

Dialogues in Spain: Zen Master Seung Sahn and his Senior Students in Palma

Eduardo del Valle Pérez, Palma Zen Center

This morning I woke up early and went to Palma Zen Center, a nonresidential center on Majorca island in Spain, and there I met Pepita and Maria Antonia, who have been keeping the morning practice twice a week for many years. Pepita, 65 years old, was leading the prostrations, with us following her while she bowed, her eyes closed, slow and steady as the pendulum of an old carillon. It suddenly struck my mind that she has been bowing every day, without ever having missed a day, for the last 28 years, since the first time she met Zen Master Seung Sahn. Pepita has been leading the morning practice in Palma Zen Center

when Joan Insa, a Spanish artist who was living in the United States, was walking down the streets of Providence and he heard beautiful and profound chanting coming from a nearby house. He was so powerfully attracted by the chanting voice that he knocked on the door of the house and found out that it was a Korean monk named Zen Master Seung Sahn who had been chanting, and that this Zen master was a great Zen patriarch from Korea. Joan became one of his first students in the West.

Soon Joan invited Zen Master Seung Sahn to teach on the Balearic island of Majorca. Immediately after this many people were interested in his teachings, students appeared and Palma Zen Center was founded. In the first years Palma Zen Center was led by Joan Insa in his own house. At that time, when Buddhism was not well known in Spain, the sangha talked to the abbot of the Christian monastery, La Real, and asked him for permission to have Zen retreats (Yong Maeng Jong Jin in Korean) in his monastery. The abbot, after meeting Zen Master Seung Sahn and listening to his teachings, approved and offered a space for the practitioners of our sangha, under the condition that he could freely attend each Zen retreat to practice with Zen Master Seung Sahn—even though his fellow monks disagreed with his decision.

Once, when Zen Master Seung Sahn was present, the dharma room floor was covered with only a thin carpet. Meditation cushions were placed around the room, but because the Zen center was so new there were no meditation mats or blankets available. The students put the only blanket they had under Zen Master Seung Sahn's cushion so that he could do bows without pain in his knees. When he entered the room and perceived the situation, he said with a smile "Bows are not necessary, no good for legs." He was always following the situation with kindness and compassion.

At that time Palma Zen Center was a small community, so that any time Zen Master Seung Sahn came to visit us, we were fortunate to spend a lot of personal time with him: going for walks, eating together, talking on the streets, sitting in front of a garden just keeping silence. We treasured spending time together with this great Zen master who we also called "Dae Soen Sa Nim" (Great Zen Master), being and acting in everyday life situations with him.

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since then—no matter what—even if at times no one else came. In our last Zen retreat, during a ceremony honoring the senior students, the students of the second generation agreed that Pepita's virtue is perseverance and strength, and we told her that she is like Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva (Dae Se Ji Bosal), who never gives up, despite any kind of hindrance.

Zen Master Wu Bong told me last year in Berlin that Palma Zen Center was born in 1976, becoming the third Zen center of the Kwan Um School of Zen—after the Zen centers of Providence and New York—and the first Zen center in Europe. For a while Palma Zen Center was the head temple for the European Kwan Um School of Zen. Now it is the head temple for Spain.

The inspiration for Palma Zen Center came in the 1970s,

One day Antonia del Olmo, Joan Insa's wife at that time, was driving her car with Zen Master Seung Sahn sitting next to her. Antonia asked him, "Dae Soen Sa Nim, what is the true job for a wife?" Zen Master Seung Sahn answered, "Wife must always follow, respect and obey her husband!"

Antonia was stuck and angry. She couldn't believe that a Zen master could give this kind of answer! But she kept silence. Later she met her husband and told him about her talk with Zen Master Seung Sahn and she told her husband, "You must go to Zen Master Seung Sahn and ask him what the true job for a husband is, and then you tell me his answer."

So when Joan Insa met Zen Master Seung Sahn he asked him, "Dae Soen Sa Nim, what is the true job for the husband?" Without the slightest doubt Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "Husband must always follow, respect and obey his wife!"

Some years later the students invited Zen Master Seung Sahn to visit the famous caves of Porto Cristo. When he entered the caves he looked around and said, "This world is very interesting." After this first visit, any time Zen Master Seung Sahn came to visit us he always said, "Going to see the caves is necessary." And when he entered the caves again he always repeated "Caves—world very interesting."

On one of these visits to the caves, Zen Master Seung Sahn was waiting in line and talking with two students from Palma Zen Center, Pedro Pomar and Jaume Más, and a student from Barcelona Zen Center, Fernando Pardo, who is now the abbot there. Suddenly a beautiful woman walked past them. Pedro, Fernando and Jaume stopped talking—they forgot completely about Zen Master Seung Sahn and just looked at that beautiful woman who had entered the caves. When the three of them looked at Zen Master Seung Sahn again he simply gazed at them in silence. Then Pedro asked, "Master, what do you think about our looking at this beautiful woman?"

"Oh, no problem! Wonderful!" he answered. "Ah! Very good! If beautiful woman appears in front of you, enjoy her beauty, looking at her, no problem. Wonderful! But when that woman goes around the corner, if you continue thinking about her, then you have a problem!"

The students looked at each other and started to laugh.

Another time, in the dharma room of Palma Zen Center, two Americans, a monk and a Zen student, were arguing about the lid to the water bowl on the altar. The monk said, "The water bowl should be opened now!" Then he removed the lid to water bowl.

"No, no, no!" the student insisted. "You are wrong! The water bowl must remain closed now. You don't understand!" And then she covered the water bowl again with the lid.

"You are wrong!" shouted the monk. "This is not correct!" And the monk uncovered the water bowl again.

The monk and the student continued arguing this way, opening and closing the water bowl, when Jaume Más, who that time was the head dharma teacher, entered the dharma

room and perceived the situation. He suddenly walked to the altar, took the lid and said loudly, "From now on, and for the peace of America, Palma Zen Center is not going to use the lid for the water bowl again!"

The monk and the student were dumbstruck while Jaume Más left the dharma room with the lid in his hands. When Zen Master Seung Sahn, who was in his room, heard about this, he approved of the head dharma teacher's action, and in Palma Zen Center we never used the lid to the water bowl again for the following 17 years! Jaume Más was a strong student and served as our head dharma teacher for many years. Later he entered the Sufi path and became a student in the Nimatullahi Sufi order.

In 1992 Pedro Pomar, who had been one of the first students at Palma Zen Center and one of its main benefactors, fell very ill. During a dharma talk in a Yong Maeng Jong Jin with Zen Master Seung Sahn, Pedro said to him, "Dae Soen Sa Nim, I'm afraid to die!"

"You are already dead!" Zen Master Seung Sahn exclaimed.

Pedro and Zen Master Seung Sahn looked at each other deeply and suddenly both of them started to laugh. A few months later Pedro passed away. Pedro attracted many people to the dharma and greatly supported the Palma Zen



Center with his wisdom and generosity. We will always remember his great compassion and his luminous smile.

Pilar, Pedro's wife, has continued practicing and supporting our center since then. During the ceremony honoring the senior students, we agreed that her virtue was wisdom because any time a student had a problem she was always ready to offer them kind words that helped clear their mind and their problem. That's why we told her that she is like Manjushri Bodhisattva (Mun Su Bosal).

Tolo Cantarellas, who has been the abbot of Palma Zen Center during the last 20 years, told me this story about Zen Master Seung Sahn:

Once, in 1992, Zen Master Seung Sahn visited us. He came with eight people, monks and students, to give a

dharma talk and lead a retreat with a precepts ceremony. At one point Zen Master Seung Sahn felt unwell with chest pain and so we urgently took him to a small hospital in Palma, situated on a hill near a forest. After an initial stay in the intensive care unit, Zen Master Seung Sahn was transferred to a room, where he was always accompanied by two or three people. When we went for a visit we found Zen Master Seung Sahn looking upward. He greeted us and smiled, and pointed a finger at a small insect with antennae, perched on the IV stand. Then Zen Master Seung Sahn introduced us to his “small friend that keeps me company,” and then he talked to the insect for a while with fun and loving words. Looking at him I could see that he was not at all concerned, and not fearful for his own life.

Zen Master Seung Sahn looked then at me and said, “You must go talk to the cardiologist. Tell him that tomorrow I must leave the hospital.” So I went to look for the doctor and I found him in the reception, looking over Zen Master Seung Sahn’s medical history. When he heard what Zen Master Seung Sahn wanted he was stunned and glared at me angrily. Then he showed me the ECG (which I can read because I’m a nurse) and he said, “Look at his background”—Zen Master Seung Sahn had already suffered three anterior infarctions—“How can you imagine that I would allow him go out? I refuse to discuss this further!”

“Yes, yes, of course,” I said. “Thank you, doctor . . .” And then I returned to Zen Master Seung Sahn’s room to give to him the doctor’s answer. He told me “OK, OK, you must go talk again to this doctor. This time tell him that tomorrow I must give a very important lecture attended by many people, and I cannot miss it. OK? Now go and talk to him.”

“Yes sir, yes sir . . .” I answered. So I went to talk to the doctor again, and on the way I was overwhelmed, trying to find the right words to explain the situation so that the doctor would understand and react with the least possible anger. I found the doctor in the same place reviewing patient records. I got his attention and explained to him how important and inescapable Zen Master Seung Sahn’s appointment was, and that it was necessary that he leave the hospital the next morning. The doctor said: “OK, if this man wants to commit suicide, then he must sign the voluntary discharge before leaving!”

The next day Zen Master Seung Sahn left the hospital, and in the afternoon he gave a dharma talk with the same energy as ever, and afterward he went to the hotel to rest.

During the ceremony honoring the senior students, we agreed that Tolo’s virtue is energy and strength, because in good and bad situations at Palma Zen Center he never gave

up, and he encouraged everybody to continue practicing no matter what. He became an example of constant practice, so we told him that he is like Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (Bo Hyon Bosal).

Gabriela Tous has been Tolo’s wife and constant dharma companion through the years. One time Gabriela accompanied Zen Master Seung Sahn to the airport. He was sick and Gabriela thought that maybe it was the last time she would see her beloved teacher alive. Then Gabriela looked at Zen Master Seung Sahn and said sadly, “Dae Soen Sa Nim, when are you going to come back?”

“You must be strong, Gabriela!” Zen Master Seung Sahn insisted sternly. “I come here so that you can become independent, and then you won’t need me anymore!”

Gabriela started to mourn, with her heart full of gratitude for this last teaching she received from Zen Master Seung Sahn. The great patriarch never returned to Palma Zen Center again, because soon afterward he became ill and remained in Korea until the end of his life.



During the ceremony honoring the senior students, we agreed that Gabriela’s virtue is her compassion. She is always smiling and lovingly taking care of everybody. Any time a student is sad she comes and smiles kindly at them with bright eyes, and nurtures the student so that they feel loved and unburdened. We named her Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva (Kwan Seum Bosal).

These are some of the stories of our life with Zen Master Seung Sahn. As I’m writing these lines, looking now at the altar of the dharma room in Palma

Zen Center, next to the golden Buddha—which he gave to our Zen Center many years ago—I see the face of a great bodhisattva: our beloved Zen Master Seung Sahn. And next to him I see the faces of Pedro and Pilar, Tolo and Gabriela, Pepita, Jaume, Manel, Tami, Xisco, Maria Antonia, Pablo . . . and many other Zen masters, teachers and bodhisattvas who, with their teachings, effort, patience and practice through the years, have made this beautiful taeng hwa (altar painting) possible. Before the living taeng hwa of Palma Zen Center and the Kwan Um School of Zen I bow with gratitude and love.

Eduardo del Valle Pérez started practicing Zen in 1991 with Zen Master Seung Sahn at the Palma Zen Center in Spain. He took bodhisattva precepts with Zen Master Wu Bong in 2011. Nowadays Eduardo is part of the European office of the Kwan Um School of Zen. Since 1998 he has worked at the University of the Balearic Islands, where he leads its web and digitization department. In addition, he is technical director of the Digital Library of the Balearic Islands. He earned his pilot’s license in 2008 and also works as a flight instructor for professional pilots. He lives with his wife in Majorca, Spain.