



Back row: Zen Master Dae Bong, Kwan Do Sunim, Mu Shim Sunim JPDS; Front row: Myo Ji Sunim, Do Kwan Sunim JPDS, and friends

A RETURN TO NORTH KOREA

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The big cruise ship, *Hyundai Kumgang*, pulls into the Northern harbor at dawn after having departed the South Korean harbor of Dong Hae the evening before. Most of the passengers are either finishing their breakfast or staring out the big glass windows on the upper decks. For most of the Koreans, and other passengers too, this is the first time to be visiting reclusive North Korea.

But, for Zen Master Seung Sahn, this is a return to the days of his youth, when during breaks from school he left the city and went to the Diamond Mountains for hiking and visiting temples. The Diamond Mountains, or Kumgang San as they are known in Korean, are considered to be among the most scenic mountains in all of Northeast Asia. Even Chinese people said there were no mountains in China as beautiful. Some say that they were named after the Diamond Sutra of Buddhism; but one look at the many sharp peaks and jagged lines of these mountains and you can easily see, without the help of any sutra, the diamond-like characteristic of these mountains. Many of the rock cliffs are bone-white—they glisten in the sun like so many diamonds on a necklace.

For many years the North Koreans kept the Diamond Mountains for the exclusive use of political higher-ups or special guests from overseas. In 1998 that situation changed when they were suddenly faced with an extreme shortage of food and little foreign exchange currency. The North Koreans struck a deal with a large South Korean conglomerate, the Hyundai Corporation, to develop the region for tourism. The chairman of Hyundai, Jong Ju Hyun, is an aging multi-millionaire who, like Zen Master Seung Sahn and a whole generation of South Koreans who were born in the North, longed to once again set foot on their home soil. He was able to convince the North Koreans to let Hyundai develop the Diamond Mountains with an exclusive contract for thirty years. In return, Hyundai promised to pay for all the costs of development, and to pay the cash-strapped North in hard currency for every tourist who visited the mountains.

Our tour group included Zen Master Seung Sahn, Zen Master Dae Bong, the Hwa Gye Sa temple abbot, and several of our sangha members from around the world including Mu Ryang Sunim and Myo Ji Sunim from America, and Kwan Do Sunim from South Africa. Joining us were about seventy monks and nuns from the Chogye order, and also about five hundred lay Buddhists from other temples. All together there were about six hundred people in our tour group.

Twelve thousand peaks

Each of a different height.

Look, Sir, as the sun rises,

The highest one blushes first.

Soeng Sung-Nin (1338–1423)

As a young student, Zen Master Seung Sahn would sometimes go to the Diamond Mountains and stay at a hermitage to study. He recalls that, “Many dedicated monks lived in these mountains and practiced hard. In every nook and cranny there was a hermitage or a temple. The mountains were alive with a vibrant energy.” Nowadays

the temples are hidden from view, or in most cases have been destroyed. All that remains is a lonely pagoda here and there standing in a field, or the Buddha’s name, Amitabul, carved into a rock near a waterfall. As we entered the Diamond Mountains our guides told us, “Be careful not to wear or show your beads to the North Korean officials. Don’t put your hands together in hapjang. Any activity that can be construed as religious may be subject to investigation and you will probably be fined.” And they were not joking! Last year a group of Chogye order monks and their followers had circumambulated the pagoda at Shin-Gye Sah temple and chanted the Heart Sutra. The North Koreans promptly fined them \$5,000 (US) for doing this without first receiving formal permission.

Entering the Diamond Mountains, you are immediately struck by the awesome grandeur of the ancient pine forest. Our guide told us that these mountains were famous for their tall pine trees and the rich soil that nourishes wild ginseng and pine mushrooms. Of course, everybody was eager to forage for some wild ginseng or exotic mushrooms, but we were warned that picking these was not permitted.



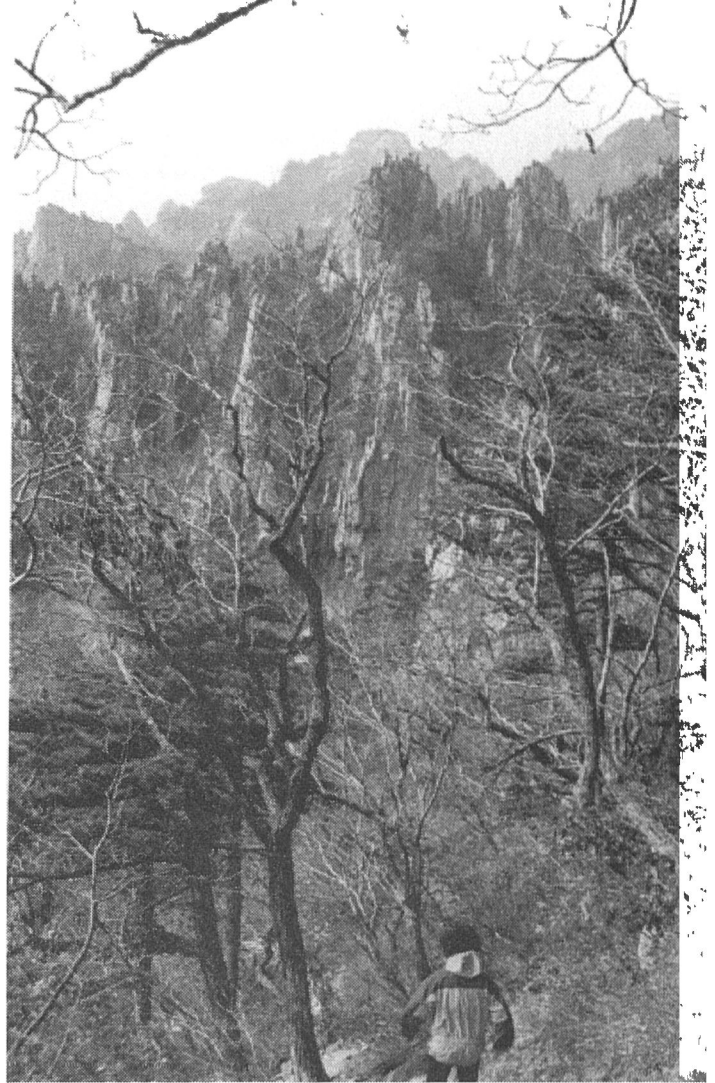
*Front row: Hyon Am Gosa, Pom Jo Sunim, Zen Master Seung Sahn, Hyon Soeng Sunim, Zen Master Dae Bong;
Back row: Do Kwan Sunim JDPS, Mu Shim Sunim JDPS, and Mu Ryang Sunim.*

The trails leading up the mountain are very well maintained and perfectly clean. There were no trashcans and we were told that any trash that we had brought in must be carried out with us. Even though more than a thousand tourists a day climb up and down these trails, we didn't see even one piece of litter. All along the hiking trails were North Korean officials who silently watched us. Occasionally we would talk to them: "How are you? Nice weather today!" and they would ask, "Where are you from?" They seemed happier to see a western face than just the usual South Koreans. One of them told us that they were expecting a visit by President Clinton any day. Each of them wore a small badge with a picture of their leader, Kim Jong Il. They all looked quite fit, but thin, compared to the people in our group.

The highest point of the hiking tour was 1,000 meters (3,300 feet)—the view is spectacular from this point. And, true to form, carved in huge bright red letters into the rock across from the lookout point was a political slogan: "Following Kim Il Sung, our Way is the best". We were told not even to point at it as that might be construed as a sign of disrespect. So, we snapped pictures of each other, enjoyed some snacks, and started back down. We encountered little wildlife there, which, combined with the lack of non-official North Koreans, gave the whole area a rather dead atmosphere. We were all relieved when we reached the Hyundai enclave below and could enjoy a hot spring bath together. The mineral water was very hot and worked wonders on our sore muscles. This hot spring is well known to Zen students familiar with the kong-an which asks the question: "You can clean your body in this hot spring, but how can you clean your mind?" Fortunately, we got a break because the old woman wasn't there any more!

After two days of hiking in the mountains we went to the Pyongyang circus and acrobatics display. The young people who performed for us were almost too perfect, but the skill required for the stunts was quite impressive. The audience not only showed their approval with applause, but some in the audience were moved to tears by the thought of these youthful acrobats devoting life to perform only for the glory of their country and their leader, Kim Jong Il. Here everything is a political event.

As we left North Korea, we had to pass through border control, customs, again with many North Korean soldiers and officials staring at us. Finally, we reached the Hyundai cruise ship and walked up the plank where the crew was waiting to greet us with big smiles and singing. Everybody was happy to have visited North Korea, but also very glad to be returning to South Korea and freedom!



The Diamond Mountains

*Sanggye Temple of Mount Chiri is great,
And the ten thousand falls in the Diamond
Mountains are extraordinary.
This body has not yet been to the famous mountains,
Yet I frequently write poems in farewell to monks.*

Paek Kwang Hun