

HOST *AND* GUEST

Bridget Duff

I'd like very much to share a couple of little stories with you. It is about two brief moments some seventeen years ago spent with our teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn.

My relationship with him has always been a series of very brief but nonetheless significant encounters. A lot of these moments have branded themselves into my memory. They stay with me. They have been mind-meals for me to chew on, sometimes for years, before I eventually began to swallow and digest them. Each one has been a kong-an that only the heart can answer. They are vignettes. Quick glances out of the corner of my eye or through the crack of the door as it was closing.

Or just him dashing through the kitchen after a grueling afternoon of religious politics with the Korean temple board of directors, and proclaiming to me with his tired face the color of ashes, "Soon dead! What can you do?" His eyes were piercing me for an answer.

"Ji Jang Bosal," I replied.

"Thank you," he said and dragged himself upstairs.

Or, at 3:00 a.m. I am standing out in the hall waiting to use the bathroom. Zen Master Seung Sahn comes out of the bathroom and sees how sleepy and fuzzy I am, and immediately uses this moment to wake me up in a *big* way. He asks me, "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying," I reply, truly bewildered.

"WHY ARE YOU CRYING?" he asks again.

"I AM NOT CRYING!" I say.

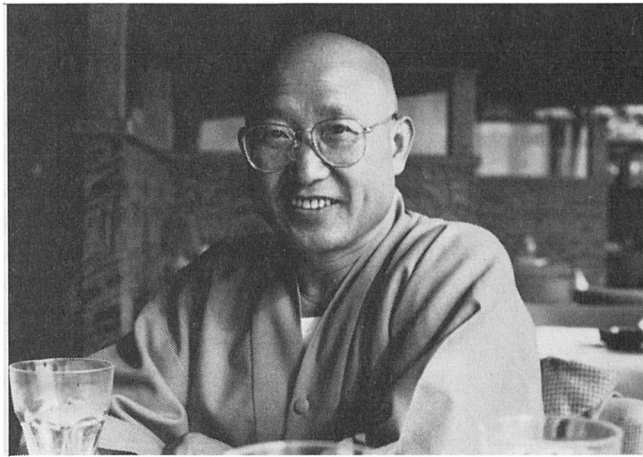
"O.K. you ask me the same question and pretend I am you, O.K.?"

"Why are you crying?" I ask him.

"Because I am a woman and many women are suffering in the world, so I am crying."

These kind of moments are what I am talking about: volumes of teaching stuffed into fleeting moments. So, here are two more about host and guest.

Seventeen years ago I was housemaster of Tahl Mah Sah Zen Center (since renamed Dharma Zen Center). At that



time the housemaster was also the Zen Master's attendant. I was not very good at it. In fact, the other students called me "Godzilla" behind my back! There was an awful lot to do in those days. Our Zen Centers were young and pioneering and we learned by trial and error. My personal experience was one of lots of trials and lots of errors.

In those days our Zen Center was located on the same property as the Korean temple. We were always interfacing with the Korean Buddhist community of Los Angeles. Zen Master Seung Sahn was always receiving tons of guests. In Korea, a Zen Master serves as psychotherapist, father confessor, marriage counselor, financial advisor, referee, and mother hen. They came in droves. In squadrons. At any time of the day or night. And Zen Master Seung Sahn would welcome them all in for a chat or some solace no matter if he was feeling like the last Native American on the "trail of tears." And I had to keep a half step ahead of him and be at the ready to serve them. Just like a good hostess. This was quite an ironic position Zen Master Seung Sahn had deliberately placed me in, seeing as I had no inclination towards being humble and accommodating.

So, a large part of my job was to be ready, willing, and gracious, to take care of him and his guests and make sure they had proper refreshments. And if they needed to be taken sightseeing or driven home or to the airport, it was to be done on the spur of the moment. Aside from that, the housemaster was responsible for all the money, shopping, making sure the house was cleaned, the kitchen was in order, that overnight guests had a place to sleep and to run the whole domestic side of the Zen Center in general, right down to a burned-out light bulb.

It seemed like I was always hitting the ground running. A lot of the time I just felt exhausted, confused, and flat-out inconvenienced. There was so much to do and not enough time to get it all done.



One thing in particular that bothered me was, there never seemed to be any time for me to take a proper bowel movement. Yes, you heard me. We only had two bathrooms and so many people were always coming and going. Either the bathrooms were occupied or I was. My intestines felt like they were tied in knots. What I wouldn't have given for just fifteen minutes of uninterrupted bathroom time! Sure enough, as soon as I would sit down on the toilet I'd hear Zen Master Seung Sahn yell, "HOUSE M-A-A-A-STER!!", and I'd pop off like a cork to go run and see what he needed or if there were some guests that I needed to put the kettle on and cut up fruit for. Damned if it didn't happen just like that every single time.

Sometimes wishes do come true. One afternoon I was incredulous to find myself all alone in the Zen Center. Zen Master Seung Sahn wasn't expected back until dinner time and everyone else was off somewhere for the day and most of my work was caught up on. Fabulous! I have plenty of time for a healthy visit to the "throne." Perhaps I might even be able to sneak in a bit of a snooze, I was thinking to myself happily as I sat there on the toilet.

All of a sudden I hear the downstairs door open and someone is pounding up the stairs. I cringe. No! it can't be... I wait, hear nothing. I begin to relax... perhaps it's just one of the other students home early...

Then, like a Marine Corps drill sergeant cracking my eardrums and blasting my tiny moment of contented calm like a fragmentation grenade, I hear the dreaded words "HOUSE - M-A-A-A-STER!!"

Without thinking I scream back from behind the bathroom door, "WHAT?!" Never before had I disrespectfully screamed back a reply to the Zen Master (though I would have loved to at times!) I came crashing out of the bathroom, just furious.

There stood Zen Master Seung Sahn in the hall, eyes wide in surprise at my outburst. He did not apologize. I was suddenly deeply embarrassed and regretted having yelled at him.

"We have a guest," he said. I sighed in resignation.

"O.K. I'll go put the kettle on for tea and cut some fruit..."

"No, not necessary. Not that style guest. Come here..." he crooked his finger at me to follow him into the dharma room.

It was summer and very hot, yet the dharma room looked magical in that particular light. The dust moats swirling in shafts of sunlight, the brown meditation cushions lined up symmetrically on the blue carpeted floor like stepping stones across a calm blue lake. The smell of incense being burned for years had permeated into the foundation of the house itself. The gold Buddha, and the black iron bell hanging from the red bell stand. The match-stick bamboo window shades cast stripes of light and lavender shadows that crept across the floor and up the walls. I was once again graced with another moment of perfect calm, my bathroom experience forgotten.

Zen Master Seung Sahn had walked straight to his meditation cushion and was standing there looking down at it.

"We have an animal guest," he declared. And sure enough,

sitting on his cushion was one of the biggest and ugliest potato bugs I've ever see. The granddaddy of 'em all! It looked like something that one would see in *National Geographic*, not on the corner of Wilton and Olympic Boulevard, the second busiest intersection in the county of Los Angeles. I swallowed hard. I was disgusted and frightened by this thing. And being with Zen Master Seung Sahn, well, one never knows what's coming next. The beautiful moment of perfect calm had suddenly transformed itself into a potato bug and I was about to have a relationship with it.

Zen Master Seung Sahn nudged me with his elbow and indicated that I should do as he was doing, which was to put my hands together as if to bow. I did this. Then he instructed:

"This is an animal guest. You must bow to him as if to an honored guest and say: 'Hello animal guest! Welcome to our Zen Center. I understand you were here before we were and now you have come to visit with us. But, it would be better for you and us if you to go outside now. Thank you very much for coming.'" And he finished by bowing to the potato bug. I didn't quite know what to make of this when, he nudged me in the ribs with his elbow again, "Now you," he said to me.

"You mean, bow and talk to the bug..."

"Yes. DO IT!" He was dead serious.

I bowed to the potato bug and said, "Uh, hello animal guest. Welcome to our Zen Center, but now you have to go, O.K.?" Zen Master Seung Sahn gave me another poke in the ribs, reminding me to add, "And thank you for coming."

"And thank you for coming."

"Now pick him up and carry him outside," he ordered me.

"What?! No way! N-o-o-o. Can't touch it. Sorry, but I cannot." I started to back away waving and flapping my arms. Zen Master Seung Sahn chuckled and did it for me.

He bowed reverently to the potato bug and as gently as a mother picked the ugly little guy up, telling me to open the back door of the dharma room. Then very delicately he placed him on the back stairs, bowed again in good-bye, turned on his heels and marched out of the dharma room and into the bathroom, slamming the door with a BANG!

I was left standing there with my jaw hanging open. No explanation given.

That night Zen Master Seung Sahn did not get to bed until 11:30 p.m. There were many problems for him to deal with concerning the Korean temple. It was a relentless barrage of people coming to him for solutions. The minute he'd have one problem solved and get people to make peace, someone else would come along and stir things up and it would start all over again. Aside from that he was Zen Master to the American students and gave dharma talks and interviews almost every morning. And he was getting up at

3:00 a.m. every morning to do one thousand bows before our regular practice at 5:00 a.m.! He really worked the hardest of anybody I had ever met.

At 1:30 that morning, two hours after Zen Master Seung Sahn had gone to bed, the doorbell rang along with someone banging on the door. I got up and opened the door. There stood about five Korean men in very bad moods and distressed looks on their faces, who pushed past me and were making their way up the stairs to Zen Master Seung Sahn's room. "You can't go up there" I whispered urgently, "he just got to bed two hours ago and is asleep. He has to get up in two hours."

They ignored me or didn't understand English, and pushed me aside and went up to his bedroom door anyway. I was incensed! How bloody inconsiderate can you be! What dreadfully bad manners! Didn't they know? Didn't they care that he worked himself to the bone non-stop? Couldn't it wait till morning? I was just seething at them. They knocked on his door and didn't even wait for a reply, just barged right into his room uninvited and flipped on his light switch! The gall! The brazenness! I was so angry I could have spit nails.

Just as I reached his door and was about to give him some back-up and kick some butt on his behalf, the door was being closed in my face and things went into slow motion for a second. Through the crack of that door closing on my face, I caught a glimpse of Zen Master Seung Sahn immediately sit up in bed. He reached for his glasses and put them on. His eyes were clear and he was completely alert...

The crack in the door became narrower.

He was out of bed with a big, genuine smile on his face and spoke in Korean. I do not understand Korean but...

The door slammed shut.

I knew what he said. I don't know how I knew, but I just knew. He said "How may I help you?"

I was once again left standing alone with my jaw hanging open. My anger was gone. He had said "How may I help you?" without the least trace in his voice of annoyance or of having been inconvenienced. What a gentleman. What a host.

I started to cry. I thought if I could just do that one time in my life and really mean it, without any thought for myself; having little or no sleep and body problems like he has, and genuinely ask, "How may I help you?" well, that would really rip the rag right off the bush, wouldn't it?

A sense of purpose began to reveal itself to me about why I was being thrust into all this chaos and inconvenience with the seemingly endless stream of guests (human and bugs alike). Zen practice made a great deal of sense to me at that moment and I suddenly knew what I wanted to be "when I grew up"...

A really good hostess.

Bridget Duff is a senior dharma teacher.