

DOGS MEETING AT A CROSSROADS

Mukyong JDPSN (Roland Wöhrle-Chon)



My wife, Namhee, and I met Zen Master Seung Sahn for the first time in spring 1991. We were both 30 years old, and after many efforts to meet teachers and gurus in India and elsewhere, the time was finally ripe to meet our great teacher. So far we had

learned yoga and meditation in Asia, and we started our Zen practice in the Japanese Soto school. In 1989 we joined our first Kyol Che in the Kwan Um School of Zen in Falenica, which is part of Warsaw, Poland. It had a strong impact on us, and thus we continued to visit parts of each Kyol Che in Poland for the following years. The retreats were led by Andrzej Czarnecki and sometimes by Zen Master Wu Bong, with whom we developed a close student-teacher relationship.

In early 1990 we opened our home in Berlin for regular Zen practice on Tuesdays and Sundays. Slowly people joined us and eventually our flat became the first location of the Berlin Zen Center.

Then in spring 1991 we received this remarkable phone call from Zen Master Wu Bong announcing that Zen Master Seung Sahn and his entourage could come to Berlin, if we wish, because the scheduled retreat in Paris had been cancelled. They would arrive in two weeks or so, which left us almost no time for preparations and organization. However, the hotels were all full due to a number of conventions going on in Berlin right then, so we couldn't get any hotel rooms for our important guests on such short notice. That's why they all had to be accommodated in our student apartment, which was also the Berlin Zen Center. We had a well-off Zen student who offered his home for the guests, but Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "We stay at the Zen Center, no problem!" So our great Zen Master Seung Sahn stayed in our bedroom and slept in our bed. Zen Master Wu Bong, the monks, and everyone else stayed in the dharma room. It didn't seem like Zen Master Seung Sahn had any problem with the situation, even though we students had little space or comfort, and not even proper showers. Still everything went smoothly. Every two days we went to the public bath together. During this time I heard Zen Master Seung Sahn often say, "You like, I like." So he just followed the situation. That was a great teaching!

But the climax for me was this unforgettable private

conversation I had with him at the Berlin Zen Center. I told him that Namhee and I planned to get married later that year, and I asked for his teaching. Then he took off his glasses and looked at me with his dark, sharp eyes and said, "One time a dog started from point A to have a walk on a road. At the same time another dog started his walk from point B on a different road. There was a junction where both roads met. There the two dogs had a good time together for a while." You must understand that I am quite a romantic person, and that this kind of teaching did not impress me at first. I thought, why would he say this to a couple who loves each other and is about to get married soon? But I had to admit that he is right, and that it is just that simple! This message of being simple and not holding anything has been Zen Master Seung Sahn's most important teaching to me until today.

A few weeks later we met Zen Master Seung Sahn again in Warsaw, where we joined the Yong Maeng Jong Jin and became dharma teachers. During our stay I once approached him in his room and told him with great sincerity: "Zen Master Seung Sahn, I want to follow you!" This determination was of great meaning and significance to me. So far I was proud to be independent and my own master. Now after I made this decision I expected something special. But Zen Master Seung Sahn only said, "Please rub this ink stone." He was about to make calligraphies and needed ink. So I sat there alone with him in his room rubbing ink. He said almost nothing. No verbal conversation. Only calligraphy and ink rubbing. From time to time I asked him: "Is it enough?" And he would say: "No! More!"

These were my important first encounters with Zen Master Seung Sahn. On both occasions I made heavy and important decisions for my life, and on both occasions I received Zen Master Seung Sahn's simple, profound and clear teachings. Unforgettable!

MATCHBOX PRACTICE

Andrzej Piotrowski JDPSN



There is an old saying: "When the student is ready the teacher appears." But in my case it was a teaching that appeared first, and I had to wait some time to experience the true source of it. What made me ready was long years of traveling without any clear direction, getting through risky psychedelic and chemical experiments, which resulted in confusion and per-

sonality disintegration, hurt my mental and physical health and caused social alienation.

Since the early years of my life I was driven by a burning question: "What is the most valuable, essential thing in my existence? I want to find something of utmost importance. What is it?" The question was good but there was no direction in it, no compass to show me the way. The result could be summarized in Zen Master Seung Sahn's words: "You want to go to Krakow but in the end you find yourself in Gdansk." The result may still be interesting, and in this case not so bad, but my situation was really critical and alarming, so I needed completely new guidance and genuine transformation. Finally I decided to spend some time in a therapeutic community under professional supervision. It was helpful but my intuition told me that it was not, as we say, the last word. The therapy helped me to clarify some problems, hidden habits, and deficiencies, but I still felt no power to overcome them. Also my original question was still a big hole of anxiety and uncertainty. It was both inspiring and dangerous. By that time I had read many books about meditation and so-called spirituality. The horizon was hazy but I felt the urgency to follow this inner call, which with time became stronger and stronger.

One day a guy joined the community whom I remembered from the past, when I was a member of a theater group. I knew he was one of the first students of the mysterious Zen Master Seung Sahn, who had been visiting Poland regularly since 1978. This man's name was Andrzej Czarnecki and he worked in the clinic as one of the therapists. I immediately experienced an affinity with him. I felt he could be the bridge leading me to Zen Master Seung Sahn. Under his guidance I started regular meditation in addition to therapy. He also gave me a book that became my Bible, the source of the clear water of wisdom. Contrary to the title, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* actually washed away the ashes from my original Buddha. Each page shone with light and clarity that filled my being with the happiness and transparency I had longed for. It was like finding an old forgotten truth, or like suddenly meeting your grandparents while lost in a big, alien, crowded city. My only wish was to meet this great Zen master in person and become his student.

One day Andrzej Czarnecki suggested I attend a retreat at the Warsaw Zen Center. There I experienced the "washing-potatoes practice" recommended by Zen

Master Seung Sahn was the strong push. The power of sangha and organized practice broke through the wall of my resistance, and I realized I had found my new home and family. But I was still looking forward to meeting the head of this great family. It was 1986 and I learned that Zen Master Seung Sahn would visit Poland in the fall. His visits and retreats were so popular that the relatively small Zen center could barely contain all the people. That's why we called it "matchbox practice."

Zen Master Seung Sahn was surrounded by love and admiration. Everybody who was seriously interested in the dharma wanted to hear his unusual and simple teaching, to experience this famous sword of wisdom in action.

When he finally arrived the box was full of matches, and one of them was me. It was breathtaking to hear the sound of the bell in the dharma room announcing the arrival of the great Zen master and seeing him appearing in the door. This was the moment I'd waited so long for! He sat on the mat and greeted everybody with a few simple words. I saw him as a combination of power, wisdom, compassion, joy and openness. A pure embodiment of enlightenment! I had the impression that Buddha didn't die twenty-five hundred years ago but was sitting in front of me and smiling. He was completely devoted to his dharma work and how-can-I-help-you was the substance of everything he did. Retreats in Poland must have been difficult for him. Giving interviews to over a hundred people demanded energy that could only have come from beyond the limitations of I-my-me mind, from infinite time and space. And that was just what his teaching was all about.

Once during a dharma talk a frustrated student asked him: "Soen Sa Nim, I've come here to practice meditation but it seems almost impossible, because of such a huge crowd of participants and so little space. It disturbs and stresses me. What can I do?" The simple answer was: "Put down I-my-me and you will have a lot of space." The teaching as usual was a precise shot into the heart of ignorance. Brilliant! I realized that

I had found my destination, my true teacher. After the Yong Maeng Jong Jin, we held a precepts ceremony. Taking the precepts should be a mature decision to follow the dharma path and the teacher. I had no doubts or hesitation. As Zen Master Seung Sahn used to teach, "don't check, just do it." During the ceremony I was asked to approach the table to receive my dharma



name. Zen Master Seung Sahn started to read my certificate: “Your name is Song Sahn . . .” and he stopped for a while: “Oh, perhaps we have common karma?” “Yes sir, I’m sure we have.” May this good karma last forever.

A FEW TREASURED MOMENTS WITH ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

Bogumila Malinowska JDPSN



I met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1981 in Warsaw. It was before the Warsaw Zen Center was founded, in a small house rented for Yong Maeng Jong Jin. The atmosphere I felt there was extraordinary. I was 20 years old, and never before in my life had I met a

person so *different* as Zen Master Seung Sahn. Some older students told me that the Zen master was doing some practice in the middle of the night, fighting with demons and visiting other planets. I didn’t participate in the retreat that time, but this experience was different from anything I’d encountered before, so it was like a seed was planted.

Two years later that seed came to fruition, and I decided to sit my first seven-day retreat in Warsaw, at what is now the head temple for Poland.

I met Zen Master Seung Sahn many more times over the years, and I had several private interviews with him when he came to my hometown of Pila in 1986 to give a dharma talk.

I gave the introductory talk then, and spoke in Polish. I wasn’t even a dharma teacher, so he asked the dharma teacher who came with him to give me a long robe, and he asked me to wear a long mala. He couldn’t understand anything we said, and from a photo someone took he looked bored. But when my talk was over he said “Oh! Great talk!” and everybody laughed. Later on we went to a restaurant and he was still answering esoteric questions using lots of technical Zen language. My close friend then asked the Zen master to paint calligraphy on the wall. When my friend, who was a mathematician, saw it, he was overjoyed. He said he stopped thinking and experienced an extraordinary excitement, something he described as an “Einstein state of mind.” He was very happy and looked so peaceful, even though he had never practiced Zen before.

The next day we went to do morning practice and eat breakfast at a beautiful castle in Tuczno, where I had grown up, and where my mother is still living. Zen

Master Seung Sahn gave group kong-an interviews for all of us in one of the large castle chambers. My two teenage brothers were there, as well as one of my former schoolteachers. The Zen master asked some simple kong-ans. My brothers were young and responded well with their beginners’ mind. But my former teacher’s intellect got in the way, and he was baffled by the exchange. Zen Master Seung Sahn laughed and told him he should learn from the younger students, and not make “difficult.”

During breakfast at a restaurant I was still very excited, so he gave me a fork and said, “Eat!” It was helpful for me to relax in that situation, because I was kind of stuck.

I will always remember how comforting he could be. When I was pregnant in 1989 I went to his room to ask for advice. I was scared of how my life would be changing. He said with his big smile, “Oh, wonderful! I will give your baby a gift!” And he gave me a necklace with a Kwan Seum Bosal pendant.

Many times I asked him about practice, and once he advised me to go for a hundred-day solo retreat. He gave me instruction, helped me plan the retreat, and he even recommended a place, even though I had been his student for no more than six years. He said, “you must do a thousand bows every day, and midnight practice every night, and make sure you don’t open the door.”

Another time I asked him what kind of practice to do during pregnancy and he said prostrations. Some people disapproved of my doing prostrations while I was pregnant, and said I was not a good mother-to-be. But despite their talk, I felt this practice really helped me and my baby son.

When my son was about five years old we went to the airport to say good-bye to Zen Master Seung Sahn. As we sat in the airport café in Warsaw, my son asked if Zen Master Seung Sahn would give him a present: a mala with a miniature moktak on it. He replied, “Of course, if you cut your hair.” At that time my son had long hair, and he said yes, he would get a haircut.

There was many a situation in which I witnessed his spontaneous loving energy and his ability to communicate and talk. He never put up any barrier with any kind of person. He also could understand and accept different men and women, of all ages and cultures, and from every walk of life. He had patience and understanding for many things that others found strange or annoying or stupid.

One time I told him I wanted to be a dharma teacher. I was very young at that time. Zen Master Seung Sahn turned to a monk who was there in the room with us and said, “Look at her: she is very strong—wonderful!”

I wish I could see Zen Master Seung Sahn. I am sure I will meet him again. He is always in my heart, and I miss him so much. ♦