

DESERT DHARMA

Thom Pastor, Great Brightness Zen Center

At 7:30 pm on April 27, 1998, two events were taking place within a mile of each other. Nestled between the neon and glitter, bright lights and buffets of the Las Vegas Strip, the Aladdin Casino's luck had run out. Nostalgia has no identity in Glitter Gulch, history affords no accommodations. A thirty-year landmark of the Las Vegas Strip was stripped from view, imploded in the name of progress. As one era came crashing down in a heap of metal girders and dust, the second event inaugurated a different age in Southern Nevada. A mile from the change-hungry mob surrounding the ill-fated casino, the dedication and renaming of the Mojave Desert Zen Center was also underway.

Like some Rat-Packed showroom from the sixties, Zen Master Seung Sahn addressed a standing-room-only crowd. The detonations from the Aladdin thrummed in the distance, each a firecracker-like pop of precise destruction. Zen Master Seung Sahn, his Zen stick in hand, hit the table three times, the sharp raps mimicking each explosion. He spoke in his native Korean tongue, with Mu Shim Sunim translating:

"In this desert, an oasis has appeared. If there is no oasis in the desert, there is no place for people to drink water, and

if you have no water to drink, you soon will die. Las Vegas has been called the city of desire, or the city of sin. A Zen Center in this city of desire is just like a beautiful oasis appearing in this very dry desert. We cannot help but say that this gem, this oasis, is the result of hard work by our abbot Thom Pastor and Dr. Ju-Choen Lee. This effort will produce much more dharma water. This dharma water will give great enlightenment to the thirsty students, and will help save many beings.

"Our Buddhism is not just getting happiness for ourselves. Our Buddhism is finding our own mind light and using this illumination to shine on all beings. If we find this mind light together, then this truly can become Great Brightness Zen Center. Dae, or great, means no opposites. Myung, or bright, means no shadow. If we acquire our true nature's light, then there is no shadow. Soen Won means Zen center. This place is Dae Myung Soen Won, meaning Great Brightness Zen Center, or No Shadow Zen Center. I hope that everyone travels to this Great Brightness Zen Center, discovers their true nature light, and saves all beings from suffering."

IN SEARCH OF NEON NIRVANA

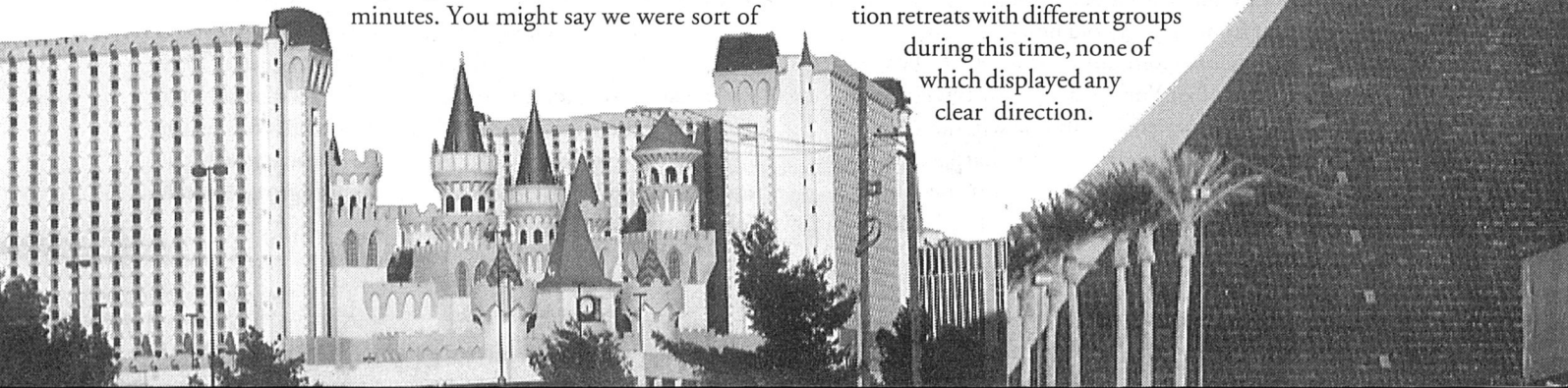
Thom Pastor, Great Brightness Zen Center

"Everybody comes into this world carrying nothing," Zen Master Seung Sahn has said. "Everyone leaves for someplace, also carrying nothing. We cannot take anything with us. Yet in between, everybody wants things, chases things, and is attached to things very much."

Back in 1964, as a young music student in Boston, one of my first acquaintances was David Mott, who in subsequent years has become a lasting friend. David and I shared a common interest in, if not a commitment to, Zen practice in those days. However, two or three nights a week we would enjoy late night green tea, discuss Alan Watts or Philip Kapleau Roshi, and "sit" for twenty minutes. You might say we were sort of

"Zen dilettantes." After Berklee, David left Boston for the Ivy-league lure of Yale University to pursue his graduate degrees. I left Boston to tour with Paul Anka and lead a musician's life. We would speak to each other once every couple of years. David's practice mind grew much stronger. He became the co-founder of the New Haven Zen Center and a world class martial artist, but in those days our infrequent conversations usually focused on music.

By the 1980s, both my parents had died, I was married and had two young children. I attended several meditation retreats with different groups during this time, none of which displayed any clear direction.



I pored through books in a vain attempt to attain this "Zen" mind which seemed to elude me. Attempting to connect with some turning phrase or word teaching that would open the flood gate of understanding was just an exercise in futility. The sudden death of my brother from a heart attack at an early age, however, was the unexpected catalyst for me to break free from this mode of thinking.

Although it is sometimes difficult for us to digest, our karma is our gift. Suppose I had "stayed the course" with this dilettante's approach to Zen? I can envision the scenario with clarity even today. In my seventies and frail with age, I hobble into the Eastern Philosophy section of some local bookstore, filled with the same ambitions for enlightenment. An old Zen saying goes, trying to find mind with mind is like trying to wash off blood with blood. It will always leave a stain. My brother is already dead. Who knows how much longer I will live. There is nothing left to do but to wake. WHAT IS THIS?

I called upon my friend David Mott once again, this question burning inside me. He told me about the Kwan Um School of Zen and Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles. He spoke of Robert Moore, a remarkable teacher and friend who was guiding teacher for the southwest Zen Centers. Now Zen Master Ji Bong, his blend of compassion and solidity in his teaching style proved David's words prophetic. Within the first year of attending retreats in Los Angeles, I took precepts. My dharma buddy Paul Lynch, abbot of the Ocean Eyes Zen Center, and I got moktak that Mu Sang Sunim had brought back from a recent trip to Korea.

I remember at that time there was a certain amount of self-consciousness about doing bowing and chanting practice around our home. I was certain my wife and children would consider them the indulgences of madness. But with a pervading sense of "don't know" and Zen Master Seung Sahn's gentle admonition "Just do it!" I would pack up my new moktak, take my dog and go out in the desert. In the presence of the cactus and creosote, lizards and coyotes, my Labrador retriever, Boo, and I would practice the chants together. This Lab, now thirteen, would howl off-key but, in retrospect, had great try mind.

Zen Master Seung Sahn would come to Las Vegas periodically, to see Dr. Ju-Choen Lee. A small practice group had developed by then,

and it was at this time that I was finishing dharma teacher training. Mu Sang Sunim called and informed me that the Zen Master would like to have dinner with Dr. Lee and I that evening. At the dining room table he looked up from his meal. "Pretty soon you have long robes, ya?" I answered affirmatively. "Are you sitting Yong Maeng Jong Jin?" he inquired. "Yes sir, every two months in Los Angeles," I replied. "Ah good, maybe a Zen center will soon appear here in Las Vegas," he smiled. "That would be wonderful," I said. I suggested that he might send someone here, a response he acknowledged with a laugh. "Oh, no, no... This is your job." Shortly thereafter, I became a dharma teacher. Dr. Lee was very generous to provide keys to his office, where I and several other students committed to practice met for over three years. We began advertising, and holding quarterly retreats in private homes. Now, ten years after that fateful call to David Mott, this "Great Brightness" Zen Center had appeared. Almost a dozen people have taken precepts, with at least three students committing to dharma teacher training precepts in February of 1999.

Zen Master Seung Sahn says that everyone wants things, chases things, and is attached to those things. These are the maxims which command Las Vegas. The spiteful snakes of sex, money, rich food and power are the deities of choice here, insulated by an industry that not only tolerates them, but, in fact, exalts them. The mouth of the lion is a wonderful place to practice. We invite you to join us.

*Views from the front door
of the Great Brightness Zen Center in Las Vegas*

