

# Dharma Teacher Retreat

*Robert Blender*

Carrying three heavy pieces of luggage, I struggled, in the dark, up the muddy incline to Diamond Hill Zen Monastery. It was cold outside. I had forgotten my flashlight, and I had a good case of traveler's irritability. Four of the Indianapolis Zen Center dharma teachers were attending the yearly dharma teacher weekend sponsored by the Kwan Um School of Zen at the Providence Zen Center. The weekend includes seminars about important ancestors in the Zen tradition, about practice forms, and about the role of dharma teachers in our school. It also offers an opportunity to meet and speak with many of the teachers in our school, and with other dharma teachers. But, as I slogged through the mud in the dark, hoping not to walk into the pond, I wondered to myself: Why do I have to come all the way out to Rhode Island for this? Don't we have a Zen Center and practice in Indianapolis? Isn't daily practice the core of Zen—not seminars and networking?

Most of the Zen lineages in the West do not have an international organization such as the Kwan Um School. The White Plum Sangha, made up of Maezumi Roshi's heirs, is a loose association of independent Zen Centers, each of which is run by a particular teacher in a particular way. Suzuki Roshi's dharma heirs do not have an over-arching organization that I am aware of. The other major lineages have only a few centers each. But, when we hear from those who were present for the beginnings of the Kwan Um School, we understand that Zen Master Seung Sahn's vision was to establish many centers around the world. He was always traveling, and he communicated with his students by letter-writing. He did kong-an practice through correspondence. Zen Master Seung Sahn established more than one hundred centers, and, with our guiding teacher's help, established the international Kwan Um School of Zen.

Zen Master Seung Sahn established these many centers, and then left them to run on their own, returning infrequently. Finally, he went back to Korea to live out the last few years of his life. To me, this is a manifestation of Zen Master Seung Sahn's great faith in his students, in the practice, in his dharma heirs. He established practice centers that did not depend upon him as an individual. In addition, the Kwan Um School emerged—with a practice manual, and policies, and many teachers, and international gatherings—to provide stability and consistency after he was gone.

During last year's dharma teacher retreat at the Providence Zen Center, the school ethics policy came up. In the policy there is a procedure for conflict resolution within the sangha. First, we are to try to resolve the conflict with the individual that we are having a problem with. If that doesn't help, then the two in conflict are to sit down with the abbot, then, maybe involve the guiding teacher, then, the School Zen Master, then, maybe the School ethics committee. Many levels are possible, depending on the nature of the problem. Would this be possible without a Kwan Um School of Zen? What about resolving difficulties between teachers and students? To whom would you appeal if the guiding teacher was the pinnacle of the organizational chart?

Apart from having a procedure for resolving conflict within the sangha, the Kwan Um School offers consistency in practice forms, and many places to practice around the world. If you travel to Kansas, the practice is the same. If you travel to Barcelona, the only thing that will differ, is that the Heart Sutra will be chanted in Spanish and Sino-Korean. We have many potential practice "families" around the world, and many centers at which it is possible to reside for some time. If you look at the School calendar, there seems to be a retreat happening somewhere at all times. These many practice opportunities and extended sangha are manifestations of our international Kwan Um School of Zen.

My little traveler's annoyance at having to walk through the mud in the dark to the monastery was resolved when early morning chanting began. There were more than seventy dharma teachers present, five to ten teachers, and several monks. The great bell in the dharma room at Providence Zen Center rung, and the chant began: "WON CHA, JONG SONG..." My questions about why I had traveled there, why there is a Kwan Um School, etc. disappeared into the strong feeling of sangha and the together action of this beautiful practice. ☸

