

## **What kind of influence did the *Kyol Che* (2–3 month long intensive meditation retreat) have on you?**

It simply changed my life – in many ways. If you jump into a long retreat with a sincere mind and intense effort it offers you the chance of really letting go of your worries, your troubles about the past and your plans about the future. Being abroad in Korea, surrounded by an amazing mountain nature, settled in an monastic setup and the many hours of silent meditation really helped me to fully connect with what is happening in the present moment. My meditation could deepen to a level that is hard to achieve in a busy city with the usual human struggles of an everyday life.



Everything becomes very clear and is functioning clear in the retreat temple life. There is nothing else to do than to focus on your meditation practice by paying attention to what is going on right now. Really becoming aware of what is happening RIGHT NOW by not following my thinking or my emotions was as a huge relief. Because once my mind activity (thinking, checking, planning, emotions and so on) settled down I could connect deeply with what is really going on NOW, in the present moment. I felt an amazing deep stillness and peace in everything, a huge relief. Like after you realized that you were just mistakenly worried about something or misled by a dream or an crazy idea, that actually turned out not to be true. And it was very clear that this stillness and peace was always there and is always there, even in your most troublesome moments. In Zen often described as "The high sky is always blue. Just because there are clouds covering it, doesn't mean it is not there." In this long retreat I could see the truth of that more deeply than before in shorter retreats. Seeing that clearly helped me very much and influenced my life deeply. So deeply that I felt ready to spent the rest of my life as a monk just practicing and helping others to do so. Once I returned to Germany my life changed a lot. Things are just happening. Sometimes in wonderful ways, and sometimes in very uncomfortable, challenging ways. But thanks to the deep meditation experience in the mountains my faith into practice was just unshakable. Even if I was troubled I knew: it's just clouds covering the sun. So I just kept going and had to learn to except life as it is and not as I want it to be. That's on ongoing practice for life...

## **Kwan Um Schools of Zen, founded by Master Seung Sahn, operate throughout Europe. Some of them can even be found here. Why did you go all the way to Korea to practice?**

I always had a deep emotional connection for Asia and its old spiritual and buddhist roots. Also I connected deeply with the teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn from the first time I meet it. And he and his teachers had been Korean Zen monks. So I felt it would be great to go there and see the culture, where this tradition is coming from, with my own eyes. Buddhism is still a baby in the West. And so of course I wanted to go the cultural source and get a taste of what this old Buddhist tradition is like. Still I practiced in an International Zen Center with lots of Western people from allover the world. I connected very well with the Western and Korean monks and nuns who lived and practiced in Korea. We spent lots of time together, traveling in Korea after the retreat and I learned a little bit about the culture and what it might mean to be a monastic in Korea. I am very happy and grateful for the time I had with these amazing sincere people. It deeply inspired me and helped me to find my path as a Western Buddhist practitioner.

## **Did you travel around Korea and Asia? Which places did you find the most interesting?**

Before going to Korea I already had the chance to travel Asia. My first long trip abroad was around 2001 to Sri Lanka. At that time I didn't know much about Buddhism at all. But I was visiting buddhist temples and scared places such as Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, which is believed to have been



propagated from the original Bodhi tree in India. And there was a very impressive procession in the capital Kandy with thousands of faithful buddhists, where they show a tooth of the Buddha Shakyamuni to the public.

In 2004 I travelled to India for 2-month. Most of the time we spent in the Himalaya region. I accompanied a friend on long track by feet through the Himalaya Region Ladak/Zanskar. For 21 days we just walked an old trail through this remote, amazing landscape above 3500 meters. On this trip I was already practicing Yoga and Meditation. Enjoying the silence among this huge mountains, the simplicity of a life just walking everyday was a big help for me at that time. I had lots of suffering in my early twenties and this trip through the mountains changed my life. When I came back, I met some people already practicing in a Kwan Um Zen group and joined them. Later on, we founded Dresden Zen Center.

In Korea I was actually visiting not so much the typical tourist places. Through my close friend Hyon Gak Sunim I had a chance to go to practicing places and meet monks and nuns who practiced sincerely since many years. So I came to visit a famous Zen Hall in Bong Am Sah, a temple which is totally dedicated to sitting Zen, deeply hiding in the mountains and rarely open to laypeople. Hyon Gak Sunim was just finishing his Kyol Che there – being the first Westerner in the history of Korean Zen invited to do his intensive 3 month group retreat in this place. Feeling the history and the energy of that place was really intense. Sitting in a place where some of the great Korean Zen Masters once sat – this connection clearly deepened my faith and direction for the spiritual path. I also visited Hae In Sah, one of the most highly respected monastic training temples in Korea. I really loved to be there with the monks.



But one of the most inspiring things, was meeting and practicing with an old Master with the name Bong Chol Kun Sunim. He lived most of his live practicing alone deeply in the mountains in an very remote mountain range of Korea. The type of practitioner I only knew from books and stories. When I met him he was already over seventy years old but his energy was still so radiant, full of life and bright. His deep love for the Dharma and the sincerity of his practice left a deep impression on me. He died earlier this year in 2011.



***The Koreans are said to be quite hostile towards foreigners and that those can feel alienated. Was your buddhist practice in any way an advantage in breaking the social barriers?***

From my experience there were just wonderful people to me. Of course, being a Westerner coming to their country to practice Buddhism makes them very happy. Also I was most of the time with a monk or a nun, that made things easier for me.

Coming from the Airport my host took me straight to a big temple in Seoul. We bowed to Buddha and in front of me was a very old lady doing lots of prostrations. When she saw me, she asked my host where I am from and what I am doing here. When she heard that I came all the way from Germany to do a long meditation retreat she was moved very much folded her hands to express her appreciation. So, yes – through the Dharma it was easy to connect with Koreans. I felt deeply connected to the many monks, nuns and korean lay buddhist I met, though we all share the love for the buddha-path no matter which culture we come from.

***Your goal of becoming a zen master was once very strong. What discouraged you?***

Thats a funny question, because for me and many others Zen has no goal. It really has not. If it would have an ultimate goal, I

would not call it Zen. Zen really means „Put it all down“, letting go your ideas and thoughts about this and that. Letting it go and really seeing what is true, some people call that Zen. How can you do that, by wanting to become someone/ something? It's not possible. Maybe Zen is much more about realizing what I am actually NOT? Getting rid of any ideas about titles and names is part of that.

The term „Zen Master“ always confuses people in the West and often creates lots of confusion, feeding wrong ideas about what is actually not true. The Zen Master(!) Brad Warner once said, that the word „Zen Master“ is a misleading term, because „no one masters Zen ever“.  
I really like this teaching.

In East Asia nobody will refer to someone as a Zen Master, in the way we refer to it in the West. In Asia it is more the way, that other practicing people may refer to you as a Master, because they have faith in your practice and wisdom. It does not matter so much if there is a lineage, a tradition, so that someone (another Zen Master) „gives“ someone a ceremonial transmission and by that „makes“ him/her a „Zen Master“. Maybe, maybe not. There are great examples in Korean Zen, where this transmission actually never happened, but still people look at this persons life and practice and out of respect for that, they might call this person „Zen Master“.



In the West Zen becomes more institutionalized and often just hearing the title „Zen Master“ seems like a big thing for those you want to follow someone, thinking of a spiritual being with a spotlessly clear mind and wisdom. Well, look for yourself, what is true and what is not. We already have a long list of „Zen Masters“ involved in actions, abuses, scandals and so on ... and people had to realize that just a title might not resample anything about their practice. In my humble opinion, there are great teachers among those with a title like „Zen Master“ and great teachers among those without this title. Some even reject to carry a title like this, because it can be misleading.

**The Bahai Faith believes in the unity of all religions. Buddhism does not see any importance in belonging to a specific religious group. Can a religion itself be an obstacle or can it serve as a support in constructing life's values?**

This really depends on what one wants. If you want to do the „right“ thing and have a „good“ feeling about doing the „right“ thing, than maybe having a religion, a belief, a philosophy is helpful. But than, their will always be people having the opposite opinion from yours. So fighting appears and maybe suffering for you will appear. Who really honestly wants that? So „right“ and „wrong“ beliefs are indeed a hindrance for real freedom. If you are looking for ultimate truth, then even a religion or a belief will not help you. What do you really want? It's up to you.



If people put their faith towards an outside thing, if there is something that people are holding on to ... a person, a belief, a philosophy, a group, a God, a this, a that ... How should it actually help them in order to be fully free? It might help them to feel „good“ or „righteous“. But than „others“ are „wrong“ and „not-righteous“, right? And where is freedom in that? Absolute freedom and peace is already there if people go BEYOND thinking and put down „I am right, you are wrong“. Than people don't have to look for freedom, because it was/is always here. But THAT kind of freedom can not be found by looking for a thing, by having a philosophy or a belief.

The Sixth Patriarch put this very nicely, saying something like „Not depending on inside and/or outside conditions, that's freedom.“ Which means, by not holding something, by not attaching to something, by not checking something inside or outside ourselves, we are free. So if people hold on to „I am right, you are wrong“, if they attach to that and always have checking about „others“, of course that will be an obstacle in their life's, because their mind will be judgmental and they might not be able to see things as they actually are.

### **Do you think we are now living in Kali Yuga? In the era of anxiety and destruction with a significant accumulation of bad karma, in which violence and brutality are overlooked?**

They only thing I know right now, it is Friday 16:55 pm. Already dark outside. Kali Yuga or not Kali Yuga, I don't have much to say about that. If people are practicing, than conditions will change, if not ... more suffering will appear.

### **Are you still willing to become a monk?**

How can I help you?

The interview was held in English by Tomáš Kubart and was published in Czech here:

<http://www.studentpoint.cz/242-kolem-sveta/5180-to-jenom-mraky-zakryvaji-slunce-rozhovor-s-nemeckym-zenovym-mnicem-svenem-mahrem#.T7zDfXl1Btl>

### **Photo description & credits:**

Page 1/ upper left:	Sven Mahr in Mu Sang Sah mountains © Photo: Youn Park
Page 1 / lower right:	Mu Sang Sa, © Photo: Sven Mahr
Page 2 / upper right:	with Hyon Gak Sunim & Boep Ung Sunim in Bong Am Sa © Photo: Sven Mahr
Page 2 / lower left:	Bong Chol Kun Sunim(1935 - 2011), Yang Baek Jeong Sah Temple, So Baek Sahn Mountains, Korea © Photo: Bo Kwan Sunim
Page 3 / upper right:	Bong Am Sa © Photo: Sven Mahr
Page 3/ bottom:	Mu Sang Sag © Photo: Sven Mahr