

Because You're Suffering, I'm Suffering: The Meaning of Sangha

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Good evening. I'm Manu. I have been practicing here for a little bit more than two years. Before that, I practiced in a Japanese Zen tradition, in France first, and later in New York.

For a long time, I didn't understand, while practicing, what the sangha meant; and this is what I want to talk about today. At first I thought I could practice only at home, without going to a Zen center. I read a lot of books about meditation. All those books were saying that you can't meditate alone, you can't practice alone, you should go practice with people at a Zen center. And they were talking about the three jewels: Buddha; Dharma, which is the teaching; and Sangha, which is the community of the persons you practice with. The books talked about taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, and in the Sangha. I understood taking refuge in the Buddha. I understood taking refuge in the Dharma. But I was kind of stubborn about the Sangha, I didn't understand why it was as important as the two others.

And one day I arrived here, at the Chogye Interna-

tional Zen Center of New York. I remember that during my first interview with Ken Kessel JDPSN, he told me, "After thinking, we are all different. But *before* thinking, your mind and my mind are the same. Before thinking, there is no Ken, no Manu; there is no American, no French." I was . . . "Wow! There is a place where American and French are the same? I want absolutely to know that place!"

And just because I was curious of that, I started to come here regularly and I was very consistent in coming once or twice a week. I met some very nice people. But I still wasn't getting the real meaning of sangha.

And then came the day that was probably my most difficult day here in the United States. It was on January 7, 2015. It's when there was this first terrorist attack in Paris, that attack against the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. It was a satirical newspaper, but a kind of satire that doesn't really exist here. Maybe the closest thing to it would be the cartoon *South Park*: very disrespectful of everything, shocking all the time. This was the purpose

of the newspaper. *Charlie Hebdo* was mocking everybody, but especially intolerant people. So they were mocking especially the far-right political party of France, the French equivalent of America's Tea Party. And they were mocking also a lot religious fundamentalists. Of all religions. Mostly Christian fundamentalists, but other religions's too.

And so, one day, all the most famous people working at this newspaper were killed all together during a meeting by two terrorists who didn't like how they mocked fundamentalists of Islam. When it happened it was of course a real shock. Because the victims weren't simply anonymous staff from a well-known newspaper: all of them were known, they were famous in different domains even before working at *Charlie Hebdo*. And they were really a part of the French identity. They were famous in France and much appreciated. They were like the Simpsons cartoon family in the United States: very familiar, very popular, very well liked.

When it happened, it was clearly, for us, French people, our September 11. It might be hard to understand that because the two events



Photo: Barry Briggs JDPSN

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are kind of different, especially in their proportions. But the thing is that in French culture, the most sacred thing is *culture*. It's not power, or symbols of power. All we have are symbols of culture: books, newspapers, music . . . all that. And so, from a French perspective, attacking culture or something related to culture is like attacking the most sacred thing.

Attacking culture in France is like attacking the Pentagon here. It's the equivalent, in France. So, of course, as you can imagine, being so far away from my home country was very difficult for me on that day. I would have liked to be there, where it all was happening, maybe just to cry, but at least to cry with people. Because here, nobody was crying with me. Here, in the United States, people were shocked. But they were not crying. Of course it didn't have the same impact!

I remember September 11, 2001. I was in France at that time and I was very far away from imagining that I would live here one day. I was shocked on that day of September 11. But, what I felt on that day had nothing to do with how I felt, more than ten years afterward, when my best friend here in New York told me her story of September 11.

Her dad was working at the World Trade Center and she spent the whole day wondering if he was still alive. Luckily he was. But I can imagine the nightmare. And I felt terrible when she told me that story. I felt terrible because of what she was telling me, but also because I realized that I never really perceived before that suffering aspect of the event. For me, September 11 had been kind of abstract still, like something in history books.

So I understand that people were not crying with me here after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. But the most difficult came later, a few days afterward. What happened then was that some voices started to arise, some intellectuals' voices started to spread the idea that *Charlie Hebdo* had been delivering hate speech. This was very shocking to me! Because from my perspective, from my French perspective, it wasn't only a wrong vision, it was the contrary to what *Charlie Hebdo* meant to me. Indeed, I had always seen this newspaper as the friend of those who were fighting against racism, against discrimination, against homophobia, and so on.

But all that made me understand more than ever before that if there is one thing that has difficulties in crossing borders, it's humor. Definitely. I don't know where humor is situated on the path of thinking. But if there is before thinking, and after thinking, humor might be very far away, after thinking, because what is humorous can differ so much from one person to the next. I understand now that something can be totally normal and obviously considered as fine and humorous in one culture, while in another culture it can be very shocking. And I know that well because, as a non-American person, there are things here that are totally

normal but that I still find shocking, even after five years living here.

But so, on the moment when *Charlie Hebdo* was accused of delivering hate speech, I was totally mad. The timing was terrible because it was only two days after the tragedy happened. So we were still mourning, we were still in shock, we were still in disbelief.

So I decided that I had the mission to convince every single American that "No, *Charlie Hebdo* wasn't hate speech." So, I became totally mad. Totally crazy. On social media, I was killing myself commenting on all the articles that painted the newspaper in a way I didn't like. I was really everywhere, on all the newspapers, commenting, commenting, saying, "No, you don't understand!" "You can't understand because you're not French!" "This is the truth . . ." and so on. I was totally stuck with my opinion, and I wasn't able to let go. At all. I was becoming crazy! And I saw online that I wasn't the only one: there were other French doing the same.

It was a very difficult situation. In addition to the pain, to the suffering, I was seeing myself in the strange position of defending something that was seen here as hate speech. It was very difficult. But luckily I had an idea. You know, if you are on the KUSZ mailing list, sometimes people make a request for Kwan Seum Bosal chanting, the chant of compassion, when they are suffering or when someone they know is suffering. I was feeling so bad that I wanted to do that. I didn't know exactly how it worked. So I wrote to the person in charge of the mailing list, saying "I would like to make a Kwan Seum Bosal chanting request for all my co-citizens who are suffering after the attack. How do I do that?" And on the e-mail I even told him "because *Charlie Hebdo* was blah-blah-blah." And I was still arguing as if he could answer me: "Oh no, we can't do that for *Charlie Hebdo*!" I don't know what I was thinking, but I was still arguing. I remember very well his answer. He answered me: "OK, just write your request, but we don't need so many details. Just be simple." So I made it very simple. And I was surprised that, starting only hours after the request was sent to everybody in the mailing list, I received e-mails from all over the world from people from our sangha: "Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal . . ." And it was nothing else. No debate, no polemic. It was just: "Manu, Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal, Kwan Seum Bosal . . ."

And I started to feel good.

Then, the Saturday that followed the event, I went here for the Saturday morning practice, and I asked the Zen master if we could chant Kwan Seum Bosal here. He said yes. So we did it. When we started chanting, for me it was a really precious moment. I was finally doing something for *Charlie Hebdo*, here, with the people I know here! And I wanted to chant with all my heart.

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provenance of the text.

Which brings us, finally, to the translation. I wish I liked it. I wish I could recommend it. Unfortunately, despite the truly heroic scholarship in which it is embedded, I cannot. Rather than choosing one version to translate, Jorgensen wants us to see all versions at once, so the text bristles with typographical conventions meant to help us distinguish between the different versions (which are then further spelled out in the notes). He uses language that, while philosophically precise, is used only by specialists (for example, “percepts” for the mental concepts created by the process of perception, which he ambiguously glosses as “objects of perception”). And, unfortunately, his translation does not flow gracefully. I will give one example comparing his translation with the Shambhala version.

Here is the Boep Joeng–Hyon Gak translation of the base text of their 9th section:

In all of the sutras expounded by the Buddha, he first draws distinctions between various kinds of Dharmas, and then only later explains the principles of emptiness. The Zen meditation tradition handed down from the Patriarchs teaches, however, that when all traces of thinking are cut off, the principle of emptiness appears clearly, of itself, as the very origin of mind.

Here is Jorgensen’s base text of the corresponding section 18:

However, while the sutras preached by the buddhas first discriminate between the dharmas and later the [buddhas] preach the ultimate emptiness [of the dharmas], if the sentences [of the hwadu] shown by the patriarchal teachers eliminate the

traces [of discriminative forms of teaching] in the ground of intention, they will reveal the principle in the source of the mind.

Jorgensen inserts three footnotes for his single sentence, directing us to eight precursor texts. The Shambhala version has no footnotes for this section. More substantively, Jorgensen’s version does not separate the Kyo and Sôn traditions, as the Boep Joeng–Hyon Gak version does, but allows for coexistence; and he says that it is Sôn practice that cuts through to reveal the origin or source of mind, not, as Boep Joeng–Hyon Gak do, Sôn teaching. This seems closer to two of So Sahn’s overarching themes: reconciling Kyo and Sôn even as he finds the latter superior; and emphasizing the importance of practice. That said, Jorgensen’s translation, unlike Hyon Gak Sunim’s, can only be read laboriously.

So I conclude this review with ambivalence. I am sincerely grateful to John Jorgensen for his deep immersion in the text and its origins, and for his clear exposition of So Sahn’s life, context, and thought in the introduction. This book is an invaluable resource. But it is a book for scholars, not a book everyone should have in their home library. I am deeply grateful to Hyon Gak Sunim for giving us a graceful and accessible translation of a contemporary Korean version of this text. But his version lacks scholarly context and, as a translation of a translation, is necessarily distant from the original. What is needed is a version of So Sahn’s seminal work that draws on Jorgensen’s immense scholarship without such bristling detail, and provides a graceful translation close to So Sahn’s 16th-century text. Given the daunting nature of the task—requiring familiarity with 16th-century Korean usage of Chinese, immersion in Buddhist practice and philosophy, access to primary materials, and financial support during the necessarily lengthy process—I’m not holding my breath. ♦

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But right when we started chanting, I broke into tears suddenly because it was so beautiful! There were a lot of people there that day, and everybody was chanting, so there were probably some among them who thought that *Charlie Hebdo* wasn’t a good thing or was delivering hate speech. Probably there were also some people who barely knew about what happened, or who didn’t care a lot about it. But they were chanting, because I asked for it. And for me it was very powerful. It meant at that moment, “because you’re suffering, I’m suffering.” And it didn’t matter what they thought about *Charlie Hebdo*.

It really relieved me and I understood at that moment that that’s all I needed! Finally I didn’t need everybody to agree on my opinion, I didn’t need every single American to be convinced. I just needed compassion. And I got it.

On that day I really and finally took refuge in the sangha. And I understood also on that day that if for some extraor-

inary reason, one day I had to meet with the mother or the sister of one of the terrorists who had been killed by the police, and if they asked me to chant Kwan Seum Bosal for their loss, or even Ji Jang Bosal for their dead son or brother, I would do it. Without any hesitation. Because suffering is suffering. ♦



Photo: Won Hays

Manu Garcia-Guillén (Won Jin) is a French citizen. She has been living in Brooklyn for six years with her wife and their two cats. Manu is a primary school teacher at a bilingual French school and a volunteer interpreter for French-speaking asylum seekers. She is also studying Freudian psychoanalysis, and she’s preparing a thesis on the connections between Zen and psychoanalysis. Manu joined the KUSZ in 2013 and she will be taking 10 precepts in August 2016.