

Inka for Steven Cohen

D H A R M A C O M B A T

Steven Cohen JDPSN received inka in a ceremony at Providence Zen Center on April 6, 2002.

Cohen Poep Sa Nim is abbot of the Chogye International Zen Center of New York. He has been a student of Zen Master Seung Sahn since 1974. Before moving to New York in 1984, he was a founding member of the New Haven Zen Center where he served as administrative director (1975-79) and head dharma teacher (1979-84). He became a senior dharma teacher in 1999. Cohen PSN is a Professor of Dermatology, Director of Residency Training, and Deputy Chair of the Department of Dermatology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. Steve and Phyllis Cohen have been married for 33 years; they have two children. Twice National Champion (1966-67) and a member of the US Olympic Team 1968, he was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 1991.

Question: Last year this time you gave a talk at the New Haven Zen Center. Your daughter attended. And as I remember you said this was the first time that your daughter came to such a function where you were teaching. I ask you, if it took this long for your daughter to come hear you speak, how will you attract any students as a teacher?

Cohen PSN: How did you get here?

Q: Through the door.

CPSN: So I guess you found your way.

Q: Thank you for your teaching.

Q: Good morning, Dr. Cohen. My name is Cary, but some people call me Dr. deWit. I'm a doctor and you're a doctor. Are we the same or different?

CPSN: How can I help you?

Q: Is that all?

CPSN: Is that the same or different?

Q: *[no reply]*

Q: Every morning we bow 108 times. Traditionally it's said we do 108 bows because there's 108 delusions, and so we put them all down. But then, one of the sutras says there's 84,000 different delusions. But the bodhisattva vows say that delusions are endless. So how many delusions are there?

CPSN: Another delusion has just appeared.

Q: Thank you.

Q: Doctor Cohen, you probably make a lot of money. But as a teacher you won't make much money. So which one has more value?

CPSN: What color is the wall?

Q: The wall is white.

CPSN: How much value is there in that?

Q: Thank you very much.

D H A R M A T A L K

Enlightenment is ignorance. Ignorance is enlightenment.

[Raises Zen stick over head, then hits table with stick.]

No enlightenment. No ignorance.

[Raises Zen stick over head, then hits table with stick.]

Enlightenment is enlightenment. Ignorance is ignorance.

[Raises Zen stick over head, then hits table with stick.]

Which of these statements is correct?

KATZ!

The dharma room is filled with kasas of many colors. All things are your teachers.

In this season of the Buddha's birthday of course we are drawn to reflect on his life... The young Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni, was a prince whose life of privilege, riches, jewels, a palace, even a beautiful wife, and child could not dispel his inner questions about *why we are born; why we die; and what is the meaning of life?*

So, he spurned the life of material advantage and left the palace. He wandered in the forest as a beggar for many years before he came to sit in meditation under the Bodhi tree. Then one morning, Gautama Shakyamuni became Buddha, which means he awakened to his True Nature; he was enlightened about the answers to the great questions that had plagued him. Then he devoted the remainder of his life to teaching others. Without recounting all the details, it seems most important that Buddha was a human being from whose life we can all find parallels.

In 1974, my wife of five years, Phyllis, and I moved to New Haven. After a few relocation hiccups, we found our own palace... a two-story 'flat' on a quiet city street... surrounded by green trees, covered by blue sky, birdsong everywhere. Many nice neighbors became our friends. My new job at the Yale Medical School was very exciting... outside everything seemed great, but inside the young doctor was unhappy because he did not understand the purpose of his life.

In the autumn of that first year in New Haven, Zen Master Seung Sahn and his first Western monk, Mu Gak Sunim (now Stephen Mitchell) came to Yale. Mu Gak Sunim delivered a stunning dharma talk, followed by Zen Master Seung Sahn taking questions and answers. At one point he asked someone in the audience, "What is your name?" But after a response of 'John' or 'William,' Zen Master Seung Sahn laughingly retorted, "Oh, that is only your body name, but what is the name of your true self?"

An awkward silence blended with the look of confusion on everyone's face... until, in a barely audible voice, the unwitting dharma combatant whispered, "I don't know." "Yah," Zen Master Seung Sahn playfully said, "The mind that does not know *is* the Buddha." At the conclusion of questions and answers, Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "Only go straight, don't know, which is clear like space, soon attain enlightenment, and save all beings from suffering."

After this dharma talk, a few of us started practicing meditation every morning. Zen Master Ji Bong was among the first small group. Before long, the New Haven Zen Center was founded. It was during those formative years of my own adult life that I often turned to Zen Master Seung Sahn for advice. He came to New Haven to lead retreats three or four times a year. I went to Providence Zen Center for ceremonies several times a year when the Zen Center was still on Hope Street. Among the more frustrating problems I faced in those days was the fact that my wife, Phyllis, was very much opposed to Zen.

Zen Master Seung Sahn at first told me, "Oh, your wife is your greatest teacher—never talk to her about Zen. Only give her good speech and loving action." Sometime later I told Zen Master Seung Sahn that she did not care about good speech and loving action... she often yelled at me that, "You're only being nice so I will approve of your being involved with that 'loony Moony.'" Zen Master Seung Sahn calmly observed, "I understand your wife's mind. She has very strong likes and dislikes. So *you* must do together action in the Zen Center with other people. Then this together action will take away your opinion, your condition, and your situation very easily. Then your wife will be 'no problem.'"

Zen Master Seung Sahn always asked about my family; however it was quite a few years later, when I was becoming head dharma teacher at the New Haven Zen Center, that we discussed how my wife felt about Zen. I explained that she was still very angry about my involvement, often reiterating words to the effect... "Going to the Zen Center all the time is your selfish, navel gazing, lazy mind running amok. That is bullshit Zen! If you are a real bodhisattva then you will be a correct husband and correct father and stay home with your family." Zen Master Seung Sahn then surprised me by shouting, "Your wife has 'number one' very bad speech and very bad action, so you must come and live for awhile at a Zen Center."

Later, I sheepishly told Zen Master Seung Sahn that I decided not to move into a Zen Center, and that although little had changed with my wife, it was most important for me to work things out with her. He looked at me in the most kindly way, put his hand on my shoulder, and spoke softly, "You like, I like!"

In the deepest sense, what Zen Master Seung Sahn has taught me derives from his living example that letting go of one's opinion, one's condition, and one's situation to

Continued on page 24

Dharma Talk
by Steven Cohen JDPSN

Continued from page 5

help others applies to Zen Masters, too.

Zen Master Seung Sahn was right from the start,

Phyllis has been and remains

one of the more important teachers in my life, because she is always there reminding me to be genuine, and to be authentic above and beyond the trappings of Zen. In June, Phyllis and I will celebrate our thirty-third anniversary. There is no doubt that for his part, Zen Master Seung Sahn has been this remarkable vision of plain clothes, plain speech, and plain living transformed into Great Love, Great Compassion, and Great Action for all beings. We are all the beneficiaries of his teaching.

I have been very fortunate to be practicing the past six years under the guidance of Ken Kessel JDPSN and Zen Master Wu Kwang in New York, as well as the many mature and compassionate teachers throughout our school. Zen Master Seung Sahn always says “try, try, try for 10,000 years nonstop” when he refers to all aspects of our practice. Kessel PSN and Wu Kwang Soen Sa truly follow this example.

The Chogye International Zen Center of New York has an “Introduction to Zen” and dharma talk every Sunday night. Except when he was very sick with pneumonia, Kessel PSN hosted guests and answered questions following the dharma talk every Sunday night between 1996 and 2000. Despite living far away from the Zen Center, he made the long trip every week. Few of us appreciated the enormous commitment Kessel PSN made until the older students of our New York sangha took on the job after he moved to Virginia. Kessel PSN also came to the Zen Center on Thursday evenings to give interviews, as well as most Saturday mornings to share teaching interviews with Zen Master Wu Kwang. Always in good humor, with a little dash of dharma mischief in his eye, he once asked if I had any questions during an interview. When I said “not this morning,” he poked me in the belly with his stick and said, “A question means, you test me, I test you. No questions means you lose your dharma combat skills, then someday a keen-eyed lion will eat you.”

I have sat at the feet of Zen Master Wu Kwang now for nearly five years. He annually leads six or more retreats at our center plus retreats elsewhere, he gives a formal dharma talk in New York twelve months of the year, he practices four mornings a week at the Zen Center, and all this while working full-time as a psychotherapist, and being a full-time husband, father and grandfather. A penchant for scholarship is reflected in his book, *Open Mouth Already a Mistake*, with a new text upcoming. His fierce dharma combat skills are reflected in an experience which he shared with me recently.

Many years ago, Wu Kwang Soen Sa went to a retreat



led by Aitken Roshi. During dokusan (interviews) Aitken Roshi repeatedly asked him to manifest “mu,” and during each interview, the Roshi would say “something is still missing.” Finally, the last interview came and *again* Aitken Roshi said, “something is still missing.” At that moment, without thinking, Wu Kwang Soen Sa grabbed the Roshi’s stick and held it in the air while shouting, “You make missing and not missing, so I hit you thirty times.” Roshi stiffened his back and tightened his muscles visibly while indignantly snorting, “NONSENSE.” Wu Kwang Soen Sa put down the stick, bowed and said, “Thank you for your nonsense teaching.” So, I say to Wu Kwang Soen Sa, thank you for your “nonsense teaching” and your “nonsense wisdom.”

I want to thank all my teachers of the past, present and future, and all my dharma siblings, especially those in the New York sangha, for their friendship and support.

Fundamentally, our practice teaches us to pay attention. So I ask you...

[Raises Zen stick over head.]

Do you see this?

[Hits table with Zen stick then raises stick over head.]

Do you hear this?

[Hits table with Zen stick.]

This stick, this sound, and your mind, are they the same or different? If you say the same, this stick will hit you thirty times. If you say different, this stick will hit you thirty times. Why?

KATZ!

Today is April 6, 2002. How may I help you?

Dharma Talk by Darek Gorzewski JDPSN

Continued from page 7

ally results in suffering. Zen Master Seung Sahn teaches that if you make something, then wanting something appears, then checking something, then holding onto something, then getting attached to something, and the only result of that is suffering.

There is one teacher in Korea who is a very good friend of Zen Master Seung Sahn. His name is Byok Am Sunim, and somebody told me when I was in Korea that the only kind of calligraphy he makes is: “You make, you get.” Very interesting. I had heard a saying before which was somewhat similar to the teaching in Byok Am Sunim’s calligraphy—“Watch out what you want,” or “Watch out what you make, because you may get it. Don’t be surprised.”

When I was still living and practicing in Poland, we had many different teachers coming to visit and teach the Polish sangha. Zen Master Seung Sahn could come only

