

Only the Mind That Wants to Help

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This article originally appeared in the newsletter of Cheong Am Sa Temple in Korea.

This article focuses on how the practice of Korean Zen Buddhist meditation can profoundly help all people to realize their true self. Many people can benefit deeply from Korea's long Buddhist tradition if it is made more culturally accessible for Western people.

In today's world it is of the utmost importance that human beings change their views of where contentment, satisfaction and overall happiness can be found. My own journey through the process of becoming a monk has changed my view as to what is important for a healthy and meaningful life.

I was raised in an upper-middle-class family where I was expected to take over my father's business, get married and have children. At an early age I was enrolled in Catholic school, where I arrived early every day to help the priest perform the morning services. I was an altar boy, so I put on the robes and performed the mass with the priest; I looked forward to this time every morning—it gave me a sense of peace and connectedness with something inside myself.

Growing up in America, we had all sorts of pressures, such as “What kind of car do you drive? Where did you go on vacation? What neighborhood did you grow up in? What college are you going to?” I decided that I wanted to study music and the arts, but was soon discouraged because of all the pressure of performing and producing, and the inevitable comparisons of good to bad. Achieving success was a bittersweet experience for me. There was always something inside of me that was never satisfied.

In 1972 I met Zen Master Seung Sahn, and the first question he asked me was “Who are you?” I had visited many yogis and other spiritual masters, but I was never directly challenged with such a simple question. I said, “My name is Carl.” He said, “That is the name your mother gave you. *Who are you!*?” He said it with such force that I replied, “I don't know!”

He then said, “Correct!” I was puzzled—how could “I don't know” be a correct answer? He told me to come back to the temple the next morning at 5 a.m. to begin practice.

The following morning it was just the Zen master and me; he hit the morning bell and chanted the Homage to the Three Jewels beautifully. We then meditated for 40 minutes.

I went and told my friends about this Korean Zen master who was in town and the next day there were five of us for morning practice. He told the women of the temple to go out and buy an American-style breakfast. After morning practice was finished there was a table prepared with Korean soup and rice, kimchi, peanut butter, cereal and milk. None of us had ever seen Korean food before—the idea of eating rice and soup in the morning was completely foreign to us. The Zen master perceived our hesitation and promptly mixed everything together in one bowl; this made everyone laugh. He put kimchi, rice, soup, cereal, peanut butter and milk all together, mixed it up and began to eat it with a big smile. We all tried to do the same, and laughed as we ate. This was the beginning of the Los Angeles Zen Center, which later was named Tahl Mah Sa and finally Dharma Zen Center.



In 1994, after getting married and raising a family, in a short period of time several of my family members died, which caused me great sadness. I was in L.A. visiting my friend and decided to go see Zen Master Seung Sahn at the Dharma Zen Center, where he was giving a series of lectures on his forthcoming book *The Compass of Zen*.

As he perceived my condition, and being a great bodhisattva, he asked me if I would like to become a monk. Without hesitation I agreed to go to Korea and become a monk. It had always been a dream of mine to become a monk; at an early age I wanted to be a priest, and then as a teenager I wanted to go to Thailand to become a monk. On December 27, 1994, I boarded a plane to Seoul, Korea, to start training at a Buddhist temple named Hwa Gye Sa.

My first day at Hwa Gye Sa I exchanged my street clothes for a set of brown haeng-ja (postulant) clothes, and proceeded to wash dishes for the 300 people who came to lunch. It was a grueling job that involved sitting on a small stool and washing everything that came to me in a tub of water. Every time any thought of regret passed through my mind, a bosalnim (Buddhist lay woman) would put some food in my mouth. It is not everyone who gets hand-fed while washing dishes.

After six months I went to haeng-ja training at Hae In Sa Temple. In my 45 years of living I never worked so hard, endured such hunger, slept in the same room with so many men or showered with so many men.

The ordination ceremony, during which the novices receive their precepts, was officiated by ten senior monks. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for my teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, and all of Korean Buddhism. I felt like I had returned home.

Inspired to continue my training, I went to Jeong Hye Sa Temple, the Zen hall above Su Deok Sa, and asked for permission to sit the spring retreat for one month. The head monk of the Zen hall told me it was full, but that if I came back on the first day of the retreat a monk might have canceled, so it could be possible to join the retreat. Fortunately there was a monk who did not show up, and I was able to join the one-month retreat.

I learned more about living in harmony with other people during that one month than I had in a lifetime of lay life. Eating, working, sitting, walking in the mountains, and sleeping together—all the monks were willing to share with me their years of experience in the meditation rooms.

By eating nutritious Korean food and walking up the mountain after every meal, I lost weight and never felt

better in my life. As I did well at that retreat I was taken to Dae Seung Sa Temple in the city of Mungyeong to ask permission to sit the three-month winter retreat. The abbot of the temple said that if I could sit the 21-day no-sleep (that is, no lying down) meditation retreat, where you sit in meditation 22 hours a day, then he would let me sit the three-month winter retreat.

There is not enough space here to talk about what finishing that retreat did for my self-confidence. At the end of the retreat the abbot said with a smile, “Dae Soeng, you are welcome here anytime.” That was a wonderful moment for me.

I went on to sit many retreats in Korean Zen halls during the next 10 years until my teacher became sick and needed my help. I took care of him for the next two and a half years until he passed away. The funeral was held at Su Deok Sa—a big ceremony where we all watched his body burn all night. It’s hard to explain the feeling when a person dies who has unconditionally helped you—a truly great bodhisattva like Zen Master Seung Sahn.

I returned to Seoul and stayed at my friend’s temple to continue practicing, after which I went back to school to study the Korean language. Two years later I was asked to go to America to help the Korean temple Won Gak Sa in upstate New York. After two years, I finished my job there and was asked to teach meditation at Bul Kwang Sa Zen Center in Tappan, New York, where I currently reside.

We have meditation classes three times a week at Bul Kwang Sa. The classes are well attended, with a wide variety of cultural and religious backgrounds represented among the members. Our common bond is this question, “Who am I?”—the investigation into our self-nature. Jewish, Catholic, Hindu and various Protestant faiths all come together with this same question.

We sit two 40-minute periods with walking meditation, and then share our experiences after I give a short dharma talk.

There is a great thirst for Buddha’s teaching in America; my dream is to be able to lead retreats like the three-month ones they have in Korea—with modern, ecologically friendly buildings and broad multicultural acceptance.

This world now is suffering, like it has always been, from desire, greed and anger. Meditation can bring our minds to equanimity; great joy and happiness will follow and one will naturally want to share it with others.

I once asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, “What is a monk’s job?” He replied, “Only the mind that wants to help is truly enlightened.” ♦