

Expanding Borders

An American in eastern Europe

Susan Bernstein

During the Sangha Weekend last August, a lot of concerns were expressed about the future and direction of the Kwan Um School of Zen. The discussion seemed to turn mostly around leadership questions. But my concern has not so much been about teachers and leaders, but something more immediate: what is our school, our sangha? Where is it, exactly? It is in the dharma room that we say our vows, wear our robes, and do formal practice. Yet the borders of the zendo seem infinitely expansive, and we speak of “one school.” How to realize it?

Last summer, I had the opportunity to experience the international dimension of the Kwan Um School of Zen: I visited the Polish sangha and traveled to the Soviet Union during Zen Master Seung Sahn’s visit there. This trip deepened my view of our school and what it means to be a member of it. I am not a dharma teacher, although I have taken the five precepts. I had no teaching or organizational responsibilities. I simply wanted to visit the sangha.

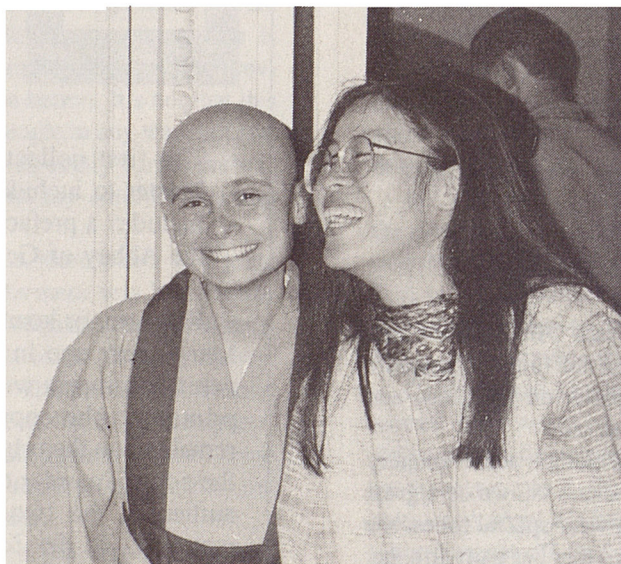
This was my first trip to eastern Europe. Since conditions were sure to be different, I concentrated on my practice from beginning to end, making a conscious decision not to expect anything and to leave my judging mind behind. I was able to let go of my ideas and go into this situation with an open mind because I knew the sangha was there. I was warmly welcomed at the Warsaw Zen Center and given a room with two Lithuanian visitors, although there were hundreds of people sleeping on the dharma room floor. Despite the crowds, the residents always made sure I had something to eat, helped me with language problems, lent me a dictionary and a needle and thread, and found me a seat in the packed dharma room. Everyone assumed I was a teacher of some kind, since I had come such a long way. People genuinely appreciated the fact that I had traveled so far to visit their Zen center—something which we in the United States sometimes take for granted. When we

went to Krakow for the day, I was asked if I wanted a ticket along with the rest of the group, or if I preferred a first class ticket along with the teachers. I wanted no special treatment, and was very happy to be included in the group (though it turned out two tickets were already gotten for me anyway!) It was a wonderful thing to be received in a foreign country with so much kindness and generosity—and to feel so strongly a common practice, a common direction and a real sense of family, though I was so far from home. Through the differences—and chanting the Heart Sutra in Polish *was* a challenge—the practice was the same. I could trust people and be helped by them, give up my ideas about deciding anything about anything, and just go with whatever happened. People took me sightseeing in Krakow, showed me parks and monuments around Warsaw, ordered food for me—my

favorite soon became kasha with butter—and, most importantly, talked to me and shared with me. I was impressed with the strength and sincerity of the Polish sangha. I saw how tightly they practice and live together—many more people in a smaller space, with usually only one bathroom—and gained a little perspective on my more comfortable surroundings back home.

I then went to Moscow and Lithuania with Zen Master Seung Sahn and several other teachers. In light of material conditions there, freedom from judg-

ing mind and not attaching to the many irritations and inconveniences was a requirement for enjoying the visit. But most importantly, I was able to spend time with Russian Zen students, new sangha members, and others interested in spiritual practice who had never been exposed to our formal training. This helped me to get back in touch with “beginner’s mind” in a very profound way. The precarious position of spiritual practice in the former Soviet Union and the very real limitations that had been imposed upon people for many years helped me to appreciate what a gift it is to have the opportunity to practice Zen with a community. For example, one friend told me that not long ago he could have been arrested for having a copy of *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. What at home sometimes seemed like a tiresome burden—just another “thing to do”—appeared to me again as a most



Won Mi Sunim (Warsaw) and Nam Hee Chon (Berlin)



Precepts ceremony, Frankfurt

wonderful privilege.

It was inspiring to experience the independent spiritual struggles of our new members in the Saint Petersburg region (with whom I spent several weeks) without the benefit—which perhaps sometimes can become a hindrance—of teachers, beautiful dharma rooms, books, moktaks, rules or schedules. In practicing with them—beating substitute moktaks (I finally settled on a jar and wooden spoon), chanting, sitting and talking in the Russian forest by the strange late light of the White Nights (the time of the summer solstice when there is only a slight darkening from about midnight to 1 a.m.)—I was able both to put down and to appreciate form in a new way. I was reminded that wearing a robe and sitting on a cushion does not necessarily mean that I am truly practicing the 100% effort to be present. On the other hand, I gained a renewed appreciation of how form and together action help me do what my small “I” cannot always do by itself. I felt a very deep bond and common direction with my new friends in Russia, who helped me to see many things about myself, and most importantly, beyond myself. To them, too, I am very grateful.

In Russia I was often questioned about practice and the dharma. As much as I may consider myself an obtuse beginner at home, I realized that I did have some experience to share. There was no place for the self-indulgence of “I am the worst Zen student in the world” mind. In Moscow, I stayed with a member of the sangha, along with the abbot from another Soviet Zen center. On the twenty-sixth floor balcony of the towering apartment block, we were discussing whether there was anything that connects us all, that makes us all one. One fellow who was not interested in Zen believed it was “the good life” that joins us all—“good food, good drink, women!” Through the difficulties of the Russian language, time changes, and of course unclear mind—well, I stopped. I asked myself this question, looked around me—over the river towards Moscow, and at my three companions waiting for my response—I asked myself as hard as I could, and only said “don’t know.”

Susan Bernstein is a member of the Providence Zen Center sangha. □

Dharma Rap

*a poem by Robert Augustine,
“Dharma Bob”*

*Clear mind like space,
is my basic rap.
Know / Don't know,
is my dharma attack.*

*Nam Cheon's cat,
Hyang Eom's tree,
Un Mun's stick (ugh!)
they're all like me.*

*I come from the East,
where the Buddhas grow,
from the clear pure land
of the ice & snow.*

*Now what is this?
Cat food again?
Go wash your bowl!
Try another Kong-an.*

*My original face
cannot be seen.
When it starts to rain
my skin turns green.*

*Dae Soen Sa Nim
was here today.
Joju's dog
just ran away.*

*Mu! Mu!
Tell me what I said!
My mind's so clear,
I have no head.*

*A cigarette man
drops ashes on me.
He runs around
with a stone monkey.*

*I have no face
where a beard could grow.
Bodhidharma
told me so.*

*Moktak, moktak,
clack! clack! clack!
You hit him,
he'll hit you back.*

*(Holding up stick!)
Tell me what you see!
You have no lips,
now go drink tea.*

*Step, step,
to this rhymin' line.
Sun, moon & stars
will fall behind.*

*My tongue is tied.
It sounds absurd;
but, you haven't heard,
my last word.*

*Grass is green!
Sky is blue!
You understand one;
but you don't know two.*

*Your katz did this
and your katz did that;
Killed 500 Buddhas
in a single splat.*

*The plane flies south;
the car goes by;
pup chasing bone;
now who am I?*

*My KATZ! is a sound
that can't be heard.
Don't know, don't know!
Don't say one word!*

*Now you've heard
my DHARMA RAP.
Put it all down,
Leave it where it's at!*