

# *If I Had Come Here to Teach People, I Couldn't Do Anything:* *Memories of Zen Master Seung Sahn*

I am tremendously and eternally grateful for his enthusiasm, generosity, humor, warmth and direct pointing to “THIS.”

—Zen Master Soeng Hyang (*Barbara Rhodes*)



Once when I was on a teaching trip with Dae Soen Sa Nim to Poland as his secretary, he turned to me and said, “You know, if I had come here to teach people I couldn't do anything.”

Another time I mentioned to him I wanted to have some more jobs. He said, “That's OK, but I have no job.” I asked him, “Sir, what do you mean? You are a great Zen master.” He replied, “Somebody made me a Zen master, so I am a Zen master. But originally I have no job.”

He'd often say things like this that would make me wonder—as I hope they do you, too.

—Mu Sang Sunim



In 1989 I visited the New Haven Zen Center seeking answers to the perennial questions: What is life all about? What is it that I am not getting? How is it that none of my explanations seem to satisfy me and I become depressed?

Within a few weeks I was invited to have breakfast with Dae Soen Sa Nim, who was coming from Rhode Island. I was startled when in a talk he answered my questions by saying, “Understanding cannot help you.” And that the important questions are “What am I?” and “How can I help you?”

After morning practice the next day we drove in various cars to his favorite diner on Chapel Street, where I noticed he ate scrambled eggs. Afterward, as the new kid, I hung back when he said his goodbyes to the sangha. Then

he made for the door with his retinue of Western monks who were to drive him to New York. At the door our eyes locked. He retraced his steps and came up to me with outstretched hand. That was the most remarkable handshake I ever had. It may explain why I keep practicing.

—John Holland



My first retreat with him, in 1978, was a three-day kido, a chanting retreat, at a house on the coast at Big Sur. I helped him build an altar out of scrap lumber, and he placed on it a beautiful, delicate, ornate golden statue of Kwan Yin. When someone asked him why we were using such an elaborate statue for the retreat instead of a plain Buddha, he replied that Kwan Yin made herself beautiful to help all beings. We followed the standard retreat schedule, early morning until late evening, but instead of sitting we chanted Kwan Seum Bosal for hours on end, each of us equipped with a percussion instrument, and Soen Sa Nim setting the tempo with a huge moktak. Assigned to clean his room during one of the breaks, I went in and found him not resting but listening intently to a tape recording of the previous session, moving his lips. His talks during that retreat were all about the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and the spirit of compassion as the heart of Zen practice. “When you are thinking, your mind and my mind are different. When you are not thinking, your mind and my mind are the same. That is Zen mind. The name for that is Kwan Seum Bosal, Great Love, Great Compassion, the Great Bodhisattva Way.”

—Zen Master Hae Kwang (*Stanley Lombardo*)



My favorite DSSN teaching: “To keep don't-know mind, you must kill three people. First, you must kill the Buddha. Next, you must kill your parents. Then, you must kill ME!”

—Carter West



I recently came across a photo taken by Zen Master Dae Bong of a dharma talk, showing Zen Master Seung Sahn sitting between Zen Masters Soeng Hyang (*Barbara Rhodes*)



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

and Dae Kwang. It means a lot to me because I was there at the First Unitarian Church of Providence when it was taken. I can still hear Dae Soen Sa Nim's voice asking "Who are you?" I became his student from that point on and cherish this memory that I found years later. I had a moment of shock when I spotted the photo left at the doorway of the Providence Zen Center! "Who took this picture?" was all I asked of everyone I could find. I must have been standing near the exact spot in the church! That talk changed my life completely.

—Roberta Hoffman

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### The *I Ching* and Zen Master Seung Sahn

In 1986 Dae Soen Sa Nim led one of his annual, wonderfully wild and mind-blowing trips throughout South Korea, shepherding a group of us students to astoundingly beautiful, ancient temples in large cities and on distant mountaintops. Most of us were in our twenties, and most of us were sorting out our career and relationship plans. While bouncing in the backs of vans over rough roads, or sitting meditation in open-air halls absorbed in the sound of cicadas, or chanting before enormous buddhas, we were obsessing about what turns our lives would take on our return to the States.

Toward the end of our life-changing pilgrimage, several of us talked about our dilemmas and anxieties about the future. I shared that I had brought along my copy of the *I Ching*, and I would be willing to throw some coins and work out hexagrams to give us a clue about what our futures might portend. (I had been doing this for about a decade in my futile quest to peer into my unknown pathway ahead.) We threw some coins and I read the obscure results in the *I Ching*. One surprising thing is that one young woman got a result and then asked me to throw the coins again for the same question. Amazingly and mathematically vastly improbable, the exact same hexagram appeared. Wanting to share this event and perhaps to show off a bit, we told Dae Soen Sa Nim the story of our discovery.

To our surprise, he got really angry at us. "You don't

know anything about using the *I Ching*," he yelled. "It takes many years of study to become an *I Ching* master!" He paused and looked at us, bewildered and ashamed, and then said, "A Zen student does not try to know the future. You must accept what appears, live don't know, moment to moment! That is enough! Don't use the *I Ching*!" After his teaching, I never felt the need to use the *I Ching* again.

—Rusty Eidmann-Hicks



### How Zen Master Seung Sahn's Teachings Made a Difference in My Life

It was the year I turned forty-seven, and I was in the middle of a double major program at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. I had been in a long-term relationship, and owned my home with my partner of almost nine years. I thought I had finally become settled in my life, clear about my profession, and I would probably not have to concern myself with any more unexpected upheavals.

Yes, I thought I had everything figured out. Until I looked honestly at myself realizing that I was not satisfied and I was looking over what I had accomplished, wondering about some of the mistakes I kept repeating, and asking myself, why? Why was I stuck and worried about my life?

Even though I had spent most of my adult life trying to avoid repeating the problems I had grown up with, they always found me again and again and I kept letting them in the door. A nagging question formed quite clearly: Why can't I see these things coming? I see that I'm in a rut and I don't know how to avoid falling into it when it's right in front of me.

All my life I've enjoyed reading books about spiritual subjects. However, one area I hadn't explored at the time was Buddhism. I began searching for books about meditation and delved into writings by Beat Generation writers who were into Zen Buddhism. Not knowing anything about Zen except what I had read about American WWII veterans in Japan studying with Zen martial artists, I assumed that Zen was a practice for soldiers and tough guys! This seemed to have nothing to do with my questions.

One author, a woman Zen master, gave the easiest instructions for practice, which I followed and used on my own for three years at home. Eventually I knew it was time to find a good teacher, and I continued to look for people to practice with and places to practice.

Again, things in my life took a major downward turn. Another rut that I fell into. Things were falling apart, and I was consumed with anger, sorrow, hatred, and fear. What to do, then? Grasping for something to steady my-

self mentally and emotionally, I spoke to one of the practitioners I had gotten to know through practicing with Zen students at Tae Gak Sa Temple, also known as the Cambridge Zen Center. She invited me to consider moving into the Zen center for a while.

I had been coming to CZC for some time, and at one of the dharma talks, I heard something that struck me. At the end of a talk, the Zen master asked the audience “What are you?” No one could answer. But to me it sounded familiar. I had asked myself the same question years ago after an experience that turned my life upside down, but I never told anyone about it. I thought this question was much too crazy to talk about, to admit to thinking about it.

I took the Zen master’s question and I practiced with it for a long time. It was as hard as a ball of iron, it would not give up its secret. I struggled with it. I have no idea how long I did that before it began to open up. Or was it opening me up? Yes, it was me that opened up. It let me look into the question “What am I?” “What is this I?”

Still my life presents me with upheavals, disappointments, challenges, losses, struggles—those of others’ and my own. Zen Master Seung Sahn’s teaching—about asking a great question, practicing together, letting go of small I, not making distinctions, and letting it all go—doesn’t make problems go away, but it helps me to see how I can meet them with courage and clarity, and also to forget myself and to help others.

—Beth Redmond Walsh



### My Favorite Dae Soen Sa Nim Memories

My daughter Mandy was born at home with a midwife right in my bedroom at the Cambridge Zen Center. The next day, Dae Soen Sa Nim came. He was loaded with bags of seaweed and dried mushrooms. He made a giant soup for me like the Korean ladies eat after childbirth. He said I needed to eat it for three weeks and get strong again.

—Dyan Eagles



Other than the highly charged, positive, and direct energy that was Zen Master Seung Sahn’s ongoing manner in the dharma room, where I saw him most



Photo: Phil Zuckerman

often, my most vivid and moving moment in his presence was during some sort of high holy ritual that was unlike any other I’ve witnessed at the Providence Zen Center. I believe it was the very early 1980s, and it may have been a Buddha’s Birthday or Buddha’s Enlightenment Day celebration. In any case, Dae Soen Sa Nim planned a special talk in the relatively new dharma room. He asked that a platform be set up, draped, and topped with a cushion and his big stick—all on the sunny side of the dharma room rather than front and center at the altar. He intended to conduct at least part of the ceremony from this platform and that troubled the relatively anti-authoritarian American members of the sangha. There was some grumbling about this latest request (or demand, as it were) as we set up the platform and otherwise prepared for the special event.

A sizeable crowd of students and visitors settled onto their cushions, with Zen Master Seung Sahn sitting motionless on the platform. His eyes were wide open; he looked at us all, holding us in his mind. He looked this way and that, surveying the room. His bearing, his gaze were nothing less than a call to enlightenment, larger than the whole world. He held the stick high, he brought it down, he brought it up, he brought it down, he moved ever so slowly and steadily. Great love, great sadness, and great strength poured out of him. Looking back, it seems like the temple bell was ringing, but I don’t know that that was the case. It was a moving and inspiring performance, for which I am grateful, by a guy who was the real deal.

A second remembrance is a bit lighter. I was a young new student, nineteen or twenty years old, and practicing evenings at the Providence Zen Center when it was on Hope Street. I had a lot of ideas about how serious this enlightenment business was. I did not want to waste time with my college friends on frivolous activity. A prominent Asian Buddhist teacher was visiting for a couple of days and I asked someone what the two Zen masters did together when they weren’t leading practice. She said that that afternoon they had taken a break from their busy schedule and just sat on a couch together and had a great time carrying on and watching a cowboy movie. This shocked me—I just could not reconcile my idea about how a Zen master was supposed to be with stereotypical, chauvinistic, shoot ’em up cowboy movies. That mental conflict was a wonderful kong-an, as it turned out, for this earnest young seeker.

—Mark Van Noppen ♦