

Turn Appearance into the Path

Beop Hwa Sunim

My name is Beop Hwa, and I received novice precepts on September 25, 2020, at Musangsa Temple.

When I started to practice at the Chogye International Zen Center in New York City more than ten years ago, I barely knew about meditation or spiritual practices. I casually went there to meet people in different circles and hoped to expand my horizons. Then, in my first interview, Zen Master Wu Kwang (Richard Shrobe) gave me a question: “What kinds of thought did I make and how did I live my life so far?” It was like when Neo in the movie *The Matrix* took the red pill and opened his eyes to the truth. I started to go to the Zen center regularly, but after experiencing such suffering at a Yong Maeng Jong Jin, I said to myself, “Never ever I will go to another retreat!” However, now I am in a retreat for twenty-four hours a day. You never know what will happen to you.

Sometime later, I needed to move back to Korea. Before coming back, I was traveling in Sri Lanka and planning to move on to India, but when I discovered that Musangsa hosted a three-month retreat the coming winter, the traveling seemed far less interesting. I signed up for the retreat and sat for three months. On the final day of the retreat, Dae Bong Sunim gave a talk on practicing and saving all beings. Although it was something that he had mentioned in his dharma talks frequently, and I had vaguely understood what that means, it sounded much clearer than before, and I wanted to explore further. I asked Dae Bong Sunim if I could stay in Musangsa, and he suggested that I try the haeng-won program, which is for people who want to experience temple life in exchange for Zen training and work with room and board. During the six months of haeng-won, which included the three-month retreat, I began to see my karma, and many questions arose in my mind that were overwhelming at times. After the haeng-won program concluded, the temple gave me some work, so I worked as a volunteer and practiced there for over four years. Although it was challenging both physically and emotionally at times, I was lucky to spend that time in Musangsa. I found there was dharma in everybody and everywhere to teach me and help me to see them as they are and to have the right relationship with them. Without that period of time, my haeng-ja (training to become a nun) time would have been much harder.

One time, Dae Bong Sunim answered the question of karma: “It is like mud in a bottle. It is hard to see through the bottle when it is filled with muddy water. But if you leave it for some time the mud sinks and it is much easier to see the bottom of the bottle and sky through the clear water.”

One day, suddenly this story gave me a big question, so I asked Dae Bong Sunim, “Mud is still at the bottom of the bottle. How can we get rid of it completely? Otherwise, we have to carry it all the time!” His answer was, “Pour off the clear water and use that for all beings. Pour

off the mud and use that for all beings. Use the bottle for all beings. Don’t hold the clear water, mud, and bottle. Digest it and use that for all beings.” A few days later, I said to Dae Bong Sunim that I want to become a sunim. He asked me why. I answered him that practice and helping all beings from suffering is the path of a true human being, and he and other monastics are already walking the path, and I would like to do it as a sunim as well.

After a year, Dae Bong Sunim told me to go to Hong Kong instead of staying at Musangsa for haeng-ja training. This was a surprise, but it gave me a “don’t-know situation, don’t-know mind,” so I could just follow the situation. During my haeng-ja training, I had to wake up at 3:30 every morning and do lots of work until I went to sleep at 10 or 11 at night. When difficult things appeared in my mind, I constantly thought about Dae Bong Sunim’s teaching: “Look inside why you are hindered by this one; reflect on your inside.”

For a year of haeng-ja training, I fortunately had a chance to stay at three temples: Musangsa, Su Bong Zen Monastery in Hong Kong, and Jeung Hung Sa, a Korean temple. I studied under inspiring teachers who devoted their time to educate haeng-jas and sunims. It was quite a journey of transformation, and I naturally learned how to make harmony and serve people regardless of time and the place. Although these temples all have very different ways of haeng-ja training, it seems all well designed to help one to enter the monastic path.

Before going to Hong Kong to become a haeng-ja, Dae Bong Sunim gave me a wonderful teaching that really touched something deep in me and helped me throughout my training:

“Most important is to see this moment’s karma clearly and to help. Then you can turn any situation into the great bodhisattva way. Turn appearance into the path. Turn whatever appears into the path. When we can do that, that is true freedom and the great bodhisattva way to save all beings. You already did it and are doing it and keep doing it for all beings.”

Thank you to teachers and sanghas.

Beop Hwa Sunim is Korean, and began practicing at the Chogye Int’l Zen Center in New York in 2006. She received five precepts at Musangsa Temple in 2010, and after the three-month winter Kyol Che there in 2014 and 2015, she lived there as a lay volunteer until 2019. During that time she received ten precepts to become a dharma-teacher-in-training. In October 2019 she became a haeng-ja at Su Bong Zen Monastery in Hong Kong, and after a year of haeng-ja training, she received monastic precepts at Musangsa in September 2020.

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