

# Don't-Know Army

*Excerpts from a panel on monastic life given at Providence Zen Center during the Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference on October 10, 2017*

## Well Yeah, What's the Big Deal?

*Kwan Haeng Sunim*

Before I took my novice precepts, Zen Master Seung Sahn told me, "If you have big desire, you have a big problem. If you have medium desire, you have a medium problem. If you have no desire, you have no problem." So for me, I haven't reached the no-desire part, but I'm always headed in that direction. What's interesting is that it's the same for all people: families, husbands, wives—same deal. If you have a big-desire mind, you have big problems. So practice deals with that.



*Photo: Allan Matthews*

But also now I'm a monastic. I'm living here in America; it's a lot different than when I was in Korea. In Korea, I lived in a cloistered society. For instance, I went to a temple in Pusan, and at one point I talked to a lady. When I went back to my temple, they said, "We saw you talking to that lady." "Well, yeah, what's the big deal?" That was interesting to me. That's how it is. That was the most extreme thing that happened to me like that there, but for the most part, we're kind of cloistered. When laypeople come and meet us, there's a buffer that comes between us.

And then I came here to America, where there's no buffer. In the room right across from me, there might be a layperson of either sex. That's how it is here, and I had to get used to that. I think it did take the entire ten years that Zen Master Seung Sahn had mentioned, of living with monastics, so that I could get comfortable. You gen-

erally don't just start out as a layperson in America, ordain in America and live in America as a monk, because basically all you've done is change your clothes. Though there have been one or two monks who have done that in America, it's not an easy thing to do.

It took me living in Korea around monks and nuns to learn how to behave as a monk. It's really a behavioral thing. I would look and watch how they behaved until it became natural for me to behave as they did around other people. When I came back here to America, it was OK. It wasn't such a big deal. I understood how to act around women and around people that are overly friendly, and so on. By learning it in Korea, you learn to do it with your monastic family. And you're with your whole family, monks and nuns, all the time. You all go out to a movie, for instance, and at the movie, situations may appear. But you watch how the older monks and nuns act, and you learn that way. That's how a lot of it was. When I came back here to America, much of it wasn't really conscious; I'm just used to it. I just slide into that role. But you have to love what you're doing, and I do really enjoy what I'm doing.

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Kwan Haeng Sunim met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1986 at Cambridge Zen Center. In 1997 he went to Korea and 1999 ordained as a novice monk at Jik Ji Sa Temple. In 2003 he became a full monk, or bhikkhu, at Tong Do Sa Temple. He continued to live and practice in Korea at Mu Sang Sa and Hwa Gye Sa temples until 2012, when he returned to the United States and continued practicing at Providence Zen Center, where he currently serves as the head monk.

## You Have No Right to Say These Words

*Bon Sun Sunim*

Before I became a nun, I was a laywoman who was born in an Asian country and grew up in an Asian country. So my whole life-responsibility was clear. My first priority was to help my family. This is a normal and traditional role for Asian women. After I became a nun, it changed. Now my first responsibility is taking care of the temple and supporting the community. This is the life of a nun. If you ask me what are the difficulties of being a nun, actually some people have a romantic idea about it. They think, "Oh, I'm going to quit my job and shave my head, and I'm going to live in the mountains forever."

But if you really think this way, I have to remind you: Please make sure that you never ever hate any of your dharma brothers or sisters. You know why? Because you not only work with them all day long; you're also going