

money

buddhi

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Zen Master Dae Bong

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your email. Zen Master Soeng Hyang and our school office forwarded your email to me. Perhaps as I have lived a large part of the past twenty-five years in temples in Asia, they asked if I would answer. This is not a definitive answer. Just my impressions and understanding from living in temples in America, Europe, and Asia.

You wrote in your email, *"I have a strong interest in Buddhism and a strong desire to practice. Unfortunately, I also have very little money. Due to personal life conditions, I have often found myself with time to practice, but no money. Twice, now, I have, despite my sincere intentions to practice, been rebuffed by both the American organization and the Korean organization to participate in extended stays at a temple because I had no money. I was willing to live in a tent by the Providence Zen Center, but I was informed that this would cost me a significant amount. And now, most disturbingly, I showed up at the actual Hwa Gye Sa temple in Seoul, Korea and was informed that it would cost me \$150 US dollars a week. I understand that several years ago, one could show up at temples in Korea and participate in the monastic life there without having to pay rent. For some reason that has changed. Why? I have stayed at temples in Thailand where no payment is expected, and I understand a similar situation exists in Sri Lanka. I do not know the particulars of the sutras on this point, but following what I understand to be the teaching of Zen, I have relied on first hand, physical experience. In relation to staying in a temple, this has suggested that, whatever sutra arguments I could produce, something is not quite right with the Chogye organization in terms of its monetary policy. Is the money because of three simple meals a day? Isn't rent paid, at least at Hwa Gye Sah? It seems that an indigent person willing to live simply, according to the precepts should be taken in. I also recognize that there are economic realities that might have to be met. I was struck in Thailand by the incredible amount of community support. Perhaps this does not exist in Korean Buddhism, but from the looks of it, a similar amount of people were participating."*

Again, thank you for your email. These are very fair concerns and questions. When you say no payments are expected, you are thinking primarily of the Theravada temples and meditations centers of South Asia. In Mahayana centers in the north, it is often different. Why is that?

As you probably know, when Buddha left home, many people in India were living homeless, literally on the ground outside, subsisting by begging for food as they pursued spiritual practices to overcome suffering. Buddha also lived this way, surviving on a little food, scraps of

cloth for a body covering, and living outside in all kinds of weather. While doing this for six years, he became enlightened.

He continued living this way as he began teaching. Gradually, other homeless practitioners gathered around him. Lay people with homes, families, etc, also became his students. When there were just a few homeless spiritual seekers in an area, being supported by the local population was no problem. When there were many, on what ground would they stay everyday? How could they all get the food they needed to live?

First, a wealthy lay student of Buddha offered a piece of land for the practitioners to stay on and food to eat. Later, a king also offered a large park and food offerings. It was possible to have a practicing place and practicing community.

Buddhism was usually spread by one or two monks going into areas where Buddha's teaching had not reached. Again, when only a few monks are traveling or living in an area, they can maintain themselves by begging. But when Buddhism moved into other areas and countries, it grew large only when it fell under royal patronage. Only a wealthy king could support many practicing people. Royal patronage has advantages and disadvantages.

The climate in South Asia, the Theravada countries, ranges from mild to tropical. Practitioners lived on one or two meals a day. A few pieces of cloth was enough for clothing year-round. Shelters, when necessary, could be built very simply. Heating wasn't necessary. There was not so much burden placed on a community to provide the necessities of life to practicing people. If someone became ill, medicines were offered. Or, if not offered, the person either got better or died. Life was pretty simple.

When Buddhism moved into the Asian countries to the north, the situation was much different. The climate is much harsher. The burden on others for the basic necessities of life is much greater. More food, warmer clothing, substantial buildings, heating in winter. Again, a few monks can survive or travel most anywhere without becoming a burden on the populace. But for practicing communities to exist, it was always necessary to have the patronage of rich people or of the king.

Buddhism spread to China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea and Japan this way through the patronage of the populace, the wealthy and often the king. In China, in the 700's, a Great Zen Master named Pai Chang appeared. The Buddha had made a precept for monks and nuns, "Do not dig the earth." However, in formulating the rules for Zen communities, Pai Chang made the famous rule, "A day without work is a day without eating." Zen communities moved away from the power centers of society. Monks and other practitioners cleared the land, built buildings, farmed. They provided for themselves the four necessities of life. Work became a meditation practice, "action" Zen. Often Zen communities worked during the day and sat meditation at night. Pai Chang's rule became a hallmark of Zen practice. Zen communities all over China and Korea followed this path.

In 841, a new king came to the throne in China. He turned against Buddhism. In 845, 40,000 temples were destroyed; 250,000 monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life. Practicing places for lay people and the ordained disappeared. The Zen temples were largely untouched. Why? They were not dependent on receiving patronage or offerings from others.

Korean Buddhism is a blend of Mahayana Sutra and Zen teaching, where Zen practice is viewed as predominant. The Chogye Order represents traditional Korean Buddhism. About 90% of Buddhists in Korea belong to the Chogye Order. Buddhism, after spreading throughout Korea starting in 372, eventually became the state religion for over 800 years during the course of three dynasties. In 1392, a new dynasty, the Chosun dynasty, appeared. The dynasty lasted until 1910. This dynasty favored neo-Confucianism. Buddhism fell out of favor. In fact, for 200 of those years, it was illegal for monks or nuns to enter the capital city under penalty of death. However, Buddhism was tolerated in the countryside. Temples received some support from surrounding communities, but the rule of "a day without work is a day without eating" was the guiding spirit of Zen practice and Zen life.

In 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea. Initially, the Japanese rule relaxed the regulations against Buddhism. But there were many other rules which caused Korean people great suffering. At one point, it was illegal to cut trees as the Japanese wanted these trees for their own use in Japan. The monks and nuns at temples could no longer cut wood for heat. It was necessary to get charcoal bricks which cost money to heat buildings. The Buddha Halls were not heated, only the sleeping quarters and the meditation hall, which are often one and the same. During and after the Korean war, the whole of South Korea was devastated. Everyone had a hard time getting food. Begging by monks and nuns was banned by all the Buddhist orders. Although South Korea is fairly prosperous now, this is still the rule today, except on special occasions.

Zen Master Seung Sahn grew up in this tradition. Perhaps you know his story. He was already a Great Zen Master in Korea, but when he came to America he got a job in a laundromat and rented an apartment. He didn't raise money from Korean or American people. He did it himself. He provided the basic necessities himself. He invited his lay students to live with him and supported the Center and everyone in it, until the students decided they would rather have him teaching full time than working in a laundromat. Everyone living in the Center contributed monthly to pay the expenses of living together—housing, food, utilities, government fees, etc. You can call this "rent" or "training fees," or whatever. It means not depending on others. This is Zen practice.

When we started a Zen Center in Paris, France in May 1985, we had a little seed money. We rented a small free-standing house. I was a monk living with a couple of French lay people. People often came in the evening and on weekends for practice. By winter we didn't have enough money to pay the rent for the building, heating, and food. I got a job painting apartments for two months and gave the money to the Zen Center. By the end of the winter, enough people were practicing together and helping with the expenses, that I could drop the painting job.

In 1989, Zen Master Seung Sahn sent me to Berkeley, California to be the abbot of our Empty Gate Zen Center. That summer, the Zen Center also did not have enough money for all expenses. I got a job in an Oakland marina

sanding and painting boats and gave the money to the Zen Center until, again, there were enough Zen students who helped support their practicing place. In our Zen centers, even monks and nuns must work hard to support the practicing place, usually inside the center, but outside if necessary.

You have a sincere desire to practice dharma. That is very wonderful! But I think your sensibilities are more in line with Theravada Buddhism than Mahayana and Zen. Theravada is more "myself" practice. Perhaps you ought to check out the Theravada centers in the United States. How have they adapted to the western culture and situation?

Mahayana is always for others. Zen practice is put down your opinions, don't check, just do it, help all beings. In Mahayana and Zen, accepting offerings is fine. But don't depend on others. Only help others. How can I help you?

In Theravada centers in Asia, usually people are not asked for money. Lay people are expected to give "dana"—to give money or offerings when they come to the temple or practice center. Asian people all understand this. Even Chinese nuns from Singapore, when they go to Myanmar to practice meditation, bring significant offerings because they come from a rich country. They understand this. Western people may not be asked, but are expected to give dana to help the others practice and to take care of their needs while they are in the temple. This is the correct way.

Before, in Mahayana centers in China, Tibet and Korea, people were not asked for money or offerings, again because Asian people already understand dana. Many westerners came with no idea about dana or anything, but only wanting something. They didn't understand one of the most basic teachings in Buddhism. Also the burden on others to provide the four necessities is not small in northern countries. Finally many temples set a fee. This is not just about money. This is teaching the correct spirit of practice—everybody help.

Zen Master Seung Sahn said, there are two kinds of religion: "I want something" religion and "Give to" religion. "I want something" religion means people want something—health, prosperity, peace, happiness, enlightenment, salvation, to go to heaven. Many kinds of wanting. "Give to" religion means don't think about "my" situation. How can I help you? If you want that, you must put down your opinion, your condition, and your situation. Then you can realize true nature. Just give to others whatever they need. Just do it! This is Zen practice. Then before you enter the meditation room, you are already practicing correctly. If you get great wisdom, skillful means will appear endlessly.

In this life, if you want something, you may get it. But you will meet hindrances everywhere. If you put down all your ideas and only follow the situation, you will have no hindrance anywhere. Which one do you like?

Finally, I ask you, What are you? This is the original Great Question. What am I? Don't know.

I hope you keep the Great Question—What am I?—only go straight don't know, put down all your ideas and opinions, just do it, attain the correct way, truth and correct life and save all beings from suffering.

Yours in the dharma,

Dae Bong 