

our true situation

Chong An Sunim JDPS

ONE: LANDING IN THE OLD WORLD

Living among gypsies is a lot of fun. Never thought I would do that, though. But after landing in Hungary from Asia with a little help, what do you do? Rentals are tough, the owners have lot of say in what you can do. Unless you own what you use, you may be in for a lot of unpleasant surprises, with a ninety-day notice to leave always hanging above your head.

So I started to search for something we could buy. I looked at several apartments, big and small, and one in District VIII, the gypsiest of all quarters, just fit. It was 43 sq.m. (390 sq.ft) with a kitchenette, and a bathroom so small you could hardly take a shower.

Yet we did live there for three years, with some spicy and really run-down girls just over the courtyard, who were high most of the time and kept their music at disco levels for their clients. Just next door, the Shooky family holed themselves up: mother, father, three kids and a dog lived in just half of the area that we owned, shouting and screaming most of the time.

A few burnouts, alcoholics, a poor family, and a lot of retired women on the second floor made the scene absolutely colorful. The grannies loved us, the addicts did not care so much, and we could start our Zen life there just opposite a small but lively Protestant temple on the other side of the street, frequented mostly by Christian Chinese.

We had a good time, though life was hard training. We had to keep our conduct, as well as our direction, very clear. Once, I was stopped by a young gypsy man and he asked, "Are you some kind of martial artist, or what?"

He was not aggressive, only strongly inquisitive.

"Yeah," I said, "but this may not be the martial arts you expect. We do this with our minds, not with the body."

"How do you do that?" he asked.

"You know, in physical martial arts, your opponent tries to make you weak by kicking and punching. In mental martial arts, your opponent wants to make you angry, or arouse some desire, or force something stupid on you. If you let any of these happen, you lose."

"Well, that sounds a little strange," he

scratched his head and said, "but you could defend yourself if you wanted to, right?"

"I probably could. But if you win the mental part, you do not have to fight the physical part."

"Interesting. Good luck, and see you sometime later," he said, and went on his way.

All of these encounters went smoothly, probably because everyone kept cool. Sometimes a group of two or three people would stop me, and leave with a little disappointment, as well as some respect and curiosity, "What is this guy really about?"

More than a year into living in the district, we were walking home after giving a dharma talk at a Tibetan center about 1.5 miles away. Just before midnight, we reached the square next to our block, and right in the middle of the square, there was a gang of fifteen people, hanging out after a long summer day, having some booze and making very little noise, being almost peaceful. One of them caught sight of us, and a loud swear shattered the lull—he thought we were skinheads. Almost immediately, another member cooled him down, "Leave it alone, I know them."

While this brief exchange took place within the gang, we were briskly walking, neither looking at them, nor running, nor talking—just doing what we had to do. We knew that in the jungle, jungle laws rule. And as long as we followed them, we suffered no harm. When we did not, we learned better very soon.

We used to go to the courtyard for walking meditation. This was especially good during a hot summer dawn. One time, the Zen Center residents were circling on the concrete slowly. I was somewhere away on a journey, and an early client of the spicy girls was sitting on the threshold, smoking pot into the rising sun.

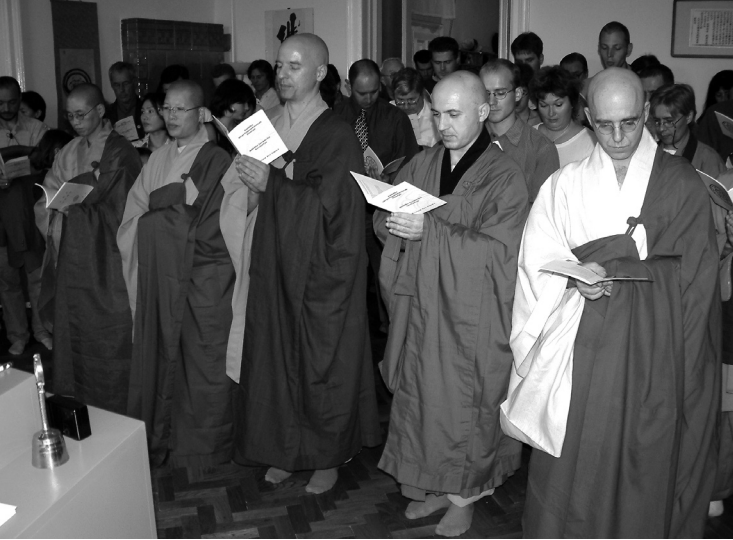
He asked one of the haeng-jas, "What are you guys doing here anyway?"

The student answered, "I have no time for this right now."

The guy went on smoking and staring, without saying a word. But the following night, some people quietly broke into the small Zen center, and while we



At the gate of the old Zen Center



were sleeping inside, they took what they found in the kitchenette. From this experience, we learned that that was no way to talk to them.

When the burglary repeated itself a few weeks later without any precursor, we put up our defenses. Until then, there were no bars on the doors or windows, despite the fact that all the neighbors had had them ever since they had moved in. We also reported the burglary to the police, but the young officer said, "Look, unless there is blood on the floor, not much is going to happen." Yeah, the D8PD had harder things to deal with.

What they did with the next case, I cannot even guess. Fortunately, this happened in the other house, whose courtyard was adjacent to ours, but separated by a wall. The residents there were far more violent, and on one winter day we heard an enormous scream, fading into a weak whimper, then silence. A man died there that night, because he kept molesting his step-daughter, and the girl's boyfriend threatened a few times to cut his throat if he did not stop. Apparently, he did not. The youngsters had no chance to make a move and start a life on their own, and when the anger of the young man reached critical density, the step-father ended up lying in his own blood. This happened about halfway through our sojourn there.

That event just made my resolution stronger that the moment we could, we would move, but I had to do some serious reconstruction of my old family apartment that I inherited. The day of relocation finally came, and almost exactly three years after we opened the first Zen Center, the second threw its gates open, this time in District VI, where you can find it today.

Even in that old, tiny apartment, we had several Yong Maeng Jong Jins, teachers visited us, and five of us lived there. As early as 2001, two haeng-jas appeared, who are now Won Hyu and Won Oh Sunims, doing hard training in Korea. Yet the way there was rough for all of us. Won Hyu Sunim took the dharma to her home town quite early, and I was hosted by her parents any time we had a dharma talk in Debrecen, a town some ten miles from her place in eastern Hungary.

Won Hyu Sunim's parents knew what was coming. Her mother asked me once, looking straight into my eyes: "So,

you are taking my daughter away?"

"No, madam, she is following her own way," I said.

The father chimed in, "Just let her do what she wants."

We left it at that. Five of us, including the two haeng-jas, went to Korea in 2002 and sat Winter Kyol Che there. Two of them remained there. When they do return home, I am not sure what they will find. I just know this: it is very risky for anybody to land right in the middle of their home karma which they left behind, still smouldering, waiting for the home-leaver to return. I wrote to Zen Master Seung Sahn about it, and he just replied, "That's not your true situation." When I read this, I could look beyond the horizon and make the next step.

TWO: SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE

As our plane takes off from Vienna Airport, we leave one of the oldest European cities behind, with its distinct flavor for opera and strudel. Cruising at 35,000 feet and looking at the white wisps of clouds, I recall some locations I have taught at: small but dedicated groups of practitioners, scattered throughout the countries of central and eastern Europe.

What is it that links Vienna, Prague, Bratislava, Warsaw, Vilnius, and Budapest together? Only history? The common European karma we had to share, with the upper classes shaping our political and economic destiny for centuries? The underlying Christian establishment, which, though mostly indirectly by now, still permeates most walks of life? No one can say for certain.

My general impression of Europe, after a year in the United States and nearly six years in Asia, is that the Old World is still holding onto ideas that cannot help its future. It has a mixed heritage of Greek philosophy, Judeo-Christian religion, Roman law, a few centuries of the Dark Ages and whatever appeared after the Renaissance—science, secular art, and extreme political systems. All of this is based on opposites thinking, and anybody



Memorial ceremony for Zen Master Seung Sahn

trying to defuse it would face some serious resistance. This is called conservatism.

A culture which establishes itself on opposites thinking is bound to foster imbalance and injustice. Europe has been plagued by many social and financial problems—all stemming from some strong thought systems which take opposites qualities for granted, as if created by someone else, not us. As a result, the twentieth century witnessed unprecedented grief and sorrow during the two world wars and their aftermaths.

The middle way seems the only path to achieve balance and anything sustainable for human society—not just in Europe, but anywhere else on this Earth. For this, the West has to reestablish itself spiritually, the need for which is not on many people's agenda. Most people only want a quick fix for their problems, and do not want to dig deep inside for the primary cause—then they would inevitably see the true situation.

Those who do want to go deeper, gather in small apartments or try to build larger meditation centers, and the penetration of Buddhism and Zen is still pretty slow here compared to the United States or Australia. In the satellite countries, many people are interested, but very few stick with the sangha. But those who do, stay on for years, so there is a core group of a few dedicated people everywhere, and less committed members hover around them. It can take many, many years for these groups to reach critical mass, being able to practice in any kind of situation.

It is prevalent that most people take Buddhism and Zen to be another religion, although this approach is far from correct. Yet most non-Buddhist Europeans have no other pattern to use, so for them, if it is spirituality, it must be operating more or less in the same way as mainstream Christianity—or it must be something really weird and harmful like a “cult.”

The inhabitants of Belá, Czech Republic, a village so small that it does not appear on most maps, first thought that we were Jehovah's Witnesses, walking in a straight line

along the road every afternoon. We heard this from the dentist in Yevichko, the town nearby, and we saw this in the eyes of the villagers, but anybody who came into personal contact with us was nice and friendly. The shopkeepers were especially happy, as the cash flow must have brought them a mini-boom for the new year—a surplus of close to one hundred consumers for three months makes a lot of difference.

All rentals end one day, and as you read these lines, we are getting ready for our third and last Winter Kyol Che at Byela. The next one will be in Hungary, in one of the most blessed places I have ever seen, which I had the fortune to find and initiate the construction of a temple there.

THREE: WON KWANG SA

Sometime in 2002, Steve Makszi walked into the Budapest Zen Center straight from Las Vegas and said, “Why don't you guys build something like a small house in the forest, you know, for retreats in nature, things like that.” I said, “Maxi, my friend, if we had anything even resembling a good piece of land close enough, I would gladly do that. What was offered so far is in Poland, called Wisla, way up north in the Beskid Mountains nearly 200 miles from here, and I cannot commute there. And nobody else is interested in starting anything there.” “Yah,” he said, “my relatives have some land in the Pilis Mountains. That's close enough, I guess.”

Umm, I mused, that can be pretty good unless it is too near some village or small town.

I checked out what Maxi had. It was a 1/119 share of a 52-acre tract, joint and indivisible ownership, given as reparations to those who were ripped off by communists more than half a century ago. If even one of them would not sell, there would be no deal. After some consultation, I did not get into it.

The Budapest sangha took frequent walks to the Pilis, but I did not leave the finding of a place to impressions only. I bought military maps so detailed that even large trees were



marked, stitched them all together, and pasted the paper monster on a big board. I looked at it every now and then, trying to find the next target for the walks.

Sikáros, the heart of the Pilis, opened itself for us and we could feel the flow of some wonderful mountain energy. If only this could support our practice! I inquired through helpers and learned the brutal truth: it was state-owned, protected by the national park authority, and used exclusively for hunting. "You know," my helper said, "I can take care of a lot of things. I would grab this for you if I could. But looking at the conditions, I have to ask you: Forget it."

In turn, he offered a piece of his land, and when I visited it near Esztergom, the seat of the Catholic Church just in the northwestern nook of the Pilis, I saw it as the least suitable land for anything but a small weekend house. "How do you get here?" I asked. "Maybe if I come here from another direction, I will have a different impression."

"We came in on the lakeside road," he said, "but that's a long way." I took that long way the next day and found his land just as unsuitable for anything meaningful as the day before. I became totally empty, as a year of arduous search did not bring any results. I took the same way out as I went in, and a mile before the lakes, in the line of the brick house which we now own, something stopped me.

I got out of the car, walked to the center of the valley, and looked around in a circle slowly. Breathe in, breathe out, feel it out, feel it out, what is this, what is this... THAT'S IT. It took less than five minutes, and though we visited numerous times later, the result was always the same. On January 1st 2005, the senior officials of the Hungarian sangha visited the land, and unanimously agreed. We would

go for it! The first inquiries were made in March, the first deposits were made in May, and the first property became ours in August 2005.

The valley has a perfect north-south alignment, wonderful mountains all around, and a zoning which gives proper legal framework for the construction we want. As you can see from the pictures available from wonkwangsa.net, there is a dirt road intersecting the area. West of this, in the small orchards, we will build small houses for guests, who can come for dharma holidays alone, with friends, and even with their whole families. They will take part in practicing and temple life to any extent that they want, then spend the rest of the day hiking, sightseeing, and having fun.

East of the road on 12 acres of land, the temple site will unfold in the coming years. Intended as the location for the International Winter Kyol Che of our School in Europe, we will first fix the houses which will hold us in 2007, then we'll start construction with the help of those who dare to stay there longer.

We already own 60% of the 12 acres, a small garden on the western side, and maybe more by the time you read this. As support streams in, we will eventually own 100% of the temple grounds and many more gardens. The buildings we need to reconstruct immediately are already ours. Preparatory work begins in earnest not later than spring 2006, with an official ground-breaking ceremony in the fall. We are creating something which will help this world, help our lives, and help our true situation.

This includes you to the extent that you want to be involved. With all aboard, let us share all that is involved: practice, work, and fun. Everyone's invited! ☸

Won Kwang Sa

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UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Our new temple in Europe

www.wonkwangsa.net, office@wonkwangsa.net We deeply appreciate your help.