

A Roaming Cow Again

Beop Seong Sunim

A Roaming Cow

I grew up in a small village in the countryside in Korea. It took thirty minutes to get to the nearest town by bus. I spent all day outside playing together with other kids. How blissful it was growing up in nature. Even tiny dew-drops on the grass made me curious, and every corner of the village provided me new experiences every day. All the neighbors were my family, and they had no hesitation to serve me meals. The whole village was my home. I was like a roaming cow.

Later, I was forced to attend a highly competitive school system, where the only valuable thing was “I am a winner.” I believed that was the only way to be happy. That small view crushed my soul and clouded my youth. So I was desperate to find the way out. I started to practice and wanted to become a monk.

The First Retreat

In 2002, I joined the winter retreat at Musangsa Temple, just one year after being ordained as a novice monk. You can imagine how harsh the first retreat would be. Before, I used to sit for one hour every day. Eight hours of sitting put me in the hell of suffering. Two formal meals were disasters. I was a person who ate slowly. It ran in my family. I couldn't eat enough. I had to bow

five hundred times a day. That was what my teacher requested. I was too hungry to practice. No snacks were allowed. Not fair. I used to grab some snacks whenever I felt hungry in the Korean temple. So I ate a lot for an informal dinner. Too sleepy on the cushion. To be honest, I had no idea what to do on the cushion. My homework was Joju's “Mu” kong-an. But it didn't make any sense at all. I asked myself, “What is wrong with the difference between Buddha's and Joju's answers? Different people can have different opinions!” I got lost on the cushion. I ended up fidgeting like a roly-poly toy. I was totally frustrated, until I got to see the other people. I realized the person next to me never fell asleep. There were several senior practitioners who sat like rocks. Their rigorous and grounded vibes touched me. I found what to do on the cushion. I was good at the competition! I decided to stay awake more than others. I did bite the bullet and stood up whenever I fell asleep. Sometimes I stood for almost half of the day. I pushed myself through to the end of the retreat. I felt confidence build up inside. Even though I couldn't even pass one kong-an, I had a try-mind, which has led my practice up to now.

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About two decades have passed since the first retreat. Times changed a lot. I got the hang of the retreat schedule and the interview turned into the most exciting of moments. The change inside was deeper. Through a bunch of retreats, I got to know how to practice; trying to be a loser instead of a winner. Every day, losing something inside was practice. That was how I became a simple person with simple needs. I became a roaming cow again. As my mind became simple, everything I perceived became clear and even inspiring. Due to the pandemic, only nineteen participants are practicing in this summer retreat. But we are not alone. The white wall in the Zen room reveals complete stillness. Two spiders in my room are practicing silence. The grass in the garden tells me why it grows only three inches. Three temple cats are practicing just-do-sleep all day. Thousands of cicadas are chanting mantras. All the beings are actually in the retreat, and all of us together practice don't-know mind and just-do-it mind. ♦

Beop Seong Sunim became a haeng-ja (monk-in-training) at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in 2000. He ordained as a bhikkhu in 2007 and practiced both in traditional Korean monasteries and at Musangsa Temple. Currently he serves as education director at Musangsa.

