

**AMERICAN  
MONK'S  
BEST-SELLER  
HIGHLIGHTS  
OUR  
SCHOOL'S  
PROGRESS  
IN KOREA**

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Our Kwan Um School of Zen is suddenly becoming famous in Korea, not the least because of the publication of Hyon Gak Sunim's best-selling book, *Cloud Path: from Harvard to Hwa Gye Sah*, which appeared in November 1999 in Korean. The book introduces Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching to a contemporary Korean audience and addresses a number of controversial issues in Korean Buddhism today. It also tells Hyon Gak Sunim's story, how he (formerly Paul Muenzen) grew up in New Jersey, searched for a spiritual path, found the dharma and Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching and became a monk in our school (the autobiographical part of the book ends with his taking monk's precepts at Nam Hwa Sah temple in China). The story is not so different from that of many American Zen students but it is certainly new, and even shocking, to Koreans, who up to now have had little knowledge or understanding of Zen Master Seung Sahn's work in the west. The book has sold over 500,000 copies—it is a best seller in Korea and in Korean communities throughout the world. Korean people find the book fascinating: as the Abbot of Un Mun Sah said, "Once you pick it up, you cannot put it down."

Hyon Gak Sunim originally did not want to write this book. He had been translating Zen Master Seung Sahn's *Compass of Zen* into Korean but found publishers loath to take it on, afraid that it wouldn't sell. Finally one publisher told him that they would publish *Compass of Zen* if Hyon Gak Sunim would write his own book first—they had been interested in him because of columns on religion and spirituality he had written in several national newspapers and magazines. Also, he had been the subject of a TV documentary, and was well-known as a foreign monk in Korea. So Hyon Gak Sunim, who had previously refused many offers to write a book of his own, agreed to do it. But the book's huge success surprised everybody.

Myo Ji Sunim, Korean nun and abbot of the Chogye Temple in Woodside, New York, explained to me why young people like this book very much. For Korean people

Harvard University is a new Mecca—almost every Korean family dreams that their child can go to Harvard and attain success and the best of what the west has to offer. When they hear of someone who in their minds could have had everything they dream of but decided instead to throw it away and become a monk in their own Buddhist tradition in Korea, it strongly hits their minds. They can hardly believe it.

Last April, the abbot of Dong Hak Sah Temple told her students, "Since Song Chol Kun Sunim died six years ago, Korean Buddhism has sadly lost its reason to feel proud about itself. We seem to have lost our role in influencing our own society... The appearance of Hyon Gak Sunim's book has awakened our Korean Buddhism to have a role again in society. This book has made Buddhism important for Korea again... How sad that we must have a foreigner re-introduce Buddhism to our country."

A young Korean monk, Hae Tong Sunim, explained, "This book is very new, fresh and impressive. It's a great introduction to Zen, giving people who know nothing of Zen the opportunity to think again about their lives."

In a conversation last March in Pusan, Soen Hae Sunim, a respected senior student of Zen Master Jin Jae, said, "All the fighting in front of Chogye Sah caused many people to turn away from Korean Buddhism like an old pair of shoes, but this book is causing many people to come back to Korean Buddhism." A friend of his added, "*Cloud Path* is making a revival of Korean Buddhism. That's Zen Master Seung Sahn's clear-eyed way."

Since the book's publication, phones at the Seoul International Zen Center have been ringing with young people calling to say they have read the book and want to learn more about practicing. Our last Winter Kyol Che at Hwa Gye Sah became swelled with new students as a result. Korean-American readers have also been calling and coming to our Zen Centers all over United States. At Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles we get several calls a week.

One feature of the book is its willingness to deal with controversial issues in Korean Buddhism and Korean society. Chapter 50, "Is it About Conversion?" criticizes Christian oppression of Buddhism in Korea. It is the first time that Christians have been openly criticized for either committing the hundreds of arson attacks against Buddhist temples, such as one at Hwa Gye Sah in 1996, or else contributing to the atmosphere where those attacks have been implicitly encouraged. This chapter has drawn a lot of attention and praise from Buddhists and Christians alike.

Chapter 57, "What You Get by Throwing It All Away," describes the international significance of Zen Master Seung Sahn's life and teaching, and brings Koreans, who have sometimes been isolated in their own tradition, up to date on the spread of Buddhism to the West, Buddhism's effect on the modern world, and the modern world's influence



on the traditional forms—for example, in the new equality of women as Buddhist teachers and administrators.

As a result of all this, Hyon Gak Sunim himself has become something of a celebrity in Korea. Korean people enjoy his gregarious personality and dynamic style. Recently, the abbot of Hwa Gye Sah took him to give a dharma speech at the Korean West Point, bringing along 500 copies of the two-volume book. The talk was a great success. Hyon Gak Sunim is currently besieged by invitations to give talks throughout Korea, but is trying hard to stay mostly at Kye Ryong Sahn International Zen Center, and just practice. Hyon Gak Sunim also mentioned to me that he has no interest in an English translation of the book, since it was written to address Korean people quite specifically about issues close to them. All the profits from the book are being dedicated to the dharma.

The appearance of the book and its success have provoked a new and great interest in our school throughout Korea, also a new interest in Zen Master Seung Sahn's books and teaching. Zen Master Seung Sahn's books are now bestsellers in the Buddhist section for the first time in Korea, and publishers are demanding rights to re-publish his works. All of our foreign monks and nuns living in Korea now feel a closer connection to the society as a whole—they feel that they can have a positive influence on Korean life and on Korean Buddhism and finally participate there in a more significant role than just that of a student.

Korea itself is vastly different from the way it was in 1975 when Zen Master Seung Sahn first began taking his Western students there. At that time Korea was a totally Confucian-style society—unique, but very isolated from the rest of the world. Young people only wanted to be like their parents, dress and manners were very formal and, to our Western eyes, perhaps a little strange. When our Sunims and lay people, including this writer, first established the Seoul International Zen Center in 1984, the Korean

monks at Hwa Gye Sah had no idea why we had come. We were perceived as very foreign and not so useful! But with the Seoul Olympics in 1988, a wave of western influence spread throughout Korea, and in the last several years great cultural changes have appeared. Young people can be seen kissing in public, many dye their hair orange, play rock and roll, and eat western-style fast food. People are enjoying western delights; they are also having western-style problems—which means they are now also more open to Zen Master Seung Sahn's "International Zen" teaching, with its emphasis on moment-to-moment practice connecting with everyday life. Blue-eyed followers of the way are in demand! So things have come full circle, since the time in the United States in the seventies when Zen Master Seung Sahn, seen as a fascinating Asian visitor, was eagerly followed by Americans hungry for eastern teaching.

Our Seoul International Zen Center, in addition to running rigorous 90-day meditation retreats for serious practitioners, now has a Sunday dharma class that draws fifty people a week, both Koreans and foreigners. Our monks and nuns have been able to sit retreats at traditional Korean temples and make their own connections with the Korean sangha.

Last Buddha's Birthday MBC TV presented a documentary on Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching and our whole international school entitled "Zen Master Seung Sahn—The Korean Bodhidharma." The Kye Ryong Sahn International Zen Center is attracting numerous Korean visitors and dharma-seekers. Even the opening of Mu Ryang Sunim's mountain temple, Mountain Spirit Center, in Tehachapi California was celebrated by newspapers in Korea. The long years of patient efforts by Zen Master Seung Sahn; by our late friend and teacher, Zen Master Su Bong; by Zen Master Dae Bong, Mu Shim Sunim JDPS and many others in building our International Zen Center are bearing fruit. We hope everyone will enjoy the feast!

