

EUROPEAN SANGHA

Dharma in Dorsten

by Harry Whitford

Although Zen Master Seung Sahn and Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim have been coming to Germany to teach for years, the Korean Dharma has been slow in taking root here. Even though the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) is Europe's most populous and most prosperous country, our Sangha here is (still) one of the smallest in the European Kwan Um School of Zen. There are several main reasons for this. When we asked Zen Master Seung Sahn about this in 1987 he said, "Germany has a very good situation — the people are rich and comfortable. 'Good situation' means lose your direction." Unlike countries like Poland and Spain where people are quite open to spiritual practice (and where our school is very strong), the orientation here is more material.

With the preference towards structure and organization that is a part of Germany's mentality, it is often difficult for people to accept teachings and teachers that don't have some organization or institute, as if the building or organization were a sign of legitimacy. There is also a very widespread fear of, or skepticism towards, teachers, gurus and masters or anyone resembling a leader — which is quite understandable in view of German history. Despite this wary-of-commitment approach, there is generally a high level of self-discipline and do-it-yourself to be found among practitioners here.

Over the past few years, the growing process of the German Sangha has often seemed to me to be like kong-an practice: numerous prickly questions, few answers and lots of "don't know." Being a small group of only thirteen students scattered across the country, we have had to deal with questions which probably wouldn't have mattered if we had moved into an established Zen Center. Questions like how to keep when practicing alone, or how to best help our teachers spread the Dharma, or when and how to start a Zen Center, have been very central issues. The process has been very different from the beginnings of most Zen communities in the U.S. where teachers from Asia came and settled, and a group grew around them. Here, the times spent together with our teachers have always been rare and precious occasions, as have been gatherings of a far-flung sangha. This isolation has been hard on all of us, emphasizing not only the need for one another's help, support and echo, but also the divergence of our opinions, expectations and priorities. This has made harmonizing and together-action quite difficult at times.

That a fledgling Sangha could form around Zen Master Seung Sahn is largely due to the efforts of three people: Oh Soeng Sunim (formerly Arno Schuh) and Heinke Griese from Frankfurt, and Dr. Paul Koeppler in Nickenich. Oh Soeng Sunim and Heinke set a good example of great effort, organ-

izing the early teaching tours of Zen Master Seung Sahn, and both were responsible for introducing many new people to our style of practicing. Paul invited Zen Master Seung Sahn to hold Yong Maeng Jong Jins regularly at Waldhaus, his center outside of Cologne. It was through these workshops and Zen Master Seung Sahn that the six Dharma Teachers in Germany made their initial ties to Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim. That was around 1985-87. Then most started to "commute" to Paris when the teachers were there, and to attend the European School Congresses in July and December. Everyone began to establish a strong connection to Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim, the resident teacher in Paris. Taking the Precepts in Paris, each of us became students of both teachers.



At Dharma Sah Dorsten: Eva Paulus-Whitford, Director of Dharma Sah Dorsten; Do Haeng Sunim, Abbot of the European Kwan Um School of Zen; and Harry Whitford, Abbot of Dharma Sah Dorsten.

In 1987, Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim started visiting Germany twice a year, holding Spring and Fall workshops at Waldhaus. Her teaching and support have had a very profound impact on the development of our Sangha in Germany, especially since Zen Master Seung Sahn's increasingly busy schedule has hindered him from coming more than once a year. Through her abilities of karma-perception and transmission of

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healing energies, and her meticulous teaching methods, she has been guiding people of all ages and backgrounds to attain a strong practice in the midst of their family, social and professional lives. She has helped hundreds of people to start practicing who might never have sought out Zen teaching as such, and yet all of a sudden they find themselves doing mantra and bowing! The personal transformations which many have experienced are truly incredible. As her translator, I have witnessed around 300 private interviews. To share in the intimacy of teacher-student counseling, and to experience the enlightened functions of her wisdom and compassion first-hand, is certainly the greatest teaching I have ever received.

One of the turning points of the developments here was the seven-day Yong Maeng Jong Jin held at Waldhaus in summer 1988. Both Zen Master Seung Sahn and Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim were there and we had a meeting of the older students about organization and cooperation problems that kept coming up. I had also announced that we had found a place for the first center. So we discussed these topics in circle-talk style with both teachers. Zen Master Seung Sahn told us that if we do hard practice, then our Dharma-light is shining, which attracts people to come and practice, and that they receive a good feeling about practicing. He also made it very clear how important it is to be strong, saying, "If one person is strong, a group or center appears and is also strong. But if no one person is strong, then nothing appears." Zen Master Seung Sahn made it very clear that we are all one Dharma-Family, which is very special. That meeting really seems to have broken up a lot of blockages, as together-action has been going much better since then.

The Dorsten Zen Center came into being in the fall of 1988 and Zen Master Seung Sahn held the Opening Ceremony in October. Dorsten is located on the northern edge of the Ruhr Region which is Europe's largest urban area. This is coal and steel country; those industries are dying out, leaving much "don't" know about the future. So we often present Zen practice as being much like mining coal and forging steel. Dig down deeper, deeper, get energy, then use that energy to control your feelings, condition and situation. Melting one's karma like iron ore, one can form one's life as the situation requires.

Slowly, a small core group of about eight people has formed. They're very serious, coming regularly to evening practice. We have also been holding monthly Yong Maeng Jong Jins and in March 1989 Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim came for the first time. Almost half were absolute beginners at that workshop, yet the energy was very strong and tight although the form was relaxed. It included walking mantra meditation in the woods, and talking during mealtime was allowed, but each person set a goal of mantras to finish. This helped beginners connect with our practice, to experience strong practice without too much agony, and to let go of the misconceptions that Zen is only silently sitting on a black cushion in a zendo.

Against the background of dramatic social and political changes that have occurred in Germany and its neighboring countries in the last year, the developments in the sangha may appear to be insignificant indeed. The opening of long-closed borders, (mostly) peaceful revolutions and social reform movements in eastern Europe have created an atmosphere of hopefulness and positive outlook in both eastern and western Europe. To a certain degree, there seems to be a similar hopefulness among our students about the positive developments and personal transformations which we have seen take place in each other. Letting go of "my limitation," the border is opened. "Put down my opinion, condition, and situation" is "peaceful revolution." And "moment-to-moment, correct function, correct relationship" are "true social reform" — a transformation of our life, which is possible by applying this most precious gift of Dharma.

It seems as though both Zen Master Seung Sahn and Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim have attempted to prepare us for this period of transformation as they have both repeated the same profound (and typically laconic) message over and over again: "This world is changing very fast now, strong practice is necessary!"

Harry Whitford is Abbot of Zen Zentrum Dorsten. First coming to Germany as an American Field Service student in 1974, he has resided in Europe for 10 years working as a tofu production manager. He is now a self-employed consultant.

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