

The Story of Zen Master Seung Sahn

Seung Sahn Soen-sa was born in 1927 in Seun Choen, North Korea. His parents were Protestant Christians.

Korea at this time was under severe Japanese military rule, and all political and cultural freedom was brutally suppressed. In 1944, Soen-sa joined the underground Korean independence movement. Within a few months he was caught by the Japanese police and narrowly escaped a death sentence. After his release from prison, he and two friends stole several thousand dollars from their parents and crossed the heavily-patrolled Manchurian border in an unsuccessful attempt to join the Free Korean Army.

In the years following World War II, while he was studying Western philosophy at Dong Guk University, the political situation in South Korea grew more and more chaotic. One day Soen-sa decided that he wouldn't be able to help people through his political activities or his academic studies. So he shaved his head and went into the mountains, vowing never to return until he had attained the absolute truth.

For three months he studied the Confucian scriptures, but he was unsatisfied by them. Then a friend of his, who was a monk in a small mountain temple, gave him the Diamond Sutra, and he first encountered Buddhism. "All things that appear in this world are transient. If you view all things that appear as never having appeared, then you will realize your true self." When he read these words, his mind became clear. For the next few weeks he read many sutras. Finally, he decided to become a Buddhist monk and was ordained in October, 1948.

Soen-sa had already understood the sutras. He realized that the only important thing now was practice. So ten days after his ordination, he went further up into the mountains and began a one-hundred-day retreat on Won Gak Mountain (the Mountain of Perfect Enlightenment). He ate only pine needles, dried and beaten into a powder. For twenty hours every day he chanted the Great Dharani of Original Mind Energy. Several times a day he took ice-cold baths. It was a very rigorous practice.

Soon he was assailed by doubts. Why was this retreat necessary? Why did he have to go to extremes? Couldn't he go down to a small temple in a quiet valley, get married like a Japanese monk, and attain enlightenment gradually, in the midst of a happy family? One night these thoughts became so powerful that he decided to leave and packed his belongings. But the next morning his mind was clearer, and he unpacked. A few days later the same thing happened. And in the following weeks, he packed and unpacked nine times.

By now fifty days had passed, and Soen-sa's body was very exhausted. Every night he had terrifying visions. Demons would appear out of the dark and make obscene gestures at him. Ghouls would sneak up behind him and wrap their cold fingers around his neck. Enormous beetles would gnaw his legs. Tigers and dragons would stand in front of him, bellowing. He was in constant terror.

After a month of this, the visions turned into visions of delight. Sometimes Buddha would come and teach him a sutra. Sometimes Bodhisattvas would appear in gorgeous clothing and tell him that he would go to heaven. Sometimes he would keel over from exhaustion and Kwan Se Um Bosal would gently wake him up. By the end of eighty days, his body was strong. His flesh had turned green from the pine needles.

One day, a week before the retreat was to finish, Soen-sa was walking outside, chanting and keeping rhythm with his moktak. Suddenly, two boys, eleven or twelve years old, appeared on either side of him and bowed. They were wearing many-colored robes, and their faces were of an unearthly beauty. Soen-sa was very surprised. His mind felt powerful and perfectly clear, so how could these demons have materialized? He walked ahead on the narrow mountain path, and the two boys followed him, walking right through the boulders on either side of the path. They walked together in silence for a half-hour, then, back at the altar, when Soen-sa got up from his bow, they were gone. This happened every day for a week.

Finally it was the hundredth day. Soen-sa was outside chanting and hitting the moktak. All at once his body disappeared, and he was in infinite space. From far away he could hear the moktak beating, and the sound of his own voice. He remained in this state for some time. When he returned to his body, he understood. The rocks, the river, everything he could see, everything he could hear, all this was his true self. All things are exactly as they are. The truth is just like this.

Soen-sa slept very well that night. When he woke up the next morning, he saw a man walking up the mountain, then some crows flying out of a tree. He wrote the following poem:

The road at the bottom of Won Gak Mountain
is not the present road.
The man climbing with his backpack
is not a man of the past.
tok, tok, tok - his footsteps
transfix past and present.
Crows out of a tree.
Caw, caw, caw.

Soon after he came down from the mountain, he met Zen Master Ko Bong, whose teacher had been Zen Master Mang Gong. Ko Bong was reputed to be the most brilliant Zen Master in Korea, and one of the most severe. At this time he was teaching only laymen; monks, he said, were not ardent enough to be good Zen students. Soen-sa wanted to test his enlightenment with Ko Bong,

so he went to him with a moktak and said, "What is this?" Ko Bong took the moktak and hit it. This was just what Soen-sa had expected him to do.

Soen-sa then said, "How should I practice Zen?"

Ko Bong said, "A monk once asked Zen Master Jo-ju, 'Why did Bodhidharma come to China?' Jo-ju answered, 'The pine tree in the front garden.' What does this mean?"

Soen-sa understood, but he didn't know how to answer. He said, "I don't know."

Ko Bong said, "Only keep this don't-know mind. That is true Zen practice."

That spring and summer, Soen-sa did mostly working Zen. In the fall, he sat for a hundred-day meditation session at Su Dok Sa monastery, where he learned Zen language and Dharma-combat. By the winter, he began to feel that the monks weren't practicing hard enough, so he decided to give them some help. One night, as he was on guard-duty (there had been some burglaries), he took all the pots and pans out of the kitchen and arranged them in a circle in the front yard. The next night, he turned the Buddha on the main altar toward the wall and took the incense-burner, which was a national treasure, and hung it on a persimmon tree in the garden. By the second morning the whole monastery was in an uproar. Rumors were flying around about lunatic burglars, or gods coming from the mountain to warn the monks to practice harder.

The third night, Soen-sa went to the nuns' quarters, took seventy pairs of nuns' shoes and put them in front of Zen Master Dok Sahn's room, displayed as in a shoe store. But this time, a nun woke up to go to the outhouse and, missing her shoes, she woke up everyone in the nuns' quarters. Soen-sa was caught. The next day he was brought to trial. Since most of the monks voted to give him another chance (the nuns were unanimously against him), he wasn't expelled from the monastery. But he had to offer formal apologies to all the high monks.

First he went to Dok Sahn and bowed. Dok Sahn said, "Keep up the good work."

Then he went to the head nun. She said, "You've made a great deal too much commotion in this monastery, young man." Soen-sa laughed and said, "The whole world is already full of commotion. What can you do?" She couldn't answer.

Next was Zen Master Chun Song, who was famous for his wild actions and obscene language. Soen-sa bowed to him and said, "I killed all the Buddhas of past, present, and future. What can you do?"

Chun Song said, "Aha!" and looked deeply into Soen-sa's eyes. Then he said, "What did you see?"

Soen-sa said, "You already understand."

Chun Song said, "Is that all?"

Soen-sa said, "There's a cuckoo singing in the tree outside the window."

Chun Song laughed and said, "Aha!" He asked several more questions, which Soen-sa answered without difficulty. Finally, Chun Song leaped up and danced around Soen-sa, shouting, "You are enlightened! You are enlightened!" The news spread quickly, and people began to understand the events of the preceding days.

On January 15, the session was over, and Soen-sa left to see Ko Bong. On the way to Seoul, he had interviews with Zen Master Keum Bong and Zen Master Keum Oh. Both gave him inga, the seal of validation of a Zen student's great awakening.

Soen-sa arrived at Ko Bong's temple dressed in his old patched retreat clothes and carrying a knapsack. He bowed to Ko Bong and said, "All the Buddhas turned out to be a bunch of corpses. How about a funeral service?"

Ko Bong said, "Prove it!"

Soen-sa reached into his knapsack and took out a dried cuttlefish and a bottle of wine. "Here are the leftovers from the funeral party."

Ko Bong said, "Then pour me some wine."

Soen-sa said, "Okay. Give me your glass."

Ko Bong held out his palm.

Soen-sa slapped it with the bottle and said, "That's not a glass, it's your hand!" Then he put the bottle on the floor.

Ko Bong laughed and said, "Not bad. You're almost done. But I have a few questions for you." He proceeded to ask Soen-sa the most difficult of the seventeen-hundred traditional Zen kong-ans. Soen-sa answered without hindrance.

Then Ko Bong said, "All right, one last question. The mouse eats cat-food, but the cat-bowl is broken. What does this mean?"

Soen-sa said, "The sky is blue, the grass is green."

Ko Bong shook his head and said, "No."

Soen-sa was taken aback. He had never missed a Zen question before. His face began to grow red as he gave one "like this" answer after another. Ko Bong

kept shaking his head. Finally Soen-sa exploded with anger and frustration. "Three Zen Masters have given me inga! Why do you say I'm wrong?!"

Ko Bong said, "What does it mean? Tell me."

For the next fifty minutes, Ko Bong and Soen-sa sat facing each other, hunched like two tomcats. The silence was electric. Then, all of a sudden, Soen-sa had the answer. It was "just like this."

When Ko Bong heard it, his eyes grew moist and his face filled with joy. He embraced Soen-sa and said, "You are the flower; I am the bee."

On January 25, 1949, Soen-sa received from Ko Bong the Transmission of Dharma, thus becoming the Seventy-Eighth Patriarch in this line of succession. It was the only Transmission that Ko Bong ever gave.

After the ceremony, Ko Bong said to Soen-sa, "For the next three years you must keep silent. You are a free man. We will meet again in five hundred years."

Soen-sa was now a Zen Master. He was twenty-two years old.

From *Dropping Ashes On The Buddha: The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn*

edited by Stephen Mitchell (Grove Press, New York, NY, 1976)

The Story of the Dead Bones

In 1957, Ko Bong Sunim became seriously ill and so Soen Sa Nim was appointed as the abbot of Hwa Gae Sah temple.

In the course of his duties as abbot, Soen Sa Nim heard of a Japanese temple in Seoul which contained the bones of 500 dead Japanese people. The temple was troubled with finances and fell under the control of lay people. The lay people were not interested in Japanese bones. They wanted to throw the bones out of the temple. When Soen Sa Nim heard about this, he went to the temple. He told the officials, "Whether these bones were once Korean or Japanese, dead people's bones are all the same. Dead bones are dead bones!"

Then he brought the bones back to Hwa Gae Sah. For days and days, he only chanted Namu Ami Ta Bul over the bones; the chanting was for the dead spirits.

A few years later, Korea and Japan resumed diplomatic relationship. Then some Japanese came to Korea to Hwa Gae Sah to claim the bones of their dead ancestors and carry them back to their homeland.

Out of great appreciation and deep respect for Soen Sa Nim's action the Japanese invited him to go to Japan. This invitation became an opportunity for him to live abroad which became a turning point in his life.

It has been said by some Koreans, "We lost a great master to Japan and to America because of some dead bones."

— *Do Gong (formerly John Barrouzol from Canada)*
Seoul International Zen Center, Korea

When Soen Sa Nim First Arrived in the U.S.A.

In September, 1970, I received a phone call from my sister, Mrs. Kimura, who lives in Japan. She told me my mother was very ill. So I decided to go see her. I prepared to leave and was on an airplane within 24 hours. When I arrived in Japan I was met at the airport by my sister and Soen Sa Nim. My sister introduced us and my first impression of Soen Sa Nim was that he was a happy, hyper person. That was it. That's all I thought. At that time I knew nothing about Buddhism. He drove us to his temple where we spent the night.

He asked me what American life is all about. I told him about America and invited him to come and see it for himself.

In May, 1972, I received a phone call from my sister. She told me Soen Sa Nim would be arriving at the Los Angeles International Airport in a couple of hours. Luckily I was home. I went to meet him at the airport and brought him to my home. I gave him my son's room. He made a small altar on which sat a statue of Kwan Seum Bosal. That evening he started chanting and told me to follow along if I would like to. I felt drawn by the sounds of Soen Sa Nim's chanting and tears started to flow from my eyes for no apparent reason. From that day forward a new life began for me. I remember being amazed at Soen Sa Nim's humbleness. He helped with the house cleaning, shopping, cooking, etc... Needless to say I loved his company and his help.

My children and their friends accepted him into the family without hesitation. They seemed to get a kick out of it. My oldest daughter who was thirteen at the time bought some English books to teach Soen Sa Nim English. He in turn was teaching her Buddhism. That was the start of a great teaching for all Americans.

I would like to end in saying that the happiness and contentment he brought into my life and to my children is immeasurable. I cannot think of a word that

describes Soen Sa Nim - only that he is vaster than the ocean and boundless as the sky and can probably best be described by the feeling, that there is no word for, that a person attains through meditation. We love him and wish he could live forever. Thank you, Soen Sa Nim.

— *Judy Barrie*
Santa Monica, California

Doyle Avenue

Soen Sa Nim's first attempt at establishing an American Zen Center was in a small apartment in Providence, Rhode Island. The apartment was located on a street named Doyle Avenue. Soen Sa Nim probably didn't care about the fairly violent and unhappy mood of the street, which would at times stage drunken brawls and knife fights. What he saw was a house with two relatively large bedrooms and a very low rent of \$150.00 a month.

At that time Soen Sa Nim was totally self-financed and, of course, totally independent. Only the spiders and a stray cat (later named Abigale) know what the apartment looked like when Soen Sa Nim first moved in, and how he spent his time. It was not long before an Eastern Religions professor from Brown University became interested in him, and with him came some of his curious students.

One or two of those brave souls decided to move in with Soen Sa Nim, surely having no idea what they were getting themselves into. There was literally no furniture in the apartment except a small kitchen table and a few assorted wooden chairs. Soen Sa Nim had brought a small electric rice cooker and a few bowls and spoons. There was an old aluminum pot in which he would create the most incredibly delicious soups.

One day a Buddha from Korea arrived in a large wooden box. It was broken into about 15 pieces. Undaunted, Soen Sa Nim asked one of his newly arrived disciples to fetch some glue and then he proceeded to meticulously and patiently convert emptiness back into form.

And that was how he did his best teaching in those days. English was awkward and difficult for him. He was a master at pantomime and example. His enthusiasm was delightful. And his examples were sometimes quite surprising. Once, objects began to be missing in the Zen Center and it soon became obvious that the thief was one of the small boys that lived in the neighborhood. The reason it was obvious was that he would be found blatantly crawling through one of the windows. He was also fond of throwing rocks at Abigale (the cat) and hanging around the driveway, making fun of Soen Sa Nim's strange clothes. One morning the little n'er-do-well was enthusiastically teasing Soen Sa Nim while he was working in the garden and Soen Sa Nim

suddenly charged towards him, screaming wildly and swinging his arms. Then he began to advance toward the then trembling youth and act out karate kicks. The boy charged out of the yard, never to be seen at close range again. One of his students questioned his methods and Soen Sa Nim simply said, "Most demons only understand demons."

Everyone that came to the apartment in those first six months only needed to be there a half an hour before they understood his purpose and direction. Soen Sa Nim wanted to make a Zen Center out of the apartment. He wanted the altar to be the heart, the Dharma Room to be wide and clean so many people could gather and practice together and find their own hearts. He made his students feel comfortable and warm by laughing and joking with them in the kitchen. He'd suddenly decide to make a huge batch of kimchee, containing every vegetable imaginable. Or he'd be sitting at the kitchen table for hours, diligently writing letters to unknown people in Korea and suddenly look up and ask everyone if they liked noodles. Often he'd have to look the word he was searching for up in his Korean-English dictionary, that never left his side. "Noodles! You like noodles?" Of course everyone would smile inside and out, loving his accent and his enthusiasm and give him a big nod. Then he'd proceed to convert the entire kitchen into a flour-filled noodle factory, producing in less than an hour a soup that surpassed even his last, filled with delicious homemade noodles. And he'd be so unabashedly pleased that everyone liked it, telling them repeatedly, "In Korea, anytime this style soup. This style is #1. Eat this, become strong - much energy, yah?" Then he'd laugh.

He slowly introduced his brand of Zen, his tradition. First it was putting bright red and yellow cloth around the altar, which held the newly assembled Buddha. Then he insisted on the meditation mats being bright and multi-colored. Once in a while another wooden box would arrive from Korea with objects for the altar, or gray robes and incense, or a big bag of expensive black mushrooms for the famous soups.

One day Soen Sa Nim sat his students down. At that time there were about seven regular "customers" (that was one of Soen Sa Nim's jokes, calling anyone who ate his soup or came to his Sunday night talks a "customer"). He explained that it was time for the Zen Center to have a practicing schedule. This was the end of an era. The practice began to shift from the kitchen into the Dharma Room. He even asked them to wear those gray robes. The chants were transliterated and bows were counted. Cushions were even assigned and Sunday night Dharma talks got better and better. At first they were always translated from Japanese to English by the Brown University Eastern Religions professor, but in time Soen Sa Nim became more confident with his vocabulary and he began to create talks as warm and nurturing as his soups. As a matter of fact, he got so busy with his English lessons and growing "customers" volume, that the kitchen became the newly-appointed and titled Housemaster's domain and he came there only to write, study, and offer spontaneous talks on the Dharma. He was almost always willing to answer any questions and if nothing else seemed helpful, he would tap the student's head with a chop stick and say, "Too much thinking! Put it down, OK?"

In the two year span of Doyle Avenue, the tone and rhythm of the future Zen Center was created. Soen Sa Nim started it all with his warmth, then introduced the practice - always stressing how important it is to practice every day, no vacations. And then he began giving Precepts, as he taught why it was so important for the mind to be able to openly take the Precepts.

So it always appeared that he was sometimes obviously making a lot of the form up as he went along, closely watching the young American n-dnd and finding the right remedies for the sometimes powerful imbalances. The other thing that appeared like grass in spring was his ageless knowledge of practice and Dharma and how to pass that on to others... the knowledge that was way beyond following a particular form... the knowledge that would give each of his students a warm and powerful boost toward understanding themselves and understanding their original jobs.

— *Zen Master Seong Hyang (Barbara Rhodes), one of Soen Sa Nim's very first "customers."*

These three stories are from *Only DOing it for Sixty Years* Compiled and edited by Diana Clark; published by Primary Point Press, Cumberland, RI, 1997