

Fifteen Years a Nun

(Hyang Um Sunim holds the ceremonial Zen stick above her head, and then brings it down and hits the table.)

Life is death, death is life.

(Hit)

No life, no death.

(Hit)

Life is life, death is death.

KATZ!

Today is July 2, 1995. How may I help you?

Fifteen years ago before I became a nun, I had three very deep insights and experiences within a few months. The first experience was a car accident in Hong Kong. One of my colleagues had just gotten his car license. We were going to a picnic; nobody wanted to ride with him and I felt sorry for him. So I said, "I'll go with you." After I said that, two more friends joined in. After fifteen minutes on the road we had to take a turn, but my friend drove his car to the opposite lane. A big lorry was coming toward us at full speed. All the friends in the car were very afraid and screaming. But I was very calm because I was already a Buddhist, so I started chanting Kwan Seum Bosal in my mind. The car bumped to the side of the road three times, and finally was back in the correct lane again.

During the accident, the only insight that came into my mind was, "When I die, where do I go?" Deep inside there was no fear at all. Only in my mind I had this big question. Oddly enough, at that time, I couldn't feel my body. I could only see that there was brightness in front of me. At the same time, I also asked myself, is there anything which holds me back from dying? And the answer was no. The whole accident happened very fast, but the experience was very clear and slow. It was like a film; only one frame at a time.

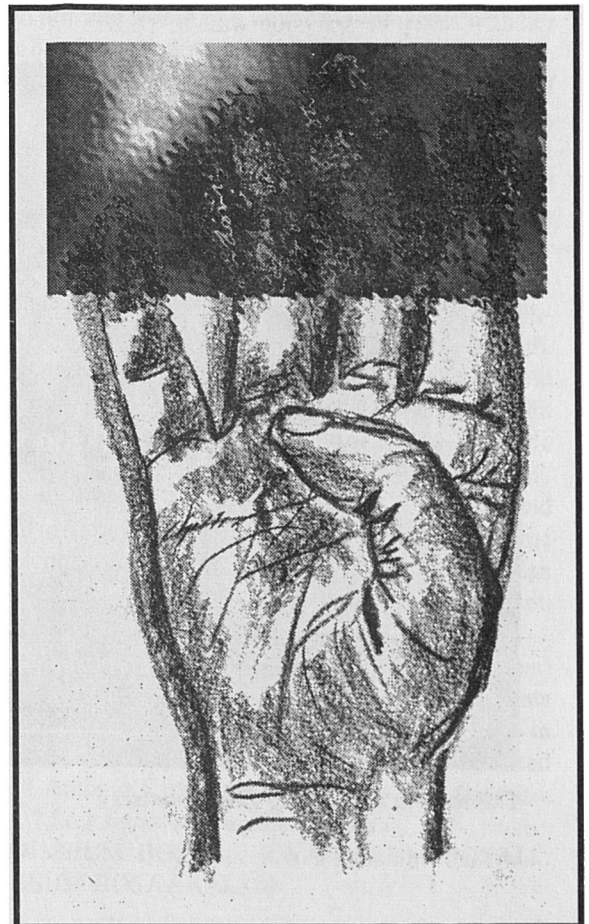
When the accident was over, none of us were hurt, but the car was badly damaged. And I could feel my body again. Ever since, my practice has been very easy. Naturally my character has also changed. I don't have to fight with myself. Sometimes when you are practicing you have to fight with many emotions inside, such as food, desire, etc. I feel at ease inside. Life became very easy.

Two weeks later, another insight also changed my life. I was working in the Central District at the Prince Building, which has many prestigious shops. It was lunch time, and as I was passing, I could see that it was under renovation. The ceiling was torn down, exposing many wires and pipes of different colors. At the very moment when my eyes caught sight of this, I felt that if I tore my skin off, it would be exactly the same as the uncovered ceiling. Before this experience, I liked beautiful clothes, shoes, perfumes and classy things.

After this experience, I became very simple.

Two months later, I went swimming with some friends. We were between the shore and a raft when suddenly my friend's leg began to cramp. I tried to help her, but instead she was pulling me down to the bottom of the sea. I called "HELP!" for her, but she drowned. After that I felt very sad because I know how to swim, but I could not rescue my friend when she was in danger. I had been studying Buddhism for four years, yet my wisdom and compassion had not matured enough to equip me to help my friend. Deep inside my mind, I desperately wanted to practice, so that one day I could help myself and the people around me.

Because of these three incidents, I became a nun. Over the last fifteen years, I spent eleven and a half years in Thailand, and almost three and a half years under the guidance of Zen Master Seung Sahn. In Thailand I spent most of the time living with nature, in the forest and caves. I spent almost two years by myself in a cave and stopped all contact with people. I was very happy and enjoyed practicing with nature.



All these years of training taught me that there is just a fine thread between life and death. When you attain "before thinking," there is no life, no death. Just like the car accident fifteen years ago. Next, life is life, death is death. Everything as it is.

After Thailand, I joined the Kwan Um School of Zen and learned from Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching. He said that just to perceive life is life, and death is death, is not enough. One more step is necessary. This step is how to use our situation and karma to help all beings. That is great love, great compassion, the great bodhisattva way. That is our direction. So if we practice, then we can use—and even change—our situation and karma for ourselves, as well as for the people around us. If we are not practicing, then we will be controlled by our karma and situation. We have no freedom from life and death. This is the most precious teaching I ever received. I have a good example.

In January, 1992, I first met Zen Master Seung Sahn. I had to go to Japan to get a visa in order to go back to Korea to finish the ninety-day retreat. A Korean monk came and asked me to get some books for him in Japan. I said no problem. But later, I discovered that the books were very expensive and he hadn't given me enough money. So I asked

one of my Korean friends what to do. She asked the monk for money for the books, and he was angry. Finally we went to Zen Master Seung Sahn and asked him for his advice. He gave me some money for the books. (He gave me a bit more, and said I could buy candy with whatever was left over!) But I was not to tell the monk that the money was from Zen Master Seung Sahn; I was to tell him that the money was collected from all the students participating in the winter retreat, as a present. So a good teacher not only can give good dharma talks, but is always teaching us great love, great compassion and the great bodhisattva way through his actions.

This is a very good teaching, because Zen Master Seung Sahn and the Korean monk became monks at the same time and they are almost the same age. So if we practice, we become a Zen Master and help many people. But if we don't practice, we will be like this old monk; anger and desire will control our life. Which one do you like? You decide.

HIT!

If you are not practicing, everywhere you go is hell!

HIT!

If you are practicing, everywhere you go is paradise. ☸



The sangha of Su Bong Zen Monastery.