

# Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes)

Transmission name Soeng Hyang  
(Nature Smell)  
Dharma name Poep Um  
Original name Barbara Rhodes

*Before Heaven and Earth separate  
True nature completely bright.  
Originally—nothing happening.  
Spring comes, many flowers blooming.*  
Zen Master Seung Sahn



Zen Master Seung Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) was one of Zen Master Seung Sahn's first American students and has been studying with him since 1972. She was given inka in 1977, and is guiding teacher of Bultasa Zen Group in Chicago and Cypress Tree Zen Center in Tallahassee, Florida. A registered nurse since 1969, she works for Hospice Care of Rhode Island. She helped found Providence Zen Center, and lived there for seventeen years, serving in a number of teaching and administrative capacities. She has two teenaged daughters, and lives in Providence.



## Dharma talk

I have been appreciating the smell of grass in the tent all weekend, so Soeng Hyang (*Nature Smell*) is a good name for me. When the Buddha gave transmission to Mahakasyapa he said, "I have the utmost profound exquisite teaching, a special transmission outside the dharma that I give to you, Mahakasyapa." I thought that that was wonderful until I started studying with Zen Master Seung Sahn. One day he said "You know, Buddha made a big mistake when he gave that kind of transmission." So I ask you, if you are the Buddha and you are holding up a flower, a stick, or anything, and your wonderful student who has been practicing for many many years looks at you and smiles, how would you give that student trans-

mission?

KATZ!

Only don't know. I can't give you the answer.

I also have a short story. When we first moved to Cumberland, many people were worried because they were afraid we were some kind of bad cult. They were afraid of us. The local newspaper interviewed a neighbor down the street and asked what the people were like who moved in. The neighbor said, "I think they are OK. I only know one man, and he stopped to help me fix a flat tire." Then the neighbor observed, "They must leave their religion at home." So I hope that you all find your home—your true self—and leave your religion there. Thank you.



## Interview by Mu Ryang Sunim

MRSN: Is there is any specific story about Zen Master Seung Sahn that you would like to share?

ZMSH: I was driving Dae Soen Sa Nim back from a dharma talk in Boston, and it was very late; we were very tired. It was summer time and the bugs were out. I was going about 65, and suddenly a big bug hit the windshield. It was still moving, but I figured it must be dead and kept driving. How could a bug survive a collision with a car going that fast? But it kept making these sporadic movements.

Suddenly Dae Soen Sa Nim said "pull over." I had to pull over three lanes into the breakdown lane. He got out of the car, picked up the bug, examined it and finally said "Yes, it's dead." There was so much caring. We were tired and wanted to get home, but he just wasn't sure it was dead. So much caring—that really got to me.

MRSN: For a long time you were the only woman teacher in our school. How do you see the role of women teachers in the West?

ZMSH: Occasionally people ask me to do retreats exclusively for women, but I've never been particularly interested. After a day or two of sitting it's not men or women, just dharma friends. I don't feel any sexual energy or sexual discrimination in that setting. It's nice that there are more women teachers and it encourages women to know that they are given the same status as men, but ultimately we all have to not attach to that and



be ourselves. Some people are more masculine and some people are more feminine but ultimately you just have to be who you are and believe in yourself. Believing in yourself means you understand your vow to help others.

**MRSN:** I could see the value of a same-sex retreat if you're discussing a lot, but for practices like sitting and chanting it doesn't seem so important.

**ZMSH:** I agree. If you're working on certain issues it could be really useful, but when you're just sitting and chanting, everything becomes one.

**MRSN:** How do you see the relationship of nuns, monks and lay people in western Buddhism?

**ZMSH:** It's nice to be talking to you now; I don't see you that often.

**MRSN:** It's nice to be talking to you, too.

**ZMSH:** Yesterday we were chanting "Kwan Seum Bosal" in the dharma room. It was very crowded, so I stood with some other people on the porch, which is separated from the dharma room by a glass wall. I noticed how those of us in the porch would end our chants just a little earlier and couldn't quite stay in tune. We had to listen really hard. Just one thin wall of glass caused this disharmony. I saw this as a metaphor for how we separate male and female, monastic and lay person. We just have to listen a little more closely. I think the more we practice together and talk to each other and respect each other's points of view, the more we are one family.

**MRSN:** How did you first meet Dae Soen Sa Nim?

**ZMSH:** I had read a little about Zen and was thinking about doing a retreat with Kapleau Roshi. I was living in California and thinking about moving to the east coast to

be closer to my family. I literally just stumbled across Providence Zen Center while looking for a place to stay.

A friend of mine had noticed an apartment for rent in the same building as the Zen center. I checked it out, but it was too expensive. I thought of knocking on the Zen center door, but hesitated. After all, the books said if you meet a Zen Master he will hit you or make you wait outside! So I was afraid to go in, but finally got up the nerve. Dae Soen Sa Nim was warm and friendly, and said "We have a talk next week, please come." So I came and liked the teaching; soon after, I moved into the Zen center.



*Zen Master Soeng Hyang*

**MRSN:** Was there a turning point at that time, something he said or did?

**ZMSH:** No, I just liked his warmth and eye contact, and the way he was just so unpretentious.

**MRSN:** Why did Dae Soen Sa Nim choose to give transmission to three people at this time?

**ZMSH:** I don't know why he does the things he does. He's really driven and really wonderful. A real missionary—he wants to get things done as fast as possible.

**MRSN:** He's not going to wait around for people to feel that they're ready.

**ZMSH:** Oh, no!

**MRSN:** It's already too late if you feel you're ready to do something.

**ZMSH:** I told a friend how I was nervous about this transmission because I know my own shortcomings, and she said "Well, that's good because that will help your teaching."

**MRSN:** Thank you.

**ZMSH:** You're welcome. □