

An American Monk in Korea

The world of Buddhism was transmitted to an enormous audience on Thursday, September 15, 1988. The Today Show, in Korea to cover the Olympics, did a series of background stories on Korea's culture and politics. They were alerted to an American monk, Mu Ryang Sunim (Erik Berall), who was famous for his walks around the country visiting temples, and for his rapid adaption to the Korean language and customs. Mu Ryang Sunim is a long-time student of Zen Master Seung Sahn. He took monk precepts in 1983. Since 1985 he has been in Korea, primarily in a hermitage above Su Dok Sah Temple. Su Dok Sah and its hermitages above it are strongly connected with Zen Master Seung Sahn and the teachers in his lineage. He considers it a prime "energy point" for Kwan Um Zen School.

Mu Ryang Sunim was also the subject of an article in Korea Today—A Monthly Photo Journal in May, 1988. The article was entitled Learning About Korea: Mu Ryang Sunim, an American practicing Zen Buddhism. The accompanying photos are from this article. The following is a translation of the Korea Today story interspersed with relevant quotes from Mu Ryang Sunim's appearance on the Today Show.

Chung Cheong South Province, Yesan County, Dok San Town, Sa Chun Village. Here 1,602 years of history are stored in Su Dok Sah (Cultivating Virtue People), which is shielded as if by a folding screen by Dok Sung San (Lofty Virtue Mountain). Following the hiking trail up the mountain, hearing the sound of water flowing rapidly downstream and the birds chirping, one arrives at Hyang Un Gak (Fragrant Cloud Hermitage).

Just below Jung Hye Sah (Mountain Wisdom Temple), a sub-temple of Su Dok Sah, and right beside a 20-meter tall statue of Kwan Seum Bosal (the Bodhisattva of Compassion), is the little hermitage called Hyang Un Gak. Here, Mu Ryang Sunim (Erik Dustin Berall), an American monk, is practicing meditation.

With the azaleas unusually brilliant for a mid-April day, Mu Ryang Sunim delightfully receives a visit from people of the world below.

A Yale university graduate with a degree in Geology, Mu Ryang Sunim, when asked his age, replied, "I was born in the Year of the Boar. In American age, that's 28."

While attending college, even though he practiced yoga meditation, he couldn't find truth or the purpose of human life. By chance, at the New Haven Zen Center, he heard a lecture on Zen; the lecture affected him so much that he immediately moved into the center and began practicing. While his Zen meditation was ripening, in December of 1983, he became a Buddhist monk.

"During college, I had a friend who was a vegetarian, so I became one too. To me, the vegetarian diet is very appealing; perhaps in past lives as well I may have been a monk. When I first decided to become a monk, my father was quite opposed. These days, however, he understands a little better, and the more I practice, the nearer I feel my mind is to that of my father."

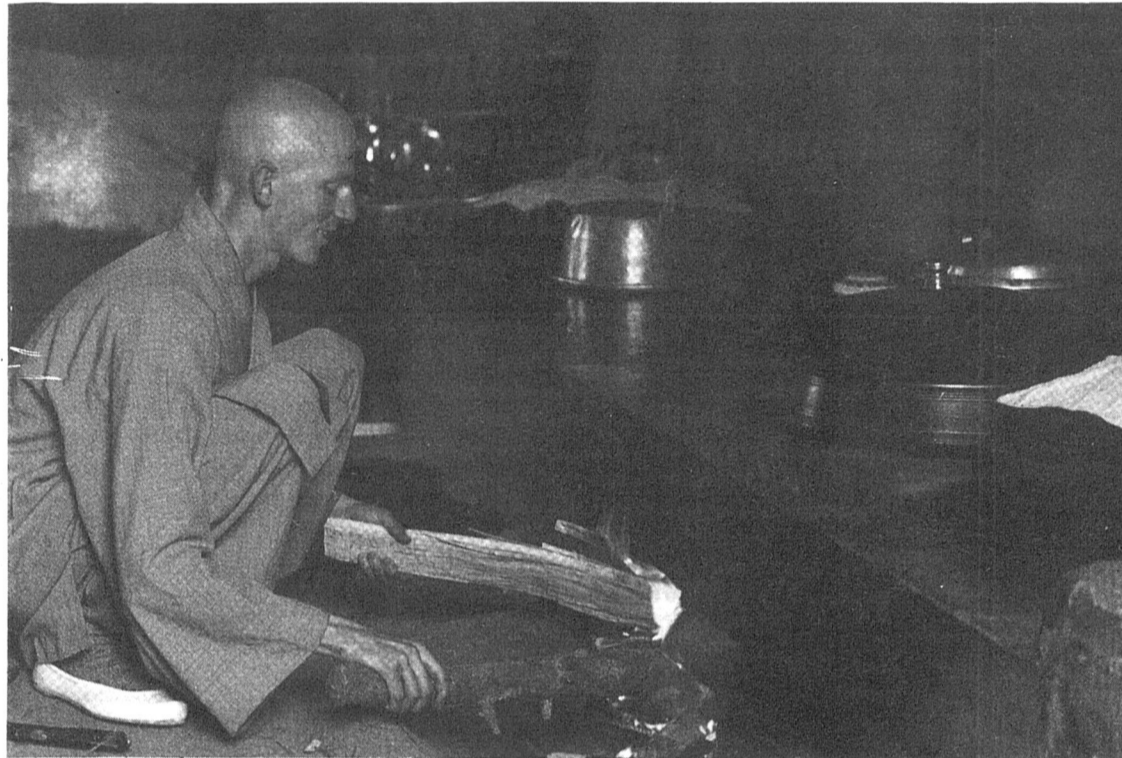
Having come to Korea in April of 1985, Mu Ryang Sunim's fluency in Korean is surprisingly good. During his stay in Korea, he has practiced Zen at Hwa Gye Sah (Flower Valley Temple) in Seoul, Tae Go Sah (Grand Old Temple), and elsewhere. Last year in May, he moved to this hermitage, and is "living like a Taoist spirit of the heavenly realms."

Three in the morning. Waking to the sound of the big temple bell struck at Su Dok Sah below, and retiring at nine in the evening. Except for mealtimes and short breaks, he practices meditation according to a rigorous schedule which he himself set up using elements given to him by his teacher: 108 bows and sit Zen, 108 bows and sit Zen...

"Bowing is not bowing to some image or object outside of myself. The practice of

bowing means: my body, my breath, and my mind all become one."

"Our practicing lifestyle must be regular for meditation to go well. If not, it's easy to become lazy. 'Keep your mind clear like space; use your mind like the tip of a needle.' Just like that, sitting Zen means seating the mind and keeping it unmoving, and then correctly using that unmoving mind for all people. For whom are you living? What are you? As you raise these questions more deeply, your mind becomes bigger. Practicing Zen through keeping a 'What is this?' mind, the great question of life's purpose becomes slowly bigger, and when it is not moving, at one instant, Tak! this doubt mass breaks apart and dissolves. This is called seeing your true nature and is the first



Mu Ryang Sunim tending the wood burning stove in the kitchen at Su Dok Sah Temple.

purpose of Zen: to see true nature and to become Buddha. If you attain that point, you can let go of your 'small I' and only live for all people. The mind without 'I' is like empty space; empty space is like a clear mirror: when red color appears, it's red; when gray color appears, it's gray; sky is blue, tree is green—every thing only reflected, just as it is. Practicing in this way, the mind is fulfilled, so that you want to live a life of practice. But this also is a desire that must be let go too—these days I experience the swift passage of time as a rather frightening thing. I sit down to meditate for what seems to be a short time, and discover life has all flown by. We're young so we don't really understand, but older people like our father or grandfather must feel this keenly."

About our existence and purpose, he says "only don't know. Keeping this not knowing mind from moment to moment, everything is clearly reflected: just see, just hear, just taste, just touch. All just like this is truth." For most people, however, it's not an easy thing to accept.

"When practicing Zen, inside and outside become one; so the shouts and noises of hikers passing by, are just the same as the sounds of birds chirping or water flowing—sometimes when practicing, if doubts appear, then just to reflect on the example of Buddha's own life and teaching is enough to dissolve the problem."

"I really enjoy the solitude that I have. It really helps the meditation practice; that is the main focus in my life right now, and living alone as I do, people do not come and disturb me. I can just practice all day."

Most Zen centers in Korea are in the mountains, like this, and you experience a wide, open view. Your mind then also becomes like that, very wide and very open.

Buddha was just a regular guy like you and me. He lived in India about 600 B.C. and had a big question: "What am I?" He left his palace, left his kingdom, went out in the woods, practiced for six years and one day, he got enlightenment.

Originally Buddhism was not some kind of religion, only understand our true self: "What am I?"

Before he came to Korea, Mu Ryang Sunim and his teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, went on a round-the-world tour teaching Zen meditation in Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Germany, Poland, France, England and America, visiting many Zen centers, Buddhist temples and famous places along the way. Then later, he again accompanied his teacher and a group of Americans on a pilgrimage of historical Buddhist temples in mainland China. Also, in the autumn of 1986 and the spring of 1987, Mu Ryang Sunim walked alone around Korea, visiting temples and meeting monks.

During that time, he learned about Korea firsthand. Since his major in college was geology, he has a special interest in the ancient science of "wind-water" geomancy; at each

bage and radish, soy bean sprouts, seaweed, various mountain plants and lettuce. He takes two lettuce leaves, puts a dollop of hot sauce and a spoonful of rice on them, rolls it all up and eats it like a Korean would.

Since he has learned not to waste food and to eat everything he has taken, he doesn't even leave one grain of rice, cleaning his bowl with hot water and then drinking that, too—very naturally, just as it is.

Without purposely effecting some kind of Korean manner, Mu Ryang Sunim is, in speech and action, not in the least bit different from a Korean. Only because of his unusually large nose, blue eyes and white skin, can one say that he is an American.

"In a past life, maybe I was a gentleman from Chung Cheong Province, since I like lettuce-rolls as much as they do. Also, I drink green tea instead of coffee. Korean green tea is very good," he said as he prepared tea, explaining additionally both the Nine Virtues and Six Benefits of green tea. A person hearing this from him directly would have difficulty in not becoming embarrassed.

His father, Frank S. Berall, who is a prominent lawyer in America, came to Korea as an officer to fight in the Korean War, during the midst of which, he became a Christian. So it is ironic that his son, Mu Ryang Sunim, came to Korea to practice Buddhist meditation.

Mu Ryang Sunim, who shaves his head by himself, says that "There is a Korean proverb which states that 'A monk cannot cut his own hair'. When shaving, if I think 'but I can cut my own hair', I invariably cut myself shaving. That's happened a few times. But if I can keep a clear mind, then it goes without incident."

Before coming to Korea, he received his Buddhist name and precepts. However, Mu Ryang Sunim came here and deliberately

did manual labor at a temple as a novice would, so he has learned to carry an A-frame backpack and make a wood fire very well.

"Perhaps because I've lived in Korea, when guests come and are departing, if I don't accompany them all the way to the bus stop, I feel uncomfortable." When asked how long he intends to live in Korea, he replied, "I'll live according to my karma (cause and effect)." Just as his Buddhist monk name 'Mu Ryang' (No Limit) indicates, his clear mind is "immeasurably" deep—he's that kind of person.

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