

# Dragons and Snakes

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Mu Chak asked Manjusri, “How is (the Dharma) being carried on hereabouts?”

Manjusri said, “Ordinary people and saints live together; dragons and snakes mix.”

—*Blue Cliff Record*, Case 35



I remember he never took the coins from the change I would bring after shopping for him. “Too heavy,” he would say. “You keep.” I’m remembering him more these days as he’s left us, left his body behind in a temple in Korea, dressed in his monk’s robes, with a smile on his face as if to say, “All done for now!”

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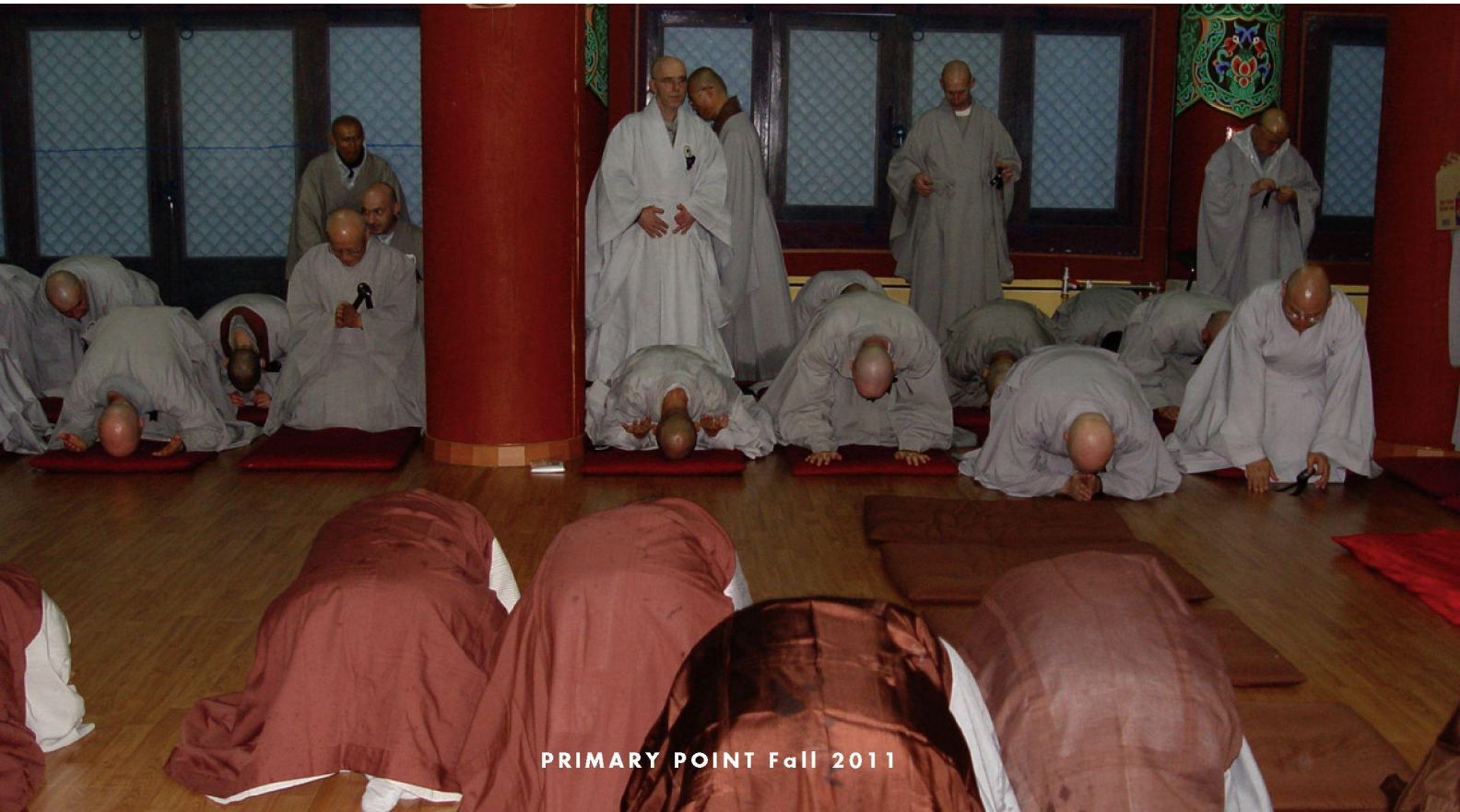
In the winter of 2004, my Zen teacher died. I attended his funeral in the mountains of Korea. This is the story of that trip.

It’s early December. I am picking up my coat and bags to head off to Ring of Bone Zendo in the California mountains for a retreat. It will be a week of sitting Zen to commemorate Buddha’s Enlightenment Day. The phone rings,

and it is my old friend Mu Sang Sunim calling from Korea. He’s just gotten off a flight from Los Angeles and tells me that Zen Master Seung Sahn, our Zen master, has passed away. I get the bare details and the schedule for the funeral and hang up, stunned. I haven’t seen him in years, and have even given back my robe and bowls and returned to lay life, but I’m still stunned. It’s like someone turning off music that I was listening to without knowing I was still listening. I feel like I’m 14 years old again, orphaned again. The thought comes, “Now I am alone in this world.”

After I hang up, a sudden change of plans and I am off to Berkeley and REI instead of the mountains, buying some long underwear and warm clothes for a trip to Korea. Koreans dress well and a layman would be expected to wear a nice black suit and tie to a funeral. Clothes. I gave up my monk’s robes when I left Korea all those years ago, and I’ve never owned a suit. What am I going to wear to my teacher’s funeral? Once again I’m in the middle ground dancing between worlds and I get a wave of grief, feeling lost and alone as I look at shirts on a rack.

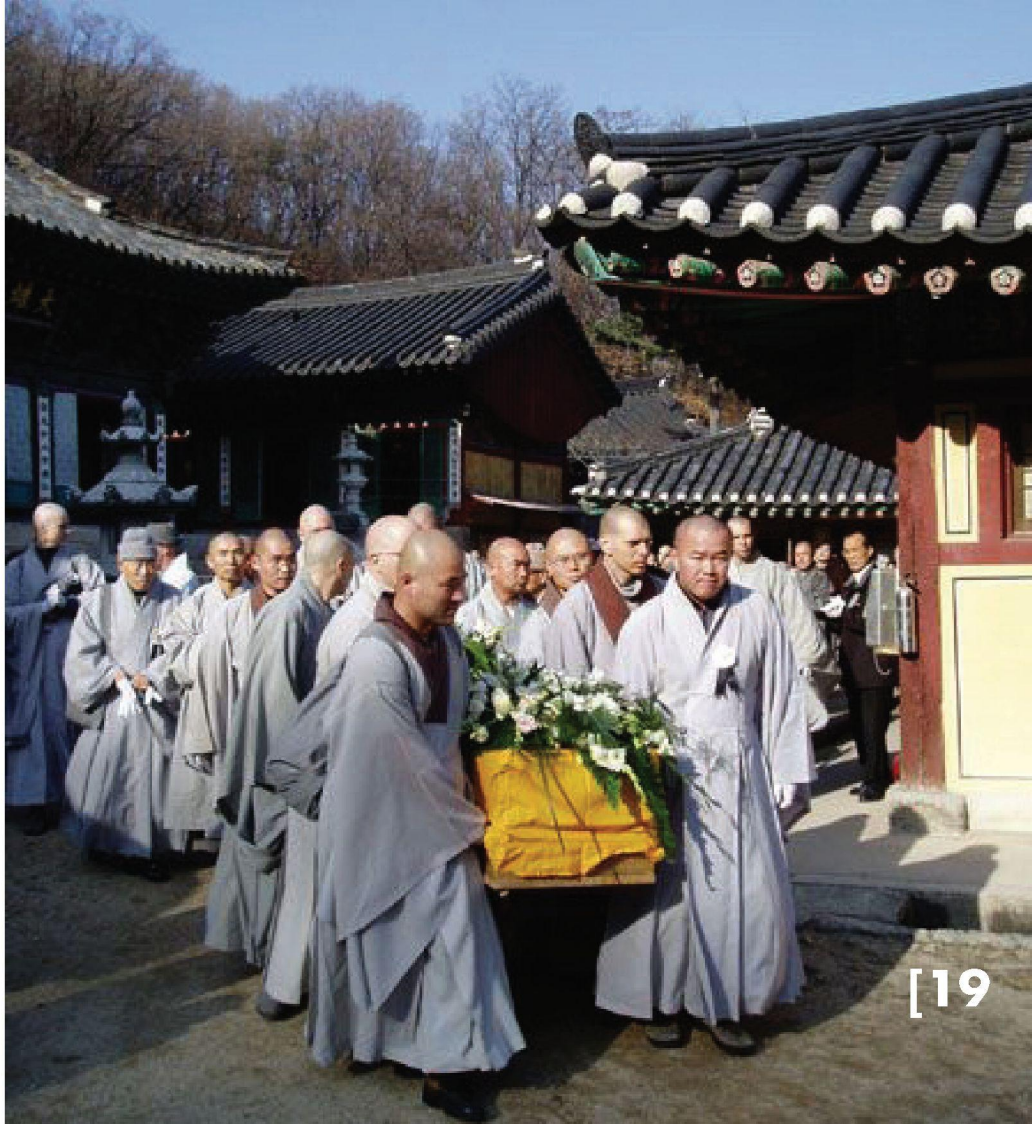
After a late night packing and an early morning ride to the airport, I’m in line to check in when I see Diana, the person who welcomed me to the first of many of Zen Master Seung Sahn’s Zen centers I would live in over the



years. It's good to see her. We fly together. A segment of Korean national news is shown after the movie and there is a piece on Zen Master Seung Sahn's death. He had become famous in his old age back in his homeland. We arrive in Seoul late at night, taking a taxi all the way across the city, which fills the granite mountains and valleys up to our teacher's temple in what used to be the edge of town. I no longer recognize Seoul, which has grown huge, with free-ways where streets used to be and sleek, fast cars. It's been 24 years since I first came here and the change is amazing. As we drive I remember all those rides through Seoul in taxis and buses. Going to temples and language school and tea houses. I find myself wondering if I'll ever come back here again and that catches in my heart with an ache. Lose one thing and lose them all.

We are met at the temple by a foreign monk and nun and go to the *kun bang* or big room. In the small old building that was the temple that I lived and practiced in an altar has been set up. It is covered with food offerings and white flowers (white is the color of death here, not black) and candles, all set around a large official portrait of Zen Master Seung Sahn. There are a few monks and nuns sitting along one side of the room. We go in and offer incense and one white flower each and bow to the altar, then we bow to the monks and nuns. And sit with them for a while. Some are friends from the old days. Such a strange mixture, the deep sadness I feel in my heart looking at the painting on the altar mixing with the joy at being back in the temple with old friends. They have stayed on and on here while I'd gone back to America long ago and traveled round and round. Seeing them and being back in the temple, I go in and out of a meditation of sorts on my life and the choices I've made. Have I been true to my teacher and his teaching? Am I on my path? Could it have been different or is it right just as it is? All these thoughts and feelings appear and then resolve back into just sitting on the warm heated floor in the winter night.

They've already taken his body down to Su Dok Sa, his home temple, where he started his dharma practice in the years just before the Korean War. Most of the monks and nuns are already there and that's where the funeral will be. That's my other temple too, where I was a *haeng-ja* or monk-in-training, and where I did several of the traditional long winter retreats. It was my last temple before disrobing and leaving for America. I decide I want to go alone, take



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the train and have time to be alone. There will be ten thousand people or more at the funeral.

The train is new and fast and clean. It takes forever to pass out of Seoul and its environs, spread out like a potted plant gone wild. I remember this train as a rattling creaky old one, with the view out the open back door in the spring, the tracks and rice fields all receding behind, all falling away from the rearward view. It always felt like an elegant metaphor of the conceptual mind looking at life, all retrospect and review. I go to look out the back but the window is sealed and the view is blocked by schoolboys in blue blazers going home for the weekend.

I think about funerals, the most inconvenient and uncompromising of events. A call comes, perhaps from far away, and one ends up buying a ticket and getting on a plane, going somewhere unexpected at an unexpected hour. And here I was, alone on a train heading south through a landscape I recalled like a dream, trying to dredge up my lost half-remembered words of Korean, going to say goodbye to the teacher I had left but who somehow hadn't left me. One last teaching on impermanence and liberation, on fire and snow.

I arrive at the hotel where the foreign students are staying and meet Mu Sang Sunim. He is an American monk

and we've known each other since the old days. We take an amazingly expensive taxi up to the temple through what has become a resort around the mountain. Again we come into a large Buddha hall, much bigger this time, with many monks and nuns sitting on one side with their shaved heads, pressed gray robes and brown great kasas, their formal monastic robes. There is a large altar at one end of the room set up in front of the body. Again we each offer incense and a white flower and then bow three times to the monks and nuns. They look exhausted, having been sitting up in turns night and day since he passed, bowing to all the visitors. I turn to leave and then an old friend, a Korean monk, comes after me and has me join the end of the line of students sitting along the side of the room. The energy is formal and heavy and deep.

People continue to arrive at the temple, each coming and bowing. The President of Korea has sent a floral wreath, and the *kun sunim*, the "great monks"—teachers from all over the country—start to arrive for the funeral tomorrow. Some people will stay up all night, sitting in shifts, meditating and bowing, meditating and bowing. I remember being a haeng-ja at this temple when I was 25.



They said to always keep *ha shim*, "low mind", and to bow to everyone I met. Just bow. It's a long time ago now, but I remember as I keep bowing to everyone here. A group of us slip out and go into the cavernous cafeteria in the basement underneath the administration hall. I see old friends from all over the world. It's fun and exciting to see everyone, to trade stories about what we've been doing in life all this time. The food is both spicy and salty and tastes amazingly good. We go back to the hotel for the night, where I lay out my futon on the heated paper-coated floor and fall asleep.

It is the day of the funeral.

It is gray and cold. We travel up to the temple in another taxi. They have the roads blocked off to deal with all the people who are expected to attend, but when they see the monks with me in the car they let us pass all the way up to the main hall. A thousand people are inside and waves of well-dressed Korean worshipers are walking up the temple steps. There is a final preparatory ceremony inside and then the casket is taken out to the large courtyard where

the ceremony is to be held. It is placed within another wooden coffin covered with white paper lotus flowers and rests on a gold colored wooden frame with hundreds of crystals hanging on cords overhead. The crystals represent Indra's Net, the interrelation of all things in the universe. A gentle rain begins to fall, like tears from heaven. More and more people arrive, along with TV cameras, photographers and reporters. Later people say that ten to fifteen thousand people attend. I sit in my chair with all the foreign students and remember all those retreats and dharma talks, all the energy my teacher gave us. I remember driving him to Chinatown in Manhattan in a rented van one crazy day, and going to afternoon kung fu movies in L.A. There are prayers and chanting and eulogies in Korean.

It rains harder. Someone gives me a rain poncho. It is well organized chaos. I am part of a huge strange family, all woven together by the man now in this box under the paper flowers and crystals.

Finally the elegies and the prayers are completed. A group of senior monks in shaved heads and robes, wearing formal white gloves, step to the funeral bier and lift the casket, and we begin the procession to the cremation ground. Everyone is chanting, reciting the name of the Buddha of Limitless Light. "Namu Amitabul, Namu Amitabul," over and over. All the meditation students are given long prayer banners hung on bamboo poles and we slowly follow in a long sinuous line, like a snake, like a dragon. Up and over the ridge to a clearing in the pine forest. There is a huge pile of wood upon which the casket has been laid. Finally the ten thousand or more of us are all circled round, chanting in the haunting, solemn, disjointed Korean style I remember. One of the monks comes out and lights the pyre and the flames grow and sizzle in the rain. Only now do I really believe that he's gone. "Gone, gone, gone beyond. Gone completely beyond." The chanting goes on and on. It will continue all night, until the sun rises and the fire burns itself to ash and we gather our things to walk down the mountain.

*Coming empty-handed, going empty-handed—that is human.*

*When you are born, where do you come from?*

*When you die, where do you go?*

*Life is like a floating cloud which appears.*

*Death is like a floating cloud which disappears.*

*The floating cloud itself originally does not exist.*

*Life and death, coming and going, are also like that.*

*But there is one thing which always remains clear.*

*It is pure and clear, not depending on life and death.*

*Then what is the one pure and clear thing?*

—ancient Zen poem 

