



## Interview with **Ji Hyang Sunim**

# One Hundred Percent

*Gak Jin Haeng Ja Nim*

Question: How did you happen to get interested in Zen?

Ji Hyang Sunim: Through the practice of Aikido, a martial art.

I wanted something that would improve my focus and ability to act spontaneously on the mat. So originally Zen was for me a means to an end. Also, I was an EMT working on an ambulance. This gave me the question, "How can I really help other people?"

Q: Why have you chosen to become a nun?

JHSN: For you.

Q: Well, thank you.

JHSN: You're very welcome!

Q: How structured is the life of a nun in our school? By that, I mean what freedom of movement do you have?

JHSN: There's a lot of freedom being a nun. I think it's the way you become the most free. One aspect is the freedom of not having an intimate special relationship, and of not having to deal with things like child rearing. But it's not a freedom from responsibility. It is a more real freedom, an internal freedom. You do not spend a lot of time on your like/dislike mind, dealing with the complexities of things you don't really care about. I never have to decide what color to wear.

Q: Basic grey is in.

JHSN: And grey coordinates so well with more grey. And maybe a little brown. [laughter]

Q: Are there many vows?

JHSN: When you become a full nun, you take something like four hundred vows. But what's important is not the letter of the precepts. It's not even the spirit of the precepts. The important part of taking vows is the direction. If you've got strong direction, the question is not whether something is right or wrong, but why do you do it? Zen Master Seung Sahn gives us a lot of space to interpret that. There is a constant challenge of where to spend your time. What priority do you give Zen center work? What priority do you give your own practice? What about resting or exercise? Everybody needs to work those issues out for themselves.

Q: I've often wondered who decides where nuns and monks live. Are you stationed somewhere?

JHSN: Well, for me it was very easy. I have a student loan, and I need to stay here and pay it until that's taken care of. For

monks and nuns who have an open situation, Zen Master Seung Sahn likes them to spend a year in Korea to see clearly what the monastic life is about. Ultimately, where you're located is a matter of what's a good match. Zen Master Seung Sahn may strongly suggest something, but it's not a command.

Q: What advice would you give to someone who is considering becoming a nun or a monk?

JHSN: You have to want to do it one hundred percent. Ninety-nine percent is not enough. A hundred and one percent is too much. If you have a clear direction, there is no problem. But if your direction is in some way not clear, no matter what situation you're in, there will always be a problem.

Q: What has surprised you most about life so far?

JHSN: Being here having this interview with you.

Q: Has there been a change in your opinion of what Zen practice requires, since your first years of practice?

JHSN: When I first started to practice, there was a funny little period when I read D.T. Suzuki, and expected marvelous exploding-mind openings. And before my first interview, I had heard all these things about Zen Masters, and would walk into the interview room with real trepidation. The interviewer would always try to make me feel at ease, but it wasn't easy for them, because I was so nervous. I thought at the time Zen was something special. Now I see it is not so special. It is only practicing every day, every day. Trying, trying for ten thousand years non-stop. For me, that consistency is the only thing that has made any difference. I didn't see that when I began.

Q: I am puzzled about intensity in practice. Many suffer burn-out, while others seem to thrive on hard training. Can you offer an explanation of this?

JHSN: For people who practice really hard, there is a danger of holding something too tightly. That is why we call Zen the middle way. We do not want a practice that is too tight, or one that is too loose. If your practice is too loose, then your center never really becomes strong. If your practice is too tight, besides your practice you have your idea of practice. The important thing, again, is direction. If you have strong direction, that is the same as having great love and great compassion. So you always have try mind. But if you don't have strong direction, your love and compassion is not really strong. So small ideas appear and grow.

Q: Do you have any plans for the next few years?

JHSN: Yes, I plan to practice.

*Ji Hyang Sunim is director of Cambridge Zen Center. Gak Jin Haeng Ja Nim is kitchenmaster of Providence Zen Center.*