

Meditation wisdom

The Kwan Um School of Zen in Germany

Roland Wöhrle-Chon, abbot

Zen Master Seung Sahn officially initiated Zen Zentrum Berlin in May 1991 with the name "Chong Hye Sah," meaning "meditation wisdom."

Where there is try mind, there will be a result.

About four years ago, two Zen students from Berlin traveled to Warsaw to participate in part of the Winter Kyol Che there. They experienced serious Zen practice and were impressed. Andrzej Czarniecki, JDPSN from Poland, who led the Kyol Che, encouraged the students to start a Zen group in Berlin and do regular practice.

They liked this idea, because they already felt that Zen could help many people. When they returned home, they announced in public places and newspapers that there would be Zen practice twice a week. The dharma room was in their own flat. In the beginning, nobody came and they practiced alone. After some months, a couple who practiced Zen in the Soto tradition joined them for Sunday morning practice. From that beginning, the number of members has continued to grow.

The first Yong Maeng Jong Jin in Berlin was organized in the spring of 1991, led by Czarniecki PSN. After that retreat, many people began coming for regular practice.

One day Zen Master Wu Bong (Jacob Perl) called to say that Zen Master Seung Sahn had to change his itinerary in Europe and there would be time for a retreat in Berlin, which had just become the new German capital. We were surprised and very happy to meet this great Zen Master of whom we had read and heard so much. We eagerly agreed to organize it. Although there were only ten days left to publicize it, about 150 people appeared for the public talk at the university. The space was totally filled; people had to stand and sit on the floor.

There was not enough time to find a hotel for Zen Master Seung Sahn and his party. So Zen Master Seung Sahn, accompanied by Zen Master Su Bong, Zen Master Wu Bong, and Mu Sang Sunim, had to share the small two-room flat without a shower. One room was our dharma room. It was very impressive for us to see how Zen Master Seung Sahn only followed every situation, no matter how difficult and uncomfortable it was.

The Yong Maeng Jong Jin took place in a dance studio, the only facility we could find on short notice. The one shower for forty was in the "kitchen" which we had to cross to get to the interview room. At one point, Zen Master Seung Sahn was crossing the kitchen/shower room at the moment a naked man came out of the shower. Zen Master Seung Sahn only said "good morning."

It is wonderful to see how our German sangha has developed since 1991. There have been Yong Maeng Jong Jins in Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Cologne. During Zen Master Seung Sahn's spring 1992 visit to Berlin, 300 people came to the public talk and about 60 people sat the three-day Yong Maeng Jong Jin together. We now have strong groups in Cologne and Hamburg, with a new group forming in Bonn. There are new students from Dresden, formerly in East Germany. The Swiss sangha, which we try to support, is getting stronger—the Zen Center in Zurich is doing well.

In Berlin, as in all major German cities, Zen groups and meditation centers of different traditions already exist. Most German Zen students practice in the Soto form, and many of them don't have kong-an practice. For most of them, Zen means only Japanese style. Often people ask if what we do is also Zen. Although many groups in Germany are quite exclusive and generally not interested in other teachers, some like coming to meet Zen Master Seung Sahn and his Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sa Nims. They are curious and like the teaching in our school, so they come again. Some of these students come to our retreats to meet and practice with a great Zen Master. This is surprising, because Germans like to hold their ideas and opinions; it might be that they are afraid of getting confused if they meet teachers of different traditions.

We have developed some very good relationships with Zen groups of other traditions. It is obvious that Zen Master Seung Sahn's teachings are not limited to any tradition or form.

In Germany, many people are becoming interested in Zen. What is the reason? Many new people come—people of all ages and education. As in every part of the world, some human beings want to understand this life. When there is a lack of belief in the traditions in which we grew up, or when fear grows about environmental and human consequences of endless, technical and economic

progress, we may start to think deeply about the meaning of life. Who am I? What is correct living? How can we find true happiness? These questions are very familiar to all human beings of all ages. But these questions especially arise in times of despair and in times of revolutions and change.

We already have some Zen students from the former East Germany, and they seem to enjoy the community feeling of the sangha. Although socialist ideas were not able to function in the communist systems, they did propagate a form of together-action life, which gave some social stability. Many people miss that feeling.

Since the breakdown of communism in eastern Europe, people have been looking for direction in their lives. After the dissolution of the indoctrinated ideology in which they all more or less believed, many have started fighting for a new nationalistic ideology in which they can place their trust. But some who don't want to fight for this kind of nationalistic independence, try instead to fight for true freedom inside themselves. The people of the former East Germany are now looking for something. I think Zen can help many of them.

Problems always appear when people live, work and practice together. What is important is how we deal with it. In sangha life we have the opportunity, and sometimes no other choice, but to put down our opinions, our egocentric desires and our judgements. Then it is possible to overcome many problems. This is very important, because then we learn to live without fighting others and causing suffering. Instead we grow together and help each other. We all want to find self-confidence, and confidence in other human beings. So, Zen practice is very useful.

But we are formed through our culture and traditions, and of course our approach to Zen is determined through this. Once Jane McLaughlin, JDPSN told a story concerning the attitude of Zen students in different countries. She said that Poland is famous for "one hundred fifty people sitting retreats with only one bathroom"; Spain for "still having a good time ten minutes after the five minute moktak was hit" and Germany for "all the shoes standing in one line in front of the dharma room."

Germans are very meticulous and well organized. This is sometimes a help and sometimes an obstacle to Zen practice. Germans like to make structures, in order to obtain a general view, and many may be afraid about a "don't know mind." Zen Master Seung Sahn once said that Germans have a strong "holding mind." We are always longing for something absolute, in which we can believe one hundred percent. We like to have our situations, our thinking and our ideas in a certain order; a big hindrance for a Zen student. Maybe we have the inclination to cling to forms, words and concepts we think we

understand, because we think that can help us. This longing is the expression of a big motivation. So maybe German Zen students are often frustrated and sad, because in Zen there is nothing special to attain. But we have one small chance. That is, to attain this.

Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching is very simple, but very meticulous and totally straight to the point. Which point? We already understand a little. But if we fully attain this point, we may have a much bigger problem than we ever felt we had, because we will know that it is our original duty to help all our fellow beings. What choice do we have? This is our job. When we understand this, we cease to cause suffering to others. Then we won't destroy this world in order to satisfy our endless desires, but to live correctly and help. Let us all work hard so that in the whole world this wonderful dharma will grow and grow in whatever shape it may be expressed. ☸



*Won Mi Sunim and Namhee Chon,
Zen Zentrum Berlin*