

Primary Point



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PRIMARY POINT®
Kwan Um School of Zen
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2019 Musangsa Summer Kyol Che

May 19 - August 15

"When walking, standing, sitting, lying down, speaking, being silent, moving, being still
At all times in all places without interruption - what is this?"

Kyol Che is a time to investigate our life closely and see our true nature. Musangsa is a Zen temple in the heart of Gyeryong Mountain in South Korea where international monks, nuns, men and women gather together every summer and winter for the traditional 90-day Zen meditation retreat known as 'kyol che'. Kyol Che at Musangsa consists of a daily meditation schedule with Dharma talks, kong-an interviews and community life with the guidance of resident and visiting teachers. Join this unique opportunity to look closely at our lives and attain wisdom, compassion and skillful means to be of benefit for ourselves and this world.

Participation for monk and nuns - full 90 days required from May 19 - August 15.

For laymen & women : minimum of 7-days, up to 90 days.

Designated entry dates on Saturdays only :

May 18, June 1, June 15, June 29, July 13, July 27, August 10.

For application & information visit musangsa.org/english/kyol-che/

Musangsa ☎ +82 42 841 6084 info@musangsa.org

Zen Master **Dae Bong**
May 19 - August 15



Myong An Sunim JDPS
May 19 - June 15



Zen Master **Bon Shim**
June 15 - July 13



Chuan Wen Sunim JDPS
July 13 - August 15



Summer Kyol Che Providence Zen Center In Cumberland, RI

July 6 - August 2, 2019

Entry and exits are Saturday and Wednesday mornings 8AM

3-day minimum participation is required

Email: director@providencezen.org

Homepage for online registration: providencezen.org





Primary Point
 99 Pound Road
 Cumberland, RI 02864-2726 U.S.A.
 Telephone 401/658-1476
 www.kwanumzen.org/primary-point
 online archives:

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The Kwan Um School of Zen supports the worldwide teaching schedule of the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sas, assists the member Zen centers and groups in their growth, issues publications on contemporary Zen practice, and supports dialogue among religions. If you would like to become a member of the School and receive Primary Point, see page 31. The circulation is 1,800 copies.

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Cover: *Painting of a monk with a tiger.*
 Courtesy of Chogye International Zen Center of New York.
 Photo by Albert Lee.

Sesshin in Daily Life: Interview with Zen Master Dae Kwang

Pema Rinchen

Editor's note: Sesshin is the Japanese term for what in the Kwan Um school is called a Yong Maeng Jong Jin—that is, a short, intensive Zen retreat.

The world is upside-down today—it's always about *I, me* and *myself*, and that's not real practice. Zen is to find your true self, to help others.
—Zen Master Dae Kwang

Sesshin, which means “to touch the essence” or “touching the heart-mind” in Japanese, is a type of meditative training to help individuals to nurture their buddha nature. These are often intensive meditation retreats—typically with a daily routine where individuals devote time to almost exclusive zazen (meditation) practice with numerous 30- to 50-minute-long sessions of meditation (interwoven with short rests, meals, work, dharma teachings and meetings with a Zen master). With the numerous types of retreats available, many are practically spoiled with choices. So *For You Information* finds out more on the true meaning behind sesshin and how should one approach it from Zen Master Dae Kwang.

SESSHIN IN MODERN LIFE

For You Information: Based on today's modern living and people's busy schedules, how practical is sesshin?

Zen Master Dae Kwang: Well, how practical is birth, old age, sickness and death—human suffering? So, it's not about being “practical.” If the Buddha was going to be practical, he would have stayed back at the palace. There are things people do and there's always the motivation, the *why* to it. And there's always a reason why they do certain things. So, I wouldn't use the word *practical*. There are many practitioners and lay teachers who lead a busy life and they definitely find time to practice. Actually, practicing within everyday life is the most powerful way to practice. It's kind of like a tree raised inside a greenhouse: if the greenhouse ever goes away, that tree can be easily blown down. If that tree is raised outside, it will be strong and not so easily moved. So actually, the practice within daily life is the strongest.

FYI: So how do you recommend we do it, the practice within daily life?

ZMDK: I recommend you do it 24 hours a day. It means to remain aware and return to your true self all

the time, regardless of circumstances. The true self is not based on circumstances—it's always there, just that you don't know it. The Buddha said everybody already has it, just that they don't know that they have it. It never gets bigger, it never gets smaller, it never comes—it's always there. It's like the sun, always shining.

FYI: Does it become clearer when we take time off to do it? For example, some people would say they feel better after a meditation retreat . . .

ZMDK: It's not about feeling better, it's about finding out what you truly are. Everyone wants to feel better, but that's not getting an answer to the question of what we truly are. The Buddha did not want to feel better when he left home. So, the question goes back to birth, old age, sickness and death.

FYI: Today, where efficiency and inclination toward instant gratification govern our lives, we constantly ask “How does practice help me in the immediate circumstances?” People want to see results immediately. How do we make them see the need to see beyond—beyond practicality as an entry point to start practice?

ZMDK: That's ignorance—always wanting to have immediate results or needing to make it practical and efficient. It can be seen as “How does it help me?” Zen means find your true self, help the world. It's not about you. When it's about you, human beings suffer, because it always becomes about *me—I, my, mine* and *myself*. The world is upside down. It's always about “me” today, and everyone's concerned about themselves. For example, people are concerned about careers, cars, credit cards, condos, country club memberships . . . but these things will soon go away. And that's what the Buddha saw. The Buddha had all that stuff, but he left. He had the intuitive wisdom that soon these things are going to go away. So the question is, what do we really want and need?

In Zen, we call it the great question of life and death. What the Buddha faced, what the six patriarchs faced, what you and I face are all the same. All human beings are the same, irrespective of their possessions; it doesn't make any difference if you are extremely wealthy or poor, just like how the six patriarchs were very poor compared to the Buddha, who was very rich. But one



Photo: For You Information Magazine

thing that is the same, is this question of what is life and death.

FYI: It seems that it is easier to approach this big question of “What is life and death?” with the older generation. So, how do we approach this question with the younger generation?

ZMDK: I don’t know. Someday, it will just hit you. Like a child who doesn’t know about fire. You can tell him or her what fire is, what it means and about how it is hot when touched. But they wouldn’t know until they touch it, to have that hot and that *ouch!* feeling. You can say, “No, it’s hot! Don’t touch that!” But the child will never really know until he or she touches it. So likewise, someday, the younger generation will get it, someday when they “touch” that stove, match or fire, then they will get it—the inner wisdom before the thinking wisdom.

Sometimes, mothers intentionally allow the child to touch something hot—not hot enough to burn but hot enough to teach them the pain. So, every human being is like that: we need to experience it. But today, we are all raised as if we were in a cocoon—and Buddhists are raised in a Buddhist palace—because parents want their kids to be raised in good circumstances or have good and controlled situations to learn things or important lessons. But if you think about it for a second, it’s not possible in the end.

FYI: And this (controlled situation) is not ideal?

ZMDK: That’s right. It’s not ideal because your personal wisdom does not grow. You don’t know what that (hot) really means, and someday, you could get into

real trouble.

FYI: So, we should allow the time and experience to unfold naturally, for things and situations to unravel on their own?

ZMDK: Yes. As you can see, Buddha lived in this cocoon, and then he looked out from his cocoon. And this is the same for all human beings; someday, at some point in time, we would look out from the cocoon.

FYI: If that’s the case, then we all have our own path—our own fate or destiny. There’s a popular attitude toward this: the Chinese would say “Let’s *sui yuan*.” (随缘: a Chinese expression for letting nature take its own course).

ZMDK: Right, but this (breaking the cocoon) can come in all different forms; it can be reading a book, watching a television program, falling off the golf cart, breaking a leg . . . all kinds of things. Because old age, sickness and death is there. You might avoid old age by dying young, you may be pretty healthy and not get sick, but you cannot avoid the third thing—death. Circumstances of life are different for everybody because everyone has different karma, but all of the different circumstances would be teaching you. My teacher always said, “If you watch closely, life is always teaching you. But who’s paying attention?” So, go back to the practice of finding your true self.

Originally published in the Chinese periodical *For You Information* (佛友资讯). Note that the title is a pun: 佛友 means “Buddha Friend” but has a pronunciation that sounds like the English words “For You.” Their website, in Mandarin, is at <http://www.foryou.sg>.

Without obstacles, there'd be no point to effort and diligence. Without effort and diligence, there'd be no value to obstacles.

Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel)

1. Response to a Letter from Prison

ZMJU: Thanks for your letter. You mention that prison is nerve-racking, and that you're out of your element. If you didn't feel that way, you wouldn't be paying attention. Everyone I've met who's been in prison feels that too. Everything you have is taken from you, so you feel that nothing belongs to you anymore. And so naturally, you feel that you don't belong there, because nothing is yours. People often either go into survival mode, or they start to look for something more meaningful. You're using this circumstance to find something more meaningful, and so you will.

You're asking a fundamental question, but I don't know if you know you're asking it. If they take everything away from me, what is it that belongs to me that can't be taken away? This is the same question that all Zen practitioners encounter, regardless of their circumstances. People depend on their circumstances to take care of their feelings and needs. But when their circumstances change, their feelings also change, and they suffer for this. But what is it that is more fundamental than circumstances?

Buddhism talks about the human mind in terms of six realms of existence. This is just a map of the mind, not a real place somewhere outside of you.

- In the god realm, there is unlimited ability to satisfy whatever you want. But if you lose this ability, what then?
- In the asura or demigod realm, there is great power. Asuras spend all their time fighting and scheming. But if they lose their power, what then?
- In the human realm, there is the ability to see your fundamental nature and to understand cause and effect. But if you don't do that, what then?
- In the animal realm, there is just the wish to satisfy sensory needs. But if sensory needs can't be met, what then?
- In the hungry ghost realm, there is unlimited craving that can never be satisfied. The image is of someone with a mouth the size of a cavern, a belly the size of the ocean, and a throat the size of a pinhole. Endless unquenchable desire; only suffering forever.
- In the hell realm, below the hungry ghost realm, it is indescribable. More suffering than suffering. Everybody goes through all of these realms one way or an-

other throughout life, even throughout the day. These realms all have this in common: I want something, but I can't get it, so I'm suffering. It is not possible to not want, so what is this thing that wants? What are you? This question belongs completely to you. If you see into that, then you find something that can't be damaged by circumstances. Prison can take away your eyes, ears, heart and voice. Finding your true self can restore your eyes, ears, heart and voice.

There are four circumstances that you can use as practice. First, if you have a practice space, then you can practice with your body in that space. Sitting meditation regularly brings you to a place where you see and remember what is most fundamental. That's *body-practice*.

Seeing what is most fundamental doesn't depend solely, though, on what you're doing with your body. When you get up from your meditation space, your activity changes, so your metabolism changes, and your feelings change. Trying to keep the feeling you had when you were meditating is like trying to chase after the toothpaste after you spit it down the drain. Your teeth are already clean, so why mourn the toothpaste?

Next, then, is *mind-practice*. Mind practice allows you to find anchor points in simple routine daily activities and use them as practice. Folding laundry, cleaning, even walking—when you do these, do them wholeheartedly and completely. Then you learn to see your true nature in your daily ordinary activities.

Next is *life-practice*. All phenomena have their own particular shape, their own particular color, weight, light, sound, scent, texture, length. If you see your mind in all these phenomena, then that's life practice. Everyday mind is Zen mind. You will discover this as you apply yourself. You find your wisdom in the shape of things around you.

Student-practice is learning to see all sentient beings as our teachers. All beings have mind-light. If you see that in all beings, then you become their student. The mind of a student is diligent, concerned, caring, connected, generous, grateful and so on. This also belongs completely to you.

These are not four practices, just four circumstances you can use for practice. The more you apply yourself in each of them, the more you find your heart everywhere. Nobody can take that from you.

Please use these difficult circumstances as motivation to apply yourself. Scott has offered to remain in touch with you and to send you materials, and you can also write to me through him.

In the dharma,
Zen Master Jok Um, Ken Kessel

Response to a Letter after a Solo Retreat

ZMJU: Thanks for your efforts, diligence, and your obstacles. Without obstacles, there'd be no point to effort and diligence. Without effort and diligence, there'd be no value to obstacles. Naturally, your retreat did not align with your suspicions. How can you say you had no insight or transformations, just because they weren't what you'd thought they'd be. If you'd only learned what you thought you were going to learn, would you have learned anything? Where is the hindrance to encountering fully the ordinary?

Diligent effort makes you create bodhisattvas all around you. Please listen carefully to their teaching.

Take care,
Ken

3. Letter Forwarded from a Zen Center

Q: Is awareness like a flashlight, or a glowing ball of energy? Is the mind like a tree? Why does the mind not look or feel like a tree? I don't see a tree at all. The mind feels like a big empty ball. Where is the root of the tree? When I imagine the mind, I feel inside the skull, and move the awareness around inside my skull. By holding awareness on different parts of the brain, different feelings emerge over time: Happiness, Sadness, Sound, Music, Peace, Body, Heart Beat, Space, Wonder, etc. So, where is the root? Is the root a place or location? Does one cut the root or get under the root? Or merely watch the root? Does the tree contain energy? Is there a relation between emptiness and the tree?

ZMJU: You make an important point in your questions.

When you ask one question, it only generates more questions. That kind of questioning means looking for something. But there is no such something. If you look in that way, it cultivates the kind of suffering involved with looking for something that doesn't exist. That is why a central element of practice is Great Doubt. It's the doubt of not believing an idea or a person. It's doubt that recognizes that there is no thing to hold on to. So if you find yourself grasping something, doubt that. Then you find the freedom of not grasping. Then you see the nature of the questions you've been asking, and beyond that, you can see for yourself. So what do you see when you see for yourself? Please, come to our retreat and investigate this continuously and thoroughly.

4. Letter from a Student

Hey Ken,

How are you? I have a question about seeing ones Karma...I have been trading "only don't know" and Seung Sahn talks a lot about seeing your Karma and then being able to use it to help others. I also listened to Carlos podcast on sit, breathe, bow and he discusses the same thing. It all makes me want to move to a zen center to practice but this is not my Karma at this time. Being my children's father is my Karma and I guess I've always known being a dad was my Karma. I'm pulled in both directions though. How do I see my Karma when I don't have a practice group that I attend regularly?

About the compass of zen homework you gave me...don't know what I'm doing when I look at it as a painting. Fingers typing on an iPhone, email is a convenient way to say

Also, answer for homework, what did it mean when Joju put his sandals on his head and walk away? My sandals are in my head, goodbye Ken.

ZMJU: Thanks for writing. We just returned from out of state, so I'm getting to your e-mail now.

You have some typos in your e-mail. How did they

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happen to appear? What can you do about them? If you see that, then you understand seeing your karma. It's not a special thing, and karma is not hidden or mysterious. It's also not a thing. It's a way of talking about your tendencies, habits, character, affinities, thoughts, feelings, relationships and actions. How could this be hidden from your view? Setting up the right external circumstances is also not required to see your own karma. Wanting special circumstances to help you see your karma is a kind of karma to see through. If you want to honor your karma as a father, then learn to see your children's mind-light. That will be your best guide. They are most intimate with you. Because of that, you have the most opportunity to practice with them. Are they not your home sangha?

If you're not sure how to look at the *Compass of Zen* as you'd look at a painting or a landscape, then spend a week first looking at paintings and landscapes. Then you'll see more easily what this means. You're already very good at looking at the ocean, so you have something to go on.

Regarding Joju—please take your sandals out of your head. There's a place where they do more good.

Take care,
Ken

5. Correspondence with a Student with Questions for a College Paper

Q: What is peace?

ZMJU: What are you? If you find your true self, then you find peace.

Q: What is forgiveness?

ZMJU: Don't eat toxic mind food. Greed, hate and delusion poison the mind.

Q: What is compassion?

ZMJU: All sentient beings are your teachers. Perceive their mind-light and be guided by it.

Q: What is the importance of compassion and forgiveness concerning oneself and others around them?

ZMJU: Don't make self and others. Then you see your true nature everywhere.

Q: What methods do you use to teach people to implement these qualities in their lives?

ZMJU: These qualities only come to life when you find that they already reside in you. Meditation practice is body-practice—intentionally making a time and space to be fully with your own nature without being seduced by mind-hindrances helps you anchor in the mind-ground. Finding this mind-ground in simple activities—grooming, folding laundry, cleaning, walking; things that don't require figuring out—can be used as practice anchors throughout the course of the day. This is mind-practice. Recognizing the shape of circumstances around you and following its flow is life-practice. Eat when hungry; sleep when tired; know how to give and how to receive. Then seeing that all sentient beings are your teachers is student practice. The mind of a student is generous, grateful, curi-

ous, engaged, kind, receptive and responsive. Finding a guide for this is very important.

Q: What is the process one goes through to accept forgiveness?

ZMJU: Why would someone reject forgiveness?

Q: How does a community prosper when its citizens have a compassionate and forgiving nature?

ZMJU: Buddha taught that a peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful village. A peaceful village makes a peaceful country. A peaceful country makes a peaceful world.

Q: Thank you again for your time and consideration

ZMJU: You're welcome. Please, if you have time and interest, come and experience practice with us.

6. Question about Becoming a Dharma Teacher

Hi Ken,

We are planning to have a precepts ceremony here soon and I have some comments and questions about making the commitment to transition from dharma-teacher-in-training (DTIT) to an official dharma teacher (DT). Lots of thinking! Here we go . . .

1. I have been a DTIT for some five years. Originally I thought that, well, "I already teach formally and informally and with sincerity, to the best of my ability. Why do I need a special robe or hierarchical position to confirm this? How will you give me what I already have?" And so I did not pursue acquiring a dharma teacher's long robes.

2. Later I thought, "becoming a DT is a valuable credential, and since I have completed many of the required steps already, I have earned this credential and I WANT IT." So I stated my intention to pursue acquiring it.

3. Now, I am of a different mind, and the path is not clear. You gave instructions to study the Platform Sutra in detail, and to look at and perceive the original *Compass of Zen* as one would with a piece of art. While I have made some strong effort, I have not been 100 percent diligent with either since our last communication. And I have not been in close contact with you regarding my progress.

You said in your last dharma talk in Gainesville (paraphrasing here) that we have a choice: either "Don't make anything!" or "Make everything, but pay very close attention!" Thank you for that teaching.

ZMJU: Thanks for sharing your reflections. I have a brief response.

At the end of your letter, you said, "We have a choice: either 'Don't make anything!' or 'Make everything, but pay very close attention!'"

That belongs to you. If you see how that applies to your questions, you see how long robes support your life, your direction, your practice and all beings. If you don't see that, then even the finest clothes and the best situation won't be a path out of suffering. I encourage you to look at this carefully. ♦

On Being a Student

Editor's note: Reflecting on my being a teacher, it occurred to me that it has deepened my appreciation of being a student. We asked our teachers to contribute some reflections on the experience of being a student. Here are three responses.

The world is full of suffering. How can it be stopped?

Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

I don't really think of Zen students or Zen teachers. I think of Zen practitioners. We are all practitioners, whether we practice a lot or a little. Whether as a student or a teacher, our job is to practice. For those of us who are laypeople, we will sometimes be able to practice a lot, and sometimes only a little. But we need to keep practicing. As students, that is the biggest gift we can give our sangha. As teachers, that is the bone of teaching. But how do we encourage each other?

I was going through the Kwan Um website and came across a letter that Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) wrote to her sister in 1978, a year after receiving inka but long before she was Zen Master Soeng Hyang. She was about to sit a 100-day retreat, and her sister wanted to know why. Bobby wrote, "The world is full of suffering. How can it be stopped? Every human being has a seed of compassion and wisdom that must be very carefully nurtured. It is our responsibility to find this seed and do everything we can to make it grow.

"First, you must believe that you have this seed. Then you must ask yourself with all the strength you have, 'What is this seed?' If you truly search for it, you will understand that everyone is just like you. Everyone has it. You will have no more desire for yourself; you will only want to teach everyone how to find their seed.

"Enlightenment is believing in yourself. Enlightenment is finding your seed. But your job is not over yet. Your mind must become strong enough to be totally wise and compassionate moment to moment in any situation."

So that's what we need to do: find that seed and nourish it to flower into compassion. To see this seed in others so that, without our having to say anything directly, their own seed is encouraged to flower.

That's what Zen Master Seung Sahn was like. He

didn't have to say it directly, but it was clear that he really believed in us. And that's what we have to offer each other: to really believe in each other. To believe in our don't-know mind, our strong center, our direction. To believe in our Buddha nature: yours, mine, everyone's. To me, that's the essence of being a Zen student: practicing and nourishing that seed in ourselves and in everyone else.



Photo: Courtesy of Kansas Zen Center

My Teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn

Zen Master Gu Ja (Namhee Chon)

My life seemed quite OK from the outside while I was a young student. But deep inside of me I felt a sense of disorientation, confusion and the meaninglessness of this life. I believed that there must be a person or a book that could reveal to me the one hidden truth. And once I knew of this truth, my life would change for the better. I devoured all the books that I could get into my hands.

Like an Indian sage who climbed onto the roof of his house and called for the students to come to him, I called intensively and sincerely for a teacher. I went to

India several times to find a teacher. There I met some teachers. The first time I took dust from the feet of a teacher and put it on my forehead—as was the custom in India—I was overwhelmed with joy. It was the very first time I deliberately put down my ego and pride. It was only then that I noticed that my ego and pride could have been a burden for me for long time.

After some years of traveling and searching for the one good teacher, I was staying for a while in a Tibetan monastery. While there, by chance I came across one of Zen Master Seung Sahn's books: *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. Since Zen Master Seung Sahn was of the same Korean origin as myself, and the book gave me the impression that he was a strong and clear teacher, I yearned to meet him soon. Very soon after, I became acquainted with practice in the Kwan Um School of Zen. Out of the blue, Zen Master Wu Bong, whom I met only briefly during a retreat, called me and Roland from America and asked if we could organize a retreat in Berlin with Zen Master Seung Sahn. Then Zen Master Seung Sahn actually came to Berlin, as if he'd heard me calling out to him.

To be honest, my first encounter with Zen Master Seung Sahn did not convince me of much. My idea that the right teacher will immediately cast a spell on me did not come true. So I kept checking him, his teaching, his speech and his actions for years. In that case, my checking meant to compare the teacher with my idea of perfection. Disillusioned that I could ever learn from him the one truth, I asked him one day if he could recommend a book that would show me the truth, or if he knew where I could go to learn it. Zen Master Seung Sahn only shook his head while making a clicking sound with his tongue: an obvious sign of disapproval. His reaction left me feeling ashamed. From that point on my focus shifted slowly into silent meditation in order to look for the truth in my mind, rather than from outside.

Several times during retreats, when I was suffering miserably from pain caused by my mind and body, Zen Master Seung Sahn told me, "You look good!" I remember that after hearing it each time, I would run into the bathroom to check what he possibly could have seen in me except the apparent tiredness and mental pain. Was there anything that is not affected by any kind of circumstances and stays clear all the time? If he could see it even though I could not, still there was hope and solace for me that I would see it by myself one time.

One day, upon seeing Roland and me and knowing that we had just returned from our trip to India, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked us, "How was India?" Before I could finish the sentence "There is so much suffering in . . ." he strongly said "Bullshit!" and simply walked away. It was as if I had suddenly received a strong blow

on my head. I felt so hurt and upset by his saying that. My strong emotion pushed me to sit meditation intensively day and night many long hours a day for several months. Zen Master Seung Sahn's words and actions always had a big impact on me, whether they were gentle or harsh. They worked as a compass that pushed me to one direction—don't know. My trust in his teaching was uncompromised, despite my intermittent emotions and checking.

I had many opportunities, while I stayed in Korea for seven years, to attend the dharma talks given by Zen Master Seung Sahn in the dharma room at Hwa Gye Sa Temple every morning at 8. His health was in bad shape then. It took a long time for him to walk up all the stairs to the dharma room in the top floor of the building. And once he got there it took a long time until his breath calmed down and his sweat dried. Seeing the Zen master gasping for breath always made me sad and worried about him. I was often close to tears. Regardless of his condition and situation, he gave himself completely to teach us, nonstop. My gratitude to my teacher now leads to my commitment to follow his footsteps.

My dearest memory of my teacher is also the sweetest one. It must have been my last interaction with him, since I left Korea soon afterward.

On one sunny day on the temple grounds of Hwa Gye Sa I saw Zen Master Seung Sahn in the distance, standing in front of the big dharma hall. At that time he did not speak much due to his health. He beckoned me to him, and I almost ran there. He took out of his monk's jacket a small candy and gave it to me with a big smile, like a father would to a small child. I thanked him silently with a deep bow. The candy was very sweet, and this sweetness has firmly merged with the memory of my teacher.

Letting Go of the Coin

Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN

We may like or dislike the experience of being a student, but actually this doesn't matter. During my very first retreat at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Korea, we had a formal breakfast together with all the monastics of the temple, and newcomers were instructed to come forward on the first day and ask the monastery seniors "Please teach me." This can be a bit confusing for a person who was conditioned in the West. But putting the cultural differences aside, in fact "Please teach me" means *being a student*.

In the West and in the East too we really like to choose. We want to choose what we want to learn and from whom we want to be taught and, most important, when or when not. Coming home from a stressful working day, do we prefer to choose a glass of wine or switch



Photo: Courtesy of Namhee Chon

on the TV instead of what's already here in this very moment? Do we not want to stop and look at what's right there? Do we prefer to cover it up with whatever is at hand, wanting neither a teacher nor a student to appear? At these moments there is "Please don't teach me."

However, when we meet with each other the idea of student and teacher can get in the way. Often we experience this with our relationships: When arguing with our wife, husband or friends about something, what is it that's in the way? Is there an idea of how a person should be or has always been? Or an idea of how my marriage or my relationship should be or shouldn't be? A look or a facial expression can be enough. How is it with my student-teacher relationship? All of a sudden, we don't see each other directly anymore—we only see an idea. At that moment there is no *Please*, no *teach*;

there is only *me*. Can that be seen?

On that retreat in Korea there was a strong desire to learn and to find out, ideally as fast as possible. When we're trying really hard to understand something, usually two results appear as a consequence: Most of the time, we don't understand it. We try with our whole being but we just don't get it. That triggers something inside, and with it comes something like "I'm worthless" or "I'm never going to get it."

The other result is that we finally do understand it and that triggers something inside too: "I've done that really well" or "That was not bad."

Usually we prefer the second result. However, aren't both of them just two sides of one coin? So often we are just flipping this coin from one side to the other side, in the illusion that this is progress. We love to run after these coins or try to make them go away. Can we stop both trying to accumulate them and trying to reduce them? Then what is it that remains?

Back then at Hwa Gye Sa I had a work assignment to brush the courtyard with a broom in a curved shape so it would make a particular pattern. At that time I really wanted to get teaching from Zen Master Seung Sahn, who was always coming in the morning to comment on one of the kong-ans and then answer students' questions. I challenged myself to find a question that would combine all my questions. So finally while working with the broom I thought I had found the question that would sum it all up for me. On the next morning after commenting on one of the kong-ans, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked if there were any questions. I asked him, "Why do you believe in Buddhism?" He said, "Me, I don't believe in Buddhism. But I ask you, 'Who are you?'" I answered "I don't know." He said "Only keep don't know. That is Buddhism."

When a question is answered—or in this case, for me it felt more like it was swept away—what happens? Are we back in the habit of flipping the coin from one side to the next? Or can it be left aside without touching it?

After the weeklong retreat my brother and I talked about the experience of sitting a retreat for the first time and how it felt. When you leave the retreat you see, hear, taste, smell and feel differently. I remember saying to him that for me indeed it was a strong experience, but I don't know if I really want it. Why is that? Is there fear of letting go of the coin? What are we afraid of losing?

We say the true teacher is always in front of us. That actually means the true student is always inside. These two are never separate. Where is the true student right now in this very moment? Where is it? No matter how much we try to run away from it or cover it up, eventually it will bubble up again. Being confronted with a situation that hits us, suddenly—it happens real fast—here it is. Helping us to look freshly, to find out, to open, to learn, to be alive.

Hope we all only keep true student, finding the true teacher from moment to moment and help this world. ♦

*‘When big, it swallows the universe.
When small, it passes the eye of a needle.’*

Interview with Ji Am Gosanim at Mu Sang Sa Temple, September 24, 2017

Editor’s Note: Ji Am Gosanim lived with Zen Master Seung Sahn during the time DSSN stayed in Japan, from 1967 to 1972, when DSSN moved to the United States. (Zen Master Seung Sahn is also referred to as DSSN, which stands for “Dae Soen Sa Nim,” meaning “Great Zen Master.” “Gosanim” is an honorific title for a Buddhist layman, the female equivalent being “bosanim.”) Recently Ji Am Gosanim offered a statue of Zen Master Seung Sahn to Mu Sang Sa Temple.

Question: When did you return to Korea from Japan?

Ji Am Gosanim: I returned in the 1990s. I went to Japan in the 1960s, so I lived there for about 30 years.

Q: We would like to hear your story.

JAGSN: I can give you the account of how Zen Master Seung Sahn (DSSN) ended up going to Japan, how he lived there, and what kind of activities he did until he left for the United States. He went to Japan sometime between 1967 and 1968. Before that the most important event was the normalization of the diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan in 1965. It took almost 11 years to achieve normalization of diplomatic relations. The reparations for 36 years of occupation were about \$3.6 billion (in 1965 dollars). But Japan was uncooperative and the talks did not proceed well. At that time the Korean and Japanese governments were arguing. In this context, what DSSN did was an important event. There is no record of it in Korean history, but DSSN did a great thing. During the 36 years of Japanese occupation, hundreds of thousands of people were killed. In Seoul about 4,000 remains of Japanese occupiers were found. DSSN gathered them in the dormitory of Hwa Gye Sa Temple and wrote a letter about it to the Japanese prime minister. A delegation came from Japan to collect the remains. At that time DSSN was still using his original dharma name, Haeng Won, and Japanese newspapers reported about him and this event. They were very thankful to this

Korean monk. The Japanese political right wing had been saying that Japan had built many railroads and roads in Korea and thus should not pay any war reparations. But after this event, a \$700,000 payment arrived. Consider that at the time, the gross Japanese export was at around \$2 million, so this was a lot of money. But back home, DSSN did not talk about it. He was really wise. Even at Hwa Gye Sa people didn’t know. He then went to Japan

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Photo: Won Hye Sunim

to make a Chogye-order Zen center, but he had no money and no personal connections.

Q: He was a monk, so people didn't make this connection with politics. Why did you go to Japan in the 1960s? People were returning to Korea at that time.

JAGSN: I was born in Japan. When I was three years old, I returned to Korea. I was living in a temple until I was 19. I was a disciple of Ko Am Sunim originally. I wanted to study Japanese Buddhism, so in 1962 I smuggled myself to Japan on a ship. I met DSSN around 1967 in Osaka. My older dharma brother was in Osaka, so when I went to visit him at home, DSSN was there. I learned he had made a temple in Tokyo, so I got the address and followed him. From the very beginning I decided I had to study under this man. Since then I worked under DSSN as his cook, driver, secretary and so on, as well as the temple secretary. In 1972 he went to the United States, after having spent about four years in Japan. Some in the Japanese Buddhist world and political world tried to help DSSN. One day we went with our guests to a restaurant. The owner recognized DSSN because he had seen his picture in the newspaper. So he came and bowed to him. At that time I realized there were many things I did not know about DSSN, and I was impressed by his achievements.

In 1969, a conference of Buddhist leaders was held. Baek Seong (Bai Sheng) Sunim (chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association) came from Taiwan. The leaders of five Japanese schools came together and held a friendship conference. Tan Ho Sunim, Pop Soeng Sunim and others came from Korea.

Q: The conference was held at DSSN's temple?

JAGSN: Yes. DSSN decided the dates and sent out invitations. Just to give you an idea of how influential the five schools were, the Rinzai, Soto, Obaku, Jodo and Shin schools each had more than 8 to 10 thousand branch temples in Japan. And unlike Korea, they do not include shamanistic shrines in those numbers. In Japan the branch temples would often have 500 or even 1,000 *pyeong* [1,650–3,300 square meters, or 17,750–35,500 square feet] in the city centers, not in the mountains. So the leader of a school has quite some authority.

Q: The place must have been too small for such an event.

JAGSN: Yes, it was so small that the disciples could not come in. Only the patriarchs came in.

Q: What about the program?

JAGSN: They just talked. We didn't have money for anything fancy, but it was very friendly. Just the fact that DSSN contacted these people and they came shows how much they accepted him. Remember, he was a young monk in his forties, and they were patriarchs in their sixties and seventies. When the patriarchs moved around, they came in fancy foreign cars. They even had bodyguards. So when a patriarch of a Japanese school moved,

it was quite a sight, like when a prime minister moves in Korea. One couldn't even get close to their cars.

So only the patriarchs entered the Buddha hall. They recognized Tan Ho Sunim even though he was not that well known. I saw him for the first time. He lived on Odaesan Mountain in Korea. He was wearing sunglasses and, although he was small, he was robust. He was a scholar of Chinese and had memorized all the Tripitaka [the Buddhist canon].

Q: The Japanese patriarchs knew Tan Ho Sunim?

JAGSN: Well, no, but here they greeted each other. He wrote a commemorative calligraphy. I prepared the ink and paper for him. They asked him to explain what he wrote. So he said: "When big, it swallows the universe. When small, it passes the eye of a needle." When translated, the patriarchs all put their palms together and said, "We have heard a great dharma talk." I don't know if these patriarchs were enlightened, but seeing their admiration, I thought they needed to practice more. The calligraphy was packed in a cypress box and they received it as a commemorative present. They treated it as a treasure. Even if you take it out in a thousand years, it will be the same. It is the best way to keep such a thing. They would wear gloves when touching it, holding their breaths and wearing masks when looking at it. So Tan Ho Sunim gave a historical treasure. He received a promise of help for spreading Korean Buddhism.

Q: What did they talk about? Monks came even from Taiwan. What were the topics?

JAGSN: It was the first meeting of Buddhist leaders from Korea, Japan and Taiwan, so the point was to make friends. The purpose was to put efforts together to keep the buddhadharma for future generations.

Q: No one came from mainland China, right?

JAGSN: At that time they could not come because of the Communist regime. Bai Sheng Sunim was a bit unconventional. In Taiwan he was regarded as a living Buddha, so in Tokyo he would stay in the best hotel. And wherever he went, his disciples would come a day before and take care of him. Our temple was very poor. The boiler broke down, so there was no warm water. It was winter, but in Japan there is a thing called *kotatsu*. It is a table with a heater underneath, so you can at least keep your feet warm. The Japanese would spread a blanket and cover their legs. It was a tatami (straw mat) room, so it was not cold. At the washbasin, we would heat up the water, seat Bai Sheng Sunim in a chair and wash his feet. We were sorry he could not even take a shower. But he still said he was thankful.

Q: How old was he?

JAGSN: Quite old, around 70. We made a connection with him by washing his feet. He smiled, as if he were thinking, "What a temple!"

Q: He was such a figure in Taiwan. He did not stay in a hotel?

JAGSN: They must have had a good connection with DSSN. So even in uncomfortable conditions, he said “I’ll sleep here today to take part in the conference tomorrow.”

Q: Were there any Korean lay practitioners or supporters?

JAGSN: During the war there were no Korean temples, so how could there be any lay supporters? There were lay supporters from Japanese temples. DSSN attracted lay supporters, but they would not bring monetary donations, as in Korea. There were no chanting ceremonies, no Kwan Um school, no system. So no money.

Q: How did you manage financially?

JAGSN: It was hard. Byeok Am Sunim was the chairman of the board of directors at Dongguk University. So I am not sure, but I suspect that he helped a lot. He came often.

Q: You were in charge of the finances, right?

JAGSN: Yes, I was in charge of the housekeeping. I would get a few thousand yen and go to the market or pay the electricity bill, errands like that.

Q: DSSN did not give regular dharma talks at that time, did he?

JAGSN: No he did not, he could not.

Q: So what kind of activities did he do?

JAGSN: He was out a lot, meeting Japanese leaders, members of Parliament, taking part in events. He attended many Japanese Buddhist assemblies, he lectured a lot.

Q: He spoke Japanese well, right?

JAGSN: In the beginning so-so, but later he spoke it well.

Q: His high school was . . . ?

JAGSN: He graduated from Pyongyang Industrial High School.

Q: That was a well-known high school at that time, right?

JAGSN: He graduated from the department of electrical engineering. During the Pacific War (World War II) he would make shortwave radios and pass information about the Japanese army’s situation to the independence fighters. Then he got caught. The police gave him a hard time. He was imprisoned for about a year. He was a young student, so probably in the end they were lenient. Otherwise he would have been executed as an independence fighter. [*Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* mentions this incident: he narrowly escaped a death sentence. —Ed.]

Q: Did he have diabetes already at that time?

JAGSN: Yes, he would inject insulin at every offering [meal]. He was also taking medicine. In this respect I couldn’t help him much. I had my own body issues. We lived so poor, I had problems with my stomach and got motion sickness whenever I rode the bus or subway.

Q: So you lived alone, with no family.

JAGSN: Yes, I went alone to Japan in 1961 and was in Tofuku-ji Temple of the Soto school. I went wearing lay clothes. I couldn’t speak Japanese. There were Chinese

characters on the temple gate, and there was a guard. He was surprised I came from Korea. He suggested I live together with them. He told me to wait and he went inside. So I waited some twenty or thirty minutes. He came back and told me to follow him.

Q: Did you get Japanese monks’ robes?

JAGSN: No. I wore lay clothes. They offered me Japanese-style monks’ robes. There was the patriarch of the temple; he held an important position, stayed in a building as big as the Buddha hall. There was a waterfall behind.

Q: Tofuku-ji Temple has a thousand-year tradition.

JAGSN: The patriarch sat all the way in the back, he looked so small. Following the abbot and head monk, all bowed three times and sat down. He was very still. Was he looking at me or did he close his eyes? I do not know. He sat still for about ten minutes. Then he gave orders. I didn’t understand Japanese, so I didn’t know whether he accepted me or not. Then someone showed me a room and the showers and gave me clothes. They really took good care of me.

Q: How long did you spend there?

JAGSN: I lived there for about a year. I didn’t speak Japanese at that time, so one would laugh at how I ended up living in a Japanese temple. In Kyoto I got on the circle line subway and just went round and round. I had no place to go and no money. The announcement said “Tofuku-ji,” so I thought that is a temple of good fortune and got out. [*Tofuku-ji* means Temple of Eastern Good Fortune. —Ed.] When I got there I saw a big temple at the foot of a mountain. So I went to a barbershop and got my head shaved. They would not accept anyone with long hair. Tofuku-ji is a temple of the Soto school, a Zen temple. For generations they have also been appointing the abbots of their subtemples all over Japan. In Kyoto I had to attend a Buddhist university. Then I had to sit Zen at Tofuku-ji for a year. This was a part of my course to get my license.

Q: How old were you then?

JAGSN: I was 19. So I had no fear. I was young and “carried the Buddha on my back” as I went around. I didn’t know anything, didn’t speak the language, but still went there. We did eight hours of zazen a day, two hours at a time, four times a day. After about two months I could speak a bit of Japanese. I saw they graduated from Buddhist universities and sat zazen. During free time they would call their wives. They were this kind of monk, they all seemed like they were married. They had to keep the family line, being the oldest son of a monk who has a temple, so in order to get the license to be an abbot, some of them were sitting zazen against their will. My room was next to the head monk’s room, and he liked me. I used to attend a village school, so I knew Chinese characters a bit. He looked at my handwriting with admiration. I had studied the *Myungshim bogam* [*Mingxin baojian*: a collection of Chinese classics. —Ed.] and memorized about

two thousand Chinese characters before going to Japan [Japanese uses Chinese characters along with two phonetic alphabets.] So comparatively I knew enough Chinese characters. Later I could speak Japanese.

When the head monk graduated and went home, he suggested I go with him. At home he had a beautiful temple with no successor. He was a bit older and was looking for a successor. He said he would recommend me to a university in Kyoto and send me there and arrange for a marriage and Japanese citizenship. My ears perked up. But then I thought about Ko Am Sunim's intentions. I came to practice, not to become a Japanese person. So I refused. He was upset, saying it was a waste. So there was this episode. Then later I got to meet Seung Sahn Sunim.

Q: How was it when Seung Sahn Sunim left?

JAGSN: He said he decided to spread the buddhadharma in America. To me he said I should continue my practice in Japan. Later I cried. It was as sad as losing my parents.

Q: Why didn't you go together?

JAGSN: I wrote a letter to Ko Am Sunim, asking whether I could study with Seung Sahn Sunim. He said I should practice with Haeng Won Sunim (Haeng Won was Seung Sahn Sunim's original ordination name.) and listen well to his teaching. I was so glad I wept when I received that letter. I wasn't sure he would let me study with another teacher.

Q: What was the impetus for his going to the United States?

JAGSN: In Japan he lived OK, he was quite busy.

Q: I heard there was a Korean businessman who invited him to the States?

JAGSN: I don't know whether anyone contacted him. He didn't just suddenly decide to go; it was telepathy. He got on the plane and next to him sat a Korean professor, who became his disciple by the time the plane touched down.

Q: I also heard lay people supported him in running a meditation hall in Japan?

JAGSN: As far as I know, there were about three. One in Kyoto and two in Tokyo, who would support him financially. When we had no food, he would make some phone calls and someone would wait at the market and give us a ride, maybe that much.

Q: In those days even Japanese people had a hard time, right?

JAGSN: The economy was developing remarkably. When I arrived in 1961, the conditions were difficult, but in a few years, they developed a lot. When I first went to Osaka, I went around on a bicycle and there were no cars or even traffic lights. Then in a few years the traffic lights appeared, and suddenly things were changing with the rapid economic growth.

Q: Who took over the Korean temple in Japan?

JAGSN: There was a monk who lived with us for a year or two. But he said he wouldn't take over. His name was

Myo Gak Sunim; he was not a scholar but a sincere monk. There was a Rinzai monk who was helping us. He was a director of a hospital and a kind man. There were 200 Korean nurses working at his hospital. Myo Gak Sunim worked at the psychiatric ward as a guard. Had he just stayed in the temple he would have had no money. He also didn't speak Japanese, so where could he work? He spent a few years there. When Seung Sahn Sunim decided to go to the States, he called Myo Gak Sunim to be the abbot and take over. He had long hair, so rather than a Chogye mission, it became a usual Japanese-style temple.

Q: But you still lived together?

JAGSN: I left. I never cared about money. I was even afraid of receiving monetary donations, so I deliberately worked to make money and earn my living. I put a Buddha statue in my place, but there were no supporters who would come and contribute; I only did chanting. Oddly enough, all I needed to eat somehow appeared. About six years ago I went to Tokyo to our temple. It looked the same as it had 40 years ago. There was no trace of any change.

Q: Wouldn't such an old house get torn down in a place like Tokyo?

JAGSN: It was not in such a bad shape. It is in an alleyway, but no one had touched it since I left. I knocked on the door, but no one appeared. They answered the phone, though. I was hoping to lay some old memories to rest, so I went there. But the monk said he didn't know me. I felt like he was not one of our people. The house had never been repaired, not even once. [A recent phone call revealed the current caretaker monk hasn't even heard of Seung Sahn Sunim. This is not so uncommon among Korean monks.]

Q: What was he doing all those 40 years?

JAGSN: How could I know? I asked about Song Dam Sunim's visits to Japan. He started talking about his child and was not interested in talking to me. I think he became a layperson. The temple had about 70 *pyeong* [231 square meters, or 2,486 square feet]. When I was there it had a debt of about ¥10 million [about US \$91,000]. Myo Gak Sunim said he paid it off. It must have been hard. He died way too soon, and he worked too hard.

Q: At that time ¥10 million was a lot of money.

JAGSN: Right. A lot of money. There was no money, so the temple started with a debt. Just the building was about ¥20 million [about US \$181,000].

Q: Where did all that money come from?

JAGSN: I don't know. When I came there was already a Buddha statue. Seung Sahn Sunim found a room in an apartment house and just put up a sign saying it was a temple. When I met him, he already had it. He said I could come. And when I did he was glad. He had no cook or driver, and he didn't know the place. It seemed he'd been waiting for me.



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Q: Did he have all three meals in the temple?

JAGSN: He would have breakfast and leave.

Q: How did you do morning practice?

JAGSN: We did chanting. For breakfast we would usually have rice, soup and kimchi. We lived a poor life.

Q: There was a Korean temple in Tokyo and in Osaka?

JAGSN: The temple in Osaka did not belong to us. It was run by a disciple of Ko Am Sunim. It was originally set up by the Marine Corps. There was not much practice, and no sitting meditation. The monk was smart and knew how to talk well; I can't tell how deep he was though. He didn't know that much about sutras, but was very sincere.

Q: At that time there were not so many Korean temples around, right?

JAGSN: No, there were not. None in Tokyo and only the above-mentioned one in Osaka. So I also heard about that temple through word of mouth, looked for it and met DSSN. If it were not for that temple I would not have met him.

Q: But didn't monks who studied there during the Japanese occupation [1910–1945] settle down in Japan?

JAGSN: Dr. So Kyong Ju joined the Rinzaï school, but apart from him I do not know anyone who would study. It was hard enough to survive and have enough to eat, so who could think of studying at a university?

Q: When did you return to Korea?

JAGSN: In the 1990s. When I came I had no hometown, so it was hard. Now I live in an old house, I have some skills in my hands so I repaired it alone. Last month I collapsed from malnutrition. I was sweating a lot and not eating enough. I went to the hospital and got an injection, so now I am OK.

Q: Which nationality do you hold?

JAGSN: Here [Korea]. I am originally Korean.

Q: Please come to Mu Sang Sa. You live in Daejeon, right?

JAGSN: Yes, in eastern Daejeon. I have no money, so I have to earn a bit to eat and live. I live in a one-room apartment, and I do some repairs to earn money. The room is so-so. I bought an old room and renovated it. The rent is high. I put together two one-room apartments. One is the Buddha hall; that is how I live.

Q: You live an interesting life in spite of your age.

JAGSN: I am 75 now. In the next four to five years my energy will decrease. I may have to take measures, maybe sell something. One should leave enough money for one's funeral and cremation, so as not to burden others. So I have no worries. It seems I have lived a long life. In fact I couldn't take care of DSSN for more than about three years, but in my life that time was real. The rest was an imitation. I learned so much from him. We all know, there is no one in the world who would enlighten their disciples like DSSN did. Even with one word he would hit the mind and enlighten. There is no one like him. There are big monks now. The more I

listen, the more delusions appear.

It is no easy task to enlighten your disciples. Back when I was in Pusan, DSSN would call me up: "Tomorrow I will arrive in Yusong." I knew already that was a big deal so I would arrive in advance during the night. He was traveling around, looking for a site for a temple. We would sit over there in the tofu restaurant and he would give all kinds of talks. He also talked about the great monk Mu Hak and Guk-sa Bong [Peak of the National Teacher, above Mu Sang Sa Temple].

Yi Seonggye [posthumous name Taejo, 1335–1408, the first king of the Confucian Chosëon Dynasty, which lasted from 1392 to 1897] came to Mu Hak Sunim and named this peak Guk-sa Bong. Yi Seonggye wanted to name the peak right away, but Mu Hak Sunim said he must wait about 500 years. Then if someone built a temple here, many great people of the Way would appear, about 700. So we were eating tofu and he would talk like this. Could it be that Mu Hak Sunim came again as Seung Sahn Sunim? It is a great joke, because the time mentioned in the prophecy matches.

Q: When DSSN was in Japan, did he give dharma talks or organize retreats?

JAGSN: He did give dharma talks for several months, on the Tripitaka, the Lotus Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, and the Avatamsaka Sutra. He would draw the core and talk about it. He said, if you know this much, it is as if you studied the whole Tripitaka. So this is how we studied.

Q: So this later became the *Compass of Zen*, right?

JAGSN: It is enough to study the *Compass*.

Q: Did he study the sutras a lot? In the United States he would tell his disciples to do a lot of zazen, but it seems like he himself also studied the sutras quite a bit.

JAGSN: Any sutra you take, he would know it all. The Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, could not write his own name, but after enlightenment, there was nothing he would not know. The sphere of our true self is not in writing. Hyon Gak Sunim went to bow to the patriarch of Hae In Sa Temple one time. The patriarch asked, "I heard the rumor that you got enlightenment. How can you get enlightenment if you don't know Chinese characters and so you cannot read any sutras?" [Many Asians assume this of all Westerners. It is not generally known in Korea that sutras have been translated to Western languages. Knowledge of the sutras is seen as a prerequisite for any practice, let alone enlightenment. —Ed.] Hyon Gak Sunim said it was good they met and asked, "Did Buddha Shakyamuni know Chinese characters?" The patriarch said, "Go take a nap." It is true. He was trying to awaken the patriarch to something. But one should be careful when talking to such a person of the Way. The sphere of our true self is not in the Tripitaka at Hae In Sa Temple. [A national treasure in Korea, the temple houses the oldest complete Tripitaka carved in wooden printing blocks. —Ed.] The sphere of our true self has no rela-

tion to the Tripitaka. Yet we have to study the sutras. If we read sutras we get a notion about the sphere of our true self. Seen from this side it looks like this, from that side it looks different. Anyway, there are many descriptions and explanations, so that people can understand. I work in home renovation, physical work. I practice in the midst of work, moving and sweating. If one just sits quietly, trying to look for their true self, they just wonder, will my true self appear or not?

Such a person wonders, does my true self have a name? It has nothing. Originally true self has nothing, no name. It is like trying to catch a cloud. It is just like this, so what kind of “true self” is there? Well, if we try hard with a sincere mind, I feel earnestly that I have to repay DSSN’s kindness and grace. When I think about DSSN, I suddenly have almost tears in my eyes. [Interviewer can

confirm.] We absolutely need such a mind. We need to help so that DSSN’s dharma can flourish for hundreds or thousands of years. I feel such an obligation, to live to cultivate virtue and merit. To practice kindness. I have no money, but if I see a beggar I give. I experienced severe hunger when I was young. I would go a day or two with no food. So I know what it feels like. When I lived in Pusan, there were many homeless people. For about two years, up until about three years ago, I would make some food at home and give to 30 or 35 homeless people. It is not that I wanted to do this; it just happened automatically. Buddha’s mind is like that. I would always prepare a food for them in the morning, but now I am old, so I don’t do it anymore.

Things like this [feeding the poor] arise in the mind naturally. With time the poor people become like family, so [when they suffer] my mind hurts. This is our nature. If you do like this, your practice will go smoothly.

I don’t know whether this will be of help to you. Before going to Japan, DSSN collected those 4,000 corpses; just that was an amazing achievement. He moved the Japanese government.

Q: At that time did Japanese people know about DSSN returning the remains to Japan?

JAGSN: Yes, they did. It was in the Japanese newspapers. People would even recognize him and greet him. We in Korea don’t know about it, but in Japan he was famous (at that time). When I first requested his statue be made, the Japanese sculptor refused, saying that he couldn’t do it. We must understand, I did not ask for a statue of a bodhisattva, but a monk, so the Japanese people hesitated. Plus there are great monks in Japan, so why a Korean? So I told him how our DSSN did a lot for Korea–Japan friendship in the past. I said to look him up on the internet and to give me a call the next day. And he did. “This man did a lot for bridge-building between Korea and Japan, so I will do it.” The sculptor was Mr. Sakagami. ♦

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Photo: Won Hye Sunim

This interview was conducted by Pop Soeng Sunim and Won Hye Sunim in Korean. The Korean transcription was done by Ha Eunjo. The translation into English is by Won Hye Sunim.

Won Hye Sunim became a Kwan Um School of Zen member in 2001, and lived at the Prague Zen Center from 2003 to 2007. In 2011, he went to Mu Sang Sa Temple and in 2013 took monk’s precepts.

Everything Becomes Buddha

Zen Master Gu Ja (Namhee Chon)

From a dharma talk given during the Summer Kyol Che at Warsaw Zen Center on September 3, 2009.

As you just heard, my name is Muchak. When I got five precepts, I received this name, Muchak. *Mu* means “no” and *chak* means “attachment.” I was very proud of my name. At that time I checked very much: I checked me and I checked others. One teacher called me “Checking Woman.” At that time I checked myself.

I’m not so much attached to money, and not so much attached to sleep, or sex, or fame. I checked myself, and thought, “I’ve not so much attachment.” I thought I could give up everything, like this [*snaps fingers*]. And so I thought, this name is really good for me.

And then once I went to Korea and met a strong Buddhist woman. She asked me, “What is your Buddhist name?” I said “Muchak” and she immediately knew the meaning. Then she told me, “Your master must have reasons to give you this name.” I never thought of it from this viewpoint. So my ego got hurt.

After a while I noticed my mistake. There was so much “I.” “I can do this, I know this, I can . . .” Everything I, I, I, so big. Even if we give away our life and the whole world, but we keep hold of our “I”—nothing happens.

Buddha once said, when we look closely, all the origins or roots of our suffering come from this “I.” We have something to protect, to be nourished and to be praised. From that come the so-called five poisons: pride, jealousy, desire, hatred, ignorance.

But what is this “I”? Who am I? To find out what this is we come here together. Once in a summer retreat in America, in Providence, I sat and I got really lost in huge mountains of memories. You know already what it is like: you have lots of memories, and I saw lots of people whom I saw before, whom I loved, whom I hated, with whom I fought. Places I had been to, and wonderful experiences and bad experiences, all this stuff.

But somehow I could manage to come back this moment where I was sitting. So I looked at the floor and suddenly a question appeared to me: “This person, this person in my memories, is it still me? Is it still me who loved this person and hated that person, who did this and that?” And I must say “No.” I was no more this person. I could not say, “This is I, this is me.”

In this way I could see that this very person who asked this question, whether this person is me or not, soon this person will not be me. So I somehow got into a panic. Then “What am I? Where is this I?” I was kind of desper-

ate to look and find, to search . . . There was no answer.

Now on this day there was an interview. The teacher rang the bell and I went into the interview room. As soon as I bowed and took a seat, Do An JDPSN (who would later become Zen Master Dae Kwang) asked me “WHO ARE YOU!”

And all of a sudden I had to cry, I had to cry hard tears. There was no way to find out. After some time Sunim told me “shhh” and then said, “Listen!” And outside at that very moment a bird was singing. I was so happy! So first I was so sad, and at that moment he told me “Listen!” and then he said, “that’s all.”

The rest of that retreat I spent with hearing. Every sound, each sound I was hearing, was wonderful. The wind, birds, doors banging constantly. There was only this sound, this wonderful sound. It’s not only hearing. When we are really stuck, when we don’t know, when we have this don’t-know completely, then everything—whatever you hear, whatever you see, whatever you touch—everything becomes Buddha. Everything is like what it is. There is nothing to add, nothing to take away. Everything is OK.

So we sit. Many of you sat the whole retreat already, and some of us just for several weeks. We sit, looking, perceiving how the thoughts are coming, going, coming, going. This is actually all that we are doing. Our work during sitting time is to sit and watch as thoughts are coming and going. And don’t touch this; then the thought itself is Buddha.

There is no good thinking and bad thinking. There are thoughts. We don’t welcome them, but we don’t reject them. And so we sit, straight but relaxed. We just naturally watch, without manipulation, just relaxed. But the thinking, the sounds that we perceive are not that important, too. Our minds just reflect these things, but it comes and goes.

But one thing: we stay awake, aware of what is coming, what arises. And we let go, by itself. This awakening from moment to moment is very important. In this way we can be master of our house. We don’t get controlled by others, or by our mind.

So we don’t need to keep saying, “How may I help you?” All this is bullshit. This is only speech. If we, from moment to moment, awaken and be aware of what is coming, that is already a big help. So I hope we keep clear mind from moment to moment, save first ourselves from suffering, and at the same time others. Thank you. ♦



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I Wasn't Evaporating Anymore

Laura Nelson

The first time I entered a Zen center was in Austin in 2012. That was the year the Maya calendar predicted the world would end. And it did. My 28-year-old son killed himself that year. He and I had been planning on visiting the center together. Instead, I visited the Austin Zen Center three days after his death, and Ian's ashes are now mixing with the roots of the enormous live oak in front of the center—a live oak, I might add, that has since been ordained as a monk. That live oak is over a hundred years old. That center used to house a Quaker Friends community. Everything changes.

I have written a solo performance piece about losing my son to suicide, and my visit to the Austin Zen Center plays a prominent role:

*"Everything changes. Everything is connected.
Pay attention."**

*At the Austin Zen Center, where we went before
picking up Ian's ashes, there was a scroll with those
words on it. I'd never been in a Buddhist center
before, and never heard the Heart Sutra, so when it
gets to the part that goes "no eyes, no ears, no nose, no
tongue, no body" I can't breathe. I am evaporating.*

What I don't say in the piece—called "This Space"—is that in that center's practice the Heart Sutra is recited twice and that the second time around my reaction to the words had already, in barely a minute, shifted. I don't know to or from what, really. I just know that by the second go-around I wasn't evaporating anymore.

Back in Seattle, I looked for a Zen center near our home and found the Ocean Light Zen Center. It turns out my husband's much-admired former boss, Michael Schutzler, happened to be a senior dharma teacher there. It also turned out that the practice was Korean based; professionally, I teach French, Italian, and Spanish, as well as English as a second language to adults. Since 2007 Korean has become my "midlife crisis language." Everything is connected.

Michael and Korean were interesting elements, but they are not why I stayed. I stayed for reasons similar to why I've stayed and kept up a regular Alanon practice, and why—and only since Ian's death—I have studied acting: the call to be radically present in every moment. The call to pay attention.

I stayed and regularly practiced at OLZC despite the robes, language, chanting, despite the odd interviewing process. I stayed because of don't-know. When I learned that the Kwan Um School used don't-know as a fundamental, a core—perhaps the core?—practice tool, I was all in. Why? This is easy. Because after Ian's suicide, anyone or any system that attempted to tell me anything besides heartfelt, crystal-clear truths in that moment, or simply variations of "don't know," did not and could not pass my fake-news detector: "Really?" I might reply, hearing something that was clearly just opinion or platitude. "We don't know that." Examples of this exchange came up often around common statements meant to comfort recently bereft and grieving people, and eventually I determined to reply with a don't-know answer:

"He's in a better place now." *Maybe, but we don't know that.*

"Everything happens for a reason." *Maybe, we don't know. Everything that happens happens.*

"Life goes on." *Yes, life goes on, and death goes on too.*

Another unhelpful saying that is meant to be helpful surrounding suicide is "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem." I'd heard this before Ian died and hadn't thought much about it. Seemed pretty clear and accurate. After his death, though, it did not sit well with me; something seemed terribly off, askew. The statement may or may not be true—don't know—but if it is, it is just as likely that the inverse is also—and demonstrably—true: "Suicide is a temporary solution to a permanent problem." Suicide frequency is on the rise. The problem is permanent. Life is difficult. I haven't been practicing or reading

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* This has been called the Heart Sutra haiku, and was written by Jane Hirshfield as a definition of Zen Buddhism in seven words.



about Zen long enough to grasp exactly what to do with/about/for/on this, though I believe the concept of function comes into play. I want to know more about correct, helpful function.

My very first meditation practice experience happened in a yoga class in Toulouse, France. I was 42 years old and petrified. The instruction was to close our eyes and breathe; the sense of claustrophobia I felt was overwhelming—and hilarious: what could I possibly be afraid of, sitting there? I smiled and tried not to burst out laughing. Our teacher proposed saying *so* on the inhale, *ham* on the exhale, which she explained was Sanskrit [सो ऽहम्] and meant “ceci est” in French, or “this is” in English. I later learned that a more common translation of *soham* in English is “I am this.” This is, I am this: are they different or the same? Ha! Regardless, the question of what this *this* is soon arises: What is this? What am I?

During the dharma talk after the meditation that first time at the Austin Zen Center, Kosho Sunim, the monk, asked some questions: “Where are we?” “What time is it?” “Who are we?” He received answers to the first two. The third one, however, was met with silence. A lovely, full silence, that was eventually broken with an answer: “This moment.” I almost cried. Just this. This. What is this? Don’t know. Answers appear and disappear. The sensation of being able to hold, and feel held, within a great ebb and flow of questions and answers rising and subsiding moment to moment took my breath away—and gave it back to me.

“Don’t know” anchored me, grounded me at a time when I was essentially—figuratively, literally, viscerally—decomposed, evaporated, cloudlike. How is it possible for this practice to have anchored a cloudlike me? The answer is the same as the answer to the kong-an–like lyric/question from the *Sound of Music*, “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?”: “How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?”

The sensation of freefall I was feeling did not subside—my son was still dead, his ashes cooling before we picked them up to take them home—but my relationship to it had changed: What is this sensation of unfathomable pain, freefall, breathlessness, evaporation? I could “not know”; I could allow curiosity to guide me. I could learn to live with the question, the don’t-know. I could try, as

Rainer Maria Rilke once advised a young friend, “. . . to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.”

I took the ten precepts with the Kwan Um School in September 2018. I consider becoming a member and entering the KUSZ teacher training process similar to other training programs I’ve embarked upon: language teacher training; twelve-step program sponsor-sponsee instruction; peer-to-peer suicide loss survivor workshops; Seattle Police volunteer community chaplaincy coaching. These are a way to help me strengthen and deepen my personal awareness practices, to prepare me to be useful to others—to the sangha, to all the sanghas. This saving all sentient beings business . . . Glad it’s already done and all, but in the meantime . . . SHEEsh! It appears that there’s a lot of work to do. We all need all the help we can get, and to give all the help we can.

I have described myself as a Buddhist—a Student of Buddhism—as opposed to calling myself a Buddhist. It is true, or not far off, to view my relationship to language as an obsession; developing tools to use my obsession to benefit all beings would be swell. The name I was given when taking five precepts was Bon Shim, Original Mind. Ha! What was I before I had words? What will I be after they are gone? Don’t know.

Here are two haikus I’ve written in an attempt to distill my Zen journey thus far:

My son killed himself.
I evaporate, consumed
By pain. So—now what?

Maybe zen saved me.
Maybe not. Don’t know. Clear mind.
How can I help you?

Laura Nelson has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen since November 2012, primarily in Seattle at the Ocean Light Zen Center, where she took the first five precepts. In September 2018, she took the ten precepts at the Empty Gate Zen Center in Berkeley. Laura continues to teach ESL, French and Italian, perform her solo piece “This Space” about the loss of her son to suicide, and feed herself, her husband and their three cats, as needed.

Book Review

Why Buddhism Is True

By Robert Wright

Simon & Schuster, 2017, \$17.00

Review by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

In the beginning was—well, it's not clear when the beginning of the romance between Western notions of Eastern philosophy and Western notions of science began. By the 1970s *The Tao of Physics* and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* were on bestseller lists; in the 1990s the focus shifted from physics to biology, most notably ecology, neuroscience and evolutionary psychology. Over the last three decades scores of papers, books, conferences and videos have appeared on these themes. (Note that these concerns are quite different from the seemingly similar and even more popular subject of how meditation affects the body, including and especially the brain.)

This only partially reciprocated Western romance with the East has generally taken the form of noting parallels between Buddhism and contemporary science. These parallels can strengthen into a philosophical preference: for example, it can be argued that the language of Nagarjuna and/or Dogen provides a better framework for modern science, from quantum physics to neuroscience, than the language of Aristotle and Descartes.

Into this ferment steps Robert Wright. He has a different agenda. He wants to use neuroscience and evolutionary psychology to show that the Buddhist analysis of how things work is, as the title says, true. This is not entirely a surprise—all of his five books invoke evolutionary psychology, which apparently imprinted itself on him indelibly when he was an undergraduate at Princeton. He is, to quote from George Johnson's 1988 review of Wright's book *Three Scientists and Their Gods: Looking for Meaning in an Age of Information*, "determined to make sense of it all." Which is both a virtue and the problem for this book. He is going to make sense of Buddhism, and he will do it through science, especially neuroscience and evolutionary psychology.

Wright is a serious practitioner of full-blown Vipassana, with a strong daily practice, who has sat a significant number of longish retreats. One of the pleasures of this book is the candor with which he talks about his own practice, and his encounters with his teachers—one of whom, when he tries to engage her in conversation as a source for this book, tells him that she is not interested in these issues; she is only interested in liberation. He does not take the hint.

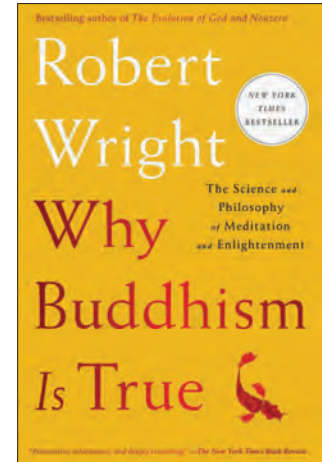
He is also a very smart guy, who has read and knows

how to clearly elucidate both Buddhist teachings (from early suttas to later commentaries) and scientific literature. In the best sense he is able to make sense of and clearly elucidate many difficult concepts: impermanence, no-self, co-dependent origination and the unreliability of our mental constructs. (This is where neuroscience really

comes in). He doesn't quite get emptiness right (not many people do)—he wants to pin it down to "things lack essence," which doesn't quite work; pinning it down to anything won't work. And his discussion of enlightenment seems misdirected.

Still, serious students of Buddhism can learn a lot from this book, because the science he cites is useful, and not as widely known in the Buddhist community as it should be. Consider, for example, Benjamin Libet's 1983 study in which the muscles of the hand begin to move before the brain has registered a decision. How better to elucidate what "human beings have no choice" might mean? (Wright actually uses this example to elucidate something slightly different, though.)

Rather than using these neuroscientific studies as illustration or metaphor, however, Wright is using them as proof: Buddhist notions do not stand on their own; they are *proved* by these studies. Buddhism is *explained* by evolutionary psychology. Although at times this approach disappears in clear explanations of both Buddhism and science, a steady argument begins about a third of the way through, when Wright introduces the notion of the modular mind, the mind as a patchwork of subselves, subroutines (my phrase, not his), some of which dominate some of the time, others at other times. This is why "no-self" is true, Wright argues: there is no self because there are many partial selves (modules) without a central control. These modules arise from the evolutionary process; humans with certain modules passed their genes on to offspring more successfully than humans without those modules. "We" (whoever that is) are usually the prisoners of these modules, in the sense that they tend to determine our behavior. So it is only logical that, toward the end of the book, he defines enlightenment as "tantamount to



a rebellion against natural selection,” that is, not being limited by the brain structures natural selection gives us.

The structure of his argument is, roughly, *this* [Buddhist concept] is explained by *that* [scientific concept]. These explanations miss important teachings. No-self is not just no-human-self. Enlightenment (or, if you prefer, awakening—Wright is aware of both translations of *bodhi*) is by its nature indefinable—not being limited by our brain structures is a side effect of enlightenment but not enlightenment itself. And while natural selection is as essential to biology as gravity is to physics, as with all scientific concepts it shape-shifts in its details as the science develops (consider, for example, the very recent field of epigenetics), so it is necessarily an unreliable foundation. (For an analogy, suppose someone in the eighteenth century justified the truth of Christian teachings by an appeal to Newtonian physics . . .)

Finally, there is his overarching summary:

If you want the shortest version of my answer to the question of why Buddhism is true, it's this: Because we are animals created by natural selection. Natural selection built into our brains the tendencies that early Buddhist thinkers did a pretty amazing job of sizing up, given the meager scientific resources at their disposal.

This is where his argument leads him. But it seems somewhat tautological—if we are animals created by natural selection, then everything we do can be explained by our being animals created by natural selection—just as, if we are humans created in the image of God, then everything we do can be explained by our being humans created in the image of God. And his conclusion is not only tautological, but it contradicts itself. Wright is not only aware of but emphasizes the Buddhist teachings that we don't really know anything, that our thinking misleads us, that we inevitably distort our reality. He knows that any theory will ultimately fail and is necessarily partial; he knows that our categories do not correspond to reality—he knows all of this, and then he reduces Buddhist teachings to a scientific theory about genes and their propagation.

So *Why Buddhism Is True* is a mixed bag. There's a lot to learn here about Buddhism, especially Vipassana, about neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, about Asian and European philosophy. You can learn a lot of other things too, because Wright pulls in relevant material from a wide variety of sources. But the task that matters most to him—to answer *Why is Buddhism true?* in precise scientific terms—seems, to me at least, to be intrinsically doomed, a contradiction in its own terms. ♦

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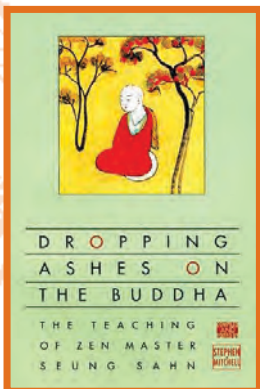


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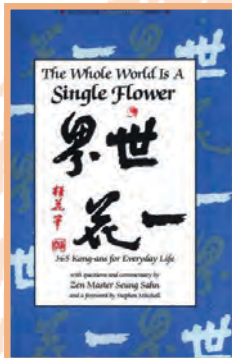
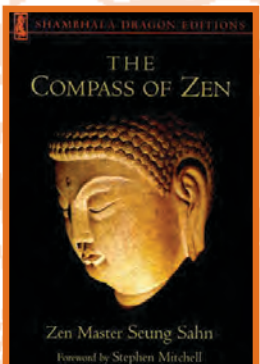
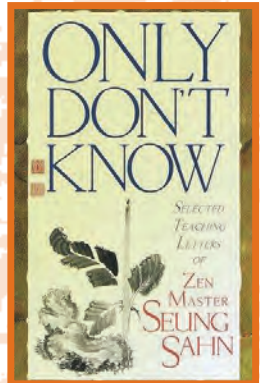
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cochisezen@icloud.com
<http://cochisezencenter.org>

28] **Myung Wol Zen Center**
Merrie Fraser JDPSN
Scottsdale, AZ
480-947-6101
fraser.mnoel@gmail.com

ARKANSAS

Little Rock Zen Group
Zen Master Hae Kwang
Little Rock, AR
501-661-1669
lucyhauer@gmail.com
<http://ebslr.org/kwan-um-zen>

Morning Star Zen Center
Zen Master Hae Kwang
Fayetteville, AR
479-530-1098
braylor@uark.edu
<http://morningstarzencenter.org>

CALIFORNIA

Dharma Zen Center
Paul Park JDPSN
Los Angeles, CA
323-934-0330
info@dharmazen.com
<http://dharmazen.com>

**Empty Gate Zen Center—
Berkley
Gong Mun Sa**
Zen Master Bon Soeng
Berkeley, CA
510-845-8565
info@emptygatezen.com
<http://emptygatezen.com>

**Empty Gate Zen Center—
Monterey**
Zen Master Bon Soeng
Monterey, CA
831-241-3084
scott.stillinger3@gmail.com
<http://emptygatezen.com>

**Empty Gate Zen Center—
Santa Clara**
Jason Quinn JDPSN
San Jose, CA
viceabbot@emptygatezen.com
<http://emptygatezen.com>

CONNECTICUT

**New Haven Zen Center
Mu Gak Sa**
Zen Master Jok Um
New Haven, CT
203-787-0912
info@newhavenzen.org
<http://newhavenzen.org>

DELAWARE

Delaware Valley Zen Center
José Ramírez JDPSN
Newark, DE
302-533-8819
dvzcinfo@gmail.com
<http://dvzc.org>

FLORIDA

Cypress Tree Zen Group
Zen Master Jok Um
Tallahassee, FL
ctzg@webdharma.com
<http://webdharma.com/ctzg>

Gateless Gate Zen Center
Zen Master Jok Um
Gainesville, FL
352-614-0512
gateless.gate.zen.center@gmail.com
<http://gatelessgate.org>

Orlando Zen Center
Zen Master Jok Um
Orlando, FL
407-897-3685
orlandozencenter@gmail.com
<http://orlandozen.com>

South Florida Zen Group
Zen Master Wu Kwang
Southwest Ranches, FL
954-324-3925
southfloridazengroup@gmail.com
<http://southfloridazen.org>

IDAHO

**Empty Gate Zen Center—
Boise**
Zen Master Bon Soeng
Boise, ID
208-661-6277
clintonjamesmith@gmail.com
<http://emptygatezen.com>

ILLINOIS

**Chicago Kwan Um Zen
Center**
*Zen Master Hae Kwang
Zen Master Jok Um*
McHenry, IL
608-405-2436
info@isthmuszencommunity.org

Dharma Flower Zen Center
Zen Master Hae Kwang
Woodstock, IL
815-236-2511
dharmaflowerzen@gmail.com
Facebook: dharmaflowerzen

**Ten Directions Zen
Community**
Zen Master Jok Um
Wheaton, IL
director@tendirectionszen.org
<http://tendirectionszen.org>

INDIANA

**Indianapolis Zen Center
Lincoln Rhodes JDPSN**
Indianapolis, IN
317-921-9902
director@indyzen.org
<http://indyzen.org>

Empty Circle Sitting Group
Lincoln Rhodes JDPSN
Hobart, IN
dharmainc@aol.com
<http://emptycirclezen.com>

KANSAS

**Kansas Zen Center
Nam Pung Sa**
Zen Master Bon Hae
Lawrence, KS
kansazencenter@gmail.com
<http://kansazencenter.org>

Prairyerth Zen Center
Zen Master Ji Haeng
Topeka, KS
785-224-4678
prairyerthzen@gmail.com
<http://prairyerthzen.org>

Tallgrass Zen Center
Manhattan, KS
785-537-8713
tallgrasszen@gmail.com
<http://tallgrasszen.blogspot.com>

MAINE

**Northern Light Zen Center
Buk Kwang Soen Won**
Terry Cronin JDPSN
Topsham, ME
207-729-6013
northernlightzencenter@gmail.com
<http://nlzc.info>

MASSACHUSETTS

Cambridge Zen Center
Dae Gak Sa
Zen Master Bon Yeon
Cambridge, MA
617-576-3229
director@cambridgezen.org
<http://cambridgezen.org>

Cape Cod Zen Center
Terry Cronin JDPSN
South Yarmouth, MA
508-760-1814
capecodzencenter@yahoo.com
<http://capecodzen.com>

Open Meadow Zen Group
Zen Master Bon Haeng
Lexington, MA
781-512-2518
openmeadowzen@yahoo.com
<http://openmeadowzen.com>

Plymouth Zen Group
Terry Cronin JDPSN
Plymouth MA
781-733-9361
plymouthzen@gmail.com
<http://plymouthzen.com>

NEVADA

**Zen Center of Las Vegas
Dae Myong Sa**
Zen Master Ji Haeng
Las Vegas, NV
702-293-4222
zencenteroflasvegas@gmail.com
<http://zenlasvegas.com>

NEW MEXICO

**Albuquerque Open Sky Zen
Group**
Albuquerque, New Mexico
505-920-5795
afssager3@gmail.com

NEW YORK

**Chogye Int'l Zen Center of
New York**
Zen Master Wu Kwang
New York, NY
212-353-0461
info@chogyezencenter.org
<http://chogyezencenter.org>

**Three Jewels Binghamton Zen
Group**
Zen Master Wu Kwang
Binghamton, NY
607-988-7966
mkllo@stny.rr.com
<http://binghamtonzencenter.org>

Three Treasures Zen Center

Zen Master Wu Kwang
Otego, NY
607-988-7966
abbot@thethreetreasures.org
http://thethreetreasures.org

RHODE ISLAND

Providence Zen Center

Hong Poep Won
Head Temple, North America
Zen Master Bon Haeng
Nancy Hedgpeth JDPSN
José Ramirez JDPSN
Cumberland, RI
401-658-1464
director@providencezen.org
http://providencezen.org

WASHINGTON

Ocean Light Zen Center

Hye Kwang Sa
Tim Lerch JDPSN
Seattle, WA
206-462-4155
info@oceanlightzen.org
http://oceanlightzen.org

WISCONSIN

Great Lake Zen Center Dae Ho Soen Won

Zen Master Dae Kwang
West Allis, WI
info@glzc.org
http://glzc.org

Isthmus Zen Community

Zen Master Ji Haeng
Madison, WI
608-405-2436
info@isthmuszencommunity.org
http://isthmuszencommunity.org

► Central America

PANAMA

Panama Zen Group

Panama City, Panama
panamazen@gmail.com

► South America

ARGENTINA

Buenos Aires Kwan Um Group

Buenos Aires, Argentina
+54 11 43 07 26 80
kwanumzenbsas@gmail.com

► Asia

KOREA

Kwan Um Daejeon Zen Group

Andrzej Stec JDPSN
Kathy Park JDPSN
Daejeon, South Korea
+82 10 2031 8813
info@kwanumdajeon.org
Facebook: kwanumdajeon

Kwan Um Seoul Zen Group

Yolrin Zen Center
Andrzej Stec JDPSN
Kathy Park JDPSN
Seoul, South Korea
+82 10 2031 8813
info@zenseoul.org
http://zenseoul.org

Seung Sahn International Zen Center

Mu Sang Sa
Head Temple, Asia
Zen Master Dae Bong
Hye Tong Sunim JDPSN
Gyeryong, South Korea
+82 42 841 6084
info@musangsa.org
http://musangsa.org

MALAYSIA

Desaru Zen Meditation Center

Gye Mun Sunim JDPSN
Johor, Malaysia
kyclzen@singnet.com.sg
http://kyclzen.org

Haeng Won Zen Centre

Zen Master Dae Kwang
Myong An Sunim JDPSN
Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
+60 10 3739886
haengwonzc@gmail.com
http://haengwon.org

Hoeh Beng Zen Center

Zen Master Dae Bong
Chuan Wen Sunim JDPSN
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
+60 3292 9839
hoehbeng@hotmail.com
http://hoehbeng.org

Pengerang International Zen Center

Kwan Yin Chan Lin
Gye Mun Sunim JDPSN
Johor, Malaysia
+60 7 826 4848
kyclzen@singnet.com.sg
http://kyclzen.org

SINGAPORE

Singapore Zen Center Kwan Yin Chan Lin Meditation Center

Gye Mun Sunim JDPSN
Singapore
+65 6392 0265
kyclzen@singnet.com.sg
http://kyclzen.org

CHINA

Su Bong Zen Monastery Gak Su Temple International Zen Center

Zen Master Dae Kwan
Hong Kong, China
+852 2891 9315
info@subong.org.hk
http://subong.org.hk

AUSTRALIA

Brisbane (Retreat & Residential Centre)

Brighton, Queensland, Australia
+617 32697393 (Peter Dae Haeng)
daehaeng@gmail.com
http://phoenixzencentre.org

Gold Coast 1 (Gold Coast Zen Group)

Runaway Bay, Gold Coast,
Queensland, Australia
+61 435 249 330 (Julie Bup
Wol)
goldcoastzengroup@hotmail.com

Gold Coast 2 (Retreat Centre)

Bonogin, Gold Coast, Queensland,
Australia
+61 755 289 923 (Julie Bup
Wol)
kwanumzen.oz@hotmail.com

SOUTH AFRICA

Jung Shim Zen Group

Zen Master Dae Bong
Wilderness, South Africa
+27 823 773 280 (Gerry)
alreadyone@webmail.co.za
http://jungshimzen.co.za

► Europe & Israel

AUSTRIA

Vienna Zen Center

Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN
Vienna, Austria
+43 680 55 396 11
info@kwanumzen.at
http://zen-meditation.wien

BELGIUM

Brussels Zen Center

Koen Vermeulen JDPSN
Brussels, Belgium
+32 497 596 659
koen.vermeulen@buddhism.be
http://www.kwanumzen-meditatie.be

CZECH REPUBLIC

Brno Zen Group

Dae Gak Sa
Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN
Brno, Czech Republic
+420 775 988 882
+420 777 933 353
kwanumbrno@gmail.com
Facebook: ZenBrno

Liberec Zen Group

Sam Bo Sa
Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN
Liberec, Czech Republic
+420 602 756 401
zen.liberec@gmail.com
http://www.zenliberec.cz

Litoměřice Zen Group

Zen Master Bon Shim
+420 721 674 455
+420 774 122 543
zen@grumpa.net

Olomouc Zen Group

Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN
Olomouc, Czech Republic
+420 603 449 959
olomouc@kwanumzen.cz
Facebook: olomouc.zen

Prague Zen Group Soeng Kwang Sa

Zen Master Bon Shim
Prague, Czech Republic
+420 602 796 371
kwanumpraha@gmail.com
http://kwanumzen.cz

Tábor Zen Group

Zen Master Bon Shim
Tábor, Czech Republic
+420 776 148 494
derossi@email.cz
Facebook: kwanum.tabor

Vrážné Zen Center

Head Temple, Czech Republic
Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN
Vrážné, Czech Republic
+420 608 169 042
abbot@vraznezen.org
http://vraznezen.org

Zlín Zen Group

Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN
Zlín, Czech Republic
+420 739 672 032
krmila@email.cz
http://zen-zlin.webnode.cz

FRANCE

Paris Zen Group

Koen Vermeulen JDPSN
Paris, France
+33 613 798 328
contact@kwanumzen.net
http://kwanumzen.net

GERMANY

Bad Bramstedt Zen Group

Arne Schaefer JDPSN
Bad Bramstedt, Germany
+49 419 2306 8360
bad-bramstedt@kwanumzen.de
http://kwanumzen.de/bad-bramstedt

Berlin Zen Center

Chong Hye Sa
European Head Temple
Zen Master Gu Ja
Berlin, Germany
+49 304 660 5090
berlin@kwanumzen.de
http://kwanumzen.de/berlin

Cologne (Köln) Zen Group

Zen Master Ji Kwang
Köln, Germany
+49 170 456 5432
koeln@kwanumzen.de
http://kwanumzen.de/koeln

**Dresden Zen Center
Oh Sahn Sa**

Arne Schaefer JDPSN
Dresden, Germany
+49 176 7008 2636
dresden@kwanumzen.de
http://kwanumzen.de/dresden

Hamburg Zen Group

Arne Schaefer JDPSN
Hamburg, Germany
+49 162 690 0684
hamburg@kwanumzen.de
http://kwanumzen.de/hamburg

GREAT BRITAIN**London Zen Centre**

Ja An Sa
Head Temple, Great Britain
Bogumila Malinowska (Ja An)
JDPSN
London, England
+44 774 297 9050
london.zen.kwanum@gmail.com
http://londonzencentre.co.uk

The Peak Zen Group

Kubong Sa
Zen Master Ji Kwang
Matlock Bath, England
+44 7400 028488 (Peter)
jibul@kwanumzen.org.uk
http://thepeak.kwanumzen.org.uk

HUNGARY**Budapest KUSZ Zen Group**

Jo Potter JDPSN
Budapest, Hungary
+36 70 457 0486
mesztamas@gmail.com
http://kvanumzen.hu

Szeged KUSZ Zen Group

Jo Potter JDPSN
Szeged, Hungary
+36 30 586 4090
szongdzsin@vipmail.hu

ISRAEL**Haifa Zen Group**

Zen Master Ji Kwang
Haifa, Israel
+972 53 431 9816
ofercohn@gmail.com
http://kwanumisrael.org/haifa.php

Hod Hasharon Zen Center

Yuval Gill JDPSN
Hod Hasharon, Israel
+972 54 483 1122
hasharonzencentre@gmail.com
http://kwanumisrael.org/hod-hasharon.php

Pardes-Hanna-Karkur Zen Group

Zen Master Ji Kwang
+972 54 652 2812
Pardes Hanna-Karkur, Israel
zen.pardeshanna@gmail.com
http://kwanumisrael.org/pardeshanna.php

Tel Aviv Zen Group

Yuval Gill JDPSN
Tel Aviv, Israel
+972 53 271 4595
relavivzen@gmail.com
http://kwanumisrael.org/tel-aviv.php

LATVIA**Jurmala Zen Group**

Kwan Ji Sa
Oleg Šuk JDPSN
Jurmala, Latvia
+371 29191137
kwanumzen@inbox.lv
http://kwanumeurope.org/locations/jurmala-zen-group

LITHUANIA**Kaunas Zen Center**

Kam No Sa
Zen Master Joeng Hye
Kaunas, Lithuania
+370 601 56350
+370 698 29299
108tomas@gmail.com
Facebook: KwanUmLietuva

Šakiai Zen Center

Son Kwang Sa
Zen Master Joeng Hye
Vilnius, Lithuania
+370 686 56392
smirnovas.vytautas@gmail.com
Facebook: KwanUmLietuva

Vilnius Zen Center

Ko Bong Sa
Head Temple, Lithuania
Zen Master Joeng Hye
Vilnius, Lithuania
+370 675 16008
songji108@gmail.com
http://zen.lt

POLAND**Gdańsk Zen Center**

Zen Master Joeng Hye
Gdańsk, Poland
+48 507 587 532
gdansk@zen.pl
http://gdanskzen.wixsite.com/zen-gdansk

Katowice Zen Center

Zen Master Bon Shim
Katowice, Poland
+48 501 430 062
kwanum.katowice@gmail.com
http://zen.pl/katowice

**Kraków Zen Center
Do Miong Sa**

Zen Master Bon Shim
Kraków, Poland
+48 530 677 081
krakow@zen.pl
http://zen.pl/krakow

Łódź Zen Center

Igor Piniński JDPSN
Łódź, Poland
+48 509 241 097
lodz@zen.pl
http://zen.pl/lodz

Plock Zen Group

Zen Master Bon Shim
Plock, Poland
+48 607 317 084
alap7@gazeta.pl
http://zenplock.pl

Rzeszów Zen Group

Zen Master Bon Shim
Rzeszów, Poland
+48 539 77 11 40
rzeszow@zen.pl
http://zen.pl/rzeszow

Toruń Zen Group

Zen Master Joeng Hye
Toruń, Poland
+48 609 696 060
torunskagrupazen@gmail.com
Facebook: torunskagrupazen

Warsaw Zen Center

Wu Bong Sa
Head Temple, Poland
Zen Master Joeng Hye
Warsaw, Poland
+48 22 872 05 52
+48 515 100 273
kwanum@zen.pl
http://zen.pl

Wrocław-Wałbrzych Zen Group

Igor Piniński JDPSN
Wrocław, Poland
+48 606 940 686
+48 661 111 516
zen.wroclaw@gmail.com
http://zen.pl/wroclaw

RUSSIA**Rostov Zen Group**

Won Haeng Soen Won
Oleg Suk JDPSN
Rostov, Russia
+7 905 432 9090
+7 908 513 5778
mail@zen-rostov.ru
http://zen-rostov.ru

**Saint Petersburg Zen Center
Dae Hwa Soen Won**

Head Temple, Russia
Oleg Suk JDPSN
Saint Petersburg, Russia
+7 921 373 95 35
contact@kwanumzen.ru
http://kwanumzen.ru

Veliky Novgorod Zen Center

Oleg Suk JDPSN
Veliky Novgorod, Russia
+7 981 601 6567
sunim@zendao.ru
http://zendao.ru

SLOVAKIA**Bratislava Zen Center**

Myo San Sa
Head Temple, Slovakia
Oleg Suk JDPSN
Bratislava, Slovakia
+421 905 368 368
bratislava@kwanumzen.sk
http://kwanumzen.sk

Košice Zen Center

Shin Jong Sa
Oleg Suk JDPSN
Košice, Slovakia
+421 903 134 137
kosice@kwanumzen.sk
Facebook: kwanumzenkosice

SPAIN**Barcelona Zen Center**

Zen Master Bon Shim
Barcelona, Spain
+34 690 280 331 (Mauro Bianco)
boricentrozen@hotmail.com
http://boricentrezen.com

Bori Sa, Retreat Center

Zen Master Bon Shim
Alta Garrotxa (Girona), Spain
+34 655 033 018
+34 872 005 192
boricentrozen@hotmail.com
Facebook: boricentrezen

Granada Zen Group

Jo Potter JDPSN
Granada, Spain
+34 671 284 810
granadazen@gmail.com
http://zengranada.blogspot.com

Palma Zen Center

Head Temple, Spain
Jo Potter JDPSN
Palma de Mallorca, Spain
+34 686 382 210
palmacentrozen@gmail.com
http://centrozenpalma.org



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