

Wearing a Kasa, Carrying the World

Uncovering the Mystery of Form

An Interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn

Interviewed by Glen Bradley at Dharma Sah Zen Center in Los Angeles, August, 1989

PP: What is the significance of the objects on the altar—the rice, the water, candles and incense?

ZMSS: Our universe is made of four elements—earth, air, fire, and water. The items on the altar are symbolic representations of these elements—the incense represents air; the candle represents fire; the water bowl represents water; the altar and the Buddha are symbolic of the earth; the rice is symbolic of earth and food. The four elements make up the universe and also our human body; they also control our consciousness. So when the incense is burning, you have a good smell; the smell goes into your consciousness. At any time, what you see, what you hear, what you smell all becomes part of your consciousness. So when you see the candles, smell the incense, see the Buddha, listen to the chanting, all this creates good feeling in your consciousness; when you come to the Dharma room, your outside condition and situation disappears and a good feeling appears. Your small mind disappears and for a little while you have Buddha Mind. That's how we use the items on the altar and the Dharma room.

PP: Why do we bow when we enter and leave the Dharma room?

ZMSS: In the Orient, when two people meet, they bow to each other according to their status. The person who is high-class bows just a little bit; the person who is lower-class bows much more deeply. This is Oriental hierarchy. But when we enter the Dharma room, we leave behind this high-low mind; an emperor bows to the Buddha and a beggar also bows to the Buddha. This is cultivating humility. In that moment, the mind becomes very simple. Also, this is a moment of paying attention and having correct relationship with the situation. The Buddha is our ideal and our inspiration. So the correct relationship is to bow to the altar.

PP: What is the origin of the moktak?

ZMSS: "Mok" means wood; "tak" means hit. But the original word is "Mok O". The Japanese call it "Mokugyo". "Moku" means wood; "gyo" means fish; so this instrument is like a fish with its mouth open. There is a story about the origin of this instrument. Long time ago, in China, there was monk called Chung San Poep Sa. He lived near a big city and a big lake. One day a high government official came to the lake with his family for a picnic. They had a small baby, only a few months old. By chance, when they were on the boat, the baby fell overboard. The official engaged local fishermen to swim into the waters and find the body of his baby but they couldn't find the body. So he went

to Chung San Poep Sa and said he would like to do a ceremony for his dead baby but cannot find the body, so please help him. Chung San Poep Sa went into deep meditation and perceived what had happened. He told the government official, we must go to the fish market very early tomorrow morning and buy some fish. So they went to the fish market and Chung San Poep Sa selected a very big fish. Then they cut open the stomach and found the baby inside. To the surprise of the family, the baby was still alive. They were all very happy. Then the official wanted to help all fish for saving the life of his baby. So this moktak is shaped like a fish, with an open mouth and a hollow stomach. When you hit the moktak, a good sound appears. The meaning of the moktak sound is that the baby is still here, all fish can hear the sound and get enlightenment.

PP: Why do we wear robes for formal practice?

ZMSS: Originally these robes are monk clothes. In India, during the Buddha's time, the monks wore yellow robes because



Zen Master Seung Sahn

it is the color of the earth. They chose the yellow, the color of ground, because they get less dirty if the dust is blowing. If the color was white, the robes would get dirty in no time. But yellow robes don't get so dusty. When Buddhism came to China, things changed a little bit. The robes that we wear are Taoist-style clothes, not Indian style. Only the monk's big kasa is Indian style. So when Taoism and Buddhism came together, a new style of clothes appeared. The kasa, both small and large, is a symbol. They have squares and lines—7-lines, 12-lines, 18-lines. There are five points — east, west, north, south and a middle. This means the whole world. So when a monk wears his kasa, it means carrying the whole world with him. A monk leads a homeless life, but with his kasa he symbolically carries the whole world with him; that means he is not separate from the world and still takes care of all beings. So the robes and kasa are different; robes are Taoist-style clothes; kasa is a symbol of renunciation, of leaving behind ego and small I.

PP: What is the origin of the four-bowl style of eating?
ZMSS: This style is from China. Originally, in Buddha's lifetime, there was only one bowl. In China, this style changed again. The four bowls are again symbolic of the four elements—earth, air, fire and water—and also of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and Mind. In Korea, they always use four bowls in the monastery; here also we use these four bowls during retreats and formal meals but our American style is a little different from Korean monastery style.

PP: What is the origin of the Four Great Vows?
ZMSS: The tradition of reciting the Four Great Vows started during the Tang dynasty in ancient China; these vows are taken from the Avatamsaka Sutra. In China and Korea, they recite these vows only at the end of a ceremony and not in the morning, as we do at Kwan Um Zen School centers. When we first started Providence Zen Center, somebody suggested saying the Four Great Vows in the morning. I thought this was a good idea, because we do 108 bows, which are the bows of repentance; these Four Great Vows provide our direction. First wake up, then bow to the Zen Master in gratitude, then recite the Four Great Vows to reaffirm our direction, then bow 108 times in repentance for all our mistakes.

PP: When you do a solo chant in the morning, before the Heart Sutra, what is the meaning of that?
ZMSS: That means praying for the whole world. The first part says we want all beings to get off the Wheel of Samsara and allow the Wheel of Dharma to go around and around and take away all peoples' suffering. The second part means wishing for harmony in all parts of the world — east, west, south and north. This part is praying that all beings become one mind, become world peace, become Buddha. The third part means praying that all students in the Kwan Um Zen School and all of Buddhism get enlightenment. The last part is a recitation of the Ten Precepts.

PP: Why do people take off their shoes when coming into the temple?

ZMSS: That's Korean and Japanese style, not Chinese or Indian. Korean and Japanese use ondol or tatami floors inside the house; if you wear street shoes inside the house, the floors get dirty. So the relationship is clear; if you take off your shoes, the house or the temple stays clean.

PP: Korean Buddhist statues are always large and colorful; other traditions use smaller, simple statues. Why is there this difference?

ZMSS: This is not only Korean style; Chinese use much bigger and more colorful statues. In India, Thailand and Cambodia, they use very big statues, very colorful. But that is not Hinayana style, only Indian or Thai or Cambodia style. In Hinayana, they have only Shakyamuni Buddha statues, but no Bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are part of Mahayana tradition; Chinese style is very colorful, so they have large and colorful statues of the various Bodhisattvas. In Korea, they have only middle size, not

*When you . . . hear the sound
of the bell, universal nature
appears. . . everything
becomes equal.*

quite as big as Chinese style. Buddhism came from China to Korea and then went to Japan. There, during the period of Nara Buddhism, they built this very large Buddha at Todaiji which was the largest Buddha in the world. Also, during the Kamakura period, they built a huge Buddha outdoors. For many people, when they look at the huge Buddha, a very strong feeling of awe or reverence arises; for a very short time, this feeling takes away their karma, their small I. For some people, when they look at a small Buddha, there is no such feeling. But for some people, looking at a small and simple Buddha, there is a deep feeling. So people have different consciousnesses. In China, Korea and Japan, big and colorful Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have a deep impact on the people's consciousness.

PP: What is the meaning of the Morning Bell Chant? Please explain some of the lines.

ZMSS: The Morning Bell Chant comes from the Avatamsaka Sutra. This sutra talks about the interdependence of all beings. So all animals, birds, human beings, all demons, all beings in hell, when they hear the sound of the bell, they wake up, get enlightenment and become Buddha. So, this sound penetrates all six realms of existence — heaven, astral, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, hell — and takes away your ignorance; wisdom grows up, you get enlightenment and save all beings. Together, we all become Buddha.

There is a line in the chant that says, "Everywhere

everything is equal.” This means in universal nature, everything is equal; there is no form, no name. So at the time when you just hear the sound of the bell, universal nature appears, name and form disappear, everything becomes equal.

Another line says, “Together you and I simultaneously attain the way of the Buddha.” This means we are all equal — all animals, all birds, all human beings, all equal — and all attain enlightenment at the same time through hearing the sound of the bell. When you hear the sound of the bell, it means you wake up; wake up means going beyond time and space. Time and space are a hindrance caused by thinking; so hearing the sound of the bell makes this thinking disappear, makes time and space disappear and all become Buddha at the same time.

At another point, it talks about “Great love, great sadness, our great teacher.” It means great love and great sadness is substance. Love is substance, and great sadness is compassion. If other people are suffering, I am sad and compassionate. If everyone is happy, I am happy. “Our great teacher” means we are connected to everything else in the universe, and everything is teaching us the lesson of great compassion and great love.

PP: The Great Dharani, which we chant, is a long mantra and has no translation. What is the origin of this Dharani and what is its meaning?

ZMSS: In Buddha’s lifetime, one monk broke precepts and was very unhappy. So the Buddha taught him that karma comes from your mind; if mind disappears, karma also disappears. If you hold your mistake, your karma will never go away. Then the Buddha

Big mistakes cause problems for others; small mistakes, problems only for myself.

gave this monk the Great Dharani mantra in order to take away his holding and thinking mind.

PP: Why do we do 108 prostrations in the morning? Why 108?

ZMSS: In Korean style, there are 108 names for Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. So in that style, 108 bows mean repeating these names of the Buddhas. Another style says that human beings have 108 delusions and we bow to cut off these delusions.

PP: When people take precepts, you give them Dharma names? How do you pick these names?

ZMSS: First, I pick a family name for the whole group that is taking precepts on that day; then I separate men and women; then I perceive what kind of name fits what kind of person.

PP: When someone takes monk’s precepts, as part of the ritual you sprinkle water on his or her head and touch it with a

sword. What is the meaning of this ritual?

ZMSS: It is symbolic of cutting the last hair, last ignorance. Becoming a monk means going from ignorance to light. When you shave you have to use soap and water, otherwise it’s very hard. So we use the water from the altar for this symbolic purpose; the sword is symbolic of the mind-sword, the sword of wisdom that cuts through ignorance. So this is cutting the last hair.

PP: What is the meaning of the repentance ceremony?

ZMSS: Everybody makes mistakes; how do we correct our mistakes? In some forms of Hinayana Buddhism, if you make mistakes, then you have to give up your precepts. But in Mahayana and Zen, if you make mistakes, you can do a repentance ceremony. There are big mistakes and small mistakes. Big mistakes mean my mistake causes many problems for other people; small mistake means a problem only for myself. Doing 108 bows every morning is a repentance ceremony in itself for our small mistakes. For big mistakes, there is a public ceremony; then my mind becomes clean, also other people’s minds become clean. If we don’t do this kind of ceremony then everyone is holding “my mistake” and making more karma. In the Catholic Church, if you make a mistake, you can go to the priest and confess your mistake, then feel relieved and complete. The repentance ceremony is like that. But Catholic ceremonies are secret; in Buddhism there are no secrets, everything is open. If you make a mistake, and make a public ceremony, then one can forgive and move on without holding.

PP: You often encourage your students to do forty-nine and one hundred day retreats. Why forty-nine days? Why one hundred days?

ZMSS: We have two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and one mouth. That’s a total of seven holes in our head. The number seven is considered lucky in the Orient. Also, seven times seven is considered a good number. The 100-day retreat is a little bit not correct. Originally a retreat was done for three months, ninety days. The number 100 comes from Taoism. For Taoists, ten is a lucky number, so their retreat time is ten times ten. In China, Buddhism and Taoism got intertwined, so many Buddhist rituals have come from Taoism.

PP: What is the role of women in Korean monasteries and should their role be different in American Zen?

ZMSS: In Korea, a nun is the same as a monk, except nuns cannot officiate at a precepts ceremony. Other than that, nuns can become teachers, also become Zen Masters; they can also get transmission but cannot give transmission. That’s the tradition from China. But that’s not a problem in America. Buddhism is always adapting itself to the culture of the country where it goes, so Korean style is not absolute in America. We can change it. Changing transmission rule is no problem, but we cannot change the precepts rule.

PP: How can we make Zen practice more interesting for Americans?

ZMSS: Traditionally, in China and Korea, only monks did Zen practice. But Zen has come to the West and here lay people practice Zen, so this has changed the character of Zen. Now our teaching is Zen in everyday life. Sitting Zen all the time is not possible for lay people. Everyday life Zen means learning mind-sitting. Mind-sitting means not moving mind. How do you keep not-moving mind? Put down your opinion, condition, and situation, moment to moment; when you are doing something, just do it. This is everyday Zen.

Monks have rules about their life — cannot go to theatre, cannot go to restaurant, cannot do this, cannot do that. Their precepts are always telling them this is no good, that is no good. So the monks only sit Zen all the time, then get enlightenment and understand truth. That's old-style Zen. In that style, there is not much teaching about great love, great compassion, great Bodhisattva Way. But for lay people this teaching of great love, great compassion, great Bodhisattva Way is very necessary. To attain that, it is important to keep a not-moving mind; then correct situation, correct function and correct relationship appear by themselves in everyday life.

PP: Some people don't like any kind of form, especially chanting. How should we approach them?

ZMSS: This is Western mind, always strong like and dislike. But there are many people who like chanting very much. Chanting means doing together action with other people, then this together action takes away your opinion, your condition, your situation very easily. That's the teaching of chanting meditation. If people don't like Korean chanting, then maybe some time in future, we will chant everything in English. But remember that our school is not only in America but also in Poland, Germany, Spain and other parts of Europe. So if someone from America goes to Poland, it's the same form, same chanting; then you have

the feeling of being part of a large international family. Then your mind becomes bigger and you are at one with the world; you "become world peace."

PP: Could you talk a bit more about chanting as meditation?

ZMSS: Meditation means not-moving mind. As I said before, old-style meditation means body-sitting, but mind-sitting is more important than body-sitting. When you chant you have one mind, not-moving mind. That's mind-sitting. It is called chanting samadhi. You chant "Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal", then you perceive sound. That's clear mind. Clear mind is wake-up mind; wake-up mind is enlightenment. So in chanting, samadhi mind is the first step, this is One Mind. The next step is perceive sound, this is Clear Mind. This is enlightenment. If you attach to samadhi, then you have a problem. That's a very important point.

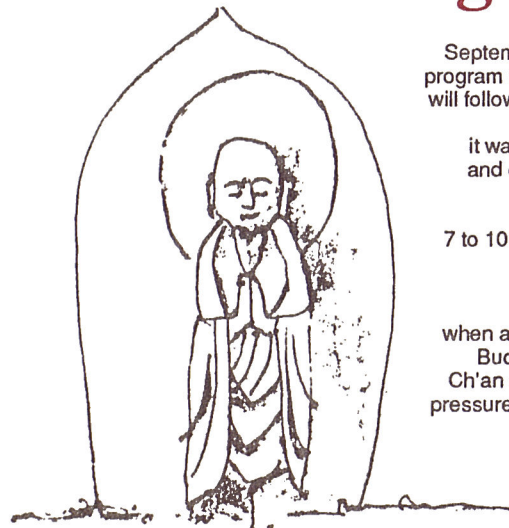
PP: How do you see the relationship between Korean Buddhism and American Buddhism changing in the next ten years?

ZMSS: These days I don't stay so much in the United States; my travels are in Korea, Europe, Australia, and other places. So now most of the teaching in United States is being done by Ji Do Poep Sa Nims. Before, everybody was my student, but now some Ji Do Poep Sa Nims have their own students. Now Ji Do Poep Sa Nims will decide the Kwan Um Zen School's direction; they understand American mind better than me. I taught only Korean Buddhism style; now the Ji Do Poep Sa Nims are teaching American style Buddhism, so that's already changing.

PP: When do you plan to give transmission? We are all waiting.

ZMSS: Spring comes, grass grows by itself. (Laughs)

Gathering in Korea, Summer 1990



Ellen Sidor

The second triennial world-wide visit to Korea will take place from August 18 to September 1, 1990. The opening event will be the second "Whole World is A Single Flower" program at Su Dok Sah Temple, from August 20 to 22. A similarly themed conference in Seoul will follow the Su Dok Sah event. The first gatherings in 1987 brought together a large number of practicing Buddhists from the United States, Europe, Latin America and Asia; it was a coming together of East and West with our different understandings of Buddhism, and of transcending our different interpretations and practicing together in an environment which has nurtured Buddhism for more than 1500 years.

The 1990 visit will follow approximately the same format as in 1987, with a 7 to 10 day tour of spectacular temples in the mountains of Korea following the initial events.

As in 1987, we are expecting a large contingent from Europe and the United States, as well as special guests and featured speakers from the two continents.

This gathering is a rare opportunity to have a first-hand glimpse into what happens when a great tradition modernizes. Korea has been the repository and custodian of the great Buddhist tradition from T'ang China; its Zen communities are a living link with the ancient Ch'an communities of China. Now this tradition is undergoing radical changes as a result of pressures from the forces of modernization and westernization. The glimpse into this process is always intriguing and fascinating; we will be participating in this process ourselves, bringing to it the creative aspects of our own experience and practicing in the West.

The Kwan Um Zen School office will be making group travel arrangements for people traveling from the United States. If enough people plan to go, group-rate air fares are possible. Please write for more details:

Kwan Um Zen School, WWSF, 528 Pound Road, Cumberland, RI or call 401-658-1476.