

# Obituary

## Zen Master Su Bong (1943–1994)

Jane McLaughlin, JDPSN

On July 17, 1994, Su Bong Soen Sa was giving a kong-an interview to a fourteen-year-old girl during a two-day retreat at the Hong Kong Zen Center. It was shortly before lunch. He had asked her a few kong-ans. Then he asked her, "What is universal sound?" The young girl hit the floor. Su Bong Soen Sa's voice became very soft, and he said, "Correct." His chin lowered to his chest. Then our dear teacher and friend, the lineage holder for the "Perceive World Sound" school, quietly passed away. He was sitting up, in formal robes and kasa, with his Zen stick in his hand.

Within the hour, the phones started ringing all around the world with this sad news. Many of us who knew and loved Soen Sa—students, friends, and family members—had a similar response: "Where did he go?" "Why so soon?" The glaring, absolutely unavoidable impact of his death is perhaps his most effective teaching of all. Why? Because it takes each and every one of us right back to the most fundamental kong-ans of all, the ones there are no getting around, the ones that keep coming back when you least expect them: "Who are we?" "What are we doing in this world?" "Is there life or death?" "What is the meaning of, 'Only go straight, don't know, try, try, try, for ten thousand years'?"

For the last twenty years, we have had the great good fortune and honor to practice with and learn from this short, smiling, mischievous fellow called Su Bong Soen Sa, who dedicated his life to addressing these

fundamental questions. More importantly, though, he vowed to help everyone else learn how to find their way with these questions, too. And lastly—and most important of all: Soen Sa actually translated his vow into the moment-to-moment action of his life.

Since first meeting Zen Master Seung Sahn in Los Angeles in 1974, Su Bong Soen Sa was always one of the most dedicated Zen students. I love the story of the first time Su Bong Soen Sa met with Zen Master Seung Sahn. The story, as he recalled it to me many years ago, went like this: One day, Su Bong Soen Sa went over to Tahl Mah Sah Zen Center to ask Zen Master Seung Sahn if he could make an appointment to meet with him and ask him a question.

"Of course!" Zen Master Seung Sahn replied. "Why don't you come on Saturday at one o'clock?" Su Bong Soen Sa was very excited to finally talk with a real Zen Master! On the appointed day, he went to the Zen center one hour early and waited. One o'clock came and went. Two o'clock came, three o'clock came.

He was still waiting! Zen Master Seung Sahn walked past him a few times, and yet seemed to take no notice of him. But Su Bong Soen Sa never questioned him. He simply waited there, thinking about the question he wanted to ask. He had read in the Platform Sutra, "Don't attach to any thinking which arises in the mind." The Sixth Patriarch heard that, and got enlightenment. Su Bong Soen Sa was very curious to know what exactly this "enlightenment" was all about.



He even brought the book along to point out the sentence to the Zen Master!

Finally Zen Master Seung Sahn motioned to him and said, "OK, come here. Please, sit down." They sat down on either side of a low, Chinese-style table. "What is your question," Zen Master Seung Sahn asked him.

"Well, Zen Master, there's a sentence in the Platform Sutra which I don't understand. When the Sixth Patriarch heard it, he got enlightenment. I want to understand this enlightenment."

"Oh?? What sentence is that?"

Su Bong Soen Sa opened up the book and placed it on the table facing Zen Master Seung Sahn. Pointing to the sentence, he traced under it with his finger as he read it aloud: "Don't attach to any..." Suddenly, Zen Master Seung Sahn slammed the book shut on Su Bong Soen Sa's finger. "Who are you?!!" he shouted at him.

Su Bong Soen Sa was shocked! "What do you mean?"

Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "No more reading! Put it all down!"

Su Bong Soen Sa was stuck, as never before, but in a new and wonderful way. It was a clear kind of "don't know," not the absent wondering, or circular, confused kind. His index finger stuck between the pages of a sutra, Su Bong Soen Sa instantly realized, "Oh! This is my teacher!" He was very happy, because at last someone had asked him the thing he most wanted to address in his life, "What am I?" It didn't matter that he couldn't answer. Just to ask it was a great relief.

Since that day, Su Bong Soen Sa kept this question all his life. For twenty years, he helped build Zen centers all over the world. He was always available to help. In the early years he designed and built pagodas, painted Buddhas, hammered nails, licked envelopes, picked up visitors at the airport, answered phones, shoveled snow, went for coffee with new students—his energy was nonstop. By now it's legendary how, in the dawning years of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching in the West, Su Bong Soen Sa and Zen Master Seung Sahn would hurtle around the streets of Los Angeles in Soen Sa's beat-up old orange Dodge van, a gold Buddha statue perched between them (looking very much like a third passenger), with dozens of mats and cushions in the back, en route to a new center or group. With the Buddha statue, moktak, chugpi, incense, and chanting books, they were a veritable temple on wheels. And this took place not only in Los Angeles, but in Providence, Cambridge, Maine, Kansas, New Haven, New York... anywhere he was needed. In the meantime of course, he was always practicing, practicing, practicing, keeping his question close to his heart.

On Buddha's Enlightenment Day in December of 1981, Su Bong Soen Sa (at the time a bodhisattva monk

named See Hoy Liao) was given "inka" by Zen Master Seung Sahn. The following winter he led his first 90-day winter Kyol Che at Providence Zen Center. At the end of that retreat he ordained as a monk and was given the name Mu Deung Sunim. Since then he led thirteen 90-day Kyol Che retreats in the United States and in Korea. Between Kyol Ches he travelled and taught in Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, South Africa, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, the United States, Croatia, and countless other places. Above all, the dharma was his life. And his life was on the road—for all of us.

In October of 1992 at a ceremony in Providence Zen Center, Mu Deung Sunim was given formal dharma transmission by Zen Master Seung Sahn, and the enlightenment name of Su Bong Soen Sa, which means "Extra-Ordinary" or "High Mystic" Peak." As we look at Su Bong Soen Sa's life, the two things which shine through most consistently are his great question and his great vow. We can learn from his example that anything is possible. That's how he was. Right or wrong, good or bad, right up to his last breath, he was doing it for all beings. That was, and always will be his greatest gift to us. It has been really incredible to watch him do that, because he was someone right here among us. This was not some ancient person in India who we read about in awe. This was someone like you and me. Su Bong Soen Sa's dharma was to show us that we can all wake up if we try. That's the teaching of his life and his death.

The bodhisattva vow is far greater than any one person who embodies it. A human being comes and goes, but the bodhisattva vow continues. Su Bong Soen Sa showed it to us. He is showing it to us even now, in this moment, if we choose to wake up. And so it remains alive in each of us. In the Orient there's an old saying which goes, "You must fulfill your obligation to your teacher." Now it is our job to do it. This is the true meaning of fulfilling our obligation to Su Bong Soen Sa, of fulfilling our obligation to all beings. We must keep that alive and pass it on. I'm quite sure that's what he would expect. ☸

Jane McLaughlin, JDPSN is editing a book on Zen Master Su Bong's teaching and would appreciate copies of his dharma talks, and anecdotes and photos. Material can be sent to McLaughlin PSN c/o the Cambridge Zen Center.

A meditation garden will be built at Providence Zen Center in memory of Zen Master Su Bong. The garden is being designed by one of his sons, Paul Liao. Contributions may be sent to the Providence Zen Center.