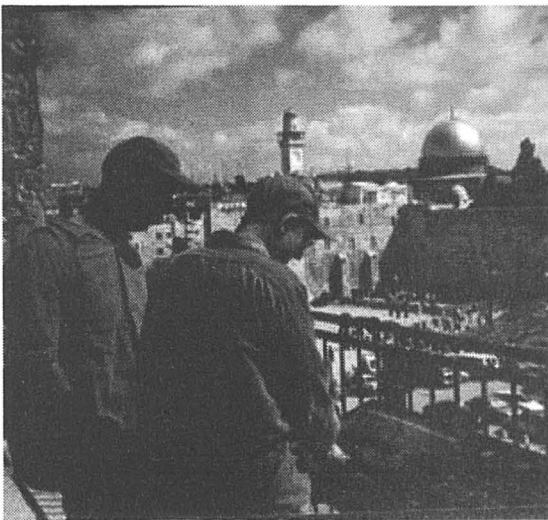


A retreat from Buddha in Israel

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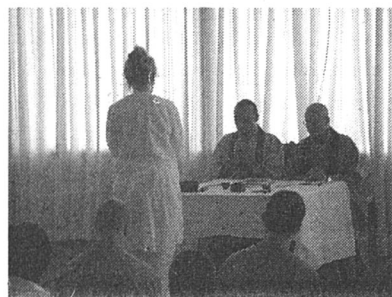
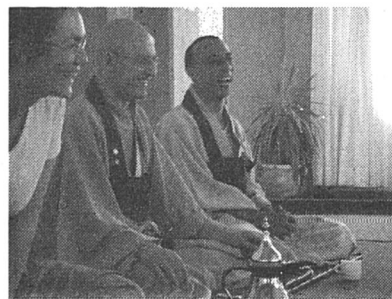
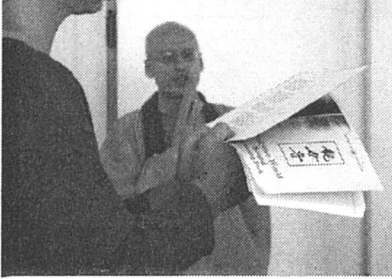


Last April the Israeli sangha had the honor of hosting a six-day visit by Zen Master Wu Bong from the Paris Zen Center. This is the second time that teachers from the Kwan Um School of Zen have traveled to Israel, the first being a visit by Zen Master Dae Bong and Mu Shim Sunim JDPS two years ago. Their visit, right after the Tel Aviv Zen Center's formal opening, gave the new Zen Center a big burst of energy and introduced many people to our school's teaching. Zen Master Wu Bong's trip took place at a different time for the Tel Aviv Zen Center—no longer a Zen Center struggling to get things going, we are now a Zen Center struggling to *keep* things going, though things are going rather well. Thirty eager people signed up to participate in a three-day retreat and about seventy showed up for the public talk with Zen Master Wu Bong in Tel Aviv.

Early the next morning we set off on a 45-minute drive to Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, the village where the retreat was to take place. Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam means Oasis of Peace in Hebrew and Arabic. It's a special cooperative village of Jews and Palestinian Arabs of Israeli citizenship, founded in the early 1970s. The residents of the village (40 families—20 Jewish; 20 Arab) are demonstrating the possibility of coexistence between Jews and Palestinians by developing a community based on mutual acceptance, respect and cooperation. We chose this location not only because the village has a lot of experience hosting different kinds of retreats, but also as an act of support which is very important in these troubled times. This was a very special retreat for the Israeli sangha; it was our first retreat with a Zen Master and therefore the first time that many of our members could experience a kong-an interview. This made Zen Master Wu Bong's job a little bit harder, but for the participants this retreat was a mind-shaking experience. It also gave them a lot of energy and motivation to practice.

Before the retreat began we decided to hold a small five precepts ceremony. Since Zen Master Wu Bong said that there should be at least four people who want to take the precepts in order to hold a ceremony, we weren't sure if the ceremony would happen at all. By the end of the Yong Maeng Jong Jin we had sixteen (!) people wanting to take the five precepts. This mass of people took us completely by surprise. We had no kasas, bowing robes or certificates to give at the ceremony. Zen Master Wu Bong said "no problem" and handed them a small note with their name, dharma name and meaning neatly written on it. The participants were all very excited and happy and it was a wonderful ceremony.

Besides his dharma duties we also wanted Zen Master Wu Bong to see a bit of the country, so he could get a sense of the impulsive spirit here. Dharma teacher Yuval Gill, founder of the Zen Center, guided him around Tel Aviv and Jaffa, to experience the beaches, fish restaurants, market places and, most of all, the interesting mixture of people from all over the world. But the high point of it all was the visit to Jerusalem. Zen Master Wu Bong, Yuval and myself set off by car one morning for the holy city. Having been born and raised in Jerusalem, I was appointed guide for this excursion. I don't have enough paper to tell about



it all, but between putting a note with a wish in the cracks of the Wailing Wall (as Zen Master Wu Bong had promised his aunt he would) and seeing the holocaust museum, we had an opportunity to get a real close-up look at the highly emotional Israeli-Arab conflict.

As the three of us had just left the famous Wailing Wall, which is located in the Jewish quarter of the old city in Jerusalem, we decided to continue walking around the city on foot. We had to take care not to cross over into the Arab quarter, knowing that getting Zen Master Wu Bong killed would not contribute to the success of his visit. However, I soon began to experience difficulties keeping the flock together. As we were walking, I received an urgent call on my cell phone. While I was engaged in conversation, Zen Master Wu Bong and Yuval disappeared from sight. When I was finished I looked around for them and... we have an expression in Hebrew: darkness in the eyes. Then I spotted them. The pair had wandered smack into the Arab market. I rushed over to them and muttered through my teeth: "Guys, we-are-in-the-wrong-place," but they just smiled at me and pointed happily at a colorful spice shop that was just opening. They had found my weak spot—I love spices. I was hooked, so I figured if I'm risking my life, at least I could get some hard-to-come-by spices while I'm at it.

And so I made the mistake of turning my back on them once again and when I emerged from the shop, spices in hand, the two had ventured even deeper into the market. Again I rushed, again I muttered, again I was waved off with a smile as the pair pointed at their next fascination. This time it was a restaurant—if you could call it that—more like a cave with three small tables; next to each were three even smaller chairs. The guy in the entrance was busily cooking fresh hummus. As we had earlier discussed where we would eat lunch, the pair came up with the bright idea to have some HUMMUS! Why not? Why not indeed, I muttered. In we went and sat ourselves down at a table. The three young men that were eating at the other tables gave us dark looks, but we pretended to be tourists and—though it made communication with the owner more difficult—spoke English only.

As we were enjoying the heavenly hummus (which was indeed *very* good,) an elderly man passed by the entrance of the restaurant... he stopped short when he caught sight of us. Somehow he sensed straight away that there were Jews and Israelis sitting at our table and, to put it mildly, he didn't like it. He parked himself at the entrance of the restaurant and began to give verbal expression, in song, to his dissatisfaction with our presence, mentioning our family members and their sexual habits, as well as Israelis in general and *their* sexual habits, at least those were the bits and pieces that Yuval and myself could make out from his Arabic. Zen Master Wu Bong asked for a translation and the young men at the other table were happy to tell us that the old man was just singing us a song, nothing to worry about. After about ten minutes of serenading us with the owner trying to shush him up, the old man finally tired of his song and continued on his way.

This is not an unusual scene for an Israeli to come across. The conflict in this country is full of hatred, anger, desperation and death. This story is only a humorous demonstration of real misery and suffering. We would like to ask all of you to say Kwan Seum Bosal for the Middle East—it needs as much compassion as it can get.