

Wide Action

Bo Haeng Sunim

After several unsuccessful attempts at bearing children, my mother finally managed to give birth to me, her first child, and I breathed in some Lithuanian air on September 14, 1961. At that time, my parents lived in Ramonai village near Vilkija, about twenty miles from Kaunas city. My mother was at the Kaunas city maternity home. My father at 5 a.m. heard that his son was born, so he immediately sat on his “buzz”—as my mother called his super slow moped, which could go no faster than twenty miles per hour—and buzzed to Kaunas city to greet his wife, a young mother. She was twenty-seven years old.

My first foggy memory: I am sitting in a stroller, painted in a typical Soviet style, and I have a pacifier in my mouth. Suddenly a huge collective farm car drives past through a puddle and splashes my mom and me. My mother was so frightened and panicked that I remember this clearly even now. From that time I have always been afraid of cars—maybe for that reason I am still not able to drive.

My second childhood picture: We are visiting Vytenai castle, not far from our home. My dad, a bit boozed, suddenly lifts me—a four-year-old tot—and here I am, hanging out of the window of a tower. It was very high. My mother saw me hanging and fainted, nearly rolling down the stairs. From that time I have been afraid of heights.

Another flash of memory: The pain of my grandmother spanking me with a birch branch. She had forbidden me from climbing among the ruins of that same castle. The pain was unbearable. Even now, when writing, I can physically remember the pain. From that time I have been sensitive to anything but the lightest touch.

My father died when I was five years old. He died in Vytenai, and we buried him in Veliuona, in the Jurbarkas district. I followed the hearse alone. In the back was the coffin with my father’s body, surrounded by wreaths of flowers. I remember my dead father’s face the most. He was handsome. At the time, I didn’t understand why he wasn’t moving, or what death means. From my mother’s crying, I understood her wish for something to be different, but I could not realize what, exactly. But nothing changed, even though she cried a lot. She even wanted to fall into the grave with my father’s coffin. I was standing nearby, and my uncle—her brother—kept hold of her. She was thirty-two at the time.

I registered for the first grade at the Vytenai secondary school. But they didn’t want to accept me because classes started on September 1 but I wouldn’t turn seven for another two weeks. So, I visited a teacher to take an exam to allow me to start school early. I was sitting in my mother’s lap so that I wouldn’t be nervous. The teacher showed me a piece of paper and asked what letter was on it. She asked the question

strictly, like a police officer who had caught me stealing from a shop. I responded to her the same way I would have responded to the officer: “Marciulynas!” My mother said, “No, dear, say the letter; you’re saying your last name.” The teacher laughed in a strange manner. Then she showed another letter and asked even more sternly, “What is this?” I answered with my first name: Kestutis. Well, the exam was finished.

But I was accepted into the class nevertheless. I was even the first of all the kids to learn to read! While my classmates were still struggling to put letters into words, I played with paper airplanes. I finished that class with a reward for good

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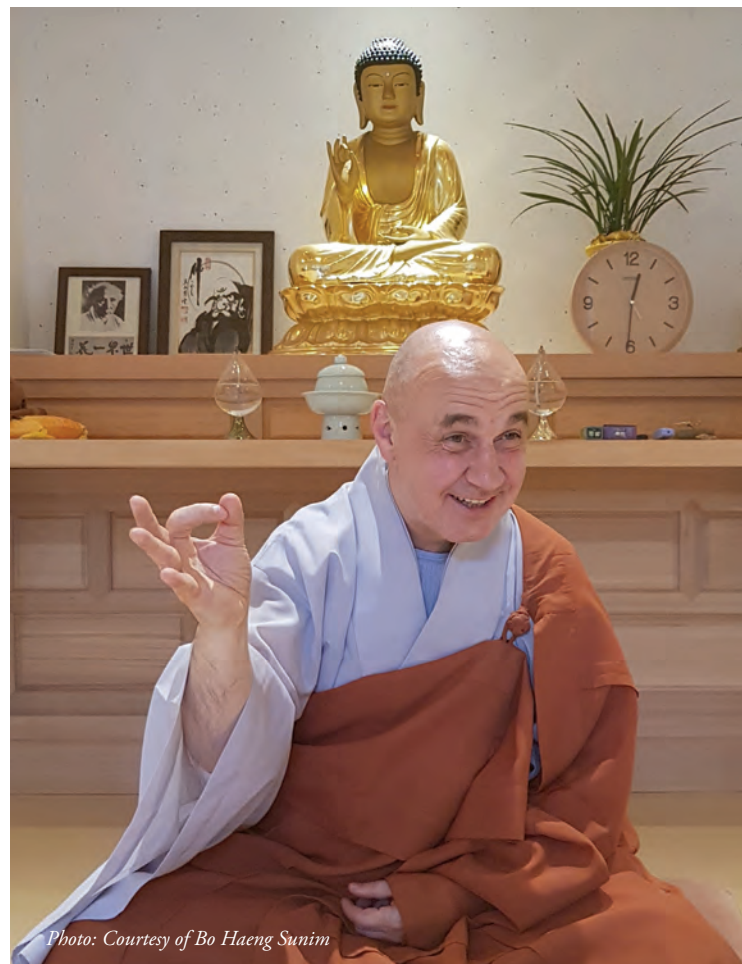


Photo: Courtesy of Bo Haeng Sunim

learning because I had all the highest marks. But it was just one word that held me back: *behavior*. I did not get passing marks for behavior until the eleventh grade, when I was allowed to pass my final exams. I misbehaved so much that my name ended up in the Soviet register of juvenile delinquents. But in my graduation year my mother passed away at the

age of forty-four. The authorities took pity on me, removed my name from the juvenile register, and allowed me to go through with my exams.

I was a bad teenager.

After passing my final exams I was accepted into the Kaunas polytechnic institute to study electromechanics, but eventually I was thrown out. Then I applied to a different department at the same institute and studied machine production for a while—but I didn't finish the program.

I married really young, and afterward my daughter was born.

To be honest, I had attended the polytechnic institute mainly to escape my compulsory Soviet army duty—even though the army got me later anyway. I didn't care about electromechanics or machine production. I had always wanted to be an actor but lacked faith in myself. Yet one night I went to a restaurant, ordered a beer, and saw an advertisement in a newspaper, an invitation to a theater group. I went and was nervous, but they allowed me to join them.

That's when my double studies began, at the polytechnic institute and in the pantomime group. I knew in my heart that it was only a matter of time before I would eventually choose theater for my career. I have always felt at my core that what really matters in life is not any position or career, but what's *within*. I had the sensation that I already had everything I needed within, and I had only to realize it. This gave me immense joy.

Other actors' performances seemed to emerge from thin air, and that transformation in them—happening in split seconds—used to shock me. It was pure magic. What could be stronger?

My experience of theater began in early childhood when in the evenings I watched my mother act in a local theater. Even during performances, I kept the script in my hands, and my mother used to run backstage, read a forgotten phrase, and then go back to the stage to say it. It seemed interesting for me: which mother was real—the one onstage, or the one who came backstage to read the script? The difference was huge. I was even somewhat afraid of her. She was an enigma.

In Veliuona, when our doctor walked down the street, holding his head high in an uncommon posture, I would follow him, imitating his funny gait, and the neighbors would laugh. Later, in the collective farm's directors' meeting, when my mother asked for some grain, the director asked me to demonstrate the doctor's walk. And I walked! All of his colleagues laughed, and my mother got twice as much grain for my performance.

My first true public performance was in Raudonė Castle, near Veliuona. There was another secondary school, and kids from our school performed there too. The play was called *House of the Cat*.

So, in reality, theater was always inside me—or I was in theater.

Eventually I applied to train in professional acting. I was

accepted to the Kaunas pantomime theater study in 1982 and finished the program in 1984. I became a real working actor, part of the pantomime group in the Kaunas dramatic theater, and my studies at the polytechnic institute fell away completely, along with all the schematic drawings. The only thing left from there was my honest love for higher mathematics, of which I had finished the entire course.

In theater, I would secretly watch the performances of J. Vaitkus, G. Padegimas, and other well-known dramatic actors from Kaunas. Tickets were limited, and people would wait for them starting early in the morning. I learned about scene lighting, decor, equipment, sound—in truth I absorbed all the best theater education in Lithuania directly, by watching these masters in action.

I eventually had to do my compulsory military service in the Soviet army in the late 1980s in Vorkuta City—the coldest city in all of Europe. We were quartered in the tundra. I performed pantomime studies in the Vorkuta drama theater's youth study, as well as in our barracks—even in subzero temperatures.

Theater broadened my worldview, leading me to read other kinds of books and meet different people.

In 1990, a Zen Buddhist monk from Poland, Do Am Sunim (Andrzej Czarnecki, who has since then returned to lay life), was going to visit Lithuania. A friend of mine suggested that I help organize the meeting. I was thrilled because I felt that to truly discover what I already had inside I needed a guide. I was not good at dealing with my thoughts and actions. I needed some kind of technique. In pantomime, we were already seeking and experimenting. We would do yoga and some meditation in our daily training—some “magic tricks.” So, I already had some sense in me, some experience of practice. When Do Am Sunim came, I sat the entire night in meditation. We had only a brief nap in the sports hall. His teaching on don't-know mind just opened my heart! That was it. And of course, even apart from teaching, the monk himself made a great impression on me. He was quite disciplined, and also a master of martial arts. Everything fell into place and I became his student. He gave me the task of taking care of our newly formed meditation group until he returned.

He came back on January 9, 1991. On January 10 I took the five precepts and became a member of the Kwan Um School of Zen. I was looking forward to meeting Do Am Sunim's teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, who planned to visit from South Korea in the springtime.

The first time I saw Seung Sahn Sunim and his students, such a bizarre feeling arose in me. It was as if they all came from a home that I remembered from the distant past. That sense of union, of being so familiar, had to come from somewhere, from a specific and concrete place where they slept, meditated, ate. Where is that miraculous place? I already felt that I wanted to be with them.

Yet at the same time my theater life was going well. While most other actors were taller than me, I was short—

the same height as our lead actor, Slava. So I started preparing to be Slava's understudy, rehearsing for the lead roles in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, among others.

And I kept reading literature, wondering if theater was just a stop on the way to something else. My colleagues and I already practiced meditation, and our life was quite ascetic. Audiences and critics seemed to think we had magical powers—pantomime in itself was exotic in those days, with so many peculiar actions, creating something out of nothing.

One day I discovered Herman Hesse's novel *The Glass Bead Game*. What a work of art! It sucked me fully in. That was the life that I wanted. In that novel there were no women—only men, which is rare. A real monastery. Determination to strive, for something higher. It seemed as if the author himself had disappeared and was not in control of the situation. The main character had escaped the boundaries of the author's imagination. Perhaps that's why Hesse killed him off in such a strange way. I thought, "That's OK—I'll carry on in the same vein."

When I started my own pantomime group, our first performance was an excerpt from that book. That is when I realized that theater is also a sanctuary, a spiritual practice. It comes from the same place as the monks in Hesse's story. And so later, when I was playing the part of Cash in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, I didn't need any explanation for why that character makes holes in his mother's coffin so that she could breathe. It was self-evident for me. My mother was already dead—and I knew already that mothers never die, as I know now still.



Looking back, I see this was a big step toward my monastic life. Again, it was only a question of time.

For a while still my colleagues and I enjoyed a successful life in theater—winning awards, showing prospects for the future. But the routine of theater can sometimes feel like sinking in quicksand without actually seeking the Source. I didn't yet realize that theater wasn't going anywhere, but was always inside me. Career is within, not outside.

It was then, in 1998, that I met Zen Master Seung Sahn for the second time. We took a bus to Poland, where I requested a personal meeting with him. I had already tried to become a monk some time before then. I went through haeng-ja training, but I didn't go through with the ceremony afterward; theater won over then, like sand pouring over my life. At that point I felt that the older students had already written me off. Now everything depended only on the Zen master. When we met, there was an interpreter from Lithuania, along with many students. Everyone thought that Zen Master Seung Sahn would scold me.

I bowed down and he asked, "Why didn't you come to the ceremony?" I said that I was sick, and my mind was not yet ready for it. Then he asked how I felt now. I answered that

I felt great being able to be there, and that I wanted to be a monk. After a long pause he finally told his secretary—to everyone's surprise—that I would be accepted in South Korea, at Hwa Gye Sa Temple. In my eyes there were only tears.

My life changed 100 percent. Of course, it took me some time to finally get to Hwa Gye Sa, but when I had bowed to the Zen master, he told me "Wonderful, wonderful. Just *do it!*" I didn't think that any other teaching was needed.

In the summertime, we used to always celebrate Zen Master Seung Sahn's birthday, usually at a large restaurant with hundreds of people. In the summer of 2000 our head monk asked me to perform something on that occasion. He said that many monks would perform something they were good at, like singing, and many of them had heard that I was once an actor. So, show something . . . But I objected. Isn't that karma? Becoming a monk, one must strictly cut ties with all of one's personal past—especially with being an actor. Yet he politely told me that it wasn't exactly a request that I could refuse.

So, without preparation, without music, I performed a short pantomime piece, *C'est la vie*. It was less than five minutes, showing the entire journey of human life. And oh, what applause and shouts of approval I got! The monks and students there showed more appreciation than any audience in Lithuania. And Zen Master Seung Sahn said loudly that here it is—talent! That was the main event. And, after that, I had to perform that same piece innumerable times. The most interesting thing for me was that my meditation practice changed the quality of my work as well. So, why not? That's how acting came back into my monastic life, with a blessing.

These days I am the head monk at Hwa Gye Sa Temple International Zen Center. I visit Lithuania often. People in my homeland accept me warmly, many gather to meet me, and we have beautiful exchanges. I feel after years of meditation I have more to offer than I did when I was just an actor in a theater. Lithuania is a Christian country, and my path is Buddhist, but we understand and enrich each other. I have friends among Catholic monks, and we participate in conferences together. As Zen Master Seung Sahn said, practicing Buddhism in Christian countries can make Christianity itself even stronger.

In 2011 we published my first book about my spiritual search, *Letters from the Dragon Mountains*. It quickly sold out and was reprinted. I also created two solo theater performances, *Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and *Letters from a Monastery*. In 2021 my second book, *Nabi*, came to life. All this social-creative work for me is deeply related to meditation mind. You are alone, and you cannot be different. Cannot escape. You are exactly what others see. I improvise.

So, this mental state—when, after jumping out of the airplane, you suddenly understand that you forgot your parachute—it exists. There is no way out. This state of mind is very common for the people who are watching you as well. They also don't know what will happen. It is the same in life. ♦