

WE
WILL
MEET
IN
10,000
YEARS

Zen Master Ji Bong



It is a privilege and an honor to welcome you to the celebration of the thirtieth year anniversary of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching tradition in America. When JW called and asked me to do this opening address he said, "We are asking you to do this because, among all of the students in the school, you are one of the oldest in terms of point of service." And that is, in fact, true. I have been around for twenty-eight years. However, he was too polite to also remind me that I am one of the oldest students in terms of the years that are actually on my head! During this past year I turned sixty, therefore we now have a teacher in our school, other than Zen Master Seung Sahn, who has passed that revered marker. Alas, as I look to my right and my left I notice that several of you are tracking very closely behind me. It is apparent that we will soon have many "senior" students and teachers among our sangha.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the early days of our school and offer a few general observations about our sangha at this time—our thirtieth birthday. For me, the journey started in January of 1974. At that time I was living in Boston doing research on a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I received an invitation to come to New Haven, Connecticut to deliver a public talk about my research and, in addition, to interview for an academic position at Yale University. During that interview I met an interesting fellow named David Mott. After the job interview David and I struck up a conversation that eventually began to focus on our mutual interest in Zen Buddhism. It turned out that both of us had been attempting to practice alone for several years. And, we were both searching for a teacher.

During the course of the ensuing summer we corresponded and decided that in the autumn semester we would form a practice group and make a serious search for a teacher to guide that group. When I first got to New Haven we went and visited Eido Shimano Roshi at Dai Bosatsu Temple in upstate New York. Later, we saw Sasaki Roshi in New Haven. However, at that time, neither of those Zen Masters was able to take on the responsibility of guiding our Zen group.

Fortunately, in November of that year I was browsing in a rather famous bookstore in New Haven called Book World. In the basement of Book World there was a quite large collection of books on Eastern religions. That particular day I was perusing a book by Ramana Maharshi when suddenly a voice came from behind me and said, "So, you like Ramana Maharshi?" I turned around and said, "Yeah, I really like Ramana Maharshi." This person then said, "I know somebody that knows everything that Ramana Maharshi knows." I replied, "Well, that is, indeed, interesting. By the way, who are you?" He said, "I'm Mu Gak." Then I said, "Mu Gak?" He replied, "That means 'no enlightenment.'" Now that was really interesting, because I had been searching for enlightenment for a very long time and this guy was named "no enlightenment."

It turned out that Mu Gak Sunim actually was Stephen Mitchell, the famous poet and translator, who many of you in this audience know quite well. The two of us went out and had a cup of coffee. In the ensuing conversation he told me a great deal about Zen Master Seung Sahn and finally he said, "If you would like to meet him I can arrange for him to come to Yale and give a public talk." I, of course,

agreed and about a month later Zen Master Seung Sahn and Mu Gak Sunim came and gave a talk at Berkeley College. Zen Master Seung Sahn was answering questions after Stephen's opening remarks.

David Mott and I were sitting in the rear of the room directly underneath a light switch. In response to a question, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked the audience, "What is enlightenment?" Now, all of us familiar with David know that he is always looking for some way to get on stage if it is at all possible. And, I'm the kind of person that will always prod somebody to get on stage if I can do so and stay in the background. Therefore, I punched David lightly in the ribs and pointed to the light switch and gave him the sign to flick it—which he immediately did. The room went dark. Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "Wonderful! Who did that?" Other people in the room began to complain and shouted, "Come on, turn the lights back on." David flicked the lights back on and waved his hands as the guilty party.

Zen Master Seung Sahn stared at the two of us and asked, "Lights come on, then what?" We were completely stuck. After a moment Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "Your head is a dragon and your tail is a snake." I thought, wow, this guy is really cool! And from that point forward the New Haven Zen Center had its teacher. Another person who was there that night was Dr. Steve Cohen, who is sitting here today in the front row. Eventually, we became the "gang of three" and within a few weeks we rented an apartment and began a formal practice together each morning.

The story from there has a lot of interesting twists and turns. I remember coming to Providence Zen Center on Hope Street for the first time and encountering blue, green, yellow and red cushions; the stylized paintings and the weird pentatonic chanting—in short the beginning of my panoramic journey into the magic kingdom of Korean Buddhism. Of course, all of us who have been around for a long time can regale you with stories about those days. It certainly was a lot of fun. Zen Master Soeng Hyang once said to me, "In those days, Zen Master Seung Sahn used to wear a sailor's hat and after retreats we would sing Korean folk songs or Italian love songs, roll around on the floor eating popcorn and sharing all sorts of dharma goodies with one another." In significant ways that was what the first decade of our practice was basically about. It was like a parent teaching and playing with his children. And it was very wonderful. We, as his children, squabbled and scrambled for attention as we slowly grew emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

As the second decade of our relationship with Zen Master Seung Sahn unfolded we became more like teenagers in our practices. And, like teenagers, we began to question and test the wisdom and authority of our spiritual parent. I was recently talking to one of our students who is currently practicing with the Dharma

Sound group in Seattle. She got very angry with the "old man" and left the school for seventeen years, only to return in the past five years. However, during the 1980s there was a lot of turmoil and many students left altogether. As I look out at this audience I see so many new faces, faces quite different from the majority of those that I saw when giving talks here in the 1980s. But, thankfully, some of us refuse to go away no matter how often we get hit by Zen Master Seung Sahn's stick or his tongue.

An interviewer once asked Suzuki Roshi, "How many people were originally practicing with you as a young man at your home temple?" He replied, "There were about 370 of us." The interviewer then asked, "How many of that group received transmission?" Suzuki Roshi's wife interrupted the exchange and proudly proclaimed, "Only Shunryu got transmission." The interviewer was quite impressed and asked, "Really? Only you? Why?" Suzuki Roshi was quiet for a moment, then meekly said, "Everybody else left." So there is something to be said for staying around and just being present.

Today we are marking the end of the third decade of our years together. This last decade has involved the process of taking responsibility. As our teacher's age has grown and his health has begun to falter, the leadership and teaching roles in our school have largely been assumed by the senior students. This process has been smooth in some ways and quite bumpy in others. It has, indeed, been reflective of all the stuff that comes up in peoples' lives as they accept the vicissitudes of adult life—divorces, sexual issues, ego attachments, etc. So there have been storm clouds and some heavy winds, but many of us are still here—not just surviving, but also continuing to mature and prosper. As my old jazz-playing friends used to say, "We're still cookin'."

It's very precarious to get into the prediction business, but I'll be brave and make two predictions about our near future. The first concerns how we are going to deal with an impending sense of loss. We have already lost Su Bong Sunim—it hardly seems possible that it was eight years ago. There is never more than a few days that go by when I don't feel the loss of my dharma brother, and I'm sure Zen Master Bon Yeon and others who were close to him also live with that pain. Zen Master Soeng Hyang's been sick and recently had major surgery. I've had a heart attack. Zen Master Wu Bong had a stroke. Many of us are no longer young and our founding teacher at this moment lies critically ill in Korea. Therefore it is apparent that one of the things we're going to have to face (with as much compassion and wisdom as we can muster) is this sense of loss—the loss of some of the most significant persons in our lives. As Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say in his early years in America, "Changing, changing, changing!" Some of us may not be here for our fortieth anniversary. Our founding teacher probably won't be here.

Secondly, it is quite apparent that the individual

14]

Thirtieth A

members of our dharma family are going to have varying attitudes about how we should develop a uniquely American approach to spreading the dharma. Some teachers are going to want to be independent or loosely affiliated with a national organization (we have already seen this among some of our teachers in the past few years). Others will want to be tightly joined together within a large national organization. Having different outlooks is neither good nor bad; it's just the way things are among all collections of people, even families. My wish is that we as a family might find a sense of charity, genuine clarity, and most importantly, a real sense of wisdom and compassion in dealing with each other as these natural processes unfold. And one personal wish that I have is that our family finds it possible to accommodate a cranky and independent old uncle from California within the group.

Thirty years! Thirty years is a long time, particularly when it defines a crucial segment of the arc of our individual lives—our successes in our professions, our lives as monks, and our attempts as Zen teachers. All of these things are, indeed, important. But today, above all things, I want to personally thank Zen Master Seung Sahn for the wonderful teaching that he has given to me about time. It is obvious that when you study with somebody for thirty years you're going to receive all kinds of gifts, most of which you can never sufficiently repay.

I remember clearly a dharma talk given by Zen Master Seung Sahn in Los Angeles about twenty years ago. There was a fellow sitting in the back of the room—it was a big group like this—who stood up in the midst of the talk and posed a question to Zen Master Seung Sahn. Zen Master Seung Sahn interrupted his train of thought and began to seriously answer the man's question. The fellow stood up, stared at Zen Master Seung Sahn and after about a minute or so derisively muttered, "Huh!" and stalked out of the room. Zen Master Seung Sahn never changed his demeanor and completed the answer to the man's question. Then he returned to the general text of his talk as if nothing had happened.

Afterwards in his room, I asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, "How do you feel when you try to give this teaching to a person and he gives you this 'Huh!' kind of attitude?" Zen Master Seung Sahn smiled and said to me, "It's like this: You're planting seeds. Sometimes you throw the seeds out and it's like they are scattered in a very fertile area. In that kind of environment the soil is so rich you hardly need to water it, you just throw the seeds down and four or five days later 'boom,' the plant starts to come up." All of us who are teachers occasionally encounter students like

that—they immediately embrace the training and give a maximum effort from the outset.

Then Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "Other times you cast the seeds of teaching and they land on cement." Have any of you ever felt like your brain is full of cement? Finally Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "We can hope that a good stiff breeze will come along"—maybe that wind might even be in another lifetime—"and blow those seeds into a more fertile area."

What Zen Master Seung Sahn is talking about here is acquiring a sense of cosmic time—eternal time. Once we get a glimpse of that time we begin to perceive all events from a different perspective. All of you present here know that Zen Master Seung Sahn is not a patient man in many ways. In fact, sometimes he can be a real pain in the neck. However, he does have an infinite amount of patience and time that he generously offers to people to help them find their original nature. Most importantly, he never gives up. Never! And that has been his incredible gift to all of us. Of course, there is a great paradox imbedded in this teaching. The only way that any of us can ever perceive cosmic time is through *[snaps fingers]*, just this moment. There is a wonderful capping phrase in our tradition that says, "I will meet you in 10,000 years." These phrases from "dharma combat" can be used in destructive ways, but they also contain profound wisdom.

"I will meet you in 10,000 years." When someone awake says that to another person it means that the moment in time 10,000 years from now in cosmic time is at one with this *[snaps fingers]* very moment. That's it. That's what Zen is about. That's all that it is. It's not about this robe, it's not about having a teaching rank and it's certainly not about being a monk, as opposed to being a layperson. It's not about any of that stuff. It's just *[snaps fingers]* this—being awake, having presence in the moment. As I suggested earlier some of us won't be here in our current form for the forty or, perhaps, the fifty or even the sixty years celebration. But, how about 300 years from now or even 3,000 years from now? My wish is that all of us meet *[snaps fingers]* again in 10,000 years. Thank you.

