

Chinese practitioners are in an unusual situation. We come from the country which founded Zen. But we only encountered Zen-style teaching in books... until we met Zen Master Seung Sahn. His whole life was a demonstration of the live words of Zen. Zen was no longer just a legend. His moment-to-moment teaching of how to respond to each situation with great love and compassion was a living example of the bodisattva way.

His last visit to Hong Kong was in 2001, at the invitation of Venerable Wing Sing, the abbot of Western Pure Land Temple in Hong Kong. Zen Master Seung Sahn was one of four teachers before an audience of three thousand. One of the speakers from China was the highly-respected 97-year-old monk Venerable Bon Won. During the program, Zen Master Seung Sahn acted as the junior person, even helping him put a shawl over his shoulders to make sure that he was warm. The old monk was very impressed by this and said, "I really like you!"

Before I joined the Kwan Um School of Zen, I practiced in the forest in Northern Thailand, near Chiangmai. Our temple was deep in the forest. We had to climb three mountains and cross three rivers before arriving at the meditation hermitage. Zen Master Seung Sahn had heard so much about my Thai teacher, Ajahn Pongsak, that he insisted on visiting him in the forest, without any concern about his own health situation. When they met, they both bowed to each other with full prostrations. Later, Ajahn said to me, "Your Zen master is very compassionate."

When we showed Zen Master Seung Sahn around the forest, he saw Ajahn's kuti (small hut.) Zen Master Seung Sahn wanted to go inside and see it himself. When he came out of the kuti, he said to Ajahn Pongsak, "You are a real monk! Your room is very simple, but my room is complicated. Your dharma is high, whereas my dharma is low." In fact, the way he said that is high class dharma.

He would respond to those whom he respects in a humble way, even though he had never met them before. He always taught us that private and public have to be clear. For a public issue, everything has to be very clear, with no mistakes. Not even as small needle is allowed to pass through. As for private matters: big mistakes, even as big as a car, are forgivable. He always showed us where true wisdom lay. He also taught us that a mistake is not for us to get attached to, but to learn from, and grow in wisdom. He always taught us to apologize, if necessary.

One time when Venerable Cheung Wai, the abbot of the Library of China in Hong Kong, invited Zen Master Seung Sahn to give a talk on Zen Buddhism, he praised Zen Master Seung Sahn as one of the best Zen teachers in demonstrating Patriarch Zen. The following day, while we were having lunch together, Venerable Cheung Wai said that Zen Master Seung Sahn was an enlightenment monk because his talk came from his practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn bowed to him and said, "You are my teacher, because you have given me inka!" We all laughed together.

When he taught sincere people, he would always give very gentle advice, even if they were not Zen students. He would explain to them that life is impermanent, things will change, don't worry—no problem, just continue to practice. Students who heard that would feel very encouraged, even though they couldn't solve their problems right away. Sometimes a mother would push her child to join the retreat at Hwa Gye Sah. Zen Master Seung Sahn would invite the child to his room, talk to them, and give them some money to buy ice cream. When he met arrogant visitors, he would shout at them and send them away. Zen Master Seung Sahn was a mirror to us; he only reflected what was in front of him. As Zen teaching says, "Buddha's eyes see Buddha, shitty eyes see shit."

Before Zen Master Seung Sahn got really sick, he would visit each Buddha Hall at Hwa Gye Sah. He would bow three times, put his palms together, and pray in silence. One time I asked him, "What was your prayer, sir?" Without hesitation, he said, "Wishing all students practice together, get enlightenment, and save all beings from suffering." This is his wish for us. Even my Thai teacher Ajahn Pongsak liked this teaching. When one of our students asked Ajahn, "Do you know Zen Master Seung Sahn?" Ajahn Pongsak stood up, put his palms together, and said, "How may I help you?" Zen Master Seung Sahn used his body, mind, and speech to teach us the correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function. Almost a year before he died, we were walking through his garden, when he pointed to a plant with many flowers which was about to die. He said to me, "I'm like these flowers, I too will soon finish my job." We looked at each other and smiled.

*Blue sky and deep ocean don't know blue,
Seung Sahn (High Mountain) didn't know high,
Haeng Won (Action Vow), come back to this world life after
life,
After the spring rain, early summer comes.*

On behalf of Su Bong Zen Monastery and all Chinese, we want to thank you deeply for the last thirteen years of your life. You have shown us live Zen, and we hope this kind of Zen teaching will once again bloom in the Eastern Land. ❀

