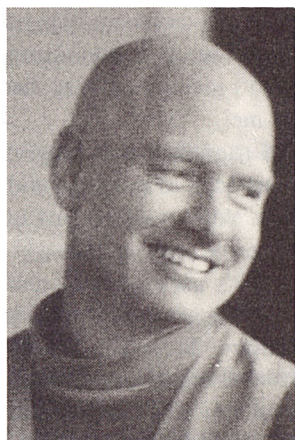


# An Emerging Monastic Tradition

*In July, 1990, six of the senior monks and nuns in the Kwan Um School of Zen engaged in a provocative discussion of monastic life in the United States. The participants were representative of a wide variety of experiences here and overseas, including doing long retreats, teaching, living in Zen centers and monasteries, working the land and operating computers. Excerpts from this "monk's panel" at the summer sangha gathering follow. The panel members were: Do An Sunim, JDPSN, abbot of Providence Zen Center; Do Mun Sunim, abbot of Cambridge Zen Center; Kwang Myong Sunim, abbot of Furnace Mountain in Kentucky; Mu Sang Sunim, director of Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles; Mu Soeng Sunim, abbot of Diamond Hill Zen Monastery in Cumberland, Rhode Island; and Mu Ryang Sunim, abbot of Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles. The questions were asked by sangha members.*



*Do An Sunim, JDPSN*

**Question:** What does it mean to be a monk?

**Do An Sunim, JDPSN:** After one of the Kyol Che retreats, the monks gathered in Zen Master Seung Sahn's room for a meeting. Someone asked the same question: "What is a monk?" Zen Master Seung Sahn didn't say anything, he just looked around the room. Then we all looked around the room; we were all just looking at each other. That was his answer.

Thomas Merton, the famous Trappist monk, was once queried as to why he had become a monk. But the tone of the question was, "You think you are so special, you are putting yourself up on a high pedestal." Merton's response was "I became a monk because I am just exactly like everyone else." When I became a monk, Zen Master Seung Sahn had but one instruction: "do together action with other people." In other words, you are just like everyone else; how can you help others?

**Mu Ryang Sunim:** I've been a monk for seven years;

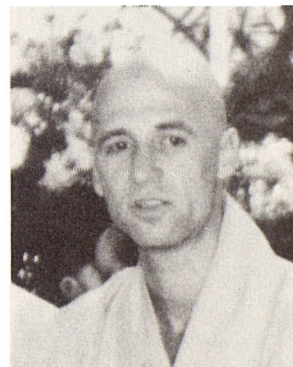
it's not easy to say what it is to be a monk or what a monk's life is like, especially in the context of being a Buddhist monk in America. You just have to experience it. Someone once asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, "what is a monk?" and he said, "Garbage human being becomes monk, and garbage monk becomes a Zen student, and garbage Zen student becomes a Buddha."

What does it take to become a monk? It takes exactly what has brought all of us to practice: our minds have gotten stuck on a question or problem. Unable to find the answer in our minds, we have reached a dead end. That is why we become monks. That is why we practice.

**Mu Sang Sunim:** Another thing is that it's not everyone's correct situation to be married. In fact, Zen Master Seung Sahn says that being married is very difficult, and it is much easier to be a monk. For those of us who aren't great bodhisattvas, it is a very easy way to practice. And there are people for whom it is just going to be their karma, to be monks.

**Question:** What is it like for those of you who have been in Zen centers for a long time? This is a new model: not being in a monastery, but rather being subject to all the temptations of normal life.

**Do Mun Sunim:** For me, it has nothing to do with getting away from temptations. It's just about our direction, and



*Do Mun Sunim*

what is needed. If that's where you are coming from, it doesn't matter what situation you are in. One problem a lot of people think about is, "If I am a monk, what will I do?" After being in Paris for three years I decided to leave. I had no plans for where I was going; I just knew that I was going to do a winter retreat. A little lost, I asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, "What's my job?" and

he looked at me and said "Help other people." So I had no thoughts about situation at all.

There is something wonderful that comes with that attitude. You get thrown into situations that you didn't plan, don't want, and have no clue how to handle. It's not theoretical "don't know." It's more like when you're a kid, jump on the slide, and go screaming down into the water. You half love it and half are scared to death.

**Question:** Is the commitment you make life long, or is it for a certain length of time?

**Do Mun Sunim:** How long is your life? (*laughter*)

**Question:** I know that in other traditions the vow is until one dies. Is that also in this tradition?

**Mu Soeng Sunim:** I think the Buddhist monastic tradition is different from the Catholic tradition. You are not joining any organization or institution when you decide to become a monk, so the vow of obedience is not there. The only vow is to the precepts. That is your guide to how you live your life. So long as you are following the precepts, then you are a monk.

**Mu Sang Sunim:** Here's another perspective. You start training as a novice monk. Later, if you want, you can take the full set of monk precepts. At that point, the idea is that you continue for your whole life. But if it doesn't work out, you can give your precepts back.

**Question:** Do you feel that this is going to help formalize American Buddhism?

**Do An Sunim, JDPSN:** Is it helping you?

**Question:** Um, yeah.

**Do An Sunim, JDPSN:** Good, thank you.

**Question:** Is there some special routine monastics follow on an average day when they are not on retreat?

**Do Mun Sunim:** There are probably six answers here.

**Mu Soeng Sunim:** You breathe in and breathe out, just like any other human being. That is our primary job. In our school, each monk's situation is different. For myself, when I'm not in a retreat, I have many other things to do. For instance, I help out in the office or work on my writing projects. I am very busy all the time.

The Buddha told his early monks to be on the road all the time; that was their practice. Except for during the monsoon season they were not to stay in any one place

more than one night. They travelled over the length and breadth of India and brought the teaching of the Buddha to people. I think the idea in Buddhism is that being a monk, we are symbolic of that particular vocation.

**Kwang Myong Sunim:** I took novice nun precepts in April, 1990. I was married and living in Manhattan. In my life, my relationships, my work, I had been seeking a way to truly express myself. But invariably I found myself accommodating and dissatisfied, because I wasn't giving myself to the direction that was appearing for me.

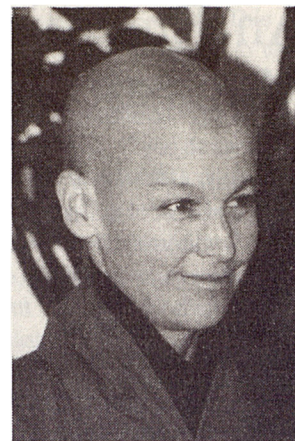
I tried different things to resolve this "question"—going back to school, working at the Zen Community of New York—looking and looking and all of a sudden it just came together: this was what I needed to do with my life. It's not even that I needed to do it; *I had no choice.*

The spark in my case was connecting with the land at Furnace Mountain, in Kentucky. I had an experience, and there was no question in my mind that I wanted to be there, and participate in whatever way I could to support and develop it.

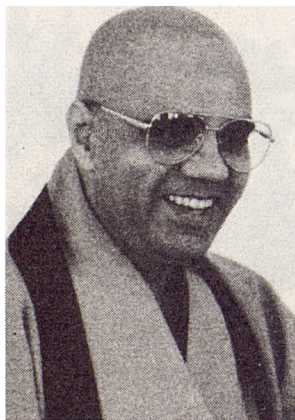
I think all of us have monk and nun karma, somewhere. It was certainly true for me—I would go on long retreats, feel deeply connected, yet I was always torn. When I connected with the land in Kentucky it became a vehicle to really express my direction. My job as a nun is to be completely available to whomever appears, whatever the need is, whatever work needs to be done. Maybe forty people are coming in for a weekend retreat or workers are coming in. Mowing the fields, general upkeep . . . there's a constant ongoing job but the form it takes is enormously flexible.

**Do Mun Sunim:** I've been in Zen centers for the six years I've been a monk. At Empty Gate in Berkeley, I stay full time at the center. It's my job to be at practice all the time, and also to function as the director. A lot of people come and want to talk either about practice or personal problems. I deal with that according to what it is. (*Editor's note: Do Mun Sunim is now abbot of Cambridge Zen Center.*)

I've also learned a little bit about what it is like to be a mother. You have responsibility for a situation or



*Kwang Myong Sunim*



*Mu Soeng Sunim*

people and it doesn't matter what you want to do at that time. You have to respond. If they are crying or they need something, then you have to do it, or everything is going to become worse. You have to respond to it. Your situation makes your job. It's no different than being married or having children.

**Question:** Do monks get paid?

**Do Mun Sunim:** The money situation is very interesting. If your center helps you, then you get help. If they don't, then you've got to figure it out. Someone talked about formalizing things in America; my particular fear is that when things get formalized, new problems will appear. It's not real easy for any of us to become attached to our situation, because there are no situations you can get control of. Also, there are no situations you would *want* to get control of. (*laughter*) But some day if you get to be abbot of a big beautiful temple, and you want to keep it, then I think that's not correct mind.

**Question:** Why do you think there are so many monks and so few nuns in our School?

**Mu Sang Sunim:** That's up to you.

**Kwang Myong Sunim:** I have no idea.

**Mu Ryang Sunim:** We also have a particular situation with a male Zen master as a role model. That may have something to do with it. In Korea and China, nuns outnumber monks by three or four to one. But I don't know what conclusion you can draw from that.

**Do Mun Sunim:** One reason may be that it is not so strange for a male to be bald. You get reactions, but they can be seen as great teaching. One day I was standing in the Boston airport and I saw a Sikh walk by, with the white turban and all. I looked at him and thought, "that guy looks like he is out of a mental hospital." (*laughter*) Then I passed in front of a soda machine and saw my own reflection. (*laughter*) It's great teaching about just how secure you are with yourself.

**Kwang Myong Sunim:** There are ways to deal with that. I live in Powell County, Kentucky. It's real backwoods. I don't wear gray, I wear regular street clothes and keep my head wrapped. So people assume that I have cancer; they come up and ask "Oh, hi, where are you getting treatment?"

So I've developed a monologue about my "cancer." I don't know if it's more strange for a woman to have a shaved head, but depending on your situation, you do

whatever you need to. Here, sitting with the fellows, having a shaved head is not bizarre.

**Question:** Have any of you been in a situation where being a monk or nun was an obstacle to getting something done?

**Mu Soeng Sunim:** I'd like to give an historical perspective. In India there was a tradition that when somebody attained enlightenment, they went into the deep forest and didn't speak. Buddha was the first teacher in India to start teaching after his enlightenment. And his disciples taught as well. So in the Buddhist tradition, a monk has always been a teacher of the dharma. What Zen Master Seung Sahn has done in this school is to create lay "dharma teachers," people who don't have a shaved head or grey clothes but are still teachers of the dharma. In that respect I don't think there needs to be any radical demarcation between the life of a monk and the life of a teacher. Both are living symbols of their responsibility as teachers of the dharma.



*Mu Ryang Sunim*

**Question:** I'm curious about how you see your relationship with your teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, and also the Chogye order. Are you part of a lay school, or do you follow the Chogye order?

**Mu Ryang Sunim:** We're kind of in limbo. Chogye is an order of Korean Buddhism and every Chogye order monk has an identification card with a number stamped on it and their picture. Now, I don't know of any non-Korean person who has ever gotten one of those. So we are not technically in the Chogye order. And according to Zen Master Seung Sahn, we are not technically in the Kwan Um School of Zen, because that is a lay school. So where does that leave us?

**Mu Soeng Sunim:** We are part of the Chogye tradition, but we are not part of the Chogye order. There has not been any formal effort to create an American monastic order. To me, being a monastic is a process, not an identity. I'm very aware of any effort, whether it's on my own part or the part of someone else, to put an institutional identity on what I'm doing.

**Question:** Where do you see your relationship evolving down the road without Zen Master Seung Sahn?

**Mu Sang Sunim:** No one knows what's going to happen when he is not around. We spend a lot of energy worrying about it, but it's a red herring. Before he leaves, I suspect he'll do a few things to ensure the continuity of our practice.

**Question:** If someone came marching up to your front door and said "I want to become a monk," how would you respond?

**Mu Soeng Sunim:** I get people calling me up on the telephone from time to time and I explain that there is a certain kind of training involved. You live in the Zen Center and take your five precepts. After one year you can take the ten precepts and enter the dharma teacher in training program. Then, two years later you can ask Zen Master Seung Sahn for permission to become a novice monk. In any successful school there is a form for becoming a monk.

**Question:** Do you have some sense of what influences Zen Master Seung Sahn to say yes or no?

**Mu Sang Sunim:** He always asks "Do you want to become a monk 100%?" He says if you are not completely certain, you may give it up down the road. And that is not so good. That is one thing he always asks people.

**Do An Sunim, JDPSN:** It's like everything else — he checks your mind. What is your direction? As with anything else, you may have an idea of what it will be like. You have a romantic notion of what marriage is like, and you soon find out whether your idea was right or not right. The same thing is true of being a monk or nun. People become romantically attached, think it represents something special, or an incredibly adventuresome lifestyle. Those people get sorted out pretty fast.

**Mu Sang Sunim:** When I first became a monk, Zen Master Seung Sahn told me that two kinds of people become monks: very low class people or very high class people. Middle class people cannot become monks. I thought that was interesting.

**Question:** Why is there this separation between being married and being a monk? Why can't one be married and have a monk mind?

**Mu Sang Sunim:** When I first came to a Zen center I had lots of problems and lots of questions and would walk in on Zen Master Seung Sahn at 10:00 p.m. Now, if he were married, or had a family, or had a job, he might not be so available. A monk has the freedom to be there all the time.

**Question:** I have a husband and a child and I'm not comfortable with what you just said. I am walking the path of trying to see, of acting correctly and understanding my correct situation. If I wanted to become a monk, why would I have to give up family, career and all that?

**Do Mun Sunim:** Why become a monk then? There is already no hindrance in your situation.

**Question:** So there is no distinction?

**Do Mun Sunim:** It's not like a better way of practicing, just a different situation.

**Kwang Myong Sunim:** The form is different, but the job is the same. The only distinction between being married and being a monk, in our teaching, is the nature of together action. If you have a family, that must be your primary concern. If you are a monk, you make no distinctions—the whole world is your family.

Zen Master Seung Sahn also described monk as an "outside job." There are doctors, lawyers, carpenters. . . those are also "outside jobs." But inside, everybody has the same job: understand themselves, get enlightenment, help other people. Does that help?

**Question:** I still have lots of questions.

**Kwang Myong Sunim:** It's like asking, "Why can't I be a doctor and a lawyer and a carpenter and a plumber?" You can only do one thing at a time. You have to choose. And once you choose, do it the best way you can. If you have clear mind, then you can use your karma and help other people. If your mind is not clear, you could have the best karma in the world and it won't help you. The Buddha's first teaching was about the primacy of "dukkha" (suffering). He didn't say "except for monks." (laughter) □



*Mu Sang Sunim*