

Opening Ceremony of Kwan Se Um Sang Ji Sal

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Furnace Mountain, Kentucky
24 January 1995

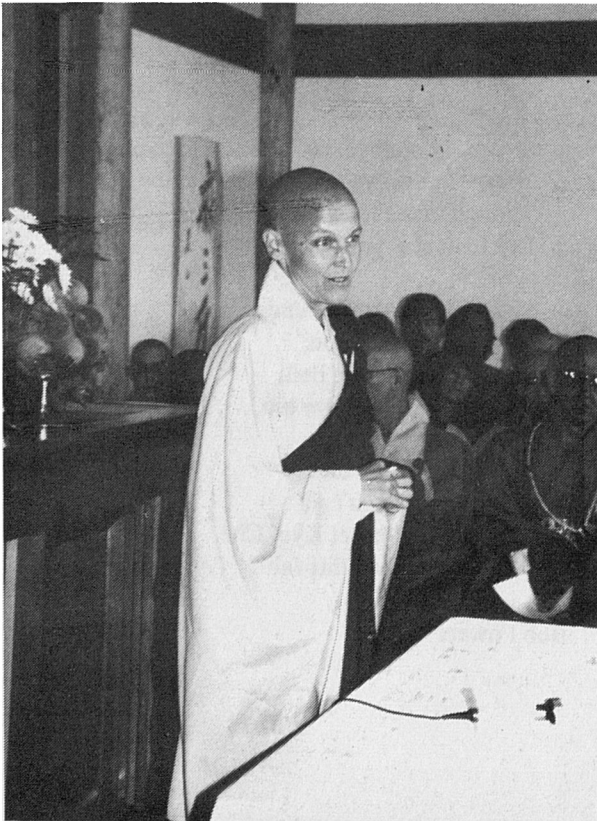
Walking to Kwan Se Um Sang Ji Sah on this snowy January morning it is hard to believe that this temple hasn't always been here. There is a startling familiarity that one has when seeing this building. Not the kind of familiarity that one has seeing another person, a parent or a child. But the recognition that one's bones, flesh and blood are standing right there in front of you. Perhaps it is because I have a deep abiding love for the land on which it stands. Or perhaps this experience of familiarity arises from the eternal, that which we recognize in our teacher and our teacher's teacher; that one determining factor that cannot be named or touched. The temple's flood lights beam. Six of us come out of the darkness into its warmth.

Dreams of the Powell County temple began when Zen Master Seung Sahn and Zen Master Dae Gak walked on the newly purchased piece of property, soon to be called Furnace Mountain. They climbed to the

highest point of the 110 acres, what is locally known the State Rock, for a better view. When Zen Master Seung Sahn caught his breath, he looked down the valley and exclaimed, "This is the best geomancy I have ever seen. You must build a temple there!" Zen Master Seung Sahn was pointing to an area about 100 feet below where he was standing. It was the center point in a bowl-like configuration of the State Rock and it's surrounding limestone ridges. Zen Master Seung Sahn said the new temple would be called Kw Se Um Sang Ji Sah, which means Perceive World Sound, High Ground Temple. Zen Master Dae Gak immediately began the arduous task of doing as his teacher asked, making real what was a dream.

Inspired by traditional oriental temple architecture and the undeniable fact that this temple was to be located in rural Kentucky, an American version of a Korean-style temple was born. This effort at design and building was fondly dubbed by all those who participated in this project as "Temple 101." No one had done this before. With the exception of the foundation and the superstructure, there were no working plans. Design and intent were verbally communicated and sketched on scrap pieces of wood and paper. Willing craftsmen were able to interpret what was needed and to create exactly what was required. Every detail was agonized over before a decision was reached. What color should the tile roof be? Blue. It was what Zen Master Seung Sahn recommended. But what if the temple looks like Howard Johnson's to those driving up the road below? Should they come, we'll invite them in for tea and fruit. And where exactly is the center of the building relative to the land? One at a time, with eyes closed and arms extended, three of us "scientifically" walked across the platform, ending up in exactly the same spot. "This must be it," someone said.

Looking back over this two-year building project, there were choices that one seemingly controlled such as painting the temple's interior walls Swan's Wing White or using recycled Douglas Fir for siding and trim. But there were other decisions that were not decisions. In creating anything, whether it be a child, meal or a temple, that which is being created, creates. The thing that is being created has its own resolve. The birthing process is the practice of not-knowing. A mother may not expect her baby to be a boy. She may not anticipate her baby to be a girl. She can not know that when her baby grows up he may become a famous doctor and help many people. Birthing a baby or building a temple is like riding a horse with rotten



reins; one cannot know the direction it will go.

Nearly everyone who has come to Furnace Mountain has commented on the quietude and peace they experience on the land. Upon entering Kwan Se Um Sang Ji Sah, these responses seem to amplify. These reactions have been totally unexpected. Whether children are playing a make-shift game of soccer or students are sitting zazen, harmony appears. In the divine union of pure mountain energy entering this wooden structure, the temple becomes a house filled with the treasures that one seeks. This building was not created by human hands alone.

A date was chosen. Then another. Then finally, the date was set for the temple opening celebration to be on Saturday, August 6, at eleven o'clock in the morning. Invitations were sent. Members began arriving a week in advance to help with the preparations of food, lodging and transportation. On August 5, with the exception of a shoe rack, the temple was finished. The rack arrived an hour before the ceremony was to begin.

On the morning of the temple dedication, the previous day's rain left the air cool and crisp. The storm also left large quantities of rain in huge puddles. The new construction site looked like a swamp, not unlike the images seen in the movie, *The Piano*. Mud. It was an unavoidable mess. With mud on our shoes, robes and clothes, one hundred and seventy people gathered to celebrate the opening of Kwan Se Um Sang Ji Sah. Among our honored guests were: Taizen Maezumi Roshi; Maha Ghosananda; Zen Master Bo Mun, Zen Master Wu Kwang, Brother Anthony from the Abbey of Gethsemani, Charles Tenshin Fletcher, Sensei; Do An Sunim, Ji Do Poep Sa; and Jeffrey Kitzes, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim. The mood was festive and the congratulatory speeches gracious. Zen Master Dae Gak gave the formal dharma talk. He encouraged each person who had come to the ceremony to practice hard and attain enlightenment, creating a critical mass to transform the world. Zen Master Seung Sahn followed with a brief speech about the marvelous geomancy of the temple location and how many people would come to enlightenment here. The mud forgotten, the sun shining brightly, a lotus blossomed. All settled into an afternoon of vegetarian food and conversation, Southern style!

Zen Master Seung Sahn comments: *Everything is impermanent. Why make a temple? If you attain "Everything is impermanent," you attain the true temple.*

Zen Master Seung Sahn's "Why?" echoes across a thousand kalpas. "Why build a temple?" There is a story of a monk who was standing in a public square giving a discourse on the dharma. Hearing his words, a

fruit vendor entered into the crowd that had gathered for a closer look. In front of him, he pushed his wheelbarrow, which was filled with pears. As the monk spoke, the pear merchant became increasingly agitated. Unable to contain his disapproval for another minute, the vendor called out to him, "All this talk, talk, talk. Your Buddha performed miracles. You call yourself a Buddhist. Let's see what you can do!" The monk responded, "Although the Buddha did perform miracles, he never taught the way of magic as a correct practice." The heckler responded, "More talk. Show us something!" The crowd nodded in agreement and said, "Yes. Show us!"

Without hesitation the monk demanded, "Clear a space." He raised his arms and then thrust them towards the ground. From the earth sprouted and grew two magnificent trees. The boughs were heavy with ripe pears. The monk quickly picked several armfuls of fruit and distributed them to the dumb-struck crowd. Then he vanished. As the vendor gained his composure and turned to leave, he saw that his wheelbarrow was empty. The two handles that he used to push it with were also gone.

Whether it is sticking a blade of grass in the ground, magically creating a pear tree, or framing a building on an auspicious spot, the question remains the same: "why?" Why did Zen Master Dae Gak buy this particular land? Why do students live and practice here? Why do people come and contribute time and money? Why? This question is at the heart of every creation. It is the heart of Zen practice. It is this "why?" that built Kwan Se Um Sang Ji Sah. It is this not-knowing "why?" that is the foundation of all true temples.

To build this temple and have an opening ceremony was an experience in magic. What began in response to a need took a direction of its own. For two years I watched in amazement at the sincere effort of my teacher and fellow sangha members as they turned truckloads and wheelbarrow loads of raw materials into a building that has inspired all who have seen it. The opening ceremony and the events surrounding it also seemed to spring forth in an unforeseen way. One happy guest left after the ceremony with a car load of food to feed forty house guests who were cycling for an AIDS benefit in Cincinnati.

The striking of the bell shatters the silence of this frigid January morning. Ten thousand voices rise and fall with the crowing rooster and the braying donkey in the valley below. Temple construction and the opening ceremony are finished, but the work has just begun. ☸

Kwang Myong Sunim, a nun, is the abbot of Kwan Se Um Sang Ji Sah and has lived at Furnace Mountain for five years.

Everything is impermanent. Why make a temple?