

# Just Do It and Enjoy: Kyol Che in Gak Su Temple

Eduardo del Valle Pérez

The compassion and clarity that pervades every corner of Gak Su Temple in Hong Kong, and on display in their monastic team, touched my heart deeply and was like a strong wind that took away my heavy karma for several weeks in 2019, letting me see beyond my own limitations as a human being. The simple and profound principles of *just do it and enjoy*, embodied by Zen Master Dae Kwan and her students—both monastics and laypeople—create an atmosphere of harmony that interpenetrates with the beauty of the forests and mountains that surround the temple, leading practitioners to return to a relaxed and joyful mind, opening the doors to their original home where the orange sun sets quietly over the vast blue South China Sea.

## Location

Gak Su Zen Retreat Temple is located in the powerful and beautiful natural environment of Lantau Island, deep in the mountains and surrounded by ancient Buddhist temples with a long tradition of strong practice that has been kept for centuries. The beautiful dharma room of Gak Su has a large window through which one can see green trees and blue mountains and hear the life of the temple. During the day—and many times at night—the

beautiful poem of the Morning Bell Chant came alive in the forests surrounding the temple, filling my heart with joy while sitting silently in meditation:

*Sitting quietly in a mountain temple in the quiet night,  
Extreme quiet and stillness is original nature.  
Why then does the western wind shake the forest?  
A single cry of winter geese fills the sky.  
Become one: infinite time, infinite space Buddha.*

## Schedule

The Kyol Che schedule of Gak Su Temple is, without any doubt, the most balanced I have ever experienced in any previous Kyol Che or short retreat in the Kwan Um School of Zen.

There are periods of formal practice combined with one period of free practice outside in nature, along with two periods of physical exercise. The period of free practice takes place in the morning, and students can choose to continue sitting formally in the dharma room or go meditate outside, walking or sitting in a beautiful, quiet, natural environment, surrounded by the forest trees and the old temples that populate the mountains, and in the distance the beautiful view of the South China Sea. The opportunity to meditate in the middle of the nature was

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a great teaching for me because the flowers, the small insects coming and going, and the bird song taught me the flow and impermanence of the natural world. And at the same time, as weeks passed and my ability to keep a not-moving mind grew, I could experience the joy of deeply appreciating the beauty of life due to the combination of keeping a don't-know mind and perceiving a constantly changing world.

Twice a day, in the morning and during the afternoon, we practiced Taoist and “Bodhidharma” exercises taught meticulously by Myong Hae Sunim JDPS that helped us to strengthen our bodies and prepare for the long periods of sitting. One interesting aspect of those exercises, which we practiced outside the building by the forest, is that I felt through the weeks of practicing them how my body became strong and at peace and—more interesting—in harmony with the green trees, the mountains, the blue sky and all beings living in nature. This deep feeling of belonging, of being part of the natural world, provided my heart and mind with a deep joy where solitude and any feeling of separation were not possible.

## Teaching

The teachings of Zen Master Dae Kwan, or Sifu as her students name her, always emerge from the present moment, reflecting the students' situation. This quality of connection with the present situation allows students to grasp and digest the teaching directly, as it is not born from the theoretical framework of the teacher's mind but rather from the moment itself that the student is living. The result is that the teaching appears out of students' real experience, allowing them to transform it through its own wisdom.

It was interesting to observe how the dharma of Sifu (which means Teacher or Master in Chinese) has its own flavor and at the same time the living brilliance and taste of the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch, Zen Master Seung Sahn and Zen Master Su Bong. Those great teachers and their dharma are always present in one way or another at Gak Su Temple.

I would like to present in this section three short examples of the living teaching style of Zen Master Dae Kwan that I enjoyed at Gak Su.

### 1. Don't make; do it with joy.

One morning, while we were practicing the Bodhidharma exercises, I could see that many students and myself were physically tired, as it takes several days or even weeks to get used to doing these exercises. Then Sifu appeared and said, with her soft, clear and kind voice: “Don't think *tired*. *Tired* is only a label, if you believe this label then you will feel tired. Don't make *tired*. Instead do it with joy: you like, do it with joy; you don't like, do it with joy. And smile—joy is very important. Enjoy, do it and relax. Then harmony will appear.”

When hearing that I just tried her teaching. I put

down the word *tired* in my mind and decided to observe the green trees moving with the wind *sssshhhhhhhh* while I continued doing the exercises. As soon as I did it the feeling of tiredness vanished by itself, and I was able to just do it and to end joyfully my round of exercises. I was truly surprised at how the don't-make-anything teaching from Zen Master Seung Sahn became suddenly alive, no longer just theory but instead very practical advice that I was able to put into practice easily.

It is interesting to note that Sifu wakes up every day at 2 a.m. to practice and is a very busy person. But she always smiles and seems to have a continuous flow of clear and harmonious energy.

### 2. Don't hold.

One day, after the meal and after cleaning her bowls, Sifu took them with both hands and said: “If you want to experience the Buddha's teachings, the way is not to hold anything. Don't hold anything that appears, don't hold any emotion, only put it all down. If you hold your bowls in your hands all the time then you cannot do anything else with them, but if you put your bowls down [*putting her bowls on the floor*] you can use your hands freely to do anything, and also use these bowls. If you don't hold, if you put it all down, you can be happy in this moment and you get true freedom.”

### 3. The importance of using the correct words.

One day during a dharma talk, Sifu explained the following:

The words *don't know* point directly to before thinking. If you say to yourself, in answer to a question, “don't know,” then this is a first step, as these words point directly to your before-thinking experience. Next step is to ask “What is this?” and then perceive. There is no realization without questioning.

So to use the exact words of Zen Master Seung Sahn and the Sixth Patriarch is important as their words are meticulous and point directly to our true self. This is the reason why when doing a translation of a dharma text it is crucial that the translator be an experienced practitioner.

Zen Master Dae Kwan and Zen Master Dae Kwang's translation of the Sixth Patriarch's *Platform Sutra*, available now in a beautiful second and improved edition, has been chosen by the Sixth Patriarch Temple in China as the best English translation among more than a hundred translations by well-known international translators. It will be presented in this temple to celebrate the 1,200th anniversary of this temple.

### Kong-an practice

Another interesting aspect I appreciated deeply, during the kong-an interviews I had with Sifu and Myong

Hae Sunim JDPS, is their clear ability to use kong-an teaching not only to check students' wisdom and center, related to the particular kong-an at hand, but to reflect meticulously the students' karma by pointing directly to aspects of their karma that they need to work on in their everyday life.

A good example of this ability from my first kong-an interview with Sifu: She suddenly told me, without any particular reason, softly but clearly, "I know you have done many retreats, that you have had many kong-an interviews with many teachers, that you have a lot of experience, but know that here I will treat you as if you are no one!" Boom! Her words deeply hit my mind and heart. It took me days to digest them, but thanks to Sifu's words I was able to return my beginner's mind to don't know, and thanks to this strong medicine I could put down my expert mind, where the pride and the heavy load of years of practice had become a dangerous hindrance in my practice.

Another example during a kong-an interview with Myong Hae Sunim JDPS: She was asking me a kong-an question when I interrupted her energetically and gave the answer before allowing her to finish the question. She smiled and, instead of approving my kong-an answer as I expected, she pointed to the fact that I had interrupted her, not listening her words until she had finished and not giving her enough space to express herself. Then she added: "This is how you communicate with other people in your life?" Her words hit my mind and suddenly I could see a blind spot in my behavior with concrete people of my everyday life whom I would answer in exactly the same

way I had just done a moment before. Then Sunim very kindly and compassionately taught me how important it is to listen carefully, being soft and centered when exchanging with others.

### Conclusion

For years I wished to practice for more than 10 days, the maximum period of retreat practice I had experienced before. The 21 days I lived in Gak Su Temple truly changed my life in many aspects and allowed me to re-discover the dharma of Zen Master Seung Sahn and the Sixth Patriarch in a completely new, helpful and amazing way through the living and joyful style of Zen Master Dae Kwan and Myong Hae Sunim JDPS. I believe that Sifu's background as a Theravada nun and her practice in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for a decade, including two years of intensive solo retreat in Tu Boo Cave, is a treasure that manifests itself in her teaching and in the balanced and harmonious practicing way and teaching style of Gak Su Temple, with great benefits for practitioners. In this sense I would like to pay homage, with this article, to Sifu's Theravada teacher, the great Master Phra Ajahn Pongsak. ♦

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