

BEADED PERSPIRATION



Thom Pastor JDPSN

Sometime back in the early 1990s, I remember being at Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles. Zen Master Seung Sahn had recently arrived from Korea, and was scheduled to give a dharma talk that evening. Whenever Zen Master Seung Sahn was in town, word spread quickly throughout the Korean community. So it was no surprise that when it came time for special chanting at 6:30 pm, the second story dharma room was at full capacity.

It was August, and it was very hot. Back in those days, there was no air conditioning in the dharma room, just ceiling fans, which were very inadequate given a “packed house.” To add to this, we had to close the windows so as not to disturb the neighbors. (Dharma Zen Center borders a residential neighborhood.)

Having sat a number of retreats there before, and being mindful of the large numbers, I skillfully positioned myself near the kitchen exit just in case the close quarters started getting to me. At precisely 6:30 pm, Zen Master Seung Sahn appeared and we began chanting the Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra. Sure enough, at about 6:50 pm, during Kwan Seum Bosal chanting, I began to feel stifled by the closeness and lack of fresh air. A few people had already exited through the back of the room, beckoned by the cool relief that the outside evening air provided. I looked over at Zen Master Seung Sahn. His eyes were fixed on the altar Buddha. Beaded perspiration fell from his face and neck, creating a moist ring around the top of his robe. His voice was unwavering, actually the strongest in the room. He embodied what we’ve heard him say many times: “Don’t check, just do it.” It was also eminently clear that even if he collapsed right there in Los Angeles on a hot August night from heat exhaustion, still everything was complete, and everything “no problem.” Blue mountain, water flowing. This realization both carried and gave me sufficient energy for the rest of the evening.

For years, I was the designated driver in Las Vegas when

Zen Master Seung Sahn came to visit. He always sat in the front passenger seat. Whether we were going to dinner, to the acupuncturist, or on a drive through the scenic mountains of the Red Rock Canyon area, if he was not speaking, beads were in his hand and the Great Dharani quietly, almost imperceptibly, on his lips.

The monks traveling with Zen Master Seung Sahn were always mindful of his health, and, in a loving way, made attempts to monitor the nutritional value of his menu choices when eating out. One time, immediately after placing a breakfast order, we were all amused to watch Mu Sang Sunim excuse himself, and chase after the waitress, instructing her “to please lighten up on the cheese” for Zen Master Seung Sahn’s omelet, and “to please bring sugar-free syrup for the pancakes!” It didn’t seem to matter, Zen Master Seung Sahn on all occasions was undaunted, laughing, teaching, telling stories. When it came time to leave, he always saw to it that we left a generous tip, and invariably complimented the restaurant personnel, in this case, “Yah, number one good breakfast.”

On one of his visits, the registration line for hotel guests at the Las Vegas Hilton was unusually long. Even though the line was moving steadily, while waiting for Mu Shim Sunim JDPS to complete the registration process, the rest of us looked for available seating in the lobby area. Zen Master Seung Sahn and I conveniently found seats next to each other at nearby slot machines. After a few brief moments of observing the gaming action, he asked me about my “homework.” It was surreal. Here I was, having a kong-an interview in the midst of a large, noisy casino, with our esteemed founding teacher, seated at a video poker machine! Soon, a tall, leggy waitress appeared, and, assuming we were players, asked us for our cocktail order! Zen Master Seung Sahn looked up, smiled and politely told her, “Oh, no thank you. Alcohol not necessary.” He then turned back to me and I found myself immersed in the Sixth Patriarch’s poem! 🌀

[7