

report from mu sang sah

Myong Haeng Sunim, January 2000

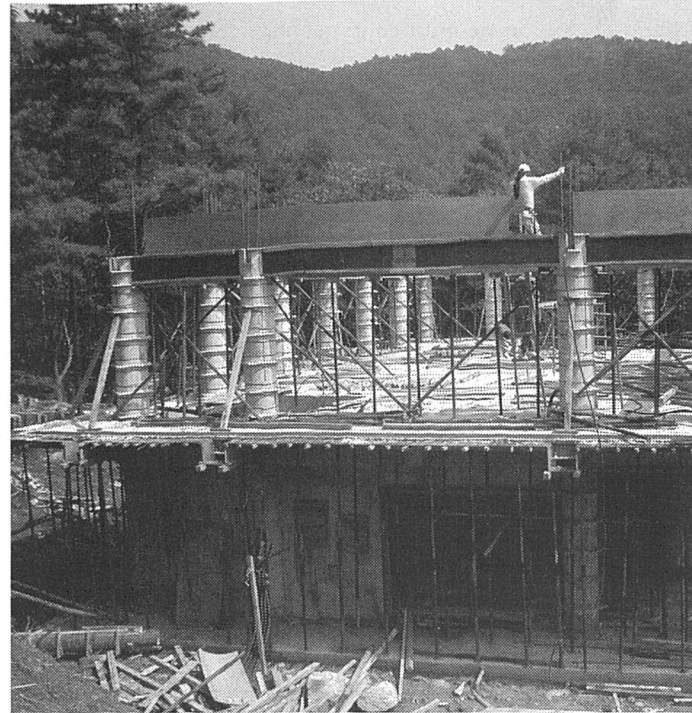
Hello from Kye Ryong Sahn mountain, South Korea! I've been living down here with Zen Master Dae Bong at the site of our new Zen Center since last September. As everybody knows, we've decided to call this place Kye Ryong Sahn International Zen Center/Mu Sang Sah. Since many members of the Kwan Um School around the world have generously contributed their time and resources to this project, I thought it would be interesting to relate a little of what we've been up to these last few months.

It's been quite an experience watching the building take shape and seeing more and more people becoming interested in what we're doing. We've been staying in a temporary house—read, mobile home. It's actually quite nice; we have a mini dharma room with a mini Buddha, also a heated floor, running water and electricity. The toilet is outside, which is fine except when it's extremely cold or dark. Sometimes, Korean people climbing the mountain will see us running to the outhouse and shout "Miguk Sunim! Miguk Sunim!" [*American monk*] Then we all have a good laugh.

Our two full time companions here are Hyon Am Go Sa and the construction boss, whom we call Jon Sajang. Hyon Am Go Sa is a strong practicing layman from Pusan, who has been Zen Master Seung Sahn's student for over ten years. Living together with him has been an amazing experience because he doesn't hold any idea about himself or his personal situation. For example, in Pusan, Hyon Am Go Sa is a successful building contractor, who is rather well to do, and lives in a large house with his wife and four kids. Out of his deep loyalty to our teacher, he has donated a year of his life to oversee this project. He doesn't live in our mobile home, but instead insists on staying in a small container box which has no heat or running water.

Using an electric heating pad he can keep warm at night, but in the morning he always tells us—laughing—how everything around the heating pad is frozen solid.

Our other compatriot, who also insists on living in a container box, is Jon Sajang, also from Pusan. Jon Sajang was a construction worker himself before he became company president, so he's kind of a tough guy, but very sweet inside. He takes his



job very seriously, and seems to be under a lot of pressure, as he chain smokes smelly Korean cigarettes, and has been trying to break a 2-liter a day coffee habit. When you drive with him down the narrow one lane dirt road that leads to our place, he clearly lets everyone know who's boss, refusing to back up for anyone except Zen Master Dae Bong and Hyon Am Go Sa. But he does his job very well.

When I arrived here last fall, Zen Master Dae Bong had been living by himself for about two months. Since he cannot speak Korean, and Hyon Am Go Sa and Jon Sajang do not speak any English, they had to use body language to communicate. But a surprising amount of communication can still take place.

For the first few months they were eating three times a day at a local restaurant called the Bo Kwang Sik Dang. After I arrived, I started cooking in our house, so Zen Master Dae Bong and Hyon Am Go Sa stopped going to the Bo Kwang Sik Dang and now eat at the Myong Haeng Sik Dang. Jon Sajang refuses to, however, because we serve only vegetables and rice.

This winter we had a three-month retreat here, along with Hwa Gye Sah, Shin Won Sah and every other Zen temple in the country. When we began, Zen Master Seung Sahn said this would be a "working Kyol Che." At first I wasn't really sure what that meant, but after a while I realized it means anything is possible. We've set up a schedule here, the same as Hwa Gye Sah and Shin Won Sah, with lots of bowing, sitting and chanting. Of course, sometimes





during sitting huge machines roll by the window and jackhammers are rumbling, so this is a kind of “construction Kyol Che.”

My job here is basically to do household chores, talk to people and serve tea. When Zen Master Dae Bong is around I help him talk to guests and our co-workers. Also, at any time during the day people appear and want to come inside. So my job is to be very nice to them, serve them tea and explain what we are doing here. Nowadays more and more people are becoming interested in what we are doing, due to both Hyon Gak Sunim’s book and the fact that the word is spreading that a couple of Western monks are living over on Kye Ryong Sahn. One family drove down five hours from Seoul just to visit us after reading Hyon Gak Sunim’s book. They stayed an hour or two, gave us a large donation, then headed home smiling. Also, we’ve made friends with many residents in the local town, so sometimes the picture-shop lady or the Buddhist gas station lady will drop by for tea and chatting.

Hyon Am Go Sa has emphasized to me many times the importance of “injeong” to Koreans, which means basically the “human love” feeling or relationship-energy between people. The best thing we can do here to make a good relationship with our community is invite everyone in, and then with a very sincere and devoted mind serve them tea and show them the new building. This has become my practice.

Our closest neighbor, whose house is a mere fifty meters away from the construction site, is an old Korean bosalnim who lives with her eldest and youngest sons. She has eight children. All the daughters are married and her other two sons are in the army. The husband, who was a very serious Confucian scholar, died a few years ago, but trained his family very well in Confucian ethics and practice.

They support themselves by operating a deer farm, and harvesting the antlers once a year to make men’s virility medicine, so we affectionately refer to her as the “Deer Bosalnim.” The eldest son drives a school bus, and the youngest son drives a sweet potato truck, so they manage to make ends meet.

You might think that this family would be disturbed to have construction going on so close to their house, not to mention the fact that within a few months twenty to thirty (at least!) strange foreigners will be moving in. However, they seem extremely pleased by the whole project, and have told me several times how happy they are that our temple has appeared next to their property. The Deer Bosalnim seems concerned that Zen Master Dae Bong and I have enough to eat, so she is always cooking delicious side

dishes for us and putting them in our refrigerator when we aren’t looking.

For the past few months the whole family has been coming to morning and evening practice every day. And whenever the Deer Bosalnim’s other children or grandchildren visit, she brings them to practice too, so we’ve packed up to six or eight people in our tiny dharma room, sometimes making it more like Romper Room than a temple. They’ve really embraced our style of practicing, and it’s a wonderful sight to see the Deer Bosalnim’s shining face every night after evening chanting saying “Aigo! Sugo Hashyushamnida!” [*Good job!*]

I noticed that every night around the same time the sound of Buddhist chanting was coming from near the Deer Bosalnim’s house. One night I asked her what it was. She said “Oh, it’s the deer’s meal time.” These are Buddhist deer, so every night while the youngest son is giving them their grass gongyang [*offering*], they play a tape of the Heart Sutra for them in the deer pen. He told me, “The deer have to get enlightenment, too!” Also, Zen Master Dae Bong has been going over and chanting the Great Dharani to them, so perhaps in their next lives these deer will come to practice here at Mu Sang Sah. I asked the youngest son if he had ever thought about becoming a monk, and he said “I used to think about it, but now that a temple has appeared next door to my house there is no need!”

By the time you read this the first building will have already been finished, and a group of westerners will be living here full time, forever changing the face of this small village in Chung-Chong Nam Do—we hope for the better. For all of us involved, both westerners and Koreans alike, this is a learning experience and a wonderful new opportunity.

