you unless you give me your money!" Then what? Only "OM MANI PADME HUM." This is concentration, one-pointed mind.

Finally, suppose that someone with a clear mind is walking in the street and a robber appears. Then the response is "How much do you want?" That is clear mind. If the man

the general area of the stomach it will be correct. One does not have to try to chant from that point below the navel. The sound comes by itself if it is done correctly.

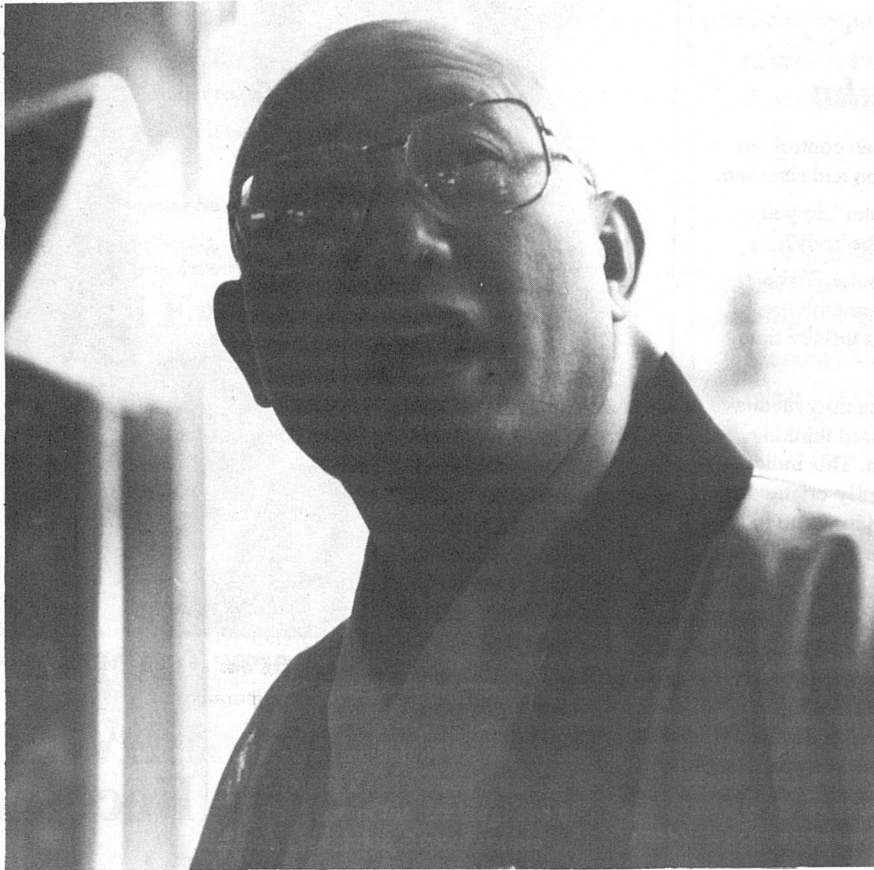
AT: What is the difference between Zen chanting and singing?

DSSN: Direction is what makes the difference. Love songs, for example, have only what we might call a "love-direction." This is in the realm of opposites; love and hate, liking and disliking. Emotions come in, so most singing is emotional. Chanting, however, means that the direction is very clear. Remember the phrase "chanting meditation." The direction or aim here is to obtain enlightenment in order to save all beings from suffering.

AT: And this is not to try for some type of feelings or emotional quality?

DSSN: No, I am not trying for any good feeling for me. Chanting is not for oneself. It is for all beings. That is the difference.

AT: In other words, it is an expression of the Bodhisattva's compassion?



Zen Master Seung Sahn

DSSN: Yes.

AT: What is the relation between compassion and wisdom?

DSSN: Compassion is the function of wisdom; it is the action. Wisdom gives the direction.

AT: By this you mean knowing what to do in order to help someone—and also how to do it correctly?

“Compassion is the function of wisdom; it is the action. Wisdom gives the direction.”

shouts "Give me all of it" there is no problem. "Okay, here is all of it." In fact, with a clear mind one can use such a situation to teach others. There are a number of Zen stories in which thieves or robbers have been so surprised and shaken by the calm response of a clear-minded Zen Master that they later returned to learn Zen from him.

So chanting ultimately means clear mind, not concentration. In concentration you want to make something, there is some desire to focus on one point. This is different than simply perceiving the sound of one's voice, without separation.

AT: In some Buddhist chanting the sound is very low and constricted, as though being produced from below the navel under great pressure. What is the reason for this?

DSSN: That is the Japanese style. It comes from the hara, the point just below the navel. This is not necessary. If the sound comes from

appear. There must be no mind! Then there is just clarity, and infinite time and space.

AT: In one of the Buddhist Sutras it says that enlightenment may be obtained by turning back the faculty of hearing to the original nature, and that this is the most suitable method for human beings. Will you comment on this?

DSSN: Those are merely different "teaching words." The idea, however, is the same as we have been discussing. Don't cling to words. Just do it! (Laughter.)

AT: How?

DSSN: Listen. Everything is universal sound: birds singing, thunder, dogs barking—all this is universal sound. If you have no mind, everything will be perceived as such. Therefore, when you are chanting with no mind it is also universal sound. If you have "I" then it is "my" sound. But with a mind clear like space, sometimes even the sound of a dog barking or a car horn honking will bring enlightenment. Because at that moment you and the sound become one.

AT: Is this moment of enlightenment related to samadhi?

DSSN: Samadhi, as we use the term, means one-pointed mind. This is not enlightenment. It is concentration-mind. Samadhi, you see, is only a good feeling for me, not for other people. Moreover, it is merely a one-pointed mind, not clear mind.

AT: Will you explain a little more about how someone can attain enlightenment by hearing a loud sound, as we often read about in Zen stories?

DSSN: If you do loud chanting, for example, and if you do it one hundred percent - put your whole energy into it - at that time there will be no "I". Thus there is no "my" opinion, situation or condition. In this regard, chanting together in a group is very important. Group chanting takes away "my" opinion, situation, condition and so on very easily. One has to blend in and harmonize

with the rest of the chanters. The main thing, however, is just to do it totally.

AT: You said in your Dharma talk earlier that in practicing a mantra or chanting it is important to keep the "Big Question," namely, "Who is practicing this mantra?" or "Who is chanting?" Why is this question about "who?" important?

DSSN: I tell students to find out "What am I?" This is a kong-an. Before thinking, what are you? One says "I don't know." But even before speaking, prior to any words or thoughts, this "before-thinking mind" is clear mind.

AT: Can music be a form of Zen practice also?

DSSN: Music is not usually Zen practice, but it can be. If the player just plays and becomes one with the playing it can be called Zen. But most of the time the direction is not clear in music. Usually there is some emotional control, some direction given by emotions. And the musician may be trying to control the emotions of the audience through his music. In fact, we speak of *good music* as having this sort of effect on other people's emotions. Emotional music means opposites-mind: wanting or not wanting, good feeling, bad feeling. But true Zen music is different. It has been compared to the jumping of a fish up and down in the river.

AT: Spontaneous?

DSSN: Yes, but not emotional. Listening to it brings a very quiet mind, a very clear mind. That is Zen music. But one should not cling to the opinion "This is music, that is not music." If we are not attached to anything then everything is Zen music.

(continued on next page)

PRIMARY POINT

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Soen Sa Nim Interview

(Continued from previous page)

AT: In the Heart Sutra it says that the Prajna-paramita mantra (mantra of transcendental wisdom) is the greatest mantra. Would you explain this?

DSSN: Yes. They call it 'the transcendental mantra, the great bright mantra, the utmost mantra' and so forth. This means that if one simply tries this mantra, *GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA* with one's whole energy, then it will be the greatest mantra. Actually, of course, any mantra which you try in this way will be "the greatest mantra"... for you! That particular mantra is not special, not different from any other. But all Sutras which refer to any kind of mantra will say that it is special.

AT: Which means it is special if one believes that it is.

DSSN: Correct. A student once asked me "if this is true then even the words *Coca Cola* can be a mantra?" Yes, if you really believe that 'Coca Cola' is the greatest mantra and practice it diligently, it will work for you.

AT: Isn't there a danger of hypnotizing oneself with a mantra, of putting oneself into a sleepy state?

DSSN: Yes. Again the difference between this and the correct method of practice lies in the direction or aim. Falling into a sleepy or hypnotic state means that the direction is not clear. Practice thus becomes merely habitual or mechanical action. So it is important to ask "Why am I practicing this mantra? Is it for me or for other people?" In self-hypnosis from mechanical repetition there is no such aim; or perhaps the aim is merely to relax or to get some sort of good feeling for oneself. In that case it is easy to fall into a dull, drowsy state, but not so if the direction is clear.

However, sometimes if very neurotic

AT: How does one keep a before-thinking mind during chanting?

DSSN: Just do it! If you chant with all your energy, thinking has already been cut off.

AT: Because to think while chanting is to divide one's energy?

DSSN: Right. Simply chanting with one hundred percent of one's energy poured into the chant is already empty mind, clear mind, which is not a state of ignorance or delusion. 'Your' before-thinking mind and 'my' before-thinking mind are the same mind. Then your substance, the substance of this paper in front of us, my substance are all the same, all universal substance.

But someone will say that this universal



Drawing of Zen Master Seung Sahn by Elaine Schmidt Urbain

AT: Would you say something about the relationship between chanting and the breath? What about the link between the breath and the mind?

DSSN: One should not check the breathing. It is necessary to put all such considerations aside and just do the chant with all of one's energy. Correct breathing will then naturally be the result. Just sitting will also do the same thing.

AT: Do you mean as in Soto Zen where the main form of practice is called "just sitting" (shikantaza)?

DSSN: Yes. But it is easy to get attached to sitting in Soto Zen practice. Therefore, one must understand what this "just sitting" is. Any kind of action—chanting, bowing, sitting, lying down, walking—all these can be Zen practice so long as one keeps a still mind. But in Soto Zen practice it is often only "body sitting," that is, where one's body is sitting but the mind is

moving all over, chasing thoughts. This is not just sitting.

AT: You mentioned that any action can be Zen practice, but is there something about just sitting that makes it especially good? Why do Zen monks spend so much time at it?

DSSN: For one thing, if one just sits, then all the internal organs of the body benefit. The sitting posture is very helpful because when one just sits with the back straight and the mind still, a great deal of energy is accumulated and all the functions of the body become correct. Some times the body is ill because it is out of balance. So one must first control the body, then breathing and mind will automatically be controlled.

AT: Are there any other sorts of sounds or rhythms that are important in Zen practice?

DSSN: One famous Zen Master only heard the sound of a rooster crowing and was enlightened. Another Zen Master was just sweeping in the yard when his broom threw a rock against a piece of bamboo with a loud knock and he was enlightened. He and the sound had become one. So this matter of sound in Zen practice is really very simple. Any sound will do.

But in regard to particular sounds that we regularly use, there are bells, drums, gongs and so forth. All of these have a meaning. For instance, the drum made out of animal skin reminds us about saving all animals; the sound of the big bell means saving all beings in the different hells. Thus we are reminded about the Bodhisattva's compassion. But this is only the external meaning. The inner meaning is the same as what we have been discussing. It is necessary to perceive the sound, whatever it is—bell, drum, gong, etc.—and to become one with it. There is no thought, no separation, only perceiving sound. This is the crucial point. So just perceive this bell or drum sound, cut off all thinking, and then your wisdom-mind will grow up. You will get enlightenment and thus save all beings.

“Yes, if you really believe that ‘Coca Cola’ is the greatest mantra and practice it diligently, it will work for you.”

people come to learn about our practice, mechanical repetition of a mantra can do some good, perhaps helping them to gather more energy and become stabilized.

substance is Buddha, or God, or nature, or the Absolute and so forth. But actually it has no name, no form, no speech, no thought, because it is before all of this appears.

Dae Soen Sa Nim

In keeping with Korean tradition, Zen Master Seung Sahn is now addressed as "Dae Soen Sa Nim" by his students. The "Dae" is an honorific prefix commonly used in Korea when a prominent teacher passes a certain age (e.g. sixty years) or has achieved a specific prominence.

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