

Tales from Shin Won Sah

Bowing with mountain gods

Neil Bartholomew

During the winter of 1990-91 I joined the sixth international Kyol Che, held at Shin Won Sah in central South Korea. This article is condensed from a collection of memories and stories from that time, written after I returned to the United States.

The retreat numbered twenty-one people, including Zen Master Su Bong (then Mu Deung Sunim, JDPSN), who was the retreat leader. There were eight monks and one nun; the rest were lay people. For the duration of the retreat, however, we all adopted a monastic appearance: shaved heads, traditional gray clothing.

The participants came from seven countries: eight U.S. citizens, three Polish, two German, two Korean, two Canadian, one Soviet, one Malaysian, and one Czech monk with a German passport who now lives in Taiwan. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to live with such a diverse group of people. There were many times when simple interactions in daily life brought to light the different perspectives with which we approached situations:

... There is a panel missing from the bottom of the door

to the men's changing room. While walking by, as a joke, I stick my head through the hole with an inquisitive look on my face.

Immediately, Oh Jin Sunim (our head monk, from Poland) exclaims, "Go away! We have no bread today! Get back in line!" We all laugh, but I will never forget what that taught me about his life . . .

This retreat reflects both the Korean tradition in which Zen Master Seung Sahn was trained and the adaptations he has made to it in the West. Our school's Kyol Che is considered quite revolutionary in Korean Buddhism. For instance, it is nearly unheard of in Korea to have men and women, or monks and lay people, practicing together. Some people in the established tradition welcome these innovations, and some are opposed to them. We were often reminded that many eyes were on us, that if we practiced hard and showed that the situation could work, we could have a profound effect on the future.

...It's 4:00 a.m. Hyon Gak Sunim is beginning to ring the great temple bell, as he does each morning at this time

Sticking your head in ice water

Patsy Talbot

From a talk given during the 1990-91 International Kyol Che at Shin Won Sah temple in Korea

I'll start in Australia.

Several years ago I left my home in Canada to do some world traveling. After a year and a half in Australia I decided to go to Thailand. I didn't know who Buddha was or what Buddhism meant, but I knew I was on my way to a very Buddhist country. I recall writing to my Canadian boyfriend, reassuring him that I wouldn't do something crazy like shave my head or go sit in the mountains.

Six months later I had to write him back from Korea and tell him I was sitting my first Kyol Che (*long retreat*), and that my head was shaved. (*Lay people are asked to shave their head before the retreat begins.*)

He was shocked and didn't understand.

I had come to Korea as a tourist, but soon after I arrived I met Zen Master Seung Sahn. When I met the Zen Master and monks here, I had a very big question: why do you

shave your head? Why not just live in society with the rest of the people? Why do you have to hide up here in the mountains? And I had such an anger mind as well: why all this bowing to a silly gold Buddha statue? And who is this eccentric Zen Master? The guy doesn't know what he's doing. I didn't know what a Zen Master was, but what I saw didn't seem very correct.

About a week or two later, after hearing Zen Master Seung Sahn's talks and being around the few monks that I had met, I moved into Hwa Gye Sah. Soon I heard about a three day Yong Maeng Jong Jin, which in Korea means an intensive retreat—all day, all night; no sleeping. Now I had never done meditation before, hardly knew what it was, and so I asked one of the monks whether I should try it or not. And he said "Oh, you should talk with the Zen Master."

and each evening at 5:00. Each of the thirty-two strikes of the bell resonates from the village below to the temples further up the mountain.

As the bell rings, the many dogs in the village answer, and they, the roosters, and the single cow keep up a discussion for up to half an hour. When the big bell finishes, I begin ringing the small bell in our hall, as I hear a monk doing the same in the main Buddha hall seventy-five yards away. This is the beginning of our morning chanting . . .

Shin Won Sah is in the shadow of Kyeryong San, traditionally one of Korea's most important mountains for spiritual practice. Almost every day, in the middle of mundane activities such as returning from the outhouse, I would look up, catch a glimpse of Kyeryong San, and stop to marvel at it. On sunny days I marveled at the striking blue of the sky, a hue which I have seen nowhere else, and the ragged beauty of the rock outcroppings on the mountain. On misty days I marveled at the play of the mist with the various peaks and valleys, as in an old Chinese painting. On rainy days I marveled at the sight of storms passing across Kyeryong San and out of sight. On snowy days came the greatest marvel of all, for which I have no words.



The Zen hall at Shin Won Sah

When I asked him, he said "Yes. Try necessary!" So I tried it. I didn't know what I was doing most of the time. I was in severe pain and constantly fell asleep. But I did the retreat. Then I heard about the three month retreat, Kyol Che. I had heard that they don't like to take beginners, preferring people with solid experience. But again I talked with Zen Master Seung Sahn. Again he said "Yes! Try necessary!"

I began with a real "beginner's mind" about everything. They shaved my head and I thought "this is interesting; I finally get to see the shape of my head!"

But our teachers always warn that if you're holding on to your opinion, your condition, and your situation, then retreat is a nightmare. Well, my first Kyol Che was a nightmare! I was doing really hard practice—a thousand bows a day, midnight practice every night. But I was following and holding on so strongly to my ideas that all this good training could not help me.

In retrospect, my antics during that first Kyol Che

The temple complex consists of several buildings. The central courtyard, with a stone pagoda in the middle, is bordered by the Jijang Bosal hall (where funeral ceremonies were held), the main Buddha hall (where the Shin Won Sah monks did their daily practice), the building with the kitchen, dining room (for the Shin Won Sah monks; we ate in the Zen hall) and office, and a small building for solo practice.

On the hill above the courtyard is the Mountain God Temple, which was built by the emperor in the late nineteenth century as an imperial shrine. It is a temple to the spirit of Kyeryong San, which Koreans have considered a holy spot for many centuries. It's a very powerful place, and many of us used it for extra practice. Set off from all of these was the building where we stayed, the traditional Zen hall.

The food was simple and nutritious. It was prepared by the same lay women who prepared the food for the resident monks of Shin Won Sah. The heart of each meal

was white rice and kimchee. Generally the rice was accompanied by either a soup or a curry. Most of the protein came from soy products: tofu, soybean sprouts, miso. Most meals also included a variety of vegetables, marinated in

seem utterly ridiculous. But it was a completely innocent mind. For instance, it is important to stay awake, but I was petrified to fall asleep. I

would put a pail of freezing cold water on the end of the porch, and dunk my head into it during the walking period. The head monk used to get so angry! Sometimes I'd have to break through the ice that formed on top of the water to stick my head in there. Or I'd walk around with snow packed on my head during walking meditation. Or get Tiger Balm and put it around my eyes and forehead; with those fumes I'd never fall asleep. Anything to stay awake.

I haven't done any of that the last couple of years. But by the second year I could start to see how my actions affect other people. Every dharma talk that was given seemed intended to hit me. I felt completely naked, as if people could see right through me. How could I erect a wall to feel a little bit more protected? Not possible.

It has been very difficult for me to accept the tradi-

various ways and set out in small dishes on trays which we shared, two or three to a tray. This is a feature of Korean cuisine everywhere—lots of little dishes set out around the table, and everyone's chopsticks poking around sampling everything. I liked it; it gives a relaxed, friendly, collective feeling to the meal, whether in a small family restaurant or eating a silent formal meal at the temple.

Throughout the retreat, supporters donated food to us to supplement the normal temple food. There was often peanut butter to mix into our morning gruel, or fruit and crackers for our tea break after work period. Sometimes, particularly at special occasions such as the lunar new year or when Zen Master Seung Sahn came down from Seoul, we had a party in the mid-afternoon with lots of food, and the rule of silence was relaxed during these times.

Toilet facilities were simple: a pee-house for the men which drained into a pit, a bucket serving a similar function for the women, and a divided outhouse about a hundred yards away for anything else we needed to do. The outhouse had cement walls and floor, with a two-foot gap between the top of the walls and the roof, and no doors on the stalls, so we were quite exposed to the elements while squatting over the pit. I found that refreshing most of the time, except when it was quite cold.

For washing our bodies or clothes, there was a building behind the Zen hall which consisted of two washrooms, one for men and one for women. While these had hot water, the rooms themselves were not heated. I heard

that the women's washroom had a tub which could be filled for baths; the men's washroom had only a faucet with a hand-held shower installed in it. The air and floor were cold, so showers were not a leisurely affair. Laundry was done by hand in the same room, in plastic tubs filled from the faucets. The good result of doing laundry by hand is that you tend to be more mindful about how you use clothes. It's an aid to paying attention.

The resident teacher of Shin Won Sah is Byok Am Sunim, who is the precepts master for monks in our school. Byok Am Sunim has been a friend and colleague of Zen Master Seung Sahn for over forty years. His sincerity is his most striking quality. Each time he passed the stupa in the central courtyard of Shin Won Sah, he bowed several times with such complete attention that it reminded me of why we practice. His joy is also striking. One time as I walked toward the Jijang Bosal hall, I saw several huge flocks of geese flying north very high in the sky. As they passed, Byok Am Sunim emerged from the dining hall across the courtyard; I caught his attention and pointed to the geese. His face broke out in a huge smile and with the excitement of a child he called wildly to bring everyone out of the dining hall to look at the geese. Another time during a particularly extravagant party when Zen Master Seung Sahn was visiting, Byok Am Sunim turned to him, pointed to the spread of cake, ice cream, fruit, nuts and other goodies, smiled, and said (in Korean), "If you have no defilements, great Zen Master cannot appear."

tional women's roles in Korea. It's a different society, and I resented that. Invariably I'd find myself beside the men at temple work period, sweeping and digging, physical activities like that. Never in the kitchen helping the women. Or doing any "women's stuff." Someone would ask me to make a cup of coffee and the rage would erupt: I'd think, "You have two hands, make it yourself!"

Slowly, slowly, we all change.

After the first Kyol Che I went to Shin Won Sah to do a short solo retreat. At that time there was only one bosalnim to take care of all the cooking, cleaning, washing, and gardening at the temple. She was seventy years old. There was no way I was going to let her do all those chores herself while I was sitting and bowing in the Buddha hall. So I began to help her. Even though I was doing but a fraction of her chores, I was completely exhausted. Later, these words appeared in my mind: "Men's work/women's work doesn't matter, just do it." I don't know where the thought came from, but all my life I never had liked doing women's work. I didn't even like being a woman. I equated it with weakness, with being someone's "slave." But here was this insight—there is a

correct time for everything; it has nothing to do with whether I like it or not. And although I still often display a strong, aggressive, "masculine" nature, I am more balanced. I am learning what it means to be a daughter, a sister, a woman. I am learning what it means to possess feminine qualities, and when and how to use them.

In the fall of '89 I went home for the first time in three years. There had always been friction with my parents—I always "knew best." This time around I really tried to let go of my opinions; and because helping out had become second nature, I did the same at home. My parents still don't understand what I'm doing, but they aren't as afraid as they used to be. And neither am I.

This past summer I came back to Hwa Gye Sah, and was asked to be Zen Master Seung Sahn's attendant. For some reason I thought that this would provide opportunities to chit-chat and stuff like that—NO! Just bring him his breakfast, hang up his coat, open his door, wash his shoes, serve his guests, O.K. We rarely sat down and talked. That was my job. It's a different culture, which isn't good or bad—just different.

Zen Master Seung Sahn's role and style, and therefore

In the middle of Kyol Che, we followed the traditional practice of Zen temples of doing extra practice during the week leading up to Buddha's Enlightenment Day. On the last day of this week, we sat all day and night. We were joined at midnight by thirty bosalnims, Korean lay women of all ages. Until 4:00 a.m. we alternated fifteen minutes of sitting with fifteen minutes of walking; almost nobody slept. When we finished sitting, the bosalnims left for the dining hall where they had breakfast, while we ate as usual in the Zen hall.

... It's about 5:00 a.m. Breakfast is over. We have a day off before resuming the regular Kyol Che schedule. I can't sleep—have too much energy. I do lots of laundry, and head up to the Mountain God hall to do some bows. During my second hundred, tears begin flowing down my face. Where do they come from? Joy? Sadness? Only don't know. Only bowing and crying, and feeling unspeakably grateful for the opportunity to practice. After three hundred bows, I return to the Zen hall and fall asleep.

I wake a couple of hours later to find a lunch of special rice and seaweed soup made from



Jane McLaughlin, JDPSN and Patsy Talbot.

those of his attendant, are different in Korea than in America. In the West he's on a more friendly and "equal" basis with people. But in Korea custom and tradition dictate that he play the "Great Zen Master" almost non-stop. Guests come and go from his room at all hours, and Hwa Gye Sah itself is continuously busy with tourists, ceremonies and religious groups. To be a good attendant, I was told, one must "say nothing and do everything." That's really a test of "I, my, me!" Accepting my function has been a challenge; what has helped has been seeing the people around me as my family, and learning how to respect and care for them.

Do my comments about the woman's role sound like subservience? To the Western mind, it is subservience. To the Korean mind it is duty, humility and respect. I continually need to choose how I want to see things. If I choose to see my actions as subservience then I create a lot of suffering for myself and others. If I choose to act

seaweed that the bosalnims picked themselves out of the ocean. My body responds to the nourishment with joy and gratitude. Outside is a clear, warm, spring-like day. After lunch, another retreatant and I use the free afternoon to do what we usually don't have time for—hiking to the summit of the mountain. We climb steadily for about an hour and a half, and emerge to a 360 degree view. After seven days of extra practice and little sleep, our minds are receptive and calm. We sit for a long time looking out over the peaks rising into the distance and the clear blue sky, feeling the warm breeze. Finally it is time to return for evening practice.

Taking a wrong turn almost immediately after leaving the summit, we are over half way down the wrong side of the mountain before we realize our mistake. (Clear mind? What's that?) After running uphill for 45 minutes and tumbling down the correct side, we arrive happy and exhausted just as the big bell rings to call us to evening chanting . . .

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out of duty and respect, then life and relationships are smooth, and people are helped.

This teaching about correct situation, correct relationship and correct function has helped my life immensely. It's astonishing how smooth your relationships can be when you keep these three things.

Many people ask me, what are you going to do, you've been in Korea for so long. Don't you want to do something different? Don't you want to get married? Have kids? Become a monk? I don't know. Really don't know. For now, I'll just do my practice and help other people. That's my job.

Since giving this talk, Patsy Talbot helped establish the new Hong Kong Zen Center, and is now living in Vancouver. □