

Zen Master Seung Sahn's Campaign for World Peace and His Views on War and Military Service

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It seems fitting, as we watch the Ukrainians fighting for freedom and independence from Russia, that we revisit Zen Master Seung Sahn's campaign for world peace and his views on war, peace, and military service.

In the early 1980s, Zen Master Seung Sahn was heard to say, "No one is doing anything for world peace, so I have to do it." His method of action was first to host a world peace ceremony at Providence Zen Center in 1982. This ceremony was to be an ecumenical demonstration of the solidarity of religious leadership throughout the United States in support of world peace. It involved religious leaders meeting, talking, eating, and practicing together during the weekend. Among those in attendance, as this writer remembers, were Taizan Maezumi Roshi, head of the Zen Center of Los Angeles; Jakusho Kwong Roshi, head of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center in Northern California; Father Kevin Hunt, Trappist monk from Massachusetts, who to this day leads retreats at Providence Zen Center; Maha Ghosananda, famous Cambodian monk and leader of the peace movement in his country; as well as a number of others whose names this writer cannot remember.

Zen Master Seung Sahn's idea was that if religious leaders could meet and make harmony together, then political leaders would follow. Before the ceremony, he made a visit to the Vatican, seeking to meet with Pope John Paul II. At a preliminary meeting with the cardinal and a Korean bishop in charge of the secretariat for non-Christians, our founding teacher proposed that the Pope come to Providence Zen

Center, along with the Dalai Lama, the head of Korean Buddhism, the leader of the Church of England, and a few other religious leaders; that they take off their clothes, have a hot bath together in the sauna room, get dressed, have a meal together, then depart—the whole gathering being conducted in silence. No speeches, no communiqués, no words at all. Simply a demonstration of together action and solidarity among the world's religious leaders.

As one might expect, this idea proved too novel and too simple for the Church leadership, but Zen Master Seung Sahn did secure the promise of a meeting with the pope, to be held three days later. Unfortunately that would have been at the time of a Buddha's Birthday ceremony at our Korean temple in Los Angeles, so he had to depart and the meeting never took place. But it was a bold initiative, which made a great impression on his students at the time.

In his youth, when Korea lay under the colonial rule of Japan, Zen Master Seung Sahn was completely devoted to the idea of Korean independence, and went so far as to try to join the Korean army in exile in Mongolia. Because of his youth (he was only sixteen) he was rejected, so he returned home to continue his studies at school and later at Dong Guk University. But he also procured a shortwave radio—illegal at the time—so he could listen to the Allies' communications. He was found out, arrested, put in jail, and faced execution. He was saved only through the intervention of a family friend who had some connections.

Zen Master Seung Sahn was born in 1927. In 1945,

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the Second World War ended with the surrender of Japan, and Korea attained independence. He was, of course, very happy. Soon, however, on the day celebrating Korean Unity against Japan, he witnessed Korean communists and capitalists at the railway station fighting and killing each other. Heartbroken, he said to himself, "Society is bullshit." So he left society to go to the mountains and find his true self. The story of his hundred-day retreat, attainment of enlightenment, and receiving dharma transmission from his teacher, Zen Master Ko Bong, is told in *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* (Grove Press, 1976). More stories from that period are told in a volume celebrating his sixtieth birthday, *Only Doing It for Sixty Years* (Kwan Um School, 1987).

During the period after his enlightenment, our founder practiced hard, sat several Kyol Che retreats, and learned the ways of a Korean monk. Later, he was involved in a movement by three hundred monks who had remained single to recover the Korean temples from those who had become married at the instigation of the Japanese colonial rulers. (Korean monasticism requires monks to remain celibate, but Japanese monasticism allows them to marry.) He was at that time a leading figure in the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism.

During the Korean War, which began in June of 1950, he was, like all able-bodied men, monks and laymen alike, drafted into the Korean army, where he became a captain. Although he did not have combat duty, he was nevertheless wounded in action. He never questioned whether going into military service was correct. He rested his precepts and participated in the ordinary life of a military officer. Once, many years later in the United States during the Vietnam War, a student asked him whether he should go into the army. Zen Master Seung Sahn replied, "First you must check, why is your country fighting? If you agree with your country's direction, then you must go. If you disagree, you must refuse."

Our founder often taught, "Any action is not good, not bad. Why do that? Only for me, then not so good. For all beings, then it is correct." This is a rather different style of teaching from Theravada Buddhism, and certainly from our Judeo-Christian tradition. It is, in this writer's opinion, well worth meditating on.

Zen Master Ko Bong had told his student, "Your dharma mission is the whole world." So Zen Master Seung Sahn first founded small temples in Hong Kong and Tokyo, chiefly for the Korean people living there. However, he had heard that some Japanese Zen masters had gone to America to teach Westerners. Wondering if this was really possible, he decided to go to America himself, which he did in 1972. From such small beginnings our Kwan Um School and our whole movement of international Zen began. (Notably, our founder never referred to our style as "Korean Zen" except when he was speaking to Korean people. He told us that he had brought the best things from Korean, Chinese, and Jap-



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

anese Zen to America to make a truly new Zen, grounded in tradition but adapted to the modern world.)

He once said, "If I hadn't become a Zen master, I would have liked to become a general." Certainly his qualities of wisdom, leadership, and determination would have suited him well in a military career. The difference, he said, between Zen and the army was in their direction. The army's direction is to defend the country. Zen's direction is to understand myself, get enlightenment, and save all beings. But much of the training is similar. Of course, in the army, one is taught only to obey orders. In Zen, one is taught to attain belief in one's true self and become completely independent, so that someday you can "kill" your teacher. Killing Buddha, killing your teacher, means killing any idea in your mind—very different from military teaching!

So I believe that if Zen Master Seung Sahn were alive today, he would support the Ukrainians in their quest for freedom. Freedom is something he treasured. But it is always dangerous to imagine one knows what our founder might think or do. He was a great Zen master, and therefore always full of surprises.

I hope this article may give newer students, who never met Dae Soen Sa Nim (the title he was called by later in life), some idea of his teaching. For me, he was always an inspiration. Trying to live up to his ideals and his teaching, however, requires a lifelong effort.

*The blue mountain never moves.
White clouds floating, back and forth.*

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Mu Sang Sunim met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1975 and was ordained as a monk in 1980. He served the Zen master for many years as his secretary, traveling with him throughout the world. He produced the documentary Wake Up! On the Road with a Zen Master, which gives a vivid and rarely seen picture of Dae Soen Sa Nim as he traveled and taught in Europe in 1991. The video, professionally filmed and edited and now restored to its original, high quality, can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBMBkjhvtR8>. After years of practicing in Los Angeles and Korea, Mu Sang Sunim currently resides at the Providence Zen Center.