

# Carrying Our Bowls: The North American Sangha Reflects on Its Fiftieth Anniversary

Jess Row

In the eighth kong-an of Zen Master Seung Sahn's Twelve Gates, a monk named Seol Bong notices Zen Master Dok Sahn carrying his bowls to the meditation hall for mealtime, even though it isn't mealtime—the bell hasn't been rung and the drum hasn't been struck. What's going on? He mentions this to the head monk, Am Du, and Am Du says, "The Zen Master doesn't understand the last word." Dok Sahn, hearing this, gets angry, and says to Am Du: "Do you not approve of me?"

*Do you not you approve of me?* That sentence, full of ego and hurt feelings, points to an essential truth about Zen communities—temples, monasteries, Zen centers, Zen schools—namely that, just like all other communities, they're built of fragile human relationships that evolve over time. The challenge of this kong-an is to find out, as Am Du found out, what to say to the teacher to restore the relationship, respectfully but truthfully. In the kong-an, that's the last word.

In life, we rarely find the last word. Something else always goes wrong. Am Du had to deal with a troubled Zen master one morning; later that day, maybe he had to send someone to deal with an overflowing latrine, or help a novice monk who was suddenly homesick. The moment-to-moment work of keeping the practice going sometimes distracts us from recognizing our long-term, continuing obligations to one another. That, too, is part of the point of this kong-an.

A Zen school that has lasted fifty years has seen just about every human experience: births and deaths, arriv-

als and departures, losses and gains, broken relationships and preserved ones. When I realized this date was on the horizon, I knew I wanted to ask those who have been in the school the longest to reflect on how it feels to have carried our bowls (and sometimes others' bowls) all this time. What have we learned about the great work of life and death in a Zen sangha?

In February and March of 2022 I reached out to the teachers and senior students (that is, senior dharma teachers and bodhisattva teachers) of the North American sangha of the Kwan Um School of Zen with three questions pointing to our history and future as a community. Below you'll find a selection of their responses, edited and contextualized.

*At the time Zen Master Seung Sahn arrived in the United States, the "Zen center" was a brand-new concept. Fifty years later, what is a Zen center? How has the idea of a Zen center evolved over time?*

In 1972, the term "Zen center" had existed for only a decade, following the founding of the San Francisco Zen Center in 1962 and Rochester Zen Center in 1966. The Zen center is an American invention: no one in Asia had ever conceived of a place where Zen could be taught to lay students, unaffiliated with a temple, often located in an urban area, and open to anyone, with or without a Buddhist background.

This accessibility and openness to the public defined the early history of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching in the West, where he often spoke to large audiences of curious people who knew next to nothing about Buddhism or Zen. For Zen Master Seung Sahn, this was precisely the point of what he called the "Zen revolution": taking Zen from an elite discipline available only to a small number of monks and nuns and instead making it widely available, with a strong, practical orientation toward helping this suffering world.

But what exactly was a Zen center supposed to be? How was it supposed to function, support itself, govern itself? In the first twenty years after 1972, all of the Zen centers founded by Zen Master Seung Sahn had a robust group of full-time residents and were, in the words of many who wrote to me, "semi-monastic" or "mini-monasteries." "Fifty years ago a Zen



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center meant daily 5 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. practice, and I mean *daily*,” writes Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman). “Over time, things relaxed, and we became less attached to that model.” Starting in the mid-eighties, Kwan Um Zen centers began to lose residents as the initial wave of students grew older and wanted to live elsewhere. Today, most centers in North America have a relatively small number of residents, or none at all. (The major exception is the Cambridge Zen Center.)

Why is it that subsequent generations of new students, for the most part, have chosen not to live in Zen Centers? According to those who wrote to me, a number of factors come into play.

Terry Cronin JDPSN writes: “We’re an aging sangha that hasn’t consistently attracted younger people, at least not in the numbers like fifty years ago.” Senior dharma teacher Claudia Schippert writes that “Fewer younger people seem to be interested in or able to live in Zen centers where they would dedicate part of their lives to building and maintaining the center and community. It takes people who want to physically be around each other, and, importantly, who want to be around people they admire and learn from to form a viable Zen center.” Many writers observed that over the decades the Kwan Um sangha has become far more oriented toward retreats than residential practice: “Monastic practices such as Kyol Che and Yong Maeng Jong Jins,” writes bodhisattva teacher Kimball Amram, “have become one of the cornerstones of the Kwan Um School.”

Most Zen centers today, many writers said, function more like a temple (or church) than a monastery: for the most part, it’s a gathering place to practice and share teachings, but not a shared living experience. Terry Cronin adds: “COVID may be challenging us to go even further, to see Zen centers less as places and more as the practice activity of the sangha, no matter in what form (in person or virtual) they have gathered together. Perhaps a ‘Zen center’ is becoming more of a verb than a noun.”

Speaking personally, I envy my peers who had the chance to live as residents in Zen centers when they were younger; I believe residential training represents a kind of full-time commitment that can’t be achieved any other way. And it may be that the rising cost of housing inspires more young students in future decades to choose a Zen community for practical reasons as well a commitment to the dharma. Will those new communities look like the Zen centers of the past? Or will the work of the Kwan Um School become more and more centered on online communities, who come together in person only occa-

sionally? These seem to be the major questions when we think about the Zen centers of the future.

*Over the past fifty years, the Kwan Um School of Zen has established a set of expectations and principles about teacher-student relationships. What do you think we’ve learned over time, as a community, about the nature of ethics, authority, and power in a Zen community?*

In the 1980s, almost every prominent Zen school in North America, including the Kwan Um School, dealt with controversy involving sexual relationships between teachers and students. Many factors came into play in these stories: close relationships between men and women, misunderstandings of the role of the Zen master, monastic vows of celibacy, and traditions of sexual secrecy. In 1988, Zen Master Seung Sahn apologized to the entire sangha for having consensual sexual relationships with two of his closest students. In the years after his



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

public apology, the Kwan Um School of Zen developed one of the first explicit ethics policies in the history of Western Buddhism. A key part of the code was that all major decisions about the school are made by a council of teachers, the teachers group, rather than a single leader. This group (now formally called the board of trustees) has dealt with subsequent cases of misconduct, which in some cases resulted in teachers leaving the school, and in others involved teacher suspensions and reinstatements.

Zen Master Bon Soeng (Jeff Kitzes), who helped formulate the original KUSZ ethics policy, describes its origin this way: “In 1993 I went to a conference of more than a hundred second-generation Zen, Vipassana, and Vajrayana teachers, which was co-hosted by the San Francisco Zen Center and Spirit Rock Meditation Center. On the first day of the conference, second generation female teachers (and many fewer male teachers) began sharing

secret stories of having been in sexual relationships with their teachers. We discovered how much pain and suffering grew out of these relationships. Many of us understood that the American sangha had a systemic problem that required a systemic response.

“When I returned from this conference, I shared my experience of the meeting with our teachers group, and we developed and put in place the ethics policy and grievance procedure of the Kwan Um School. During the almost thirty years since then, there have been grievances filed about both dharma teachers and members of the KUSZ teachers group. Most, but not all, of the complaints have been about inappropriate sexual relationships or nonconsensual sexualized touch.”

Reading the reflections of many older students about how the Kwan Um School changed in the 1980s and 1990s, I was struck by how many of them stressed the larger historical transition in American Zen from first-generation Asian founders (nearly all male monks) to second-generation American teachers. “Dae Soen Sa Nim was a very charismatic and powerful teacher,” writes Zen Master Bon Soeng. “His ‘just do it’ direction was so strong. During the early years of the Kwan Um School, he held most of the power to decide the direction and practices of our sangha, and we mostly followed.” Zen Master Bon Hae is more blunt: “In the beginning our model was more than a little authoritarian. People would let Zen Master Seung Sahn tell them who to marry or where to live. We put him on a very high platform; some of us felt he could do no wrong. All of us had a romanticized notion of *Zen Master!* which did none of us any good.” But she adds: “To his great credit, as he got older Zen Master Seung Sahn began putting more and more responsibilities on the people he’d authorized, not wanting the school to be so identified with him that his death or serious illness would cause an existential crisis.”

Several teachers wrote to me of how they were personally affected by these crises in the sangha, and profoundly shaped by the experience. “I was a member of a Zen center that was thriving, exciting, making plans,” writes Rebecca Otte JDPSN, “and sangha members—one by one—left the Zen center because of the inappropriate use of power by the guiding teacher. It taught me so much about the importance of not placing a teacher on a pedestal and of holding a teacher accountable for their behavior. As a new teacher, I’m acutely aware of how my behavior on and off the cushion impacts each person in our sangha. When I became a dharma teacher, I don’t think I really understood what I was doing until I turned around to face the sangha and did a prostration. In that moment, I understood that becoming a teacher was an act of compassion—to be present for the sangha and help in whatever way I could—not a goal to be reached.” Barry Briggs JDPSN adds this reflection on the teacher’s role: “What most students don’t realize is that, in the interview room,

they are actually the host, not the guest. The teacher asks, ‘Do you have any questions?’ and the interview goes from there. It’s alive! But mind makes it seem otherwise. And so power gets confused—teachers are granted powers by students. And teachers, like every one else, like power.” Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stanley Lombardo) puts it this way: “Teachers are no longer regarded as gurus, or much less so regarded, an attitudinal shift that in itself has resulted in a healthier relation between students and teachers.”

Claudia Schippert speaks for several writers who voiced concerns about the limits of the current ethics policy. “Our existing policy addresses what to do when boundaries are transgressed and harm is caused,” they write. “It does not address sufficiently what larger structural issues the school wishes to address, which values to pursue, or where the school and/or its representatives will commit to proactive social engagement that can correct existing imbalances in power and access among sangha members.” They add that “the current sole reliance on teachers for all decisions of the school is probably in need of revision in order to bring in sangha representation more intentionally, and in order to learn more about each other and respond to situations wisely.”

*The Kwan Um School in North America began as a school of students in their twenties and thirties who knew Zen Master Seung Sahn well and studied with him directly; but eventually—over the next fifty years—the school will be led by third- or fourth-generation teachers who weren’t old enough to study with Zen Master Seung Sahn or never knew him at all. How do you see the school changing as it passes to new generations in the same lineage?*

As Tim Colohan JDPSN writes, “This is the \$64,000 question!” Zen Buddhism in the 1970s was practiced almost entirely by monastics in East Asia and by a tiny number of Western converts; now Zen is an international tradition within the larger globalization of Buddhism. Zen played a large part in the development of the secular mindfulness movement and has permeated contemporary culture in ways large and small. At the same time, traditional monastic Zen in Asia is declining—particularly in Japan, where, by some reports, it is actually in danger of disappearing.

One question that inevitably arises out of this situation is, Does Zen outside of a monastic setting need to maintain its original practice forms? Many teachers in the North American sangha have long been concerned about whether the trappings of our practice (Korean chanting, robes, and terminology, for example) are unnecessarily alienating to potential students, and whether our sangha would be larger if it was more flexible about the practice forms outlined in the *Dharma Mirror*.

On the other hand, one of the distinctive aspects of the Kwan Um School is that our North American, European, and Asian sanghas remain tightly connected, and we have a home temple in Korea, Mu Sang Sa, where Kwan Um



students can connect to the origins of our tradition. Moreover, KUSZ remains intertwined with the Korean monastic tradition, which now extends far outside Korea. While relatively few North American teachers are monastics, the opposite is true in KUSZ's Asian Zen centers. In this way, there's more continuity built into the structure of the Kwan Um School than there is in other North American Zen sanghas that no longer have direct links to Asia.

Does this mean that KUSZ is a "traditional" Buddhist sangha? In the literal sense, yes: our practice forms, leadership, and teaching haven't changed much in fifty years. But this has to be seen in the context of Zen Master Seung Sahn's Zen revolution: the profound historical break with the existing Zen tradition that occurred when he (and other Japanese, Korean, and Chinese Zen masters) moved to the West to teach lay students in the 1960s and 1970s. The Kwan Um School still embodies the radical idealism of Zen Master Seung Sahn's message as put into practice in 1972, summed up by Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) when she writes: "Don't-know knows nothing about generations. Don't-know wakes us up to our Buddha nature, and the rest evolves as needed."

At the same time, Zen Master Soeng Hyang makes clear that the process of evolution is very real: "To me, little has changed," she writes, "except increased sensitivity to power dynamics and racial and gender issues." One of the clearest aspects of the school's present and future situation is a need to pay attention to how attitudes about race and gender shape the Kwan Um community. In the 1970s and 1980s, Buddhism in the United States was sharply divided between traditions practiced by Asian immigrant groups and new schools pioneered by "convert Buddhists," who were almost entirely white. In 2022, these categories have softened but not disappeared. Quite a few KUSZ students today are second- or third-generation Asian Americans or immigrants from Asia (or other parts of the world), and the younger generation of students is more racially diverse than the generation that founded the school.

Nevertheless, the North American sangha—and especially its leadership—remains overwhelmingly white. While there have been efforts to promote dialogue about

race and racial justice within the school, KUSZ Americas (the official name of the North American sangha) has no official policy regarding diversity, equity or inclusion, and visitors to the KUSZ website find no mention of these issues. Senior dharma teacher Christina Hauck writes that she is equally alarmed by the gender ratio among the North American sangha's newer teachers: In the past twenty-two years, she points out, thirteen men and three women (one of whom subsequently passed away) have become Ji Do Poep Sas. Many writers expressed to me a genuine concern that the Kwan Um School risks losing younger students to other Buddhist sanghas that are more explicitly oriented toward social justice.

Colin Beavan JDPSN who received inka in April 2022, writes, "I am among the first few teachers who never met Zen Master Seung Sahn. Ji Do Poep Sas have authority to teach only as long as they are attached to the school; but when my generation starts to produce Zen masters, things will get really interesting, because a Zen master has authority to go their own way. What will happen then? What will be the flavor of the teaching then? I really hope such teachers will stay in our community, but the community of what will be senior teachers will then have a whole different set of references. Also, most have us have a number of teachers, not just one. I think it will be more like jazz to our founder's score."

As a senior dharma teacher who first joined the school in 1994, I still recall the sense of awe I felt nearly thirty years ago when I first drove down Pound Round in Cumberland, Rhode Island, and saw, rising out of the drab fields of an East Coast suburb, Providence Zen Center's Peace Pagoda and dharma hall. The longer I study Buddhist texts and history, the more impressed I am with the strength and sheer bravado of "try mind" energy in the generation that founded the Kwan Um School. But the real question is, always: How can I help? What can I do? ♦

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*Senior dharma teacher Jess Row is a writer and member of the Chogye International Zen Center in New York City. His second novel, The New Earth, will be published in March 2023.*

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