

When I first came to the Providence Zen Center, some thirty-odd years ago, I didn't know anything about the Zen tradition. I didn't even know who the teacher was. I just heard that there was a Zen Center in Providence. I drove up, hunted around the town, and somehow found it. It was a Sunday night, and when I came in, evening chanting had already started.

Somebody showed me to a cushion. There were some people on either side of me and they gave me the chanting book. I think that at that time, we were just starting the Korean Heart Sutra. I was trying to chant the Korean pronunciation of a Chinese text, and here we are in America, and I'm going, "Ma Ha Ban Ya...". Meanwhile, the person next to me had this strange—to me, very strange, voice. I grew up in Philadelphia and I'm thinking, "There's a cowgirl singin' Chinese stuff next to me," and I'm kind of expecting that it's gonna be, "Ma Ha Ban Ya, get along little doggie," and it's like, "Wow, this is a really weird place".

But I enjoyed the chanting—the feeling, the sounds coming out, and not knowing what it meant, and the English Heart Sutra went by too fast to figure out what it was talking about. Afterwards, they announced that there was going to be a dharma talk by the housemaster. So I'm thinking, "Okay, now I'll get a feeling for what this teaching is." But it turns out to be the cowgirl again! She got up front—the Zen Master's not there—but it didn't mean anything to me 'cause I wasn't thinking about anything, just, "what is going on here?" She started by saying how we all have ideas about things and how we all think we know how to do things. That day she was working at a nursing home and peeling a banana for an old patient. All of us peel the banana from the stem end. But this old guy says, "That's not the way to peel a banana." And she says, "No. Come on, this is the way everybody peels it." And he says, "No, no. It's much easier from the other end." (This is not deep sutra stuff.) Then she tells him again, "No, no, no. Everybody peels it this way." So he says, "It's easier from the other end." Finally, he convinces her to try the other end and she says, "So I try it. And guess what? It's easier!" And that's the only thing I remember from my first dharma talk and visit to the Providence Zen Center.

The next great talk I heard from Zen Master Soeng Hyang was when I had moved into the Zen Center. I was cutting a cabbage in half and looking at the leaves inside. She came up to me and said everyone is an individual like the leaves of this cabbage, but the whole thing made this cabbage—together—and you can make soup and all kinds of wonderful things from it. I'm looking forward to her book because I'm sure I missed a lot of good fruit and vegetable dharma talks.

We talk about Zen as everyday life—there are all kinds of great poetical things you can say about it—but unless our everyday life really is our practice, and not even our practice anymore, just our life, you haven't completely digested Buddha's way. For our new School Zen Master, Soeng Hyang, it really is her everyday life and the two have digested each other. There are a lot of schools out there whose teaching is perhaps

better organized and their speech is perhaps more beautiful, but unless our practice really does connect completely with our everyday life, it's just a nice hobby.

When our school first started, we tried to have our Zen Centers together with Korean temples. Ultimately, it didn't work out so well. I remember Zen Master Seung Sahn telling one Korean monk who wanted to do that about ten years ago, "We tried that. Not possible." I'm sure that over the years we drove them crazy and they drove us crazy. Now, it's interesting, because everybody's changing and soon we might not even know the difference between us, but it was always fun to ask Zen Master Seung Sahn about it. One time we asked him, "What's the difference between Korean people and American people?" And he immediately said, "Korean people have two horns. American people have no ears." We might all want to think about that—that was his comment about us.

Zen Master Soeng Hyang has, luckily for us, two horns and two ears. That's really good. The thing about the two horns that's beneficial is it gets things done. People poke you and you sometimes get motivated to do something. If you also have two ears, that's really great—in fact, it's crucial.

The relationship between the head of a school and the rest of the school is just like the relationship between our head and body. If they don't fuse and become one, there's a lot of suffering. If it really becomes one, then even if the head is setting the direction, the direction is coming from everything else.

So when Zen Master Seung Sahn died, the first question any Korean person asked me was, "Who's the head of your school?" I had always thought of Zen Master Seung Sahn as the best student, so I wasn't really thinking of him as some kind of dictator-leader of some organization. It's just that he knew how to learn better than any of us and he could show us how to learn. So I said, "Oh, you know, we have teachers' groups and they make the decisions." And they'd say, "Oh, that's cool. Who's the head of your school?" But I found out in the last few years that it's important to have a head, and it's important for the head to hear the body, then things can function very well.

Zen Master Soeng Hyang, I'm very glad that you are the one doing this job right now, and I think a lot of other people are, too. That is good for you and a benefit for everybody else. We are all very lucky, and thank you for doing this job. Thank you! 🌀

