

# STARTING FROM SCRATCH

*Merrie Fraser JDPSN*

When I moved into Providence Zen Center in the fall of 1978, it was already on Hope Street. It was a very interesting Zen Center because we lived in a developing neighborhood, so we always had to be wary. The dharma room was on the first floor. It was colorful with a dark blue rug and mats of many colors. There was a 'front door' but it was always kept locked. Although, one evening it was left unlocked and during sitting some neighborhood man walked in, saw us sitting there, then backed out. We figured later that he was going to see what he could rob. We also had a window next to the staircase on the first floor. One night one of the local kids got in, went upstairs and robbed all of us. It was my first lesson in watching Zen Master Seung Sahn's non-attachment mind. He had a really nice camera that was taken. One of the students who lived there at the time said, "Let us run down the street and see if we can find him." But he said, "No, not a problem, that's okay, that's okay." So that was a lesson: always keep the door and windows locked and don't be attached if something happens.

After about six months, we moved up here to Cumberland. I remember coming out, seeing this place and thinking, "There's only sixteen of us. How will we do everything?" The Providence house could only hold about sixteen people, but this place was much bigger. How would we do it all? I have since learned that we can do a lot with even fewer people.

Because the building was really old, the land hadn't been taken care of properly and nothing had been done to it for a while. The main dharma room and library weren't built yet. The upstairs dharma room was missing and only a ramp from the second floor existed in that space. Outdoors was right next to the lounges. The door to the upstairs dharma room opened to the outside—there used to be stairs there, but they were missing. The other door, by the little upstairs interview room, opened on the ramp which was under a roof but still outdoors. There was no dining room. We used to have our Yong Maeng Jong Jin

meals in the dharma room after it was built. Of course there was no monastery.

So we started from scratch. The first thing we built was the dharma room. That became part of our practice. We'd do evening chanting wherever the current dharma room was located, then we'd go into the new dharma room and sand the walls and do all sorts of things.

We sat in numerous places. When we first moved in up here, we took the blue rug out of the old dharma room in Providence and we installed it upstairs in that long hallway, otherwise known as the blue rug area. This is where the term came from and why when we put in carpet, we used blue for that area. We decided the hallway was the only open area that could contain our numbers, but we still needed extra room, so we broke out the wall on the end room and opened up the "L".

One day the announcement after dinner was, "Okay, we're going to put in the steel beam, everybody upstairs." So twenty people lifted this big beam to support the ceiling across the newly opened space. After much discussion, we set up the altar where the upstairs dharma room door is, and Zen Master Seung Sahn sat at the end of the narrow part where you enter the blue rug area. Then for some reason, we moved to the visitor's lounge area, only it didn't look as nice as now. It was unpainted and dull. We had wall-to-wall mats of various colors from the old center. The house was not sealed, so we had to put up curtains on the entrance way because the wind would whistle down the hallways and make it cold. We had black and green tile in the halls—good for marking straight lines for sewing, but cold to walk on.

The dharma room was put up, the walls first because the architect told us that the roof was aero-dynamically correct and would fly off without the walls. It was late fall, and we were all hoping that it wouldn't snow before they got the roof completed. Once the roof was on, we thought, "Oh, we could practice in the library underneath." Well, the library was so cold that it was the only place we had permission ever to wear hats and gloves while we were sitting! We were sitting on top of plywood and underneath that was the ground—no insulation. That's why we went up and sanded walls.

During this time, we got our wood stove going, but that meant we not only had to chop the wood, somebody had to get up in the middle of the night to actually feed the fire. If the furnace smoked when they put the wood in, there would be a few clouds that would seep up to the first and second floors. You could see the seepage on the baseboards in the guest rooms. We eventually had two wood stoves, one for the house and a smaller one for the dharma room. Until we got the upstairs dharma room, someone

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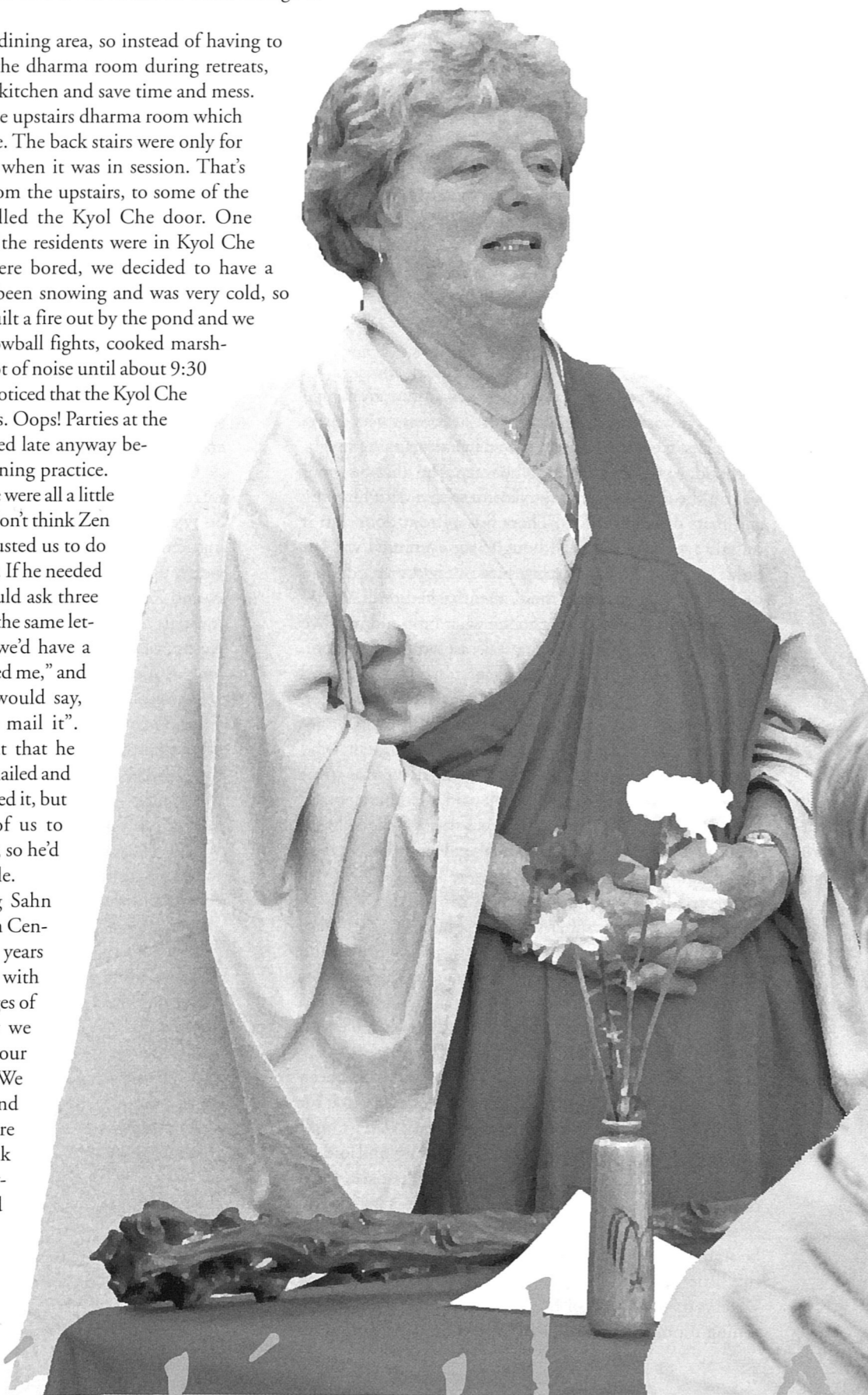
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had to go down at about 4:15 a.m. and start the furnace for the main dharma room, so that room would be warm enough to practice in.

Next we built the dining area, so instead of having to cart all the meals to the dharma room during retreats, we could eat near the kitchen and save time and mess. Eventually we built the upstairs dharma room which was used for Kyol Che. The back stairs were only for the Kyol Che people when it was in session. That's why the back door from the upstairs, to some of the older students, is called the Kyol Che door. One winter when most of the residents were in Kyol Che and the rest of us were bored, we decided to have a skating party. It had been snowing and was very cold, so one of the residents built a fire out by the pond and we went skating, had snowball fights, cooked marshmallows and made a lot of noise until about 9:30 p.m., when someone noticed that the Kyol Che retreatants could see us. Oops! Parties at the Zen Center never lasted late anyway because of the early morning practice.

In the early days, we were all a little bit left-over hippies. I don't think Zen Master Seung Sahn trusted us to do anything meticulously. If he needed a letter mailed, he would ask three or four people to mail the same letter. Then, of course, we'd have a discussion, "but he asked me," and then somebody else would say, "no, he asked me to mail it". Finally we figured out that he just wanted the letter mailed and he didn't care who mailed it, but he didn't trust any of us to actually mail the letter, so he'd ask three or four people.

Zen Master Seung Sahn used to refer to the Zen Center as only being five years old, then a "teenager" with all the attitude and stages of growing up. So, now we have made it through our twenties and are thirty. We get the letters mailed and do even more, so we are maturing nicely. Thank you very much to everyone for your efforts and your practice.



## STICKING AROUND

*Michael Konstan*

Today we are celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of Providence Zen Center and the Kwan Um School of Zen. Going back thirty years, there was not much Zen practice in Providence. Jacob Perl—now Zen Master Wu Bong—and I were part of a small group that met at Manning Chapel at Brown University for daily meditation practice.

Then we heard about a Buddhist monk living out on Doyle Avenue. This was Zen Master Seung Sahn. He was new in the country and he didn't speak English, only Korean and Japanese. One evening I decided to visit. I went along with Brown's Buddhism professor, Leo Pruden. Besides speaking Japanese, Professor Pruden also understood proper etiquette. "When you visit a monk," he said, "you must bring a gift." So he bought a box of

Japanese bean-jelly candy. We didn't know at the time that Zen Master Seung Sahn was a diabetic. Zen Master Seung Sahn graciously accepted the candy and then served it to us with tea.

We visited for about an hour, with Professor Pruden translating. Zen Master Seung Sahn gave his cookie dough talk that night. I'm sure you've heard it. It goes, "All things are cut out of the same

universal substance, like cookies all cut out of the same dough."

Anyway, the very next morning I began practicing with Zen Master Seung Sahn. By the end of the second week, there were already three or four of us sitting regularly at Doyle Avenue. That's when we began chanting practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn brought out chanting books, all in Chinese characters, no English. He pointed to a character, "This 'Shim,' this 'Myo,' 'Jang.'" We wrote the sound in pencil under each pictogram. "Ku,' 'Te,' 'Daranhe.'" That became our first chanting book.

Just like today, chanting and sitting practice were done very early in the morning. Maybe 5 o'clock. Then Zen Master Seung Sahn had to get ready to leave for work and we had to go to school. As you probably know, in those days Zen Master Seung Sahn didn't have a big donor base. Instead, he supported himself by repairing washing machines at a local laundromat. Before leaving for work he made himself breakfast and he invited us to join him. Breakfast was potato-miso soup. Very tasty! I don't know if it was intentional or not, but, if you feed college students, they will stick around.

Within a couple of months the two-bedroom apartment at Doyle Avenue was completely full. Other people began renting apartments nearby so they could come to practice every day.

And today, thirty years later, the Kwan Um School of Zen has grown to over eighty temples in twenty-five countries worldwide. It's truly beyond the wildest dreams of anyone in those early days at Doyle Avenue. Of course it didn't happen without a lot of work.

Special congratulations must go to those students who have devoted fifteen, twenty, even thirty years of their lives to building our school. Thank you.

And, finally, for those of you who are new to Buddhist practice, I would like to extend a special welcome. You are the future of our school. Maybe today marks your first meeting with a Zen Master. In our school we have a saying, "Only try, try, try for ten thousand years." So I invite you to try this practice. And after just thirty years you, too, may find that the results are beyond your wildest dreams.

Thank you and again congratulations to the Kwan Um School of Zen on thirty years of Buddhist teaching.

