

PILGRIMAGE TO PUTUO SHAN MOUNTAIN IN CHINA

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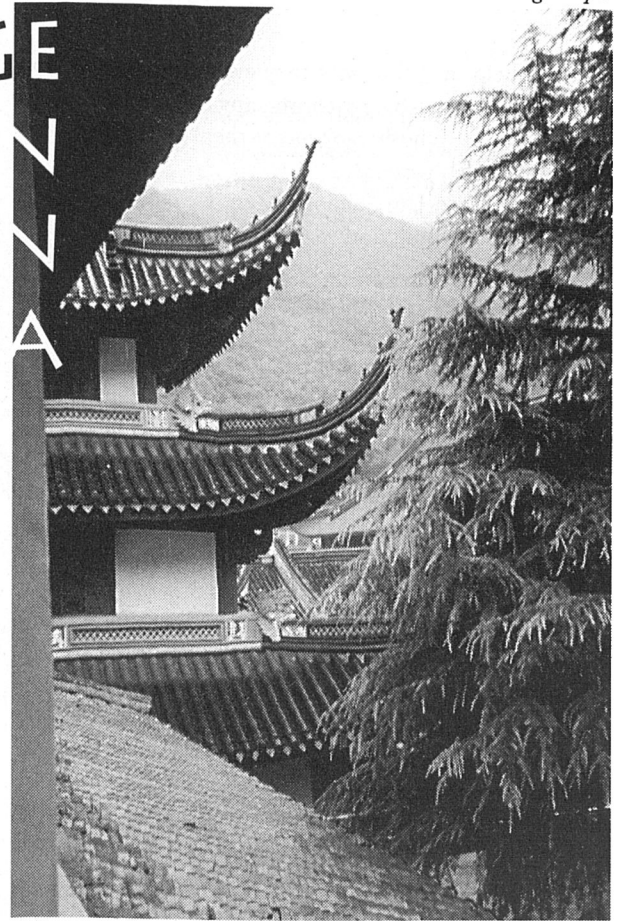
My heart is as light as the plane as it flies serenely against the blue sky and its wings gently embrace each white cloud as it passes by. The four months of hard work and planning have come to an end. We are on our way back from a pilgrimage to one of the four sacred mountains of China. Finally, I can put it all down.

When the idea of a pilgrimage was first conceived, Hyang Um Sunim, Ji Do Poep Sa and I had a common goal of organizing a trip around practice. We would visit the famous island mountain in the East China Sea which is associated with Kwan Seum Bosal, the bodhisattva of compassion.

We would not follow the usual tourist itinerary. Instead, we would focus primarily on practice—meditation, chanting, and vegetarian meals. The central theme for our trip would be “three steps one bow,” a ritual Buddhist practice. To our surprise, this combination attracted slightly over a hundred serious participants.

We flew from Hong Kong to Ningpo, the Ming Dynasty seaport just south of Shanghai. It was at Ningpo that Dogen, the famous Zen Master who founded the Soto school in Japan, landed during his pilgrimage to China in search of the dharma. Among our stops during our five-day pilgrimage were such famous sites as Seven Pagoda Temple, a 1400-year old temple in Ningpo; Tiantong Temple, north of Ningpo, where Dogen got enlightenment and which is the head temple of the Ts’ao Tung (Soto) school in China; and the Dharma Rain and Fan Um Cave Temple on Putuo Shan. Even though our trip was somewhat hectic, we were deeply touched by the profound peace of the surroundings.

The grounds of the Dharma Rain Temple were unexpectedly cleaned by an overnight rain, as though heaven knew that we were going down on our hands and knees to pay respects to Buddha. Most of us were skeptical about



bowing on the dirty wet ground, yet at the same time intrigued by this tradition. Hyang Um Sunim’s teaching still rings in my ears about putting yourself down totally when you are kneeling on the ground, even though it seemed far-fetched at that time.

The sound of the moktak dispelled all our thoughts. In the mist of our chanting “Kwan Seum Bosal,” I stepped out on my right foot, then my left foot, then my right foot again, then down on my hands and knees with my forehead kissing the smooth and wet cobblestones. At this moment, all my original worries and hindrances suddenly evaporated and the movements became as natural as if I were jumping into my own bed.

After the initial set of three steps and one bow, the rest became automatic. My feelings became completely different. Finally, the ego surrendered; I was totally involved with a 100% don’t know mind. Chanting, walking and bowing. “Just do it.” Hyang Um Sunim said if you put it all down, one would have a glimpse of clarity and peace—the open state of mind. Is that what it’s all about?

My legs, unexpectedly, seemed stronger than usual and my hands and feet never felt so well co-ordinated. The ritual bowing was completed smoothly in just over half an hour.

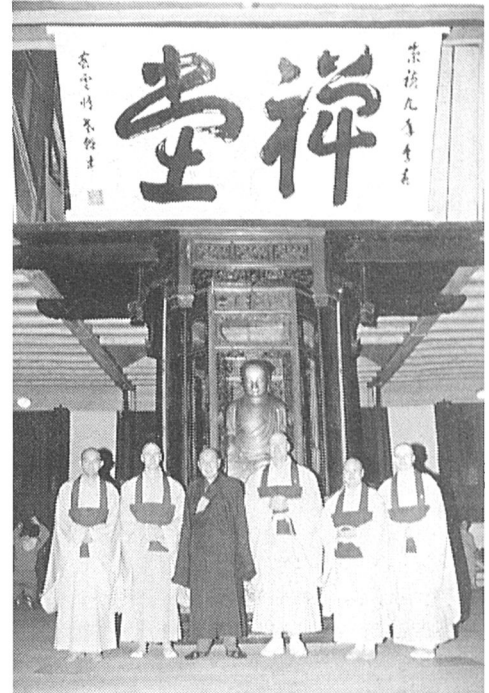
Hyang Um Sunim, Dae Kwang Zen Master and Do Mun Sunim at the head of the Three Steps, One Bow procession



Dripping with sweat and with an awakened state of mind, I stood in the main hall of the Dharma Rain Temple as we chanted the Heart Sutra with all our might. The familiar sutra sounded quite different and all of a sudden it took on a new meaning. I was deeply touched; tears cascaded down my face like water from a broken dam. Words are not enough to portray the feelings deep within me. As we left the main dharma hall, the sun suddenly broke through, glittering off the wet cobblestones and reflecting tears of gold on our elated faces.

Later that day we visited Fan Um cave temple at the base of Putuo Shan mountain. Putuo Shan has been famous for more than a thousand years as the place in China where Kwan Seum Bosal appears. We, along with hundreds of tourists from Taiwan, China, and Japan, crowded into the small ocean cave to try to get a glimpse of her. One of our party, Gloria Wong, suddenly found herself in the middle of this tourist crowd. She saw a blurred shadow, like a person, appear in the cave. She realized that this phenomenon was probably caused by light reflecting off

*Kwan Um monastics with the head
Zen monk of Tiantong Temple*



the variously-shaped rocks. Extracting herself from the crowd, Gloria walked to the mouth of the cave and found Do Mun Sunim JDPS looking out at the sea. She asked him, "Sunim, what are you doing? Why not go see Kwan Seum Bosal?" He said, "The sky is blue and the waves are singing. The people in the cave are full of desires. They wish to see Kwan Seum Bosal appear. If they can see her, they feel happy. If they can't, they are disappointed. Actually, Kwan Seum Bosal is here. Listen! Kwan Seum Bosal is singing, non-stop."

Pilgrimages are a special kind of trip. What we acquired on this trip was far more than just souvenirs. Even though there were over a hundred travelers following a rigorous itinerary, everyone treated each other with respect and compassion. This grew out of our concern for practice more than sightseeing. As Zen Master Dae Kwang said, "you don't have to look for Kwan Seum Bosal in a cave or some special place, she is everywhere when your mind is clear."



Corrin Chan, George Liu, Sheila Cheung, Zen Master Dae Kwang and Henry Wong at Tiantong Temple