



10.

My experience

Book Excerpt
Zen Master Bon Yo

During one dharma talk in Korea a monk asked me a question: "I'm a traditional monk in the Chogye Order, and I also respect very much Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching, so I'm here practicing in his temple. But it is difficult for me to find a balance because I feel like his teaching is putting things upside down. You are from the West, how do you practice his teachings? Is it easier for you?"

This question made me smile, and I told this monk that Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching turns the Westerner's life upside down, as well, and that is the most precious thing. He understood and smiled, too.

In fact I should say that Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching puts things in the right place, because as it is now, human life is upside down. Human beings are lost, confused, and unhappy.

In one of his dharma talks, Zen Master Wu Bong said “This universe is giving us everything, what are we giving in return? When we go to the shop and take things without paying, we are taken to jail. Do we want to be thieves? Do we want to be in jail? So it’s better to pay.”

We refuse to pay, or don’t recognize the fact that we should, and so we stay in the jail of desire, anger, and ignorance and we cause so much suffering around us, and for ourselves.

Zen Master Wu Bong added: “Who is going to fix all the problems that human beings have caused? God? Buddha? No. That is *our* job.” Raised a Catholic, I was not satisfied with what my priest offered as teaching, so I spent many years looking for a spiritual practice that would help me to understand more about this world, this life, our human life, and that would give me help with finding solutions. I met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1983, first through his book, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* and then, later that year, personally during a three-day retreat. I fell in love, if I may say so, with him and his teaching. I had been looking for a spiritual path for some time already, but at the same time, being quite skeptical, I was not satisfied with what others had to offer.

First reading and then hearing Zen Master Seung Sahn, I received very down-to-earth teaching, filled with good humor, directing me to self help and genuine strength, filled with freedom, wisdom, and compassion. His was the kind of teaching that helps us to live correctly and follow the right direction.

So I started to practice in the Kwan Um School of Zen, and in time with many other teachers, where the spirit and teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn was always present.

I began in Poland, in the Gdansk Zen Center, with a wonderful group of dharma friends. We had practice a few times a week and once a month we had a retreat, but only once a year the Zen Master came to lead a retreat. So, just once a year we met Zen Master Seung Sahn, and once a year had a retreat with kong-an interviews and direct teaching. Otherwise it was just practicing on our own and reading the teachings at the end of each session.

When Zen Master Seung Sahn visited for a retreat, there were usually over a hundred people practicing and that meant very little private time with the teacher. For the interviews, we went four or five students at a time and had a translator with us. With so many people, it was always very fast, and most of the time I had no idea what had just happened. Somehow, though, we all went forward and progressed. And we had so much fun with each other and the practice, even with the bad conditions and all the pains that came from sitting and thinking. That was a very important part, for having joy in practice and not mortifying oneself is what keeps us going forward.

After four years of practice, I went to Providence Zen Center in the United States, where a completely new era started in my life and practice. I married Zen Master Wu Bong and started living at the Zen Center.

Providence Zen Center is a great place with woods and lake, a main Zen Center building, and a small Monastery. The practice there is strong: every morning and evening there is daily practice. There are monthly retreats, yearly Kyol Ches, and regular interviews. Beside Zen Master Seung Sahn, there were other teachers there at that time, and receiving so much teaching was almost overwhelming.

There, for the first time, I had a one-on-one kong-an interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn, without a translator. This was a great and important moment, and I felt very nervous. My English was not so good, but neither was his, and with his easiness and warm smile, my nervousness disappeared quickly. I went through many ups and downs during the kong-an practice but the regular training was precious.

Zen Master Seung Sahn was strong and uncompromising when it came to practice and training, but very warm, loving, and understanding at the same time. He always pushed us to strong practice and did it himself, too, but the strong practice in his teaching was not the “body punishment” that some take for strong training.

During one of the Kyol Che retreats at the Providence Zen Center, some of the participants were angry with the head dharma teacher for letting it be too relaxed, so they went to Zen Master Seung Sahn and asked him to talk to that student and make him lead the practice in a more severe style. That afternoon, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked the head dharma teacher to come to his room. When the student came, he hugged him and said, “I heard that you do a great job leading this Kyol Che, that’s wonderful.”

After twenty years of practice, I was able for the first time to attend the whole three month Kyol Che in Korea at Mu Sang Sah in the Kye Ryong mountains. I had traveled to Korea several times before, but mostly for ceremonies and meetings. This was the first time I had gone for the long retreat. It was a great experience. The place is a wonderful practice place, a temple in the middle of mountains, with a strong practice schedule and good care from the hosts.

Last year, I went there again to attend Kyol Che. Before going to Mu Sang Sah, I spent two days in Seoul at the Seoul International Zen Center, and had the opportunity to spend time with my teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn. It was a very quiet time as he was already very sick. We did not talk much: I shared some of the news from Europe and the Paris Zen Center, and he was happy to hear that the practice is growing. Most of the time, though, we spent just eating or just being together. Sometimes he fell asleep in his armchair and I silently left; sometimes he just looked at me and we smiled to each other; and sometimes he ground to a halt and I knew that he was tired and I was dismissed. Nothing special happened; I had no questions and he had nothing to say, for everything had already been said in the past years.

A few days after I left, I learned that Zen Master Seung Sahn had passed away, and the next time I saw him was as his body was prepared for the funeral ceremony. He lay there in his quarters, on the floor of his room in his robes. We went inside to pay our last respects, and when I bowed, I looked at his face. We were all very sad. We, his disciples, had spent the previous night in his rooms chanting and keeping vigil with his body, so everybody was exhausted. Then I saw his face, peaceful and smiling, as if wanting to say: “Don’t worry, everything is fine,” and “See you soon.”

The whole ceremony took a few days, with part of it in Su Dok Sah. After the funeral was completed, we went back to Mu Sang Sah to continue the Kyol Che. We arrived very late and everybody went straight to sleep. After about an hour of sleep, I woke up from a dream and couldn’t sleep that night anymore. In the dream I saw Zen Master Seung Sahn’s face, smiling and full of energy, and I heard him saying: “Get up and go! Carry on!”

Today, I write these words, and wish to have him around to ask for advice and teachings. He is no more, but his teachings are alive, so I, as well as his other disciples, will carry on. 