

Encounters with Zen Master Su Bong

Zen Master Dae Kwan

“Nice to meet you! My name is Mu Deung.”¹

“Nice to meet you! My name is Sudhamma.² I practice in Thailand, but originally I am from Hong Kong.”

This was the first time we met at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Seoul, Korea, in 1991. Later, I found out that Zen Master Su Bong was to be our guiding teacher for the three-month winter retreat at the 1,700-year-old Shin Won Sa Temple in Gye Ryong Mountain.

In a very small Zen hall deep in the mountain, there were 26 people from all over the world practicing together at that retreat. It was not easy at all. I had lived mostly alone in the Chang Mai forests of Thailand for 10 years, but now I had to share a very small room with six other women. I could not even stretch my arms because I might hit the person sleeping next to me. Not only that, we had to do everything together, and we were not allowed to go outside the temple grounds.

After a few days, I was a bit agitated with the situation. During a kong-an interview with Zen Master Su Bong, I told him about my agitation. He said, with both palms facing up, “Give me your agitation.” He signaled me to put my agitation into his palms, and then continued, “I will light an incense to burn down the agitation.” When I heard that, I burst out into laughter.

All the agitation disappeared. This was my first encounter with a great Zen Master. I met him even before I met Zen Master Seung Sahn. He helped me to understand that a Zen kong-an was not merely a legend or a story in a book. It can happen moment to moment in our daily life.

He also taught us what it means to follow the situation. When we went to China, he would follow 100 percent the Chinese way of practicing, not holding on to his own way. One time during a tea break at the retreat, the group started laughing. When he saw this, he did not say anything. He hit the floor with his hand. The sound of his hit was very loud, and all of my thinking disappeared. He would use all situa-

tions to bring you back to who you really are and not who you think you are. Our true nature has no ego, so everything we do is not about “me” or “for me.” It is so important to attain this quality of mind in this fast-changing world.

Zen Master Su Bong became the first guiding teacher of the Hong Kong Zen Center when it opened in 1992. Despite being a teacher, he did not like to be special. Instead, his character was such that he easily connected with people of all ages and backgrounds, young or old, educated or illiterate, lay or monastic. His charisma and gift of skillfully presenting Zen Master Seung Sahn’s teaching in a humorous way, yet retaining the originality

of his teacher’s style, won the hearts of many students. When an elderly Chinese nun entered the room for an interview with Zen Master Su Bong for the first time, he bowed to her. This action moved her so much that she immediately wanted to become his student. His action taught us true equality—a rare trait in Asian Buddhist communities where traditionally a monk will never bow to a nun.

On July 17, 1994, Zen Master Su Bong gave his last kong-an interview to a 14-year-old girl at the Hong Kong Zen Center. He asked her, “How do you perceive the sound of the world?” After she answered, he indicated that she was correct and

then entered nirvana while sitting up in his full dharma robe and kasa. His bodily age was 51 and his monastic age was 11.

Zen Master Seung Sahn said, “Su Bong Soen Sa is giving us the teaching: coming and going, no hindrance.”

KATZ! Thank you for your teaching, Zen Master Su Bong. Where is Zen Master Su Bong now? Where did he go? If you find that, you are walking hand in hand with him. ♦



Photo: Su Bong Zen Monastery Archives

Notes

1. Zen Master Su Bong’s name before transmission.
2. Zen Master Dae Kwan’s ordination name in Pali.