



Before (1978): Diana Lynch, Ezra Clark, Zen Master Seung Sahn, Sherry Rochester, Mu Sang Sunim (David Gerber) and Merrie Fraser



Twenty years later (1998): Front row—Enrique Iranzo, Diana Lynch, Zen Master Seung Sahn, Mu Sang Sunim; middle row—Myo Ji Sunim, Ji Soen Sunim; back row—Piotrek Bogdanowicz, Jo Potter, Leo Steindl and Mu Shim Sunim

## Zen Master Goes to Europe, Twenty Years Later: Some Subversive Thoughts

*Mu Sang Sunim, Dharma Zen Center*

*I am only poking open a hole;  
my students will go through.*

Zen Master Seung Sahn

Twenty years ago I was one of six Zen students who accompanied Dae Soen Sa Nim on his first trip to Europe. We saw a lot of sights, met a lot of people, ate a lot of food, and, in passing, watched in awe as Dae Soen Sa Nim began the transmission of Zen to Europe. (I chronicled the trip in *Zen Master Goes to Europe*, which I am hoping to publish soon.)

One story from that time: we are all sitting with a group of Zen students in Poland. Dae Soen Sa Nim, as he has done so many times before, picks up a cup and says, "If you say this is a cup you are attached to name and form. If you say it is not a cup, you are attached to emptiness. So is this a cup or not?" One student gets up, walks in front of the Zen Master, picks up the cup and smashes it to the floor where it shatters! Without batting an eye, Dae Soen Sa Nim says, "Ah, too strong! You understand one, you don't understand two." Then he proceeds to show that the proper answer is just to pick up the cup and drink it—breaking it is not necessary.

Last April senior dharma teacher Diana Lynch from Berkeley and I went back to Europe on a two-week trip with

the Zen Master to attend the Twentieth Anniversary Ceremony of the European sangha, where we were joined by Zen Master Wu Bong, now guiding teacher for the European sangha, who had also been there at the beginning. Zen Master Dae Kwang, our school abbot, Grazyna Perl JDPSN, abbot of the Centre Pariesien de Zen Kwan Um, Mu Shim Sunim JDPS, who lives at Hwa Gye Sah in Seoul with Dae Soen Sa Nim, Heila Downey JDPSN, abbot of our South African sangha and Myo Ji Sunim, abbot of our Korean temple in Queens, New York, came as well.

The ceremony could be seen as celebrating our school's appearance in Europe as a whole. Now twenty years later we have a European head temple in Paris; the Polish head temple in Warsaw; and (alphabetically) centers or groups in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Beograd, Bratislava, Brussels, Budapest, Cologne, Gdansk, Krakow, Palma de Mallorca, Prague, Riga, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Vilnius, Zurich—and other cities too numerous to mention.

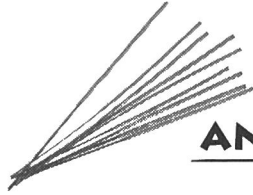
Rather than chronicle the short, if exciting, history of European Zen, I will just jot down some thoughts which appeared on the trip and which I hope the reader will find interesting. These will fall under the categories of teachers and students, Europe and America, and Zen Master Seung Sahn in action.

*If I had come here [to Poland] to teach people,  
I couldn't do anything.*

Zen Master Seung Sahn

An interesting remark. What does it mean?

Going to Europe, seeing hordes of Zen students and lots of second-generation teachers as well, makes any competitive Zen student think: why not me? Why aren't I out there teaching and getting bowed to. Maybe this is Dae Soen Sa Nim's big trap for us all, teachers and non-teachers alike. If you think you need a title, or even some level of attainment, to be complete—then you're not complete. That's clear



enough, isn't it? As Dae Soen Sa Nim told me long ago, "Just put it all down right now, then you are already complete."

There's a documented sickness in the literature called "waiting for enlightenment." We can wait and wait, wondering when we'll have a "big experience," when we'll finally get certified and recognized. Meanwhile our life is passing us by. As Strether says in Henry James' *The Ambassadors* (a novel about Americans and Europeans, by the way) the most terrible thing in life is never to have had one's life. What a pity that is!

As for the teacher-student question, a student once asked Dae Soen Sa Nim: "Some people become teachers and then seem to think, 'I am a teacher; you are (only) a student.' Is this correct?" Dae Soen Sa Nim answered, "Teacher means having no I. So 'I am a teacher' is not so good."

Another time a newly-minted Zen Master once remarked that it was a shame people didn't realize that his transmission meant that he had the same mind as Dae Soen Sa Nim. On hearing of this Dae Soen Sa Nim said, "That's O.K., but I have no mind." He also remarked that Zen Masters come in many different levels.

But of course I, in the middle of drinking wine (dreadful thought!) and eating cheese in Paris, after a blissful day of walking among French gardens and being transfixed by the paintings of Van Gogh, had to come up with the idea—wouldn't it be fun to return here some time and teach people. Suddenly I felt my mind sag—I had made myself another project, and it wasn't really going to be that much fun after all. Then I realized that what is really wonderful about traveling to Europe is learning from everyone there—and not wanting to teach anybody anything. Just to come and live in a Zen Center and do together-action with all who come, experiencing directly the history, traditions and traits of character that make the people of each country different from those of another and all of them different from our own—that is the really great experience. *That* is enlightening. Our practice together makes this "grand tour" a real education, makes it possible to digest and learn from it all rather than have our experiences calcify in some split-off corner of the mind, only to emerge in old age as the "long-ago memories of my youthful European adventures."

I shared these ruminations with Grazyna Perl JDPSN, who told me she had had a similar experience. When she first came to Paris and established the Centre Parisien de Zen Kwan Um she felt called upon to be a teacher. "I must teach them!" Then she felt like she was butting her head against a wall. Finally she relaxed and began enjoying her life—the everyday life which Zen Masters have talked about from

Nam Cheon onwards—and things began to fall into place—including, of course, her teaching.

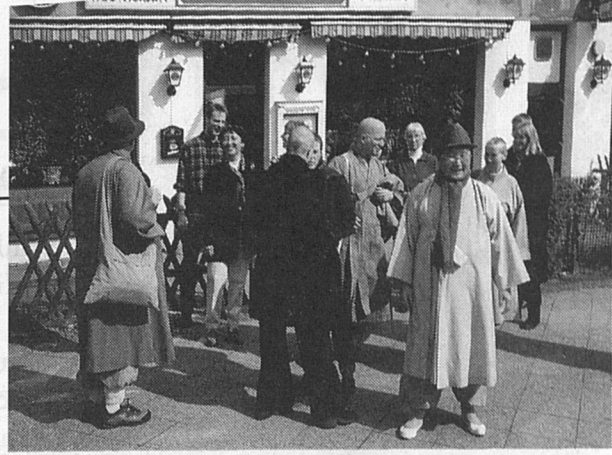
The history of the past century—think of Vietnam—doesn't show that we Americans like to learn very much from other peoples, and maybe as Zen students we are not so different from our compatriots. Political imperialism can give way to spiritual imperialism—what a thought!—although our spiritual imperialists are more often identified with Disney and Spielberg than with the Kwan Um School of Zen. We all like to think we know it all, we have all the answers, and other people should listen to us. But Europe has been a school for Americans for a long time, since well before there were any Zen students in America, and there are well-known lessons that Europe has to teach us. The wine, the cheese, the gardens, the paintings and sculpture—all are talking to us—wake up, o ye sons of Puritans! Live! Relax! Enjoy!

For if we Americans are to attain true freedom, perhaps we must throw off the awful cloak of Puritanism which has covered our emotional lives, without embracing the much-feared (at least by us) license of "Dangerous Liaisons." Maybe it seems anachronistic to be talking of Puritanism in the post-Playboy era, but aren't Puritanism and Playboy just two sides of the same coin? If we think we can practice and get enlightenment without confronting our true emotional nature, we will have an awful shock when we die, if not sooner. My experience of Europe is that it can help us to see sides of ourselves that we have repressed and help us become whole. Then we can truly help others. "In the three worlds, all Buddhas of past, present and future simultaneously become the path. On the ten levels, all beings on the same day enter into Nirvana."

So I have to thank all of our European students, and especially the Polish sangha, which has practiced so hard for the past twenty years. In Poland we are always greeted by great crowds of Zen students, eager to see Dae Soen Sa Nim and receive his teaching. The Polish students this time were also quite pleased to meet Zen Master Dae Kwang, who was visiting Poland for the first time and gave interviews together with Zen Master Wu Bong. Dae Kwang Soen Sa for his part was overwhelmed by the sincerity and strength of the Polish Sangha. Aleksandra Porter JDPSN is presently the only Ji Do Poep Sa residing in Poland (Myong Oh Sunim JDPS, Dorota Krzyzanowska, is currently practicing in Korea) and her burden has been quite heavy. But she and her family and all the sangha were unfailing in their hospitality to Dae Soen Sa Nim and all the visitors from many countries, making us all feel incredibly lucky and welcome.



*Before (1978): Mu Sang Sunim (David Gerber), Merrie Fraser, Ezra Clark, Louise Stanton, Sherry Rochester and Zen Master Seung Sahn*



*Twenty years later (1998): Mu Sang Sunim, Jo Potter, Mu Shim Sunim, Diana Lynch, Zen Master Seung Sahn, Ji Soen Sunim*

In five weeks time the Warsaw sangha built a new dharma room at its headquarters in Falenica, an industrial-suburban area of Warsaw. The dharma room was just ready for the Twentieth Anniversary Ceremony on April 19. One hundred square meters large, the room was already filled to overflowing at ceremony time with Polish Zen students and friends, visitors from many European countries, our American group, and even a group of Koreans posted to Warsaw by their businesses and quite fascinated by Polish Buddhism.

In addition to visiting Warsaw, our group took a quick trip to Crakow, where Dae Soen Sa Nim gave a dharma talk, and we visited the Crakow Zen Center, as well as the Wawel fortress and the beautiful market area of the town.

We also spent time and had ceremonies and dharma talks on this trip in Paris and Berlin, both of which had opening ceremonies for the new Zen Centers just last year, and both of which have only been able to function due to the dedicated efforts of their teachers, Wu Bong Soen Sa and Grazyna Perl JDPSN, as well as the abbots, directors and many dedicated students I haven't the space to name here. (I might mention that a good number of these students are Polish!—their influence spreads far and wide.)

It is a measure of Dae Soen Sa Nim's greatness as a teacher, I believe, that the European sangha has been able to function these last several years largely in his absence. He has never wanted to be, although we have often considered him, indispensable. He has always pushed us to learn to function on our own. Still for me Dae Soen Sa Nim remains as wonderful a figure as ever, and as ever full of surprises. Just before leaving for Europe, while visiting the publishers of his *Compass of Zen* at Shambhala, he told them, "I am an atom bomb." Watching him, I am sure that nobody doubted it.

I have a story of my own about Dae Soen Sa Nim on this trip. One morning we returned from Crakow on a very early train to Warsaw so we could make a particular social lunch

obligation that I was not at all interested in attending. But the Zen Master wanted me to go, so I said I would. Meanwhile however, on the train Dae Soen Sa Nim also decided he would give a formal dharma speech at the Warsaw Zen Center that night, making for a rather full day. Well, after the lunch I had already had my fill of togetherness, so before the dharma speech, during evening chanting, I felt sick and left, happy to walk back alone the forty minutes to our hotel, where I immediately recovered. The next morning Dae Soen Sa Nim confronted me. "Why weren't you there?"

"You made me go to lunch, so I got sick!" I hissed angrily.

"Oh, you ate too much so you were sick. That's *your* problem."

"No I didn't eat too much. I was angry."

"Then you must control your feeling and condition!" the Zen Master shouted.

"I am sorry," I said softly.

"That's O.K." the Zen Master said. "No problem." He gave me a big smile. And that was the end of it!

Dae Soen Sa Nim, in my experience of him, never holds onto anything and is always so precisely in the moment that he makes the supremely difficult look easy. That is why his teaching has spread to so many different countries; that is why so many people love him; and that is the example that all of us, teachers and students, Americans, Asians and Europeans, will have to live up to in the years ahead. I hope we can enjoy ourselves and each other as we try.

*A postscript: I apologize for "the American angst and explaining the whole world through only American cultural icons and experiences," as one European friend remarked on reading a draft of this article. But, European Zen students—I must invite you to please contribute your own points of view here, since for myself I am stuck with being indelibly American.*