

*‘When big, it swallows the universe.
When small, it passes the eye of a needle.’*

Interview with Ji Am Gosanim at Mu Sang Sa Temple, September 24, 2017

Editor’s Note: Ji Am Gosanim lived with Zen Master Seung Sahn during the time DSSN stayed in Japan, from 1967 to 1972, when DSSN moved to the United States. (Zen Master Seung Sahn is also referred to as DSSN, which stands for “Dae Soen Sa Nim,” meaning “Great Zen Master.” “Gosanim” is an honorific title for a Buddhist layman, the female equivalent being “bosanim.”) Recently Ji Am Gosanim offered a statue of Zen Master Seung Sahn to Mu Sang Sa Temple.

Question: When did you return to Korea from Japan?

Ji Am Gosanim: I returned in the 1990s. I went to Japan in the 1960s, so I lived there for about 30 years.

Q: We would like to hear your story.

JAGSN: I can give you the account of how Zen Master Seung Sahn (DSSN) ended up going to Japan, how he lived there, and what kind of activities he did until he left for the United States. He went to Japan sometime between 1967 and 1968. Before that the most important event was the normalization of the diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan in 1965. It took almost 11 years to achieve normalization of diplomatic relations. The reparations for 36 years of occupation were about \$3.6 billion (in 1965 dollars). But Japan was uncooperative and the talks did not proceed well. At that time the Korean and Japanese governments were arguing. In this context, what DSSN did was an important event. There is no record of it in Korean history, but DSSN did a great thing. During the 36 years of Japanese occupation, hundreds of thousands of people were killed. In Seoul about 4,000 remains of Japanese occupiers were found. DSSN gathered them in the dormitory of Hwa Gye Sa Temple and wrote a letter about it to the Japanese prime minister. A delegation came from Japan to collect the remains. At that time DSSN was still using his original dharma name, Haeng Won, and Japanese newspapers reported about him and this event. They were very thankful to this

Korean monk. The Japanese political right wing had been saying that Japan had built many railroads and roads in Korea and thus should not pay any war reparations. But after this event, a \$700,000 payment arrived. Consider that at the time, the gross Japanese export was at around \$2 million, so this was a lot of money. But back home, DSSN did not talk about it. He was really wise. Even at Hwa Gye Sa people didn’t know. He then went to Japan

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Photo: Won Hye Sunim

to make a Chogye-order Zen center, but he had no money and no personal connections.

Q: He was a monk, so people didn't make this connection with politics. Why did you go to Japan in the 1960s? People were returning to Korea at that time.

JAGSN: I was born in Japan. When I was three years old, I returned to Korea. I was living in a temple until I was 19. I was a disciple of Ko Am Sunim originally. I wanted to study Japanese Buddhism, so in 1962 I smuggled myself to Japan on a ship. I met DSSN around 1967 in Osaka. My older dharma brother was in Osaka, so when I went to visit him at home, DSSN was there. I learned he had made a temple in Tokyo, so I got the address and followed him. From the very beginning I decided I had to study under this man. Since then I worked under DSSN as his cook, driver, secretary and so on, as well as the temple secretary. In 1972 he went to the United States, after having spent about four years in Japan. Some in the Japanese Buddhist world and political world tried to help DSSN. One day we went with our guests to a restaurant. The owner recognized DSSN because he had seen his picture in the newspaper. So he came and bowed to him. At that time I realized there were many things I did not know about DSSN, and I was impressed by his achievements.

In 1969, a conference of Buddhist leaders was held. Baek Seong (Bai Sheng) Sunim (chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association) came from Taiwan. The leaders of five Japanese schools came together and held a friendship conference. Tan Ho Sunim, Pop Soeng Sunim and others came from Korea.

Q: The conference was held at DSSN's temple?

JAGSN: Yes. DSSN decided the dates and sent out invitations. Just to give you an idea of how influential the five schools were, the Rinzai, Soto, Obaku, Jodo and Shin schools each had more than 8 to 10 thousand branch temples in Japan. And unlike Korea, they do not include shamanistic shrines in those numbers. In Japan the branch temples would often have 500 or even 1,000 *pyeong* [1,650–3,300 square meters, or 17,750–35,500 square feet] in the city centers, not in the mountains. So the leader of a school has quite some authority.

Q: The place must have been too small for such an event.

JAGSN: Yes, it was so small that the disciples could not come in. Only the patriarchs came in.

Q: What about the program?

JAGSN: They just talked. We didn't have money for anything fancy, but it was very friendly. Just the fact that DSSN contacted these people and they came shows how much they accepted him. Remember, he was a young monk in his forties, and they were patriarchs in their sixties and seventies. When the patriarchs moved around, they came in fancy foreign cars. They even had bodyguards. So when a patriarch of a Japanese school moved,

it was quite a sight, like when a prime minister moves in Korea. One couldn't even get close to their cars.

So only the patriarchs entered the Buddha hall. They recognized Tan Ho Sunim even though he was not that well known. I saw him for the first time. He lived on Odaesan Mountain in Korea. He was wearing sunglasses and, although he was small, he was robust. He was a scholar of Chinese and had memorized all the Tripitaka [the Buddhist canon].

Q: The Japanese patriarchs knew Tan Ho Sunim?

JAGSN: Well, no, but here they greeted each other. He wrote a commemorative calligraphy. I prepared the ink and paper for him. They asked him to explain what he wrote. So he said: "When big, it swallows the universe. When small, it passes the eye of a needle." When translated, the patriarchs all put their palms together and said, "We have heard a great dharma talk." I don't know if these patriarchs were enlightened, but seeing their admiration, I thought they needed to practice more. The calligraphy was packed in a cypress box and they received it as a commemorative present. They treated it as a treasure. Even if you take it out in a thousand years, it will be the same. It is the best way to keep such a thing. They would wear gloves when touching it, holding their breaths and wearing masks when looking at it. So Tan Ho Sunim gave a historical treasure. He received a promise of help for spreading Korean Buddhism.

Q: What did they talk about? Monks came even from Taiwan. What were the topics?

JAGSN: It was the first meeting of Buddhist leaders from Korea, Japan and Taiwan, so the point was to make friends. The purpose was to put efforts together to keep the buddhadharma for future generations.

Q: No one came from mainland China, right?

JAGSN: At that time they could not come because of the Communist regime. Bai Sheng Sunim was a bit unconventional. In Taiwan he was regarded as a living Buddha, so in Tokyo he would stay in the best hotel. And wherever he went, his disciples would come a day before and take care of him. Our temple was very poor. The boiler broke down, so there was no warm water. It was winter, but in Japan there is a thing called *kotatsu*. It is a table with a heater underneath, so you can at least keep your feet warm. The Japanese would spread a blanket and cover their legs. It was a tatami (straw mat) room, so it was not cold. At the washbasin, we would heat up the water, seat Bai Sheng Sunim in a chair and wash his feet. We were sorry he could not even take a shower. But he still said he was thankful.

Q: How old was he?

JAGSN: Quite old, around 70. We made a connection with him by washing his feet. He smiled, as if he were thinking, "What a temple!"

Q: He was such a figure in Taiwan. He did not stay in a hotel?

JAGSN: They must have had a good connection with DSSN. So even in uncomfortable conditions, he said “I’ll sleep here today to take part in the conference tomorrow.”

Q: Were there any Korean lay practitioners or supporters?

JAGSN: During the war there were no Korean temples, so how could there be any lay supporters? There were lay supporters from Japanese temples. DSSN attracted lay supporters, but they would not bring monetary donations, as in Korea. There were no chanting ceremonies, no Kwan Um school, no system. So no money.

Q: How did you manage financially?

JAGSN: It was hard. Byeok Am Sunim was the chairman of the board of directors at Dongguk University. So I am not sure, but I suspect that he helped a lot. He came often.

Q: You were in charge of the finances, right?

JAGSN: Yes, I was in charge of the housekeeping. I would get a few thousand yen and go to the market or pay the electricity bill, errands like that.

Q: DSSN did not give regular dharma talks at that time, did he?

JAGSN: No he did not, he could not.

Q: So what kind of activities did he do?

JAGSN: He was out a lot, meeting Japanese leaders, members of Parliament, taking part in events. He attended many Japanese Buddhist assemblies, he lectured a lot.

Q: He spoke Japanese well, right?

JAGSN: In the beginning so-so, but later he spoke it well.

Q: His high school was . . . ?

JAGSN: He graduated from Pyongyang Industrial High School.

Q: That was a well-known high school at that time, right?

JAGSN: He graduated from the department of electrical engineering. During the Pacific War (World War II) he would make shortwave radios and pass information about the Japanese army’s situation to the independence fighters. Then he got caught. The police gave him a hard time. He was imprisoned for about a year. He was a young student, so probably in the end they were lenient. Otherwise he would have been executed as an independence fighter. [*Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* mentions this incident: he narrowly escaped a death sentence. —Ed.]

Q: Did he have diabetes already at that time?

JAGSN: Yes, he would inject insulin at every offering [meal]. He was also taking medicine. In this respect I couldn’t help him much. I had my own body issues. We lived so poor, I had problems with my stomach and got motion sickness whenever I rode the bus or subway.

Q: So you lived alone, with no family.

JAGSN: Yes, I went alone to Japan in 1961 and was in Tofuku-ji Temple of the Soto school. I went wearing lay clothes. I couldn’t speak Japanese. There were Chinese

characters on the temple gate, and there was a guard. He was surprised I came from Korea. He suggested I live together with them. He told me to wait and he went inside. So I waited some twenty or thirty minutes. He came back and told me to follow him.

Q: Did you get Japanese monks’ robes?

JAGSN: No. I wore lay clothes. They offered me Japanese-style monks’ robes. There was the patriarch of the temple; he held an important position, stayed in a building as big as the Buddha hall. There was a waterfall behind.

Q: Tofuku-ji Temple has a thousand-year tradition.

JAGSN: The patriarch sat all the way in the back, he looked so small. Following the abbot and head monk, all bowed three times and sat down. He was very still. Was he looking at me or did he close his eyes? I do not know. He sat still for about ten minutes. Then he gave orders. I didn’t understand Japanese, so I didn’t know whether he accepted me or not. Then someone showed me a room and the showers and gave me clothes. They really took good care of me.

Q: How long did you spend there?

JAGSN: I lived there for about a year. I didn’t speak Japanese at that time, so one would laugh at how I ended up living in a Japanese temple. In Kyoto I got on the circle line subway and just went round and round. I had no place to go and no money. The announcement said “Tofuku-ji,” so I thought that is a temple of good fortune and got out. [*Tofuku-ji* means Temple of Eastern Good Fortune. —Ed.] When I got there I saw a big temple at the foot of a mountain. So I went to a barbershop and got my head shaved. They would not accept anyone with long hair. Tofuku-ji is a temple of the Soto school, a Zen temple. For generations they have also been appointing the abbots of their subtemples all over Japan. In Kyoto I had to attend a Buddhist university. Then I had to sit Zen at Tofuku-ji for a year. This was a part of my course to get my license.

Q: How old were you then?

JAGSN: I was 19. So I had no fear. I was young and “carried the Buddha on my back” as I went around. I didn’t know anything, didn’t speak the language, but still went there. We did eight hours of zazen a day, two hours at a time, four times a day. After about two months I could speak a bit of Japanese. I saw they graduated from Buddhist universities and sat zazen. During free time they would call their wives. They were this kind of monk, they all seemed like they were married. They had to keep the family line, being the oldest son of a monk who has a temple, so in order to get the license to be an abbot, some of them were sitting zazen against their will. My room was next to the head monk’s room, and he liked me. I used to attend a village school, so I knew Chinese characters a bit. He looked at my handwriting with admiration. I had studied the *Myungshim bogam* [*Mingxin baojian*: a collection of Chinese classics. —Ed.] and memorized about

two thousand Chinese characters before going to Japan [Japanese uses Chinese characters along with two phonetic alphabets.] So comparatively I knew enough Chinese characters. Later I could speak Japanese.

When the head monk graduated and went home, he suggested I go with him. At home he had a beautiful temple with no successor. He was a bit older and was looking for a successor. He said he would recommend me to a university in Kyoto and send me there and arrange for a marriage and Japanese citizenship. My ears perked up. But then I thought about Ko Am Sunim's intentions. I came to practice, not to become a Japanese person. So I refused. He was upset, saying it was a waste. So there was this episode. Then later I got to meet Seung Sahn Sunim.

Q: How was it when Seung Sahn Sunim left?

JAGSN: He said he decided to spread the buddhadharma in America. To me he said I should continue my practice in Japan. Later I cried. It was as sad as losing my parents.

Q: Why didn't you go together?

JAGSN: I wrote a letter to Ko Am Sunim, asking whether I could study with Seung Sahn Sunim. He said I should practice with Haeng Won Sunim (Haeng Won was Seung Sahn Sunim's original ordination name.) and listen well to his teaching. I was so glad I wept when I received that letter. I wasn't sure he would let me study with another teacher.

Q: What was the impetus for his going to the United States?

JAGSN: In Japan he lived OK, he was quite busy.

Q: I heard there was a Korean businessman who invited him to the States?

JAGSN: I don't know whether anyone contacted him. He didn't just suddenly decide to go; it was telepathy. He got on the plane and next to him sat a Korean professor, who became his disciple by the time the plane touched down.

Q: I also heard lay people supported him in running a meditation hall in Japan?

JAGSN: As far as I know, there were about three. One in Kyoto and two in Tokyo, who would support him financially. When we had no food, he would make some phone calls and someone would wait at the market and give us a ride, maybe that much.

Q: In those days even Japanese people had a hard time, right?

JAGSN: The economy was developing remarkably. When I arrived in 1961, the conditions were difficult, but in a few years, they developed a lot. When I first went to Osaka, I went around on a bicycle and there were no cars or even traffic lights. Then in a few years the traffic lights appeared, and suddenly things were changing with the rapid economic growth.

Q: Who took over the Korean temple in Japan?

JAGSN: There was a monk who lived with us for a year or two. But he said he wouldn't take over. His name was

Myo Gak Sunim; he was not a scholar but a sincere monk. There was a Rinzai monk who was helping us. He was a director of a hospital and a kind man. There were 200 Korean nurses working at his hospital. Myo Gak Sunim worked at the psychiatric ward as a guard. Had he just stayed in the temple he would have had no money. He also didn't speak Japanese, so where could he work? He spent a few years there. When Seung Sahn Sunim decided to go to the States, he called Myo Gak Sunim to be the abbot and take over. He had long hair, so rather than a Chogyo mission, it became a usual Japanese-style temple.

Q: But you still lived together?

JAGSN: I left. I never cared about money. I was even afraid of receiving monetary donations, so I deliberately worked to make money and earn my living. I put a Buddha statue in my place, but there were no supporters who would come and contribute; I only did chanting. Oddly enough, all I needed to eat somehow appeared. About six years ago I went to Tokyo to our temple. It looked the same as it had 40 years ago. There was no trace of any change.

Q: Wouldn't such an old house get torn down in a place like Tokyo?

JAGSN: It was not in such a bad shape. It is in an alleyway, but no one had touched it since I left. I knocked on the door, but no one appeared. They answered the phone, though. I was hoping to lay some old memories to rest, so I went there. But the monk said he didn't know me. I felt like he was not one of our people. The house had never been repaired, not even once. [A recent phone call revealed the current caretaker monk hasn't even heard of Seung Sahn Sunim. This is not so uncommon among Korean monks.]

Q: What was he doing all those 40 years?

JAGSN: How could I know? I asked about Song Dam Sunim's visits to Japan. He started talking about his child and was not interested in talking to me. I think he became a layperson. The temple had about 70 *pyeong* [231 square meters, or 2,486 square feet]. When I was there it had a debt of about ¥10 million [about US \$91,000]. Myo Gak Sunim said he paid it off. It must have been hard. He died way too soon, and he worked too hard.

Q: At that time ¥10 million was a lot of money.

JAGSN: Right. A lot of money. There was no money, so the temple started with a debt. Just the building was about ¥20 million [about US \$181,000].

Q: Where did all that money come from?

JAGSN: I don't know. When I came there was already a Buddha statue. Seung Sahn Sunim found a room in an apartment house and just put up a sign saying it was a temple. When I met him, he already had it. He said I could come. And when I did he was glad. He had no cook or driver, and he didn't know the place. It seemed he'd been waiting for me.

Q: Did he have all three meals in the temple?

JAGSN: He would have breakfast and leave.

Q: How did you do morning practice?

JAGSN: We did chanting. For breakfast we would usually have rice, soup and kimchi. We lived a poor life.

Q: There was a Korean temple in Tokyo and in Osaka?

JAGSN: The temple in Osaka did not belong to us. It was run by a disciple of Ko Am Sunim. It was originally set up by the Marine Corps. There was not much practice, and no sitting meditation. The monk was smart and knew how to talk well; I can't tell how deep he was though. He didn't know that much about sutras, but was very sincere.

Q: At that time there were not so many Korean temples around, right?

JAGSN: No, there were not. None in Tokyo and only the above-mentioned one in Osaka. So I also heard about that temple through word of mouth, looked for it and met DSSN. If it were not for that temple I would not have met him.

Q: But didn't monks who studied there during the Japanese occupation [1910–1945] settle down in Japan?

JAGSN: Dr. So Kyong Ju joined the Rinzaï school, but apart from him I do not know anyone who would study. It was hard enough to survive and have enough to eat, so who could think of studying at a university?

Q: When did you return to Korea?

JAGSN: In the 1990s. When I came I had no hometown, so it was hard. Now I live in an old house, I have some skills in my hands so I repaired it alone. Last month I collapsed from malnutrition. I was sweating a lot and not eating enough. I went to the hospital and got an injection, so now I am OK.

Q: Which nationality do you hold?

JAGSN: Here [Korea]. I am originally Korean.

Q: Please come to Mu Sang Sa. You live in Daejeon, right?

JAGSN: Yes, in eastern Daejeon. I have no money, so I have to earn a bit to eat and live. I live in a one-room apartment, and I do some repairs to earn money. The room is so-so. I bought an old room and renovated it. The rent is high. I put together two one-room apartments. One is the Buddha hall; that is how I live.

Q: You live an interesting life in spite of your age.

JAGSN: I am 75 now. In the next four to five years my energy will decrease. I may have to take measures, maybe sell something. One should leave enough money for one's funeral and cremation, so as not to burden others. So I have no worries. It seems I have lived a long life. In fact I couldn't take care of DSSN for more than about three years, but in my life that time was real. The rest was an imitation. I learned so much from him. We all know, there is no one in the world who would enlighten their disciples like DSSN did. Even with one word he would hit the mind and enlighten. There is no one like him. There are big monks now. The more I

listen, the more delusions appear.

It is no easy task to enlighten your disciples. Back when I was in Pusan, DSSN would call me up: "Tomorrow I will arrive in Yusong." I knew already that was a big deal so I would arrive in advance during the night. He was traveling around, looking for a site for a temple. We would sit over there in the tofu restaurant and he would give all kinds of talks. He also talked about the great monk Mu Hak and Guk-sa Bong [Peak of the National Teacher, above Mu Sang Sa Temple].

Yi Seonggye [posthumous name Taejo, 1335–1408, the first king of the Confucian Choseon Dynasty, which lasted from 1392 to 1897] came to Mu Hak Sunim and named this peak Guk-sa Bong. Yi Seonggye wanted to name the peak right away, but Mu Hak Sunim said he must wait about 500 years. Then if someone built a temple here, many great people of the Way would appear, about 700. So we were eating tofu and he would talk like this. Could it be that Mu Hak Sunim came again as Seung Sahn Sunim? It is a great joke, because the time mentioned in the prophecy matches.

Q: When DSSN was in Japan, did he give dharma talks or organize retreats?

JAGSN: He did give dharma talks for several months, on the Tripitaka, the Lotus Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, and the Avatamsaka Sutra. He would draw the core and talk about it. He said, if you know this much, it is as if you studied the whole Tripitaka. So this is how we studied.

Q: So this later became the *Compass of Zen*, right?

JAGSN: It is enough to study the *Compass*.

Q: Did he study the sutras a lot? In the United States he would tell his disciples to do a lot of zazen, but it seems like he himself also studied the sutras quite a bit.

JAGSN: Any sutra you take, he would know it all. The Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, could not write his own name, but after enlightenment, there was nothing he would not know. The sphere of our true self is not in writing. Hyon Gak Sunim went to bow to the patriarch of Hae In Sa Temple one time. The patriarch asked, "I heard the rumor that you got enlightenment. How can you get enlightenment if you don't know Chinese characters and so you cannot read any sutras?" [Many Asians assume this of all Westerners. It is not generally known in Korea that sutras have been translated to Western languages. Knowledge of the sutras is seen as a prerequisite for any practice, let alone enlightenment. —Ed.] Hyon Gak Sunim said it was good they met and asked, "Did Buddha Shakyamuni know Chinese characters?" The patriarch said, "Go take a nap." It is true. He was trying to awaken the patriarch to something. But one should be careful when talking to such a person of the Way. The sphere of our true self is not in the Tripitaka at Hae In Sa Temple. [A national treasure in Korea, the temple houses the oldest complete Tripitaka carved in wooden printing blocks. —Ed.] The sphere of our true self has no rela-

tion to the Tripitaka. Yet we have to study the sutras. If we read sutras we get a notion about the sphere of our true self. Seen from this side it looks like this, from that side it looks different. Anyway, there are many descriptions and explanations, so that people can understand. I work in home renovation, physical work. I practice in the midst of work, moving and sweating. If one just sits quietly, trying to look for their true self, they just wonder, will my true self appear or not?

Such a person wonders, does my true self have a name? It has nothing. Originally true self has nothing, no name. It is like trying to catch a cloud. It is just like this, so what kind of “true self” is there? Well, if we try hard with a sincere mind, I feel earnestly that I have to repay DSSN’s kindness and grace. When I think about DSSN, I suddenly have almost tears in my eyes. [Interviewer can

confirm.] We absolutely need such a mind. We need to help so that DSSN’s dharma can flourish for hundreds or thousands of years. I feel such an obligation, to live to cultivate virtue and merit. To practice kindness. I have no money, but if I see a beggar I give. I experienced severe hunger when I was young. I would go a day or two with no food. So I know what it feels like. When I lived in Pusan, there were many homeless people. For about two years, up until about three years ago, I would make some food at home and give to 30 or 35 homeless people. It is not that I wanted to do this; it just happened automatically. Buddha’s mind is like that. I would always prepare a food for them in the morning, but now I am old, so I don’t do it anymore.

Things like this [feeding the poor] arise in the mind naturally. With time the poor people become like family, so [when they suffer] my mind hurts. This is our nature. If you do like this, your practice will go smoothly.

I don’t know whether this will be of help to you. Before going to Japan, DSSN collected those 4,000 corpses; just that was an amazing achievement. He moved the Japanese government.

Q: At that time did Japanese people know about DSSN returning the remains to Japan?

JAGSN: Yes, they did. It was in the Japanese newspapers. People would even recognize him and greet him. We in Korea don’t know about it, but in Japan he was famous (at that time). When I first requested his statue be made, the Japanese sculptor refused, saying that he couldn’t do it. We must understand, I did not ask for a statue of a bodhisattva, but a monk, so the Japanese people hesitated. Plus there are great monks in Japan, so why a Korean? So I told him how our DSSN did a lot for Korea–Japan friendship in the past. I said to look him up on the internet and to give me a call the next day. And he did. “This man did a lot for bridge-building between Korea and Japan, so I will do it.” The sculptor was Mr. Sakagami. ♦

This interview was conducted by Pop Soeng Sunim and Won Hye Sunim in Korean. The Korean transcription was done by Ha Eunjo. The translation into English is by Won Hye Sunim.

Won Hye Sunim became a Kwan Um School of Zen member in 2001, and lived at the Prague Zen Center from 2003 to 2007. In 2011, he went to Mu Sang Sa Temple and in 2013 took monk’s precepts.



Photo: Won Hye Sunim