

Crazy Zen Master

Sasha Rymar

The last full Kyol Che with Wu Bong Dae Soen Sa Nim was at Bonghwa, Boep Hwa Do Ryang, November 2012 – February 2013.

On the first day of Kyol Che, Wu Bong Dae Soen Sa Nim gave a dharma talk in which he spoke about the importance of silence.

But actually there was not so much silence, and Zen Master Wu Bong himself would often start some conversation. Besides, there was an hour-long teatime in our schedule, which was officially free for communication.

Originally during this time, Zen Master Wu Bong was supposed to give a short dharma talk, and we could ask him questions and also discuss some organizational matters. But on the second day, when asked by our head monk to give a dharma talk, Zen Master Wu Bong said, “What dharma talk? I already gave one yesterday. No, better let’s get to know each other.” And so, with Zen Master Wu Bong’s initiative, this tea break turned into the time for telling jokes and stories and having fun.

Very soon one sunim stood up to protest. He demanded silence and the cancellation of teatime. After his long speech in support of silence, Zen Master Wu Bong smiled and said, “Well, actually, when I was speaking about the importance of silence, first of all I meant inside silence.”

Then he told us a story. Once he was head dharma teacher during Kyol Che at the Providence Zen Center. The person leading this Kyol Che was very sick, so in fact he—the head dharma teacher—was the actual leader of the Kyol Che. At that time, the rule during Kyol Che was to observe complete silence—not even looking each other in the eyes. Very strict.

But at this Kyol Che there was some talking and some laughing, and Zen Master Wu Bong didn’t try to stop it.

The work period was taking place outside in the grounds of the Zen center, so people working in the Zen center office could see and hear what was going on. After some time they sent a note to Zen Master Wu Bong asking him to bring back Kyol Che discipline and stop people talking. But Zen Master Wu Bong didn’t do anything. Some time later he got a second note, but also ignored it. In the third note that came, it was said that if he didn’t change the situation, the office would complain to Zen Master Seung Sahn about it. Again, Zen Master Wu Bong didn’t react. So soon he got a note that Zen Master Seung Sahn was waiting for him in his apartment.

“This time,” Zen Master Wu Bong said, “I got a little worried. But I went and as soon as I entered Seung Sahn Sunim’s room he came out and hugged me and said, ‘Wonderful Kyol Che! Great job!’ Seung Sahn Sunim hated it,” Zen Master Wu Bong said, “when everybody was walking around, sad, looking down, never smiling. He suffered; he really didn’t like this strict style.”

I guess this last Kyol Che at Bonghwa was also very different from the regular Kyol Che in the Kwan Um school. It was very joyful, relaxed, with a lot of fun and much freedom. One sunim who was used to practicing in a more strict style came to Zen Master Wu Bong and said, “This is crazy! What kind of Kyol Che is this?”

And Zen Master Wu Bong answered him, laughing, “Yes, this is crazy! Because I’m a crazy Zen master!” ♦

Always in Front of You

Many students, colleagues and monks around the world mourn the passing of Wu Bong Dae Soen Sa Nim. This situation has occurred once before, in 1994, when Zen Master Su Bong passed away in similar circumstances while leading a retreat in Hong Kong. One student, TK Ong, wrote a letter to Zen Master Seung Sahn at that time, lamenting that he was sad about Su Bong Sunim’s passing. Zen Master Seung Sahn replied (in his exact words):

Dear TK Ong,
Thank you for your letter, how are you?
If you clear mind, always Su Bong Sunim in front of you. Don't check, don't holding your emotions. Complete put it down. Moment to moment, when you're doing something just do it. That will help your direction, your practice, & get enlightenment. OK?
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