

# Transmission to the West

## *An interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn*

**PP:** Why did you choose the twentieth anniversary of the Kwan Um School of Zen to give transmission?

**ZMSS:** After twenty years, there are now three disciples whose practicing is ripe and whose teaching is correct, so now it is time for transmission.

**PP:** How did you decide to pick these three people as new Zen Masters?

**ZMSS:** We have a process. First, someone finishes all the kong-ans and is tested in a Ji Do Poep Sa Nim certification ceremony. At the ceremony, anybody can ask any kind of question, and if the candidate answers with no hindrance then he or she can become a Ji Do Poep Sa Nim.

After three years, each Ji Do Poep Sa Nim is tested again by doing dharma combat with Zen Masters both outside and inside our school. Three years after they successfully complete this dharma combat, I check their teaching again. At that time, if their teaching is clear, their mind is clear, and their actions are clear, then transmission is no problem. Meditation and wisdom have come together; their practice is now ripe.

**PP:** When you were twenty-two years old, Zen Master Ko Bong Sunim gave you transmission. Nobody knew who you were. That style and our present process seem different.

**ZMSS:** Yes. Ko Bong Sunim was a freedom-style Zen Master. He did not stay at a big temple and have many students like other Korean teachers. He didn't even want to teach Korean monks; he thought they had too much pride and didn't practice correctly, so he only taught nuns and lay people. He wasn't so concerned with

building an organization or a teaching lineage. Ko Bong Sunim would come and go. He was a freedom-style Zen Master, so he gave a freedom-style transmission.

I do not teach freedom style. In the United States, from the beginning, I have taught correct organization: correct temple organization, correct work organization, correct school organization. Now we have correct teacher

organization: Ji Do Poep Sa Nim for three years; then dharma combat with other Zen Masters; then again after three years I will check their teaching; then transmission. That's our style.

**PP:** In Zen we refer to "a special transmission, outside the sutras, not dependent on words or speech." What does this mean?

**ZMSS:** Three times Buddha's mind and Mahakasyapa's mind met and became one. Thus, Mahakasyapa became the First Patriarch. The three occasions of transmission were:

First: "Sharing the cushion with Mahakasyapa in front of the Pagoda of Many Children." Many disciples had gathered for the Buddha's daily dharma speech. The great monks

were in the front; the newer monks were seated in the rear. No one spoke as they anticipated the talk. At that time, Mahakasyapa was still a relative novice, even though he was an old man. He was out begging and arrived late to the assembly. As he walked in, his eyes and Buddha's eyes met—their minds connected. Mahakasyapa proceeded toward the front of the crowd, to the consternation of the senior monks. As he approached, the Buddha moved over on his cushion to make room for Mahakasyapa. This was the first transmission.

Second: "Holding up a flower on Vulture's Peak." Again, Buddha had appeared for a dharma speech in front



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of a huge gathering. For several minutes he was silent. Finally, he picked up a flower. Everyone was confused except Mahakasyapa, who smiled. Then Buddha said, "My true dharma I transmit to you." This was the second transmission.

Third: "At Niranjana River, when Buddha's feet burst out of the casket." After Buddha died, his disciples gathered around his gold casket. They were very sad. Also, they were very confused—he had said "no life, no death," so how could he die? Maybe his teaching was not correct. So there was a lot of thinking. Mahakasyapa arrived late and saw this; then, he slowly began walking around the casket, with his hands at hapchang. He walked around three times; when he came to the front of the casket he bowed three times. No one knew what he was doing—why wasn't he crying over the Buddha's death? Suddenly, the Buddha's feet shot through the end of the casket. Everybody was happy—only the Buddha's body had died, not his true self. This is the story of the third transmission.

In all three cases, there were no words, just mind to mind connection.

PP: Buddha's mind to his mind; what does that mean?

ZMSS: It's kind of like an auction. You make a

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*This tradition of mind-to-mind transmission has continued from the Buddha to our present day.*

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gesture and the auctioneer's mind and your mind connect—there is a recognition. Words are not necessary. *From mind to mind.*

PP: When you give transmission, is this also mind to mind?

ZMSS: Yes. This tradition of mind to mind transmission has continued from the Buddha to Mahakasyapa, from Mahakasyapa to Ananda, and through our lineage to the present day.

PP: You are the seventy-eighth patriarch in your line. You gave transmission to three people; which one is the seventy-ninth patriarch?

ZMSS: They are all seventy-ninth patriarchs going back to the Buddha, and "second patriarchs" in the American extension of the lineage that began when I

came to the West.

PP: Usually we think of transmission as one person. So what does this mean, three?

ZMSS: Before the sixth patriarch there was only one line of transmission; no patriarch had given transmission to more than one student. The Buddha's robe and bowl were passed on as a symbol of the singular, direct lineage. After the sixth patriarch, five lines appeared. Later on, teachers would spawn as many as one hundred lines. My grandteacher, Man Gong Sunim, gave transmission to more than a dozen students.

PP: How do we know which of the three transmissions represents the Kwan Um School of Zen line?

ZMSS: They are all considered Kwan Um School of Zen lines because they all descend from Kwan Um School of Zen. But the first monk to receive transmission fosters the "main line," responsible for preserving our specific tradition and practice forms. Zen Master Su Bong (Mu Deung Sunim) thus continues our main line, which is a tradition of monk to monk transmission. The Kwan Um School of Zen centers and organization follow this main line.

Zen Master Bo Mun (George Bowman) and Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes), if they wish, can begin their own schools with their own traditions, their own centers. They can also teach at the Kwan Um School of Zen centers, where they would follow the practice forms of the main line. And all the teachers who receive transmission will participate in the overall governing of Kwan Um School of Zen.

PP: When people have asked you over the years about American-style practice, you have said "when an American Zen Master appears, we will have American style." Today, three American Zen Masters are appearing.

SS: As more Zen Masters appear, their individual styles will emerge. Perhaps some of them will make their own schools. So maybe, slowly, this Korean style will disappear and be replaced by an American style or American styles. But the main line does not change.

PP: Now you are giving transmission, so you will have no job. What will you do, sir?

SS: Yes, hungry time only eat, tired time only sleep, that's all.

PP: Thank you very much. □