

# Sharing on Practice as a Monastic

Won Hye Sunim

A question one often encounters in monasteries (and hospitals and supposedly prisons too) is, how did you end up here? So first I will talk about what led me to the monastery and then about my monastic life.

I first encountered meditation in the context of martial arts training. There are significant parallels between martial arts practice and Zen practice. Historically, the two used to be intertwined in many areas and eras. For instance, the limitations of intellectual understanding are very clear when a punch is flying your way. After reading books on Zen, my friends from the martial arts world decided to try to practice sitting meditation together regularly. Soon we saw we needed to connect with an experienced teacher. I met two teachers who were practicing in the Japanese tradition, but I kept my eyes open, looking for a place with more intense practice. The Kwan Um School had just opened a residential Zen center in Prague, where people could practice every day, morning and evening. Short retreats were organized about every two months with a teacher from abroad. I started to come to the Zen center and eventually moved in. At that time the interest in residential training was such that we had a waiting list. (Ten years later the interest declined to the point where the Zen center was closed down.)

During the time when I lived in the Prague Zen Center, I was studying environmental chemistry and technology. Later on I had the opportunity to study also in Germany, Japan, and China. In Germany I could join a group in the Kwan Um School. In Japan I stayed one summer at a practicing temple; later I came back several times just to attend short retreats. This was my first exposure to monastic life. Even in China I attended a chanting retreat. In the meantime I also joined retreats at Musangsa Temple in Korea. All this time I was studying environmental science, especially pollution analysis and cleanup. In many case studies I searched for the cause of the environmental problems, and then for the cause of that cause. I always ended up with desire, anger, and ignorance. I guess the same would happen in any other field. Unfortunately, most scientists do not take these three poisons into account. I came to the conclusion that focusing solely on science and technology while disregarding the mind cannot bring about sustainable solutions. Unless the mind changes, we will just keep making the same mistakes, maybe more efficiently. Is there a way to train the mind? Meditation. Where can one focus on training the mind full-time? In a monastery.

Talking about monastic training, I should first stress that there is no one uniform training system. Monastic training differs considerably from country to country, between different monastic orders and even between individual monasteries. Even in the same order and the same monastery the training is always changing, developing, adjusting—and may even depend on the situation and the team that happens to

run a particular temple at a particular time. So my experience by no means shows the one universal system of monastic training, just the situations I happened to encounter on my way in certain places at a certain time. Maybe each individual just runs into their own karma?

I first joined a three-month retreat at Musangsa as a lay participant. Next I worked as an apprentice for half a year. Then the circumstances concerning immigration regulations, especially the way to obtain a long-term visa, along with Chogye Order training regulations, lead me to join the Chogye Order apprentice training, which consisted mostly of learning the Korean language for half a year. After receiving novice monk precepts, I kept studying the language for another half a year. The next year I spent with one of our senior monks who was undergoing chemotherapy, because hospitals in Korea often expect a family member to stay with a patient and take care of any nonmedical needs. Next I again had to join a Chogye Order novice monk training program. There were three options: Buddhist studies at a university, traditional sutra school temple, or a meditation temple. So I spent four years at a meditation temple. Here, we sat three-month summer and winter retreats. In spring and autumn we would spend between fifty and thirty days on a schedule similar to a retreat but with more time devoted to lectures than meditation. We were also very practically learning about community life governed by strict hierarchy but with rules and customs changing unexpectedly all the time.

After receiving full precepts I returned to Musangsa. Now I am learning to adjust back to temple life in the Kwan Um School again. By this time Musangsa residents could get a long-term visa, and both apprentice and novice monks can undergo training at Musangsa.

It is not easy to say how my training has changed me. It has surely had an impact on a few people around me, including my family. Personally I think that throughout the monastic training one can experience tapping into a reservoir of peace, clarity, and stability. But at the same time, encounters with various people keep reminding us that we need to keep practicing and learning so that we can see each moment as new and fresh and act exactly as the situation demands. I try to pay attention and see more and more how, when acting together with others, we usually act based on our own assumptions rather than becoming one with the situation and the people involved. ♦

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*Won Hye Sunim is from the Czech Republic, and started practicing in the Kwan Um School in 2001 at the Prague Zen Center, where he was a resident from 2003 to 2007. He has lived in Korea since 2011, where he became a monk in 2013. He underwent novice training from 2014 to 2018 at Baek Dam Sa Temple, and he took bhikkhu precepts in 2019.*