

# A Zen Center Comes Into Being

*Berlin Zen Center*

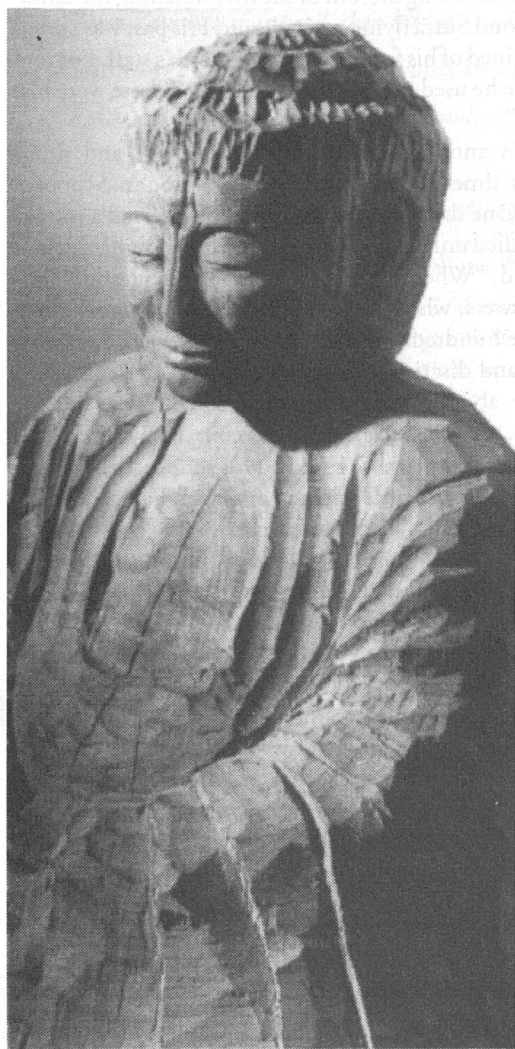
The city of Berlin has been undergoing tremendous changes ever since the wall crumbled. Everywhere there are construction sites. Building is a fever in Berlin. Reconstruction, renovation, new construction, explosions, implosions—all these words can't begin to describe the fate of our city. In fact, the largest construction site in all of Europe, Potsdamer Platz, is in the heart of Berlin! Right in the middle of all this new energy and construction we have been doing some construction ourselves—dharma construction.

Berlin Zen Center is the result of a vision which appeared soon after Zen Master Seung Sahn established the Berlin sangha in 1990, right after the wall fell. In the beginning Roland and Namhee offered the sangha their flat. It was a rather small flat, which meant that we had to rent another place to do retreats. Since practically nothing in Berlin is located on the ground floor, we regularly tracked up and down flights of stairs, continuously packing and unpacking altars, mats, cushions and kitchen stuff. All this naturally got us to thinking what it would be like to have a center with showers or a kitchen large enough to cook for lots of people. In short, we had the same dream that all sanghas have.

We never stopped talking—or thinking!—about our Zen enter vision. Everyday the details would change but the vision never went away. Then one day, a wonderful friend of the sangha, who had become tired of all the talk, gave us a generous donation and said to us: “Just do it...please!” Constant talk can have a good karmic result, eh?

The whole mood of the sangha transformed into feverish action. The hunt for our new home began. It was an arduous search: Too big. Too small. Too dark. Too expensive. Too loud. No U-bahn in sight. So it went until we found a huge empty hall located on the top floor of an industrial building which had been built in 1880. The building was situated in a suburb of Berlin called Wedding—a colorful, bustling area populated by working people and filled with little Turkish restaurants. Directly beneath us on the floor below was a belly dancing school which had its ceilings painted blue with stars. Perfect. The new Berlin Zen Center would sit on top of the stars!

Everything we had visualized would fit in this empty hall—no problem! We would do all the work ourselves and save loads of money. Lots of showers there, a big kitchen here, a big space for the dharma room, some rooms for residents, an office and—best of all—a room just in case a teacher might want to come and live with us. We signed the contract and the place was ours. That evening we toasted our great find with a glass of vintage green tea and we felt GREAT!



*Below: Berlin Zen Center, building from 1880, the small windows on the third floor belong to the Zen Center; lifting the beam in the dharma room.*

At that time, our sangha was made up mostly of students who studied psychology, physics or literature. It also included a few other kinds of non-student people who worked in the health professions or in business. Not many construction skills here! Except for one student of architecture, there were no other “worker types.” We had no clue about how to build anything. We were in a pure state of not knowing. If we had known then what we know now, we might never have started at all.

Out of this state of not knowing appeared various kinds of helpers, good weather, and materials. For example, Hannes appeared and showed us how to fill out the official building permit papers required by the city government, which is our landlord. He also showed us how to put in electrical wiring, how to tile walls, how to put up drywall and how to put in the wooden floor. Actually, he would rush in, instruct Arne on how to do all these things, and then Arne would train us. Arne became our “half hour expert.”

We started with the showers. After not having a shower for years we were completely committed to lots of showers. We tiled for weeks. Udo would sing his lopsided songs while pasting tiles to the walls in less than symmetrical patterns until 4:00 in the morning. Hyon Mun Sunim tiled the floor after we bought him a super pair of rubber boots. One day the three showers were finished. Some of us walked in after work that day and immediately proceeded to take showers. It was the best shower ever!

Around this time we began to realize how immense the project was. As we focused on the walls we became aware that they were crumbling and that we had to rebuild them. The immensity of the task made our good intentions start to crumble also. Just at those moments, someone would always appear and bring in a new rush of energy. Like Darek from the Paris Zen Center. He was doing a thousand bows at that time and his energy level was phenomenal. He taught us how to do walls in German and in French, and inspired us all with his strong practice.

Our “antique” wooden doors (eleven of them) were found by Arne in a dump heap. The federal police department had thrown them away. Nickolaus spend hours meticulously removing years of paint. The wood planks for the new floor were often so warped that they looked like propellers but they were cheap! Udo and Silke would carefully sort each plank out and assign it to this or that room, with the best planks going for the dharma room. Eventually, the wood planks became a floor and after Piotrek and Jacek sanded it for an eternity, Sabine brushed on many hard wax coats. The whole center was suddenly imbued with a soft golden glow.

As the construction rushed to completion, the work would sometimes become frenzied, sometimes exasperatingly slow. Arne’s eyes would shine with madness as he wired the whole center with cables for electricity and phones. Somehow he never lost track



*Below: Like a puzzle, the dharma room floor had to be leveled before the wooden one could be layed; the new dharma room in use during the visit of Zen Master Seung Sahn, Zen Master Dae Kwang, Mu Shim Sunim JDPS, Mu Sang Sunim, Myo Ji Sunim and Ji Soen Sunim; kitchen/living room.*

of the skinny and the fat wires. Jo and Katya discussed a thousand possibilities regarding the kitchen and finally bought a sink big enough to wash a thousand plates. Mariusz from Szczecin arranged for three jovial and loving Polish workers who slowly and with great pride covered the center with a warm new roof. In the evenings before practice they would fervently greet all the women who had come to sit with a kiss on their hand.

The official opening ceremony of Berlin Zen Center took place on the 7th of April, 1997 with Zen Master Seung Sahn present. The center was far from being finished. The Yong Maeng Jong Jin retreat that weekend took place in the belly dancing school. This year when Zen Master Seung Sahn came, the center was finished—he had a great smile on his face as he looked around.

At the beginning we struggled with many dissappointments. We thought this project would take at the most four to five months. It took over two years of continual construction. We thought many people would come and help, but sometimes there were only one or two people. As it turned out, those times of disappointment and discouragement were really helping us. We had no choice but to look at the very moment and evaluate the next tiny step. Step by step, each one of us had to learn that it didn't matter why others were doing it. Each one of us had to come to a clear understanding of why we were giving our time to this unique project. One of us once complained to Zen Master Wu Bong, the guiding teacher for Berlin Zen Center, "This sangha is terrible, it does not even exist, there is no together action!" Wu Bong Soen Sa Nim just answered, "Ja, that is how it is. Welcome to the club!"

All through the time of building, in winter and in summer, people from the other European sanghas, and especially from Poland, would come to help us. They would spend their vacations with us in the freezing cold of winter when we had no heat. In the summer heat they were helping us put up walls or put in the wood planks. Because no one came for personal profit, the emphasis was directly on the work itself. We often asked ourselves, "How is it that these people so generously give us their help?" We couldn't pay them and the work was hard. They would silently come and go. We are very grateful to them.

In the evenings, sometimes Su Joung will welcome us with her delicious kim bop, Korean sushi. Newcomers sit around the big kitchen table and drink tea. Arne pounds away at the computer. The phone rings and a voice asks; "What is Zen?" Silke answers; "You are very welcome to come and practice with us and have a cup of tea." And you also are warmly welcome to come visit!

