

Practicing as a Lay Dharma-Teacher-in-Training at Mu Sang Sa Temple

Hae Seong (Moon Sook Kim)

Coming to Mu Sang Sa Temple was a coincidence, but the fact that I am still here practicing is not a coincidence at all. It is because of my dharma friends, especially the DTITs with whom I have been practicing together for the last ten years. Sometimes, when I suffer because of my karma, I think to myself, “Am I crazy doing this practice?” and then I see my dharma friends doing the same things and realize, “Hey, there’s another one just like me, still trying!” And I get comfort in that. When my mother was about to pass away, it was a very difficult time for me. That time, being with my dharma friends and practicing through it together helped a lot. When Zen Master Dae Jin became ill, we wanted to do some practice to help him, so we began a practice group together and shared on Kakaotalk (a smartphone messaging app popular in Korea), and to this day, we continue to share our practice sessions daily. Every up and down of my practice till today has been thanks to the support of my dharma friends.

20] It’s been almost ten years since I first joined the Monday meditation class at Mu Sang Sa. Wow, ten years! In the beginning, I thought, “Let’s try it for ten years, then probably something will appear!” Yes, that enlightenment thing. Now, I no longer attach to enlightenment. What’s more important is practicing don’t-know. Still there is something . . . ahh, don’t check! I met my dharma friends first at the Monday meditation class. At that time, there were a few people in the group who had strong opinions about what is Zen and their own practice. They wouldn’t accept some of what the teachers were teaching us, and the feeling in the group was not cohesive. But as time passed, new students came as old ones left, and for those of us who stayed, the group dynamics changed for the better.

One day in winter, we were waiting for the teacher to arrive to give the dharma talk in the main Buddha hall. It was during winter Kyol Che, so the Monday meditation class was being held in the main Buddha hall instead of the Zen hall. The heater was not working that day and we were quite cold, wearing our gray robes, waiting for Zen Master Dae Bong. Then he finally came, and once he sat down, he looked at us and said, “Wow, gray army!” We all laughed. My dharma friends looked like an army that day to me, too—a real solid team!

In 2014, five of my dharma friends received the ten precepts. At Mu Sang Sa, taking ten precepts is not a common thing, so five lay people taking ten precepts was considered quite unusual. Traditionally in Korea, only monks and nuns can teach the dharma. For ordinary laypeople, rather than practicing, it is common to be faith-based Buddhists, making prayers or reading sutras. Of course, now more people

are interested in meditation, but still, finding a lay teacher is unusual in Korean Buddhist society. Giving or taking ten precepts for laypeople is not something taken lightly. My dharma friends looked half pleased but also half worried with a shadow of burden. They began having DTIT training classes, and at times I was envious that I could not join them. We had all started about the same time in the Monday meditation classes, and had been practicing for about the same number of years, so I was forlorn that I was not included in the DTIT group. At the same time, I knew quite well, too, that I wasn’t ready for the ten precepts yet.

I was able to take the ten precepts one year later and began joining the classes. We learned from the *Compass of Zen*, trained in how to use the moktak, hit the chukpi, carry the walking stick and do the head dharma teacher’s job of leading practice. We learned how to share our own experiences and also how to skillfully answer various questions about practice. Last year, we went to Jeju Island for a trip with the teachers, and we learned how teachers respond to different situations, which was very precious. We did lots of together action. We prepare Buddha’s Birthday events together at Mu Sang Sa every year; we organize Monday and Sunday meditation classes; and we also lead practice at the Daejeon Zen Group. Yes! We do many things together.

Thanks to so much together action, I really trust my dharma friends. While we practice, sometimes we face some unexpected karma that hits us in the face. At those times it can be truly difficult, and at times, I want to quit practicing altogether. Of course, I then consult a teacher, and they say, “Yeah, better quit. More suffering necessary!” Dumbfounded and shocked, I turn around and complain behind the teacher’s back, only to continue to practice again. This has happened a few times so far, so now I don’t bother asking teachers the same questions anymore. Instead, I end up doing something stupid in front of my dharma friends, but they accept me no matter what. They recognize, “Oh, she’s having a rough time. She’ll get over it and come back to normal.” This way, they tolerate my difficult behavior without judgment, wishing me to come back to my senses. That has been a tremendous help for my continuing this practice. So, dear dharma friends, thank you! My being here is all because of you! And dear teachers, just wait—we are practicing very hard to hit you soon! ♦

Moon Sook Kim (dharma name: Hae Seong) started practicing at Mu Sang Sa in 2009. She took five precepts in 2011, and in 2015 she took ten precepts to become a dharma-teacher-in-training. She currently practices at Mu Sang Sa and the Kwan Um Daejeon Zen Group in Korea. A mother of two, Hae Seong also volunteers her time regularly to translate dharma talks at Mu Sang Sa.