

A Bad Situation is a Good Situation

BY MU SANG SUNIM

Traveling with Zen Master Seung Sahn in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union last spring, I was repeatedly struck by his teaching: "a good situation is a bad situation; a bad situation is a good situation." The whole region is in upheaval. For ordinary people, getting even the simplest things can be an arduous task. And yet over and over I found people who, far from concentrating on their possessions, had a strong desire to practice and find the true way. In many ways I was reminded of America in the sixties: young people struggling to find the truth in a world that made no sense.

Scenes from a journey: One woman and five men take novice monk/nun precepts at the Warsaw Zen Center in Poland. They are all in their early twenties. Not wasting any time, with complete faith in his students' potential, Zen Master Seung Sahn tells them, "Each Bodhisattva has a special job. So you must each pick out some kind of practicing, only go straight, then completely understand your mind, become Ji Do Poep Sa Nims, then become Zen Masters."

Again at the Warsaw Zen Center, a group of young students come up and ask me to teach them Soen Yu, Zen Master Seung Sahn's breathing-energy exercises. I haven't taught Soen Yu for years - I haven't practiced it for years (I've been in a funk). But what can I do? They asked, so I teach. Slowly I remember the exercises, They feel just right. The students love them. By the end of the class we're all very happy. People are asking me all kinds of questions — their sincerity, openness, and lack of checking amaze me, give me energy. "Now you are again Soen Yu Master," says Zen Master Seung Sahn, half serious, half joking as usual. I've been practicing Soen Yu regularly ever since.

Zen Master Seung Sahn is giving a Dharma talk in a Tibetan center in Leningrad. The center is just a musty room in an abandoned building maintained by squatters, with a few Tibetan-style pictures on the wall. The room is full, about 50 people. The students are all young, with long hair and beatific smiles, just like our flower children in the sixties. Zen Master Seung Sahn says, "In this world, very few people understand their minds. Most people nowadays are totally controlled by the animal mind inside them. They only have desire. So this world is getting worse and worse — Christians say, 'End of this world.' But I say it is the beginning of a new world. Any fruit first has a very good form, very good color, but not such a good taste. Then later, when it becomes ripe, the form and color are not so good, but the taste is very good. Then finally, the fruit becomes rotten — then inside, the seeds are completely ripe. A new tree can be born. So you must all find your don't-know seeds, then no matter what occurs, for you it will be no problem." The students gaze at Zen Master Seung Sahn intently, still smiling.

At another Dharma talk, this time in Moscow, we encounter a different kind of energy, and it requires stronger teaching. Two older men obviously believers in Communism - dominate the question period. One wants to know what Zen has to do with social responsibility. Zen Master Seung Sahn asks him, "What are you? If you understand your true self, there are no opposites. Then you and the universe become one. Then helping other people is very easy, automatic." The man starts to argue. Zen Master Seung Sahn waves his hand - "Sit down please!"

Another starts to argue in the same vein. Zen Master Seung Sahn asks in the middle of the old man's harangue, "You have a son? If you're holding your opinion, then you and your son cannot communicate, cannot become one. But if you put down your opinion, your condition, your situation, then your son and you will have a very good relationship." A chord has been struck - for the rest of the talk the man sits, head down, holding his face in his hands.

In Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, we have a Yong Maeng Jong Jin. Everyone is anxious about the dangers facing the country, about provocations by the Red Army. About 80 people come for the retreat from all over the Soviet Union. Do Am Sunim, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim and head of the Polish Sangha, has been coming here to teach for several months now, stirring up interest in Zen practice. In January he stood outside the Parliament building with his students, joining a large group of Lithuanians defying the Russian soldiers. A student with whom he had been talking one evening was killed by attacking Soviet soldiers the next day. The Lithuanian students admire Do Am Sunim very much for standing with them, and they are ready to meet the Zen Master.

Zen Master Seung Sahn tells them, "I understand your mind. Long ago when I was young, Korea was controlled by Japan. At that time we only wanted to drive out the Japanese. Win or lose didn't matter - we only wanted to fight. We just did it. But if you understand your mind, then fighting is not necessary. You can keep your correct situation, condition, and opinion. "You come here to practice. That is wonderful. In this world how many people want to understand their minds? Not so many. So I say to you, you are special."

Afterwards we have a Precepts Ceremony: thirty-three people take the five precepts, among them several youths, one of whom looks like he cannot be older than thirteen; five people become Dharma Teachers. I think about our Zen centers in America, where nowadays so few young people are involved, and wonder why it is that here people find it so easy to believe in Zen Master Seung Sahn.

The economies in this area are in disarray. In the Soviet Union we find there is a two-tiered economic system: one tier for those with dollars, another one for those with roubles. In many places, if you want to stay in a good hotel or go to a restaurant with good service, you must pay in dollars — pay a lot. And Soviet citizens are often not allowed in unless accompanied by Westerners. On the other hand, where goods and services are offered for roubles, the prices, by Western standards, are very low. A deluxe buffet breakfast in our hotel in Leningrad cost the equivalent of 30¢. But this is no solace for Soviet citizens, who make an average of \$10 a month! The result is that ordinary Soviets feel

shut out of their system. They are looking for a change - and their openness to Zen is one aspect of their search.

In the newly-capitalistic Eastern European countries there are many new millionaires - former Communists who stole from the state, and now, ironically, are set for life. Now they are becoming the prime capitalists. But there are many opportunities for ordinary people too. In Poland, sixteen and seventeen year old boys get together and pool their money. One of them gets a truck, takes it to Western Europe, buys a load of bananas, and brings it back. They divide the load, each taking some of the bananas and selling them on the street. Then they pool their profits and do it again. Everywhere you see people selling even tiny quantities of goods in little stalls on the street. So nowadays, unlike before, you can find all kinds of Western goods in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia. Most people don't yet have the money to buy them. But the people are free, and happy to be so. And everywhere they are trying.

Riding through Leningrad in a large bus we have rented for the day, Zen Master Seung Sahn is talking to our Russian students. He finds out that now people can own their own homes. Houses are very cheap by American standards. "You buy an old building, fix it up, make a Zen center. We will help you," Zen Master Seung Sahn says, ever alert to possibilities for encouraging his students.

People talk a lot about new business possibilities. The government is also beginning to give land to the farmers. "Soon everything will change," says Zen Master Seung Sahn. "There will be lots of cars, the roads will be widened, everything will open up, politically and economically." The Russian students look dubious. "You must understand," says Dorota, a senior Zen student from Poland who is traveling with us, "ten years ago when the Solidarity leaders were in jail, Zen Master Seung Sahn told us that Solidarity would win. We all thought he was crazy. But it's happened, now Poland's politics have changed completely. Soon it will happen here too."

We ride on, admiring the broad streets, the stately rows of old buildings on the River Neva - some of us seeing ghosts from the past, some of us looking deeply into a future that is ours alone to make together.