

First European Sangha Convention 2018

Listening to the Voices of the Sangha

Veronique Struis and Agata Sobiecka

In the beginning we have a provocative question. What is correct, tradition or change? Where does Zen Master Seung Sahn's dharma end and his cultural karma appear? What is the core of our tradition and what is just its relative surrounding landscape? The Kwan Um School of Zen is said to adhere to its Korean legacy, but Zen Master Seung Sahn was a great revolutionary himself. He not only changed the Korean *ganhwa soen* (observing *hwadu*) method and introduced a system of various *kong-ans*, but he also brought gender inequality in Korea to light and allowed women to give others precepts and transmission. It seems that our tradition is only forty years old. So how can we continue our founder's tradition of functioning in accordance with a changing situation, while making sure its core is accessible to a contemporary mind?

24] It's been more than forty years since Zen Master Seung Sahn came to the United States and shared with us his teachings. We are now facing new challenges, especially the beginning of a dialogue with a new generation of students dealing with very different life demands and values in our fast-changing world.

During the 2017 Meeting of Members, the European sangha was presented with the results of the Millennial Dharma Report, based on a global sangha survey undertaken in 2016 and interviews among the youngest generation of Kwan Um practitioners in America. In order to start a discussion about the challenges of the younger generation within the dharma regarding—as the report puts it—“diversity, education, religion, values, health, environmentalism, social justice, and technology” as well as other important topics raised by sangha members, the Meeting of Members decided to call the first European sangha convention. One of its objectives was to check whether the report's findings are also valid within Europe.

This was done in the first convention on September 18, 2018, at Wu Bong Sa Temple in Warsaw, Poland. According to European sangha bylaws, the sangha convention is a legal vehicle to “exchange views regarding innovations or changes, or in respect to new inputs or unresolved topics.”

Our European sangha members were consulted, with the previous worldwide surveys as a starting point, and four topics were identified. These became the basis for the convention survey, recommendations and discussions during the convention event and online.

- About twenty-five members participated in preparing the convention's topics and case studies.
- There were 103 members who responded to the convention survey.

- About forty senior dharma teachers and sangha delegates came to Warsaw.
- There were 161 people who joined the convention online, including sixteen members during real-time streaming, along with 480 Facebook reactions.

Topic 1: New Forms of Together Action for Community Building

At the core of topic 1 was finding approaches to encourage new ways of together action outside the dharma room, such as social gatherings, work fests, child care for meditating parents, and opening up to socially or scientifically engaged Buddhism. The outcome was that through discussions in local work groups and the creation of a community director position (both locally and centrally in the European office) we may be able to build a stronger, more diverse, and inclusive community.

Topic 2: Zen Practice for Beginners

The recommendations for topic 2 focused on finding ways to introduce beginners to our school and eliminating possible hurdles that prevent them from becoming regular practitioners. The impression was that access to the core teachings may be too difficult, too odd, or not adequate to contemporary social values. This included a request from the sanghas to reconsider some of the cultural, religious, and hierarchical aspects of our practice forms, such as bowing on the floor to teachers or wearing robes. There was also a suggestion for a beginners' program and for setting up a system for collecting membership data.

Topic 3: More Education

A growing need for dharma study as a form of valid practice in our current culture was identified, and topic 3 addressed the sangha's need for education. The recommendations involve cultivating a more open attitude toward various kinds of education and sharing, instead of responding to honest dharma discussions or sutra study with quotes from Zen Master Seung Sahn, for example, “You are attached to thinking,” or “This is only your idea,” which sometimes can be perceived as judgmental and condescending. This can both trivialize our founder's message and undermine the personal experience and expression of a new generation of teachers. Other suggestions included a standardized certification program for dharma teacher training, new methods of explaining basic Buddhist doctrine other than standard Q&A, which would encourage more open sharing and discussion, and the promotion of podcasts and webinars on Buddhist subjects prepared by students and teachers.

Topic 4: Empowerment of Students

This topic looked into the hierarchical structure of the sangha and professionalization of administration, so it can become based more on skill than on rank, through shifting less dharma-related tasks from teachers to students with adequate formal education or experience. The resulting recommendations suggest promoting the culture of acknowledging volunteers, for example by developing a credit/loyalty system, enabling employment within school structures, and introducing a trusted person in ethics from among students. It also looked at including a dharma friend (mentorship) program in the Dharma Mirror and considering changing the dharma teacher title to one of several other options, including senior student, senior dharma student, meditation instructor, or dharma instructor.

Organic Changes Appear by Themselves

The voices of the sangha were summarized in the report together with case studies, which were to track the organic trends and changes that are already happening in our Kwan Um Zen centers and groups. The trends we observed (including Zen-Yoga days in Slovakia, Zen days without robes and sutra studies in Poland, London Diversity Multi-faith Organization) show that these bottom-up cultural processes are already in full motion and as such don't need any seal of approval other than the enthusiastic response among new and old practitioners.

Don't Know, Just Listen

The convention resulted in further refinements and ob-

jections for the topics or the process in general. This was documented for future organizers so they will learn from this "pilot study." The next step was evaluation of the recommendations by the European teachers group, which approved of most of the recommendations. And currently we are awaiting the official response from other regional groups and the international council.

In summary, throughout the whole sangha convention process, we heard clearly the voices of many of our members. Some are open to change, and others are reluctant to change. We are looking to safeguard a strong dharma in modern society, which offers many ways to deal with suffering and personal growth. It's important that we act skillfully and listen carefully in order to provide relief, instead of insisting we already know what is good for the times to come.

For the full report please visit kwanumeurope.org/2019/06/22/convention. ♦

Veronique Struis has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen since 2013. She started her practice at the Cambridge Zen Center and is now a member of the Online Sangha. She works for a company that educates and raises awareness for HSPs (highly sensitive persons). She is also a member of the European office and lives with her two children in the Netherlands.

Agata Sobiecka (Hae In) has been practicing Zen for twenty years with four years of retreat experience and years living in Zen temples. After four years in Korea, she rested her monastic vows and lives now in Warsaw Zen Center as a bodhisattva teacher and European office director. She works as a psychotherapist.

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Poetry

On Age

I'm not the one I used to be
But you are the one I
Always knew
Fast and slow and
Standing still
Time plays this game
Wakes me up and asks
Who are you?



Living the way we
Feel is good
Breaking past rules
Of should and must
The flowers still bloom
The sun still shines



Sun changes
Moods
Cooler mornings



First rains
Grass and trees
Freshly green
Once more



The thoughts
Then the words
No thoughts
No words
Just be



Full moon
Seen through
Black branches
Outshines the streetlight

Rowena Gill is a longtime student in the Israeli sangha and the mother of Yuval Gill JDPSN. During her time in Japan she connected to Zen poetry, and now she writes her own in her garden after morning practice.