

## TEACHER FEATURE

# Old Wisdom, New Wisdom

## *An Interview with Bob Moore, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim*

*Bob Moore, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim, is Guiding Teacher for Dharma Sah Zen Center in Los Angeles, Empty Gate Zen Center in Berkeley, and the Seattle Dharma Center. He also directs the graduate music theory program at the University of Southern California, teaches internal martial arts (nei kung and tai chi), and is married with three children. He and his family live near Whittier, California, about one hour from Los Angeles. This interview was conducted for PRIMARY POINT by Leonard Ross of Dharma Sah Zen Center.*

**Primary Point:** You do a lot of different things: Tai chi, music composition, teaching. What do you think is the common thread that ties all these together?

**Bob Moore, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim:** The common thread, of course, is Zen practice. (*laughs*) I was initially attracted to Zen Master Seung Sahn's teachings because of his emphasis on putting practice into action moment by moment. I connected quite strongly with that pragmatic bent, perhaps because I was already married and involved in a full professional life as a professor and composer.

**PP:** What was your practice before you became Zen Master Seung Sahn's student?

**BM:** My first exposure to Eastern thought began with some dabbling in the martial arts in 1963, and that led me to explore various yoga practices. Like many others during the late 1960's, I read and was deeply influenced by Philip Kapleau Roshi's *The Three Pillars of Zen*, but I was too involved in pursuing advanced academic degrees to commit to a daily practice or to search for a teacher.

In 1969, I began teaching music at Oberlin College in Ohio and took a personal vow to become a Zen student. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, came out in 1970, and I must have read it twenty times. I was determined to find a way to go to California and study with him, but he died in 1971. I also considered making trips to Rochester to see Kapleau Roshi, but before that could happen I got a teaching position at Yale. When we moved to New Haven I found a diverse group of Zen students who were sitting together a couple of mornings each week. During my first few months there I met and sat with both Sasaki Roshi and Eido Roshi. Then I met Zen Master Seung Sahn through one of his students who was visiting in New Haven.

**PP:** What particularly attracted you about Zen Master Seung Sahn?

**BM:** All Zen masters have a presence about them, and Zen Master Seung Sahn certainly has a dominating personality. But I think the particular quality that struck me was his humor  
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and his natural good nature and earthiness. His English was not terribly sophisticated then, but he took questions and engaged in some spirited Dharma combat with several people, including me. I didn't understand the Zen lingo very well, but I recognized the spirit as being the same that I had observed in the exchanges in Chung-yuan Chang's *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism*, a book I had been studying with great interest. I thought to myself, "Wow! Here is someone who is the authentic item."

**PP:** What is the link between Taoist and Zen teachings?

**BM:** Contemporary Taoist practice might be described as the process of finding one's natural and true energy. Zen is more concerned with the mind, what is usually called our true nature or universal mind. This may be an oversimplification, but it points at the essential difference between the two approaches. Contemporary Taoist teachers are usually skeptical about the simplicity of Zen practice and teach a much more elaborate system of standing, sitting, martial, and visualization exercises. This is paradoxical considering the ultimate simplicity of classical Taoist philosophy, but perhaps it is no more paradoxical than Buddhism with its 84,000 sutras aimed at cultivating no-mind.

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### *The struggle to attain special powers has been the greatest block to genuine insight into a clear and helpful mind.*

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At first I was fascinated by the special powers promised by Taoist practices, but now I feel that is also its greatest pitfall. A lot of contemporary Taoist practices are similar to Western white witchcraft. For most Taoist students in my observation, the struggle to attain these powers has been the greatest block to genuine insight into a clear and helpful mind. American students in particular tend to want to possess special energy in a manipulative and materialistic way. Perhaps this is inevitable, given our recent cultural history.

I learned many wonderful things from Taoist masters, but there is no conflict in my direction: it is clearly a Zen direction. I see the martial arts, healing arts, and nei kung practices that I teach as coming from a Zen core. They represent so-called

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“outer path” practices; the primary goal is drawing people to the benefits of Zen. I have also found that these Taoist practices can help to conquer some of the physical and psychological hurdles that students encounter in their Zen training.

**PP:** When you were not able to practice regularly at the Zen Centers, what did your practice consist of?

**BM:** I’ve had a Zen corner or room in my home since 1969. It is necessary to have a special place in the home to reinforce a commitment to regular practice, particularly once children are on the scene! When you practice in the same place with the proper accouterments day after day, that location takes on a calm, spiritual energy similar to that of a temple. The other factor is to have a regular practice schedule and stick to it.

Zen Master Seung Sahn has established our practice to include five aspects, and I advise students to include each aspect in their home practice. First, we recite the four vows to



**Bob Moore, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim**

confirm our direction. Second, we bow 108 times to balance the scales of our accumulated karma. Third, we sit in meditation to calm the mind and develop our samadhi nature. Fourth, we chant to focus our energy and, more importantly, to open the compassion in our hearts. Last, we have interviews, listen to talks, read kong-ans and so forth to sharpen our cognition so that Dharma wisdom might appear. I include those five aspects in my daily home practice. If I don’t have time to do the complete two hours, then I modify it while keeping some form of each practice alive every day. I also try to do two to three hours of martial arts and nei kung practice daily as a form of moving meditation.

Also, those of us who can’t go away for long retreats can still do special home retreats. One of my close Dharma friends, Mu Deung Sunim, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim used to do a lot of special retreats in the early 1980’s, and I found myself envying his

freedom. So I decided that when he went off for one of his solo retreats, I would do a special personal retreat at the same time. For example, I might sit two hours at home each day rather than one hour for the hundred day period. Then when he came back to the Zen Center, rather than feeling envy, I would feel a joint sense of accomplishment and Dharma energy.

**PP:** What does your family think about you practicing Zen?

**BM:** My wife opposed it somewhat when I first became involved with a Zen group. We had only been married a short time, and I think she saw the formal practice as a potential wedge in our relationship because she wasn’t interested in any religious practice. She had some resistance during the entire time we lived on the East Coast.

When we first moved to California we only had one car. We were both working at the University of Southern California, so I couldn’t go to the Dharma Sah Zen Center in Los Angeles very often. She noticed a change in my overall demeanor and finally said after a few weeks, “Why don’t we buy a second car so you can start going over to the damn Zen Center?” From that point forward my practice hasn’t been a real issue except when I’m gone too much on teaching trips and the burden of raising our children falls completely on her shoulders.

**PP:** What about your children? Do they express any interest in what you do?

**BM:** My daughters, who are nine and twelve, are aware of what I do in terms of teaching and practicing. We have family meetings periodically, and issues about religion come up from time to time. I would like to expose my children to many paths and let them choose, as they mature, whatever direction seems best for them. I feel that Zen is a path that precedes religion as it is usually understood. The core teaching of Zen is what might be called a theology of the present. In this sense Zen can be thought of as the ground from which all true religious insight grows. I hope that I can help my children discover this intimate aspect of Zen. Then, whatever theology or dogma of lack thereof seems appropriate to them will be fine with me.

**PP:** You are a musician and professor. What kind of music are you involved with?

**BM:** I’m a so-called avant-garde composer. I compose what is usually labeled modern classical music. Also I have a long history of being connected with the whole spectrum of American music, particularly the jazz tradition. I began to play professionally in jazz groups when I was fifteen, and after playing for awhile on the road I worked my way through undergraduate and graduate school as a trombonist and string bassist. These days I direct the graduate music theory program at U.S.C., and I have a fairly elaborate electronic music studio in my home. In general, the market for my type of music is very small, almost as miniscule as that for Zen!

**PP:** Has Zen helped you with your music? Or has music helped you with Zen?

**BM:** Yes and yes. These two questions originate from the same place. A great teacher once said that if we make Zen practice one more chore along with our jobs, family responsibilities and so forth, then it will just make us very busy! There is no actual separation between Zen and all the other aspects of



our lives. Everything we do is fodder for our practice, and we are continually testing our clarity in the fires of daily experience. Formal practice is very important. Its rituals are like entering a laboratory to do high-level research; the very best lab ever discovered for self-knowledge and renewal is the one of quiet and concentrated meditation. But the actual benefits of that formal practice are manifested in our everyday activities and interactions.

**PP:** Where do you get the energy to do all these different things on such a tight schedule?

**BM:** That is a very important question, and a lesson I have had to learn the hard way. Several years ago I was working full time at the university, studying the Taoist healing and martial arts several times a week, going regularly to acupuncture classes, functioning as Head Dharma Teacher at Dharma Sah, composing music, writing a book on the American jazz tradition, and trying to be a husband and father. And I damned near died! Perhaps temporary insanity is a prerequisite for a Zen student.

What actually happened was that my body became very weak and I discovered that I have insulin-dependent diabetes. Now I try to live by a more reasonable schedule. My doctors were amazed that the diabetes had been masked for so many years, and I think that probably resulted from all the nei kung and meditation that I had done. But there is an important lesson here. I was spending a lot of time studying about the body's energy systems in order to help *other people*, and I was trying to acquire more personal energy and wisdom. But actually I was over-stressing my own energy system and losing my center in too many desires and expectations. As Zen Master Seung Sahn says, "Don't make anything and you will get everything!" Correct practicing means not wasting our energy on trivial matters, not losing our direction and concentration, and not giving away our center easily to the tribulations of daily life. Most importantly, it means not making or wanting anything other than to experience intimately the mysteries of each moment. Then our dharma energy will be "just enough" and our path will be unimpeded by whatever scenery appears.

**PP:** When Zen first came to this country, there was a preoccupation with kensho. How do you see that in terms of everyday practice? Do you think there is something experientially separate, or is it just being clear in our everyday interactions?

**BM:** There are experiences of insight that come from concentrated practice. But Zen Master Seung Sahn says we must put down any tendency to hold these experiences for the purpose of making them yet another possession. During his early years in this country he emphasized that attaining kensho was quite easy. I liked that! He wanted to shatter our notion that kensho was difficult to attain and that our only hope was to go away to the mountains and try to penetrate the Mu kong-an for years and years. Later he began to emphasize that getting enlightenment was easy, but maintaining the fruits of that experience in our daily encounters and actions was quite difficult. So you can't really trust Zen Masters!

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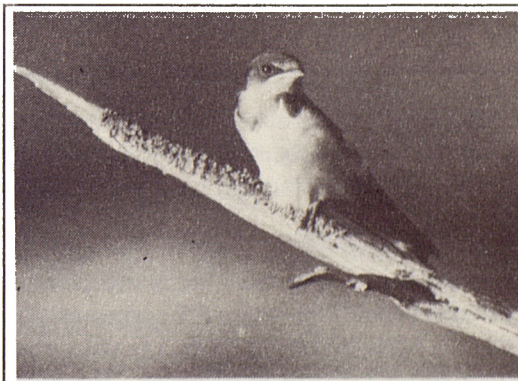


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The point is that Zen practice and any resulting experiences of insight are neither difficult nor easy. As soon as we try to predict what an experience will be like, we have already created a conceptual barrier to that experience. And when we try to hold any genuine experience that we might have, it immediately dissolves into the chatter of our thinking mind.

It is important to understand that the questioning process we use in Zen practice is quite different from the more familiar one of modern scientific and philosophical thought. In the latter, the questioning process results in problem solving through logic and deduction; the primary goal is to build a fund of knowledge and a coterie of techniques for future research. Spiritual questioning is quite different. The great doubt of Zen can never be solved in this logical and paradigmatic way. The mysteries of Bodhidharma's "don't-know mind" can only be penetrated, not solved, and during that process the secrets of our existence become heightened, not dissipated. Finally, through a process of attrition, our "don't know" becomes completely boundless and open. Becoming intimate with that process is the essence of Zen attainment. If we are asked what is the secret to this mystery, we must respond as Nan Yueh did to the Sixth Patriarch's question about the nature of his awakening. Nan Yueh replied, "To say it is like something is already to miss the point."

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### *"Why don't we buy a second car so you can start going over to the damn Zen Center?"*

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**PP:** Some students in our school feel that we don't place enough emphasis on the academic study of Buddhism, for example the study of Zen texts or the sutras. How do you feel about this?

**BM:** It is a matter of timing, I think. Zen Master Seung Sahn had to take books away from me at one point. Most beginning students come with such a full conceptual plate, so to speak, that any study of Buddhist dogma would create more complications and intellectual attachments. However, like many others, I think training in our school has been inadequate for more seasoned students as they begin to take on teaching responsibilities. We are addressing that issue now, and we are putting together a bibliography for potential Dharma Teachers to use. In our roles as first and second generation American Zen students, we must do our very best to preserve the core of the tradition as it has been passed to us from the East. That is one of our basic responsibilities.

**PP:** That raises the question of how American Zen might be

different from Korean, Chinese, or Japanese Zen. In what directions do you see American Zen heading?

**BM:** We are in a turbulent and sensitive period now because the first generation of American Zen teachers has begun to appear. It is similar to the transition of Indian Buddhism to China and later the exportation of Ch'an to Korea and Japan. Buddhism has always proven to be very resilient and malleable, and we are seeing this transitional process starting to unfold here in the U.S. But this birthing of American Zen will be painful in some ways, and we are also experiencing that.

Many students are taken with notions of the mysterious and ineffable Oriental teacher, and have a hard time accepting a Zen teacher who appears to be just another plain American psychologist, musician, carpenter or whatever. And many students find it difficult to grow side-by-side through the years with someone as a Dharma brother or sister and then suddenly confront that old friend as a teacher of the Dharma. Many senior students struggle with that problem as the Zen Masters withdraw more and more from active teaching. Another problem is that America is governed by democratic principles that are deeply ingrained in our psyches. The Zen tradition has tended to be quite autocratic and hierarchical. All of these complex issues around hierarchical authority as opposed to group decision-making must be worked through. To complicate matters further, the inherited Zen tradition has been largely a patriarchal one, and that simply will not fly in contemporary American society. Many of our strongest Zen students are women who are quite committed to feminist positions. It is indeed a very complex transition that is taking place.

Also, there is no question in my mind that Zen teachers would have larger sanghas and greater financial resources if we simply did away with most of the rituals of practice: chanting, bowing, formal interviews, ceremonies, etc. Many Americans are interested in the benefits of meditation but are alienated by any kind of religious ritual — Western or Eastern. This kind of Zen practice, which might be thought of as an extension of New Age or transpersonal psychology, is very appealing to a number of socially middle- and upper-class Americans.

But I feel that this path is fraught with danger. I tend to be pretty conservative as a first generation teacher, and I think we have to be very careful when discarding any part of the thousands of years of tradition that we have inherited. Maybe that is why I have always been attracted to formal meditation, nei kung, and martial forms of practice. I get a feeling of connecting to the energy and wisdom of dozens of previous generations, and that can be exhilarating — when it isn't too painful!

On the other hand, there is no question that American Zen will eventually become Americanized. How that is going to happen is still very much an open question, and probably won't start to become clear until we get to at least the second or third generation of American Zen teachers. Maybe then Zen will find its natural place in the fabric of American society.