

India several times to find a teacher. There I met some teachers. The first time I took dust from the feet of a teacher and put it on my forehead—as was the custom in India—I was overwhelmed with joy. It was the very first time I deliberately put down my ego and pride. It was only then that I noticed that my ego and pride could have been a burden for me for long time.

After some years of traveling and searching for the one good teacher, I was staying for a while in a Tibetan monastery. While there, by chance I came across one of Zen Master Seung Sahn's books: *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. Since Zen Master Seung Sahn was of the same Korean origin as myself, and the book gave me the impression that he was a strong and clear teacher, I yearned to meet him soon. Very soon after, I became acquainted with practice in the Kwan Um School of Zen. Out of the blue, Zen Master Wu Bong, whom I met only briefly during a retreat, called me and Roland from America and asked if we could organize a retreat in Berlin with Zen Master Seung Sahn. Then Zen Master Seung Sahn actually came to Berlin, as if he'd heard me calling out to him.

To be honest, my first encounter with Zen Master Seung Sahn did not convince me of much. My idea that the right teacher will immediately cast a spell on me did not come true. So I kept checking him, his teaching, his speech and his actions for years. In that case, my checking meant to compare the teacher with my idea of perfection. Disillusioned that I could ever learn from him the one truth, I asked him one day if he could recommend a book that would show me the truth, or if he knew where I could go to learn it. Zen Master Seung Sahn only shook his head while making a clicking sound with his tongue: an obvious sign of disapproval. His reaction left me feeling ashamed. From that point on my focus shifted slowly into silent meditation in order to look for the truth in my mind, rather than from outside.

Several times during retreats, when I was suffering miserably from pain caused by my mind and body, Zen Master Seung Sahn told me, "You look good!" I remember that after hearing it each time, I would run into the bathroom to check what he possibly could have seen in me except the apparent tiredness and mental pain. Was there anything that is not affected by any kind of circumstances and stays clear all the time? If he could see it even though I could not, still there was hope and solace for me that I would see it by myself one time.

One day, upon seeing Roland and me and knowing that we had just returned from our trip to India, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked us, "How was India?" Before I could finish the sentence "There is so much suffering in . . ." he strongly said "Bullshit!" and simply walked away. It was as if I had suddenly received a strong blow

on my head. I felt so hurt and upset by his saying that. My strong emotion pushed me to sit meditation intensively day and night many long hours a day for several months. Zen Master Seung Sahn's words and actions always had a big impact on me, whether they were gentle or harsh. They worked as a compass that pushed me to one direction—don't know. My trust in his teaching was uncompromised, despite my intermittent emotions and checking.

I had many opportunities, while I stayed in Korea for seven years, to attend the dharma talks given by Zen Master Seung Sahn in the dharma room at Hwa Gye Sa Temple every morning at 8. His health was in bad shape then. It took a long time for him to walk up all the stairs to the dharma room in the top floor of the building. And once he got there it took a long time until his breath calmed down and his sweat dried. Seeing the Zen master gasping for breath always made me sad and worried about him. I was often close to tears. Regardless of his condition and situation, he gave himself completely to teach us, nonstop. My gratitude to my teacher now leads to my commitment to follow his footsteps.

My dearest memory of my teacher is also the sweetest one. It must have been my last interaction with him, since I left Korea soon afterward.

On one sunny day on the temple grounds of Hwa Gye Sa I saw Zen Master Seung Sahn in the distance, standing in front of the big dharma hall. At that time he did not speak much due to his health. He beckoned me to him, and I almost ran there. He took out of his monk's jacket a small candy and gave it to me with a big smile, like a father would to a small child. I thanked him silently with a deep bow. The candy was very sweet, and this sweetness has firmly merged with the memory of my teacher.

Letting Go of the Coin

Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN

We may like or dislike the experience of being a student, but actually this doesn't matter. During my very first retreat at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Korea, we had a formal breakfast together with all the monastics of the temple, and newcomers were instructed to come forward on the first day and ask the monastery seniors "Please teach me." This can be a bit confusing for a person who was conditioned in the West. But putting the cultural differences aside, in fact "Please teach me" means *being a student*.

In the West and in the East too we really like to choose. We want to choose what we want to learn and from whom we want to be taught and, most important, when or when not. Coming home from a stressful working day, do we prefer to choose a glass of wine or switch



Photo: Courtesy of Namhee Chon

on the TV instead of what's already here in this very moment? Do we not want to stop and look at what's right there? Do we prefer to cover it up with whatever is at hand, wanting neither a teacher nor a student to appear? At these moments there is "Please don't teach me."

However, when we meet with each other the idea of student and teacher can get in the way. Often we experience this with our relationships: When arguing with our wife, husband or friends about something, what is it that's in the way? Is there an idea of how a person should be or has always been? Or an idea of how my marriage or my relationship should be or shouldn't be? A look or a facial expression can be enough. How is it with my student-teacher relationship? All of a sudden, we don't see each other directly anymore—we only see an idea. At that moment there is no *Please*, no *teach*;

there is only *me*. Can that be seen?

On that retreat in Korea there was a strong desire to learn and to find out, ideally as fast as possible. When we're trying really hard to understand something, usually two results appear as a consequence: Most of the time, we don't understand it. We try with our whole being but we just don't get it. That triggers something inside, and with it comes something like "I'm worthless" or "I'm never going to get it."

The other result is that we finally do understand it and that triggers something inside too: "I've done that really well" or "That was not bad."

Usually we prefer the second result. However, aren't both of them just two sides of one coin? So often we are just flipping this coin from one side to the other side, in the illusion that this is progress. We love to run after these coins or try to make them go away. Can we stop both trying to accumulate them and trying to reduce them? Then what is it that remains?

Back then at Hwa Gye Sa I had a work assignment to brush the courtyard with a broom in a curved shape so it would make a particular pattern. At that time I really wanted to get teaching from Zen Master Seung Sahn, who was always coming in the morning to comment on one of the kong-ans and then answer students' questions. I challenged myself to find a question that would combine all my questions. So finally while working with the broom I thought I had found the question that would sum it all up for me. On the next morning after commenting on one of the kong-ans, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked if there were any questions. I asked him, "Why do you believe in Buddhism?" He said, "Me, I don't believe in Buddhism. But I ask you, 'Who are you?'" I answered "I don't know." He said "Only keep don't know. That is Buddhism."

When a question is answered—or in this case, for me it felt more like it was swept away—what happens? Are we back in the habit of flipping the coin from one side to the next? Or can it be left aside without touching it?

After the weeklong retreat my brother and I talked about the experience of sitting a retreat for the first time and how it felt. When you leave the retreat you see, hear, taste, smell and feel differently. I remember saying to him that for me indeed it was a strong experience, but I don't know if I really want it. Why is that? Is there fear of letting go of the coin? What are we afraid of losing?

We say the true teacher is always in front of us. That actually means the true student is always inside. These two are never separate. Where is the true student right now in this very moment? Where is it? No matter how much we try to run away from it or cover it up, eventually it will bubble up again. Being confronted with a situation that hits us, suddenly—it happens real fast—here it is. Helping us to look freshly, to find out, to open, to learn, to be alive.

Hope we all only keep true student, finding the true teacher from moment to moment and help this world. ♦