

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.

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

to sleep beside them, sit beside them and eat together with them, do everything with them, every day and every night. So never hate anybody close to you if you want to choose this path. It's really not easy.

There's another point. When we start to move from our family life to our community life, another difficulty appears. I think many of us have this experience. We used to tell our parents, "I don't care, it's my life." After you become a monastic, you have no right to say these words. What you need to learn is always to be aware of the needs of the community and what the temple needs. This is the temple culture and the monastic way. This is what we need to learn after we become a nun or a monk. Not for myself, but rather what the temple needs, what the community needs. That's really difficult to do, because when the temple way challenges "my way," this I-my-me will create lots of suffering inside, and imbalance and tears. But in the end, if we can digest all this experience and all these situations, we find that this actually helps our nun's life to mature. It helps our center to become stronger and our direction to become more clear in order to do our inside and outside job and to support the whole community. Thank you.

A Malaysian nun, Bon Sun Sunim began practicing in the Kwan Um School in Singapore in 1998. In 2002 she began haengja training at Mu Sang Sa Temple. In 2003 she ordained as a nun at Su Bong Sa Zen Monastery. Since then she has practiced and continued her nun's training in Hong Kong. During all these years she also often joined Kyol Che retreats at Mu-sangsa. Currently she is the head nun at Su Bong Sa in Hong Kong.

You Are No Longer One of Ours

Bo Haeng Sunim

A monk's life is not easy. The first time I tried and did not succeed. When I was a haengja, I did not come to the ordination ceremony at which I was supposed to become



Photo: Allan Matthews

a monk in Poland. Instead, I stayed in Lithuania. Later I tried again. I had a meeting with Zen Master Seung Sahn, and he gave me permission to try again. To make the decision to become a monk is very private. I didn't know what it meant, because I'd never been a monk before. I had seen Catholic monks in Lithuania. But when I saw Buddhist monks in the market outside the monastery, I would think, "Why is this monk outside the monastery? Monks must stay in the monastery." This was because in Catholic countries we usually never see monks outside. I know a Benedictine monk. He took precepts, left his previous life and went to the monastery, and he cannot go out. Like desert monks. I really believed, "Oh my God, if I become this kind of monk, my life is over."

But I went to Korea, and in 2001 I became a monk. My teacher, Dae Bong Sunim, gave me precepts, and I got the name Bo Haeng, meaning "Wide Action." It's



Photo: Allan Matthews

not a good name for me, because I don't know how wide my action is even now. At that time, when we bowed to Zen Master Seung Sahn after the ceremony, he said very sternly, "Why become a monk? This is very important. If you become a monk for yourself, it's better not to do this. Only to help people. This direction." We were happy and felt like celebrating. But I remember he spoke strongly to us, almost like shouting. Not like congratulations, but more like a warning. I remember his eyes and his speech, deep and enduring, as if it were yesterday. Afterward, I became the housemaster, and later the director, of Hwa Gye Sa International Zen Center. Later on I became the *ipsung* (head monk) at Mu Sang Sa Temple. And I've served in many other positions. Taking on these responsibilities is part of normal monastic life.

In 2004, I returned for the first time to Lithuania. All my friends already knew my circumstances. I had stayed in touch, and called them sometimes before I took