

# Remembering Zen Master Seung Sahn

*Zen Master Hae Kwang*

*Zen Master Seung Sahn, the founding teacher of the Kwan Um School of Zen, died of heart failure at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Korea on Tuesday, November 30, 2004. He was the 78th patriarch in his line of transmission in the Chogye order of Korean Buddhism. More than 10,000 people attended his funeral in the rain at Su Dok Sa, his lineage temple.*

I remember him best bowing. For years he rose at 3 a.m. to do 500 prostrations before the regular 108 with the group at morning practice. He was a sturdy figure in his short gray bowing robe. His arms swung freely both on the descent and ascent, his forehead pressed against the mat for a precise moment before he rocked forward on his hands to rise. “Much bowing, your center becomes stronger and stronger.”

6] Once, before a retreat in Boulder, I asked him what he did when he sat. He told me he recited the Great Dharani over and over, very fast, one repetition per breath. “Then your mind is like a washing machine on spin cycle, moving very fast. All the dirty water goes out, but the center is not moving.” The Great Dharani (or Dharani of Great Compassion) is a very long mantra— about 450 syllables.

I asked him if he actually pronounced, sub-vocalized, every syllable. He said he perceived each syllable, moment to moment. He was fond of the notion that in Buddhist psychology moments of perception go by at about the same fraction-per-second rate that frames of film must be projected in order to create the illusion of motion. He liked movies, especially Westerns and other action films. Once, during a kong-an interview, he told me. “You must become a Western action hero!” He liked the movie *E.T.* because the children and the alien were so compassionate to each other, but he thought the title character fell short of being a true bodhisattva because he was so preoccupied with going home.

He himself was always on the road. By the early 1980s he had Zen centers dotting the country and several in Europe and Asia. He visited them all regularly. His energy was very strong during the 80s, perhaps due to special practices he did then. Once when he came to Kansas he stayed at our house in a downstairs guest room. That night my wife and I, in bed



*Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives*

upstairs, listened to bloodcurdling yells coming from his room. When dawn broke we went downstairs and found him in the kitchen, bags packed and ready to be driven to the airport, drinking tea and smiling. “Many demons attack last night but I drive all away.” And he explained the various Taoist yells he had used and how the feng shui of our town and the room on the side of the hill under the pine tree attracted demons and restless spirits. My wife, fearing her old teacher had lost his way, said, “Those demons are all in your mind, Soen Sa Nim.” As he opened the car door he waved his stick and shouted up to her, “Yah, you are correct, all in the mind—but you must understand this mind!”

He learned English when he came to this country in 1972 at the age of 40. At the age of 21 he received dharma transmission from the brilliant, eccentric Ko Bong Sunim, and went on to direct temples both in Korea and in Japan. Ko Bong had told him, “I am the flower, you are the bee. You must spread this teaching throughout the world.” So in 1972 he landed in Providence, Rhode Island, and began living with and teaching a group of Brown University students who had found out that



*Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives*

a Zen master was working in the local laundromat. Even though he took English classes at Harvard, his use of the language was always shaped by the directness and urgency of his Zen teaching. “What are you? You don’t know, so only go straight, don’t know, always, everywhere.” This don’t know epitomized his style, a masterful use of colloquial English to translate, in this case, the Chinese *wu shin* (no mind) and bring it to life, manifesting the concept and instilling it rather than explaining it. He taught us to breathe in “What am I?” and breathe out “don’t knoooooow.” It became for many of us, certainly for me, the Great Question. He was also telling us “Just do it!” years before Nike picked up the phrase. Also “Don’t make anything,” and “Put it all down,” and “Try, try, try, for ten thousand years, non-stop.” These were not presented as slogans but as sincere admonitions, always in the moment no matter how often repeated.



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

He was a master storyteller and delivered much of his teaching through stories, gesticulating and mugging his way his way through tall Buddhist tales and becoming in turn a wise old woman, a proud but naïve sutra master, a bewildered Manjushri, a stern Nam Cheon killing the cat. Many of these stories can be found in his books, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* and *Compass of Zen*, but of course it was his living presence that kept us enthralled. It was not just his energy. There was a dearness about him in everything he did, but especially when he spoke. Interviews with him were warm and clear, “water flowing into water,” as Barbara Rhodes (Zen Master Soeng Hyang) put it.

My first retreat with him, in 1978, was a three-day kido, a chanting retreat, at a house on the coast at Big Sur. I helped him build an altar out of scrap lumber, and he placed on it a beautiful, delicate, ornate, golden statue of Kwan Seum Bosal (Kwan Yin in Chinese). When someone asked him



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

why we were using such an elaborate statue for the retreat instead of a plain Buddha, he replied that Kwan Seum Bosal made herself beautiful to help all beings. We followed the standard retreat schedule, early morning until late evening, but instead of sitting we chanted Kwan Seum Bosal for hours on end, each of us equipped with a percussion instrument, Soen Sa Nim setting the tempo with a huge moktak. Assigned to clean his room during one of the breaks, I went in and found him not resting but listening intently to a tape recording of the previous session, moving his lips. His talks during that retreat were all about the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and the spirit of compassion as the heart of Zen practice. “When you are thinking, your mind and my mind are different. When you are not thinking, your mind and my mind are the same. That is Zen mind. The name for that is Kwan Seum Bosal, Great Love, Great Compassion, the Great Bodhisattva Way.”

He believed in chanting as the easiest form of practice and the best form of “together action.” His own chanting was like a great bell. It seemed to reverberate directly from his gut into ours. He was absolutely still when he chanted.

When he was 21 years old, disenchanted with politics and philosophy, he undertook a 100-day solo retreat in the mountains, chanting with a moktak 20 hours a day, taking cold baths at night, and eating only pine needles. At the end of the retreat he wrote this poem:

*The road at the bottom of Won Gak Mountain  
Is not the present road.*

*The man climbing with his backpack  
Is not a man of the past.*

*Tok, tok—his footsteps  
Transfix past and present.*

*Crows out of a tree,  
Caw, caw, caw.*

His diet on that retreat may have given him the diabetes he had to cope with the rest of his life. It did not slow him down; rather it was simply another vehicle for his teaching. He always spoke of his body as a rental car, and he would say that when something is ripe it will soon be rotten.

Toward the end of his life he was given the title Dae Jong Sa (Great Elder Teacher), the highest title bestowed by the Chogye order. When he was presented with the accoutrements of this position—which include a large fly whisk—he said, “This whisk is heavy.”

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adult son, who doesn't take part in the practice but nonetheless contributes greatly to the sangha simply by accepting and supporting Ja An JDPSN and the Zen center in their house.

I felt impressed by her willpower, perseverance and determination, as well as her ability to manage both the Zen center and her daily life, adding on top many more hours of nightly practice, working full time in London and travelling for teaching retreats and meetings. This is no doubt the result of authentic, strong, continuous practice.

I feel that I established a good connection within the household. We were harmonious and learned to respect each other's space.

### Conclusion

I see that my practice strengthened during my residency and that I was also a support to the sangha, albeit in the last months my energy went low and I felt tired. This residency program is very tough and a great experience, especially in London where everything is fast-paced and there is a huge mixture of people and cultures in transition. Many people don't stay long, and changes in housing, jobs and life all come fast. Add to it a full-time job and two hours commuting daily, and the challenge becomes a great opportunity to practice Zen in daily life and to try to harmonize temple and city life.

Before my residency started, it was good to meet the

teacher and experience a little of Kwan Um practice. Three weeks seems like enough time to get used to the practice and to go a bit deeper. But then, it's also nice afterward to return to having more space and time in one's life.

It would be interesting if the Zen center were in a bigger house, with a more established sangha giving greater support to one another. This would allow having several students in residence, giving more people the chance to live this extraordinary experience.

*There I was, in a cement gray tower block with a green patch of big trees down below, at night the planes flying overhead and ambulances rushing by . . . on those summer nights the moon would show up behind the clouds and the fresh gentle wind would bring all sounds, mixed up together.*

*It would still be night when morning practice started, the sunrise would gently light up the dharma room, while the morning bell would reverberate throughout the whole universe . . . the big city awakening with golden rays and foggy sounds. There I was, and I am grateful. ♦*



Pedro Dinis Correia comes from a small town in southern Portugal. At the age of 20 he lived in London for a time, where he discovered Zen practice. He returned to Portugal and practiced with a small Soto Zen group for some years. Last year, at the age of 35, he returned to London, found work as a Web designer and lived at the London Zen Centre for five and a half months.

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The last time I heard him teach was at a precepts ceremony. He told two stories at precepts ceremonies to illustrate the importance of correct direction, knowing when the precepts are open and when they are closed. First he told the story of Hae Chung, a precepts-keeping monk who would not even uproot grass in order to save his own life and was made national teacher by the emperor in recognition of his virtue. Then he told the story of Nam Cheon killing the cat, a kong-an that has opened many Zen students' minds. When he came to the part of the story where Joju puts his sandals on his head, he took the brass hand bell from the table and put it on his head. Balancing it there he looked at the sangha serenely and said, "So keep precepts, become the national teacher. Break precepts, become a great Zen mas-



*Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives*

ter. Which one do you like?" He always left us with a question. But when Su Bong Sunim, his dharma heir who died in 1994, asked him "What is the shortcut to Zen?" he answered, "Not for me." This was how he lived his life—not for himself, but for all beings. The poem on the precepts certificate reads:

*Good and evil have no self-nature.  
Holy and unholy are empty names.  
In front of the door is the land of stillness  
and light.  
Spring comes, the grass grows by itself.*

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