

In front of 200 people at the first-ever installation of a School Zen Master at 1:30 pm on April 5, 2008, Zen Master Dae Kwang pointed out that Zen Master Soeng Hyang has already served three years of her five-year term. Teasingly, he suggested that perhaps other great institutions, like the United States, might emulate the Kwan Um School of Zen and have its presidents complete a three-year probationary term. Of course, in reality we followed Korean Buddhist protocol in waiting three years until after the death of our Founding Zen Master to officially appoint his successor.

In her inaugural speech Zen Master Soeng Hyang spoke of the importance of Try Mind and the need for encouragement from a teacher. I was reminded that she led my first Yong Maeng Jong Jin. After energetic bows, we launched into the Morning Bell Chant with such a lack of energy that the Ji Do Poep Sa Nim (as Zen Master Soeng Hyang Rhodes then was) halted the four of us saying sternly, "Even if you are new to this, you must do better." After our second attempt at chanting more or less passed muster, we began meditation. But little time elapsed until she admonished one of us for nodding off to sleep. Another ten minutes, and noticing the reemergence of torpor, Zen Master Soeng Hyang violently shook the person next to her. As a newbie I found all this intimidating. And later, at my first-ever interview, she may have detected obstinacy lurking within my nervousness, for she was very firm with me and unforgiving of my ignorance and lack of perception. (In her talk Zen Master Soeng Hyang said that "If you feel discouraged that's the demon in the corner. It's not a bad thing to be discouraged." "Believe in yourself," "Embrace what is difficult.")

I like to think that some of my less-than-passive obstinacy to the formalities of our practice wore away because in subsequent visits to the Providence Zen Center I was often hugged by Zen Master Soeng Hyang, who stood outside on the verandah to welcome morning arrivals on the Buddha's birthdays. I was very impressed that a teacher of her stature would do this.

Over the years, I have cherished the warmth of Zen Master Soeng Hyang's generous affection as well as her teaching. A year ago I was her attendant in New York. We went to the Japan Society to admire exquisite Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When she said that she had had enough of them, we went to the Zen Center where we sat side-by-side for forty minutes. I ascribed the samadhi that I experienced to being in her presence. (At her installation ceremony, Zen Master Soeng Hyang quoted Zen Master Seung Sahn's admonition to her, "This is NOT a school of samadhi, OK? This is not about feeling good. It's about 'How may I help you?'" ) Later, over dinner at a nearby Korean restaurant, she listened with great empathy to my account of my son's demise. On the Sunday following the retreat led by her, we had one of the heaviest rainfalls that the city has ever endured. Zen Master Soeng Hyang arranged to meet me in my local coffee shop on the Upper East Side. When I saw her there, enveloped in a rain cape talking on a cell-phone, I was taken aback because the barista fiercely forbids the use of phones. When I thanked him later for not causing a rumpus, he replied, "Oh, I saw that she was *una persona speciale*." We brought our coffee to my apartment where our stray, neurotic cat Parker jumped onto the sofa to sit beside Zen Master Soeng Hyang. Now, this is a Kiplingesque cat who walks by herself and is a non-greeter. Zen Master Soeng Hyang, however, said that she perceived her Buddha-nature, something that Parker has hidden from me for fourteen years. Explaining as she did, that Zen Master

Seung Sahn had given her the Buddhist name of Nature Smell because he knew of her delight in nature ("I am the compost queen... I love being outside") Zen Master Soeng Hyang insisted that we slither across Central Park in the pouring rain to our appointment at New York Chogyesa.

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At Zen Master Soeng Hyang's installation, some of the teachers from the United States, Europe, and Asia, made attempts at addressing aspects of this deceptively simple (special) person who has a penchant for leading with her weak suit and then turning it into trenchant teaching. I am reminded that Alan Watts explained in *The Way of Zen*, "This is like encouraging the growth of a hedge by pruning, for obviously the basic intention is to help, but the Zen student does not really know Zen unless he [or she] finds out for himself [herself]." Zen Master Bon Shim, from Warsaw, described asking Zen Master Soeng Hyang for advice on her relationship on her first visit to Providence Zen Center. Zen Master Soeng Hyang replied that she couldn't give her any because she didn't know why people fight instead of loving each other. At first Zen Master Bon Shim was disappointed in Zen Master Soeng Hyang's answer, but on reflection, came to overlook her own problem and focused instead on that kong-an. "We have," said she, "a strong, compassionate head."

Zen Master Dae Kwan from Hong Kong told us:

I remember Zen Master Seung Sahn said one very important thing. It's not so much the person; who is holding the light that is very important. This head is somebody who is holding the dharma light. We are looking at the dharma light; not-so-much the person. So don't check the person. [Zen Master Soeng Hyang] is very frank to tell her things to all of you... usually [Zen masters] don't talk about their shortcomings, but Zen Master Soeng Hyang tells you everything. But behind is the dharma.

This morning I saw something that really touched me, when we woke up very early. We have one monk here who has been a monastic for thirty years and Zen Master Soeng Hyang walked right up to him and bowed to him. It's not so much what you say as your action, how you relate to people. How would you relate with a sangha student? Are you hearing what they are saying to you? This is very important. Also, harmony is very important. If we are in harmony, our school will be very strong.

It doesn't matter what people say about us. We look funky, I must say, from a Chinese angle. But, if you see behind this funky thing, actually there is a lot of good stuff inside. We need each other to help. We need all of us to help this school, and turn into this dharma light. Our mission is to share this dharma light, so all beings have this light and they don't live in darkness.

I want to congratulate Zen Master Soeng Hyang and congratulate our school. So let's become one: head and body, hands and feet become one, not for ourselves but for all beings.

Spring comes, grass grows by itself.  
The blue mountain does not move.  
White clouds float back and forth.

