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Seung Sahn: The Makeover of a Modern Zen Patriarch

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Buddhism will appear. American Buddhism will appear. Polish Buddhism will appear. Each country has its own culture. I only teach the bone of Buddha's teachings, not just Asian Buddhist culture. Let local people become teachers, each country's Buddhism will appear by itself.

—Seung Sahn

How a Zen master will be remembered by posterity is a delicate matter that is often as much an exercise in heuristics as it is one in hermeneutics. Because of the stakes involved in the creation of such an image—sectarian, national, global, and historical—the passions it evokes are always intense. The documentation of Chan patriarchs in Chan lineage records such as the *Transmission of the Lamp* (*Jingde chuandeng lu*) (1004), the *Baolin chuan* (801), and the *Zutang ji* (K. *Chodang jip*) (952) attests to this undercurrent of competition in works written presumably by disciples with the intention of securing for their masters their good name and reputation within the lineage. Who is left in or out of these esteemed documents is an intriguing question in itself and has become an important entry point for modern scholarship where—literally—no stone has been left unturned to reconstruct an account of the image left behind in historical documents, cave drawings, iconography, temple steles, and memorial inscriptions.

Contemporary Zen masters who hope to secure a place within the lineage must thus enter into the same process that others before

them had similarly done; that is, write books, build a community of followers and temples, and then entrust that image to their disciples to protect and even defend for posterity. Modernity, however, presents to modern Zen masters challenges unforeseen and unimagined by their ancient predecessors. Modern Zen masters, in order to make a name for themselves, must travel the globe, teach Dharma in a language that is not familiar to them, attend television talk shows, enter the World Wide Web, and see their Dharma talks and discussions with their disciples turn into instant YouTube picture shows.

Such a contemporary Zen master was Seung Sahn Sunim (1927–2004). When he died in 2004, he had left behind a community of followers, more than a hundred schools in America and Europe, a temple in Korea, and an image of Zen in the West that is other than that shaped by the Japanese. When Seung Sahn first arrived in America in 1972, he confronted challenges that were more than linguistic or technological. America in 1972 was, to borrow Dale Wright's formulation, "already immersed in a prior understanding [of Zen] that is articulated in terms of Japanese Zen."¹ The entry into the English language of the Japanese word "Zen" to represent all branches of the school attests to Japan's dominance. It is perhaps all the more remarkable that despite this, Seung Sahn managed to impress upon his American audience a new image of Zen, one touted to be in contradistinction to Japanese Zen. Certainly, such a claim to the "new" is bound to raise not just a few eyebrows, especially if we bear in mind Wright's insight that "the new ways" are "never totally new" and that "they are always hammered out on the anvil of the preceding discursive practice and mediated through the culture's grasp of its new situation."² That granted, it still remains to be asked, what is "new" in Seung Sahn's image of Zen? It is the contention of this chapter that the image of Zen presented by the Korean Zen master to the West operates on two levels: a rhetorical one that masterfully weaves his own image and narrative with that of the Korean Sŏn lineage, and a practical level that skillfully adapts Korean Zen style to its new environment, even as it reappropriates the prevailing discursive practice defined by the Japanese. In other words, the image of Korean Zen was developed as a combination of old and new, so that what emerged appeared familiar yet fresh.

More than a practical and expedient strategy to penetrate the Buddhist Western market is at stake here, however. It will become apparent in this chapter that the contestation of Japanese Zen dominance in America has a subtext of protest derived from cultural and national pride. This protest, to be sure, is a muted one, especially in comparison with the more vociferous ones raised during the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910–1945), and further back in 1592, when Japan first invaded Korea. As this chapter contends, what Seung Sahn's

image of Zen attempts to do is to protest the hegemony of Japanese Zen in the West and its presumption to speak for all the branches of the school. This intertwining of nationalism and religion is neither unusual nor a recent phenomenon, as scholars of Korean Buddhism have pointed out.

As Robert Buswell noted, we recognize that in premodern Korea Buddhist identity formation extended far beyond the confines and rhetoric of nationhood, and that many monks to this day are still apt to consider themselves members of a larger ordination line and monastic lineage.³ Nevertheless, it is difficult by the early twentieth century to separate Korean Buddhist identity from the nascent emergence of Korean nationalism—forged particularly by its long periods of resistance to Japanese invasion and influence. Narratives of the lives of several prominent Korean Zen masters note not only their meditation prowess, reclusive habits, and mind-blowing moments of enlightenment but also their leadership in resisting the Japanese.⁴ For example, Master Yongsong (1864–1937) led in the struggle for the independence of Korean Buddhism from the Japanese and represented Korean Buddhism in a nationwide demonstration against Japanese occupation.⁵ Similarly, Seung Sahn's own grandmaster, Man'gong (1872–1946) was remembered for his “deafening Zen shout” at a Japanese governor and declaring, “For what reason should Korean Buddhism follow Japanese Buddhism? The person who stresses such an idea must be in hell.”⁶

Bernard Faure, however, reminds us that these “nationalistic” tensions predate Korea's formation as a nation.⁷ During the eighth century, Korea already had to struggle to assert its own primacy against the major cultural referent, which was China. And while Korean expatriate monk-scholars may have distinguished themselves in China, those who did not return to their homeland were noticeably absent in historical documentations, such as the *Chodangjip* (Collections of the Patriarch Hall), compiled in 952.⁸ The value of *Chodangjip* to Korean Zen Buddhism is redoubtable, since it contains biographies and the teachings of eight Silla masters.⁹ Missing from this distinguished list is Musang or Master Kim (680–756), a Chan master of two of the earliest schools in China, who was famous in Tibet. Also missing is Wŏnch'uk (613–696), one of Xuanzang's (602–664) chief disciples. Both were expatriate monk-scholars who never returned to Korea.¹⁰ Conversely, those who returned were celebrated and went on to establish Zen schools and lineages. As Faure maintains in his work on Chan master Musang, culture, religion and nationalism interacted, and Buddhism became a pawn in this politicocultural game.¹¹

The persistent identification of Buddhism with nationalism in modern and premodern Korea presents itself as a critical subtext that we must reckon with in the consideration of the image of Korean Zen, especially given the prevailing influence of Japanese Zen in the West. As the face of Korean Zen in the

West, the image of Seung Sahn as Zen master is indivisible from the image of Korean Zen that he imparts through his teachings of the “Don’t Know Mind.” But before considering this subtext of cultural and national pride, let us turn first to Seung Sahn’s two-pronged strategy of rhetoric and practice in the formation of a new image of Zen in the West.

Seung Sahn and the Image of Korean Zen

Known to his American and European disciples as Dae Soen Sa Nim (Honored Zen Teacher), Seung Sahn taught a brand of Zen that became known as “Don’t Know Mind.” When he died on November 30, 2004, at Hwagyesa Temple in Seoul, Korea, he was surrounded by his disciples who had flown in from all corners of the world to be by his side. Credited for having transmitted Korean Zen to the West, Seung Sahn has been called the “Korean Bodhidharma” by his countrymen, in reference to the Indian monk who was said to have brought meditation to China. By all accounts, Seung Sahn arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1972 with little money or English.¹² In a commemorative book celebrating his sixtieth birthday, he described those early days, “No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue . . . A good retreat!” That retreat turned into a twenty-year sojourn, in which Seung Sahn went on a trailblazing path that saw the proliferation of temples, books, and students all over America and Europe. The magnitude of his energy and drive to spread Korean Zen is perhaps best captured by an old Korean nun who had known both Zen Master Kobong and his young disciple, then known as Haengwŏn: “Haengwŏn Sunim is always making something! Haengwŏn Sunim is always making temples, making pagodas, making books, making students, making Zen centers, making this, going to this country, going to that country. Always making something! But my teacher Kobong Sunim never made anything. He never even . . . opened . . . his . . . mouth.”¹³

Like premodern Korean monks, Seung Sahn saw himself as being tasked with the universal transmission of the Dharma. But if premodern Korean monks participated in the universal transmission both spatially and temporally, ultimately tracing their path back to India and the Buddha himself,¹⁴ Seung Sahn does it by means of a temporal and spatial turn outward to the West before returning to the East near the end of his life. Indeed, the story of Seung Sahn might have turned out differently had he not returned to Korea. Perhaps, taking a lesson from Musang’s and Wŏnch’uk’s lack of legacy in Korea, as noted above, Seung Sahn returned. Back in the East, not alone, but with his American and European disciples in tow, Seung Sahn took his Dharma to other parts of

Asia, where he began a fundraising effort to build a temple on one of the mountains in Korea. Musangsa, the international temple of the school in Korea, was established in 2000, three years before Seung Sahn's death.¹⁵

But even before Seung Sahn's return to Korea, it was evident that he had had his eye on the kind of image that he would leave behind. In 1976, he published a biography of himself—though to be more precise, the official story is better seen as a piece of self-constructed hagiography written by him in collaboration with his American disciples, primarily for a Western audience. A close look at this “biography” reveals hagiographic topoi that clearly were intended to locate him within the Korean Zen lineage and, beyond that, to the Sinitic arc of premodern Buddhist influences and a time when Korean monk-scholars made significant contributions to Chinese Buddhism.¹⁶

The Official Biography

In the biography that Seung Sahn charged his disciples to write, we are given the basic information of his early life. We learn that he was born in 1927 to a Protestant Christian family; that in 1944, he fought in the Korean Independence movement to liberate Korea from Japan; and that he renounced the world and found enlightenment upon reading the *Diamond Sutra* (K. *Geumgang gyeong*; C. *Jingang jing*). We are then given a detailed account of his retreat into the mountains for a hundred days, a period during which he was said to have eaten only pine needles and had terrifying visions of tigers and demons. Of the visions of delight, he wrote: “Sometimes Buddhas would come and teach him a sutra. Bodhisattvas would appear in gorgeous clothing and tell him that he would go to heaven. Sometimes he would keel over from exhaustion and Kwanseum 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.”¹⁷

On the ninety-ninth day he had an “out-of-body” experience and understood that “the rocks, the river, everything he could see, everything he could hear, all this was his true self.”¹⁸ The biography also recounts how he met his teacher, the Zen master Kobong, who had instructed him to “only keep this don't know mind. That is true Zen practice.” He had predicted then, “Someday Korean Buddhism will spread to the world through you.”¹⁹ Several patterns consistent with hagiographic accounts of Chan and Korean Zen masters can be readily identified here: a recourse to the fabulous; a repetition of the paradigm of enlightenment through the *Diamond Sutra*; and an identification with the Korean Sŏn lineage.

The Fabulous

We are alerted to the trope of the fabulous in Seung Sahn's biography when we are told of visitations by tigers, demons, and buddhas. This trope is a common motif in accounts of Chan patriarchs in the *Jingde chuandeng lu* chronicles and the *Chodangjip*. In *Jingde chuandeng lu*, we are told that when Master Fa-yung left the mountains, "birds and animals cried for months. In front of the temple four great paulownia trees suddenly withered away in the middle of the summer."²⁰ Of Mazu Daoyi, we are told that he could touch his nose with his tongue, and on the soles of his feet were wheel-shaped marks, both of which were associated with Sakyamuni Buddha.²¹ And in *Chodangjip*, we are told that Master Toui was born after thirty-nine months in his mother's womb.²² Also, Master Teng Yin-feng, a disciple of Mazu, died standing on his hands in front of Diamond Cave at Mount Wutai.²³ Or, consider the earlier *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, which tells us that the monk Huizhu lived on pine needles.²⁴ Or, to take a more representative Zen master of modern times, Hanam (1876–1944) was said to have secluded himself in a monastery for twenty-five years, where he died with his legs crossed, seated in meditation.²⁵ These hagiographies offer the student of Buddhism an idealized paradigm of the Zen spiritual experience.²⁶ As John Kieschnick points out, all this is part of a reconstruction of the ideal image of the monk by their biographers who compiled them for sundry reasons, among which are proselytization and even the pure pleasure of reading.²⁷ The fabulous aspects of Seung Sahn's biography clearly fall into this paradigm of the fantastical in Buddhist hagiography. His visitations by buddhas and bodhisattvas, and even his diet of pine needles, are intended to point not only to his asceticism but more important, to the connection between himself and past Zen patriarchs by foregrounding these very same paradigmatic patterns of spiritual experience. Quite clearly, his official biography shows us that Seung Sahn's self-image is carved after the image of past Zen masters.

Paradigm of Enlightenment: Diamond Sutra

Another distinct pattern consistent with hagiographic accounts of Chan and Korean Zen masters can be readily identified here: Seung Sahn's personal narrative places it within a paradigm of enlightenment that is special to the Korean Sŏn tradition. Chinul (1158–1210), an early and key systematizer of the Korean Sŏn tradition had achieved enlightenment when he read the *Platform Sutra*.²⁸ In this Chan text, the sixth patriarch describes his spiritual enlightenment upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra*. The biographers of Chinul, who had incorporated the *Hwaŏm* (*Hua*) theory into the Sŏn schools and was instrumental in

bringing *hwadu* (head phrase) into the practice, tell us that Chinul, on account of this, would often encourage people to recite the *Diamond Sutra*.²⁹ This textual reference to the *Diamond Sutra* thus signals its textual importance within Korean Zen, and further asserts Korean Zen's historical association with the sutra.³⁰ More critically, it serves to align Seung Sahn's enlightenment with the sixth patriarch's own enlightenment through the sutra, where the image of Zen master Seung Sahn is represented as a repetition (with a difference, no doubt) of the image of past Zen patriarchs. The textual reference to the *Diamond Sutra* is thus intended to affirm the pedigree of Seung Sahn which, according to the chart produced by the school's publication arm, then lists him as the seventy-eighth patriarch. The construction of this lineage reprises the myth of origins with Sakyamuni Buddha at its fount and Mahakashyapa as the first patriarch.³¹ It thus serves to codify Seung Sahn's place in the lineage and formalize in strategic ways his status and role as the seventy-eights patriarch and possibly as the last-generation embodiment of Buddha's teaching and virtues.

The referencing of the *Diamond Sutra* also underscores another important strategic move. It appeals to the august tradition of Korean Sŏn and the authority of its eminent teachers, which includes Bodhidharma, for his teaching of the "Don't Know Mind." In a 1984 roundtable session with his disciples, Seung Sahn reaffirmed the pristine roots of the Korean Sŏn lineage as going back to the Buddha, and underlined at the same time the authority of the school he has founded:

So what kind of roots does our school have? A long time ago in India one man appeared and obtained enlightenment: Sakyamuni Buddha. That's our root. Then the twenty-eighth patriarch, Bodhidharma, came to China. At that time there were already many kinds of Buddhism being taught, including the sutras, but Bodhidharma brought something new: the teaching of how to correctly perceive mind, or Zen meditation. When he came to China he didn't bring anything. He only taught "don't know . . . So the transmission of this "don't know" teaching came from China and Korea and then here to the United States. The teachings of Bodhidharma are the roots of American Zen.³²

Clearly, what we have here is a master narrative that attempts to revise Korean Zen tradition as one long, unbroken lineage of patriarchs leading to the legendary Bodhidharma and further to the Buddha. Although one who is familiar with Zen's cultural history may dismiss this as "nothing new," since Zen masters routinely promote their own lineage of teachers and patriarchs, doing so in this case would overlook the importance of the context in which this

conversation took place. The round-table session presented a formal occasion where Seung Sahn properly pried his disciples away from their prior image of Zen and immersed them in the new image by a radical reconstruction of their roots and their lineage.³³ It must also be remembered that it is these Western disciples and other potential ones who ultimately concerned Seung Sahn, and not the scholars whose enterprise it is to debunk the myths that he constructs. Indeed, Seung Sahn's strategy could be summed up in this way: if America was already immersed in a Zen discourse shaped by the Japanese, then Seung Sahn would reimmerse them in another shaped by the Koreans. By the deliberate omission of Japan's role in the formation of American Zen, Seung Sahn clearly intends to impress upon his disciples that his image of Zen, supported by this master narrative, is the more authentic one. Further, what Seung Sahn's biographical narrative does is to consolidate the image of Korean Zen, and by extension, the authority of the school he founded in the West.

Seung Sahn and Korean Sŏn

The consolidation of Seung Sahn's authority as the seventy-eighth embodiment of Sakyamuni's teachings and as Korean Zen master is another important strategic move in his biography. After locating his place within the "transnational" Buddhist lineage that starts with the historical Buddha, he now moves into a specific location within the Korean Zen tradition and the development of the Nine Mountain Sŏn schools. Seung Sahn does this by inserting himself into another salient pattern in the hagiographies of Korean Zen patriarchs: leadership and participation in the resistance to Japanese influence. By mentioning his own involvement in the Korean independence movement, Seung Sahn situates his own life story and struggles within the long Korean tradition of national and Buddhist resistance, first against Sinitic incursions and hegemony, and then against Japanese invasions and occupation.

The close involvement of Buddhist monks in the nation's liberation movement is well documented. We are told that when Hideyoshi invaded the Korean peninsula (1592–1598), it was the monks' militia that first turned back the Japanese threat. The national Chogyŏ Order, the officially recognized Buddhist order, also formed a Monks' Militia for National Defense in which all monks must participate to this day.³⁴ Seung Sahn's retelling of his own involvement in the Korean independence movement thus reaffirms his Korean identity and his place within the Korean Sŏn tradition. This important detail points strongly to the subtext of cultural and national pride that underlies the making of the Korean Zen image in an America already accustomed, if not immersed, in one shaped by Japanese Zen.

Cultural and National Pride

Seung Sahn's own references to Korean-Japanese tensions appeared often within a personal narrative, where he speaks of growing up in colonized Korea, having to learn Japanese in school, and being made to live as a second-class citizen in his own country. This narrative not only made its way into his official biography, as has been shown above, but also into texts published by the Kwan Um School.³⁵ We also learn that as abbot of Hwagyesa, he founded the United Buddhism Association, a community of laypeople committed to the revival of Korean Buddhism. He was also on the Board of Directors of the Chogye Order which, in the mid-fifties and sixties, sought to reform its own house and reverse policies (such as the marriage of monks) brought about by Japanese domination of Buddhist matters in Korea. Seung Sahn would also spend another nine years in Japan administering to the large Korean community there.³⁶ All this—framed as anecdotes leading to his renunciation and to his search for a solution to the “immense suffering”—suggests that Seung Sahn's image of Zen is indivisible from his own resistance to the image of Zen imposed on Korea by Japan during its occupation. But it must be pointed out that this subtext of national and cultural pride arising from a history of neighborly competition had never interfered in his relations with his Japanese Zen counterparts. His best friend remained the Soto Zen master Taizan Maezumi, and he himself had never been disparaging about Japanese Zen.

Still, one could easily imagine the cultural and national pride that Seung Sahn must have felt when he returned to Korea in the 1990s, with his Western disciples in tow. But Seung Sahn went beyond showing his country to his disciples; he got them to stay and build a temple on one of Korea's mountains.³⁷ Whether his disciples were aware of the temple's significance is uncertain, but, as shown earlier, Seung Sahn was cognizant of the “career moves” by Korea's Zen patriarchs. By modeling himself after the great premodern Korean masters who went to China, attained enlightenment after meeting many famous Zen masters, then built a great temple on one of the mountains, and established a school, Seung Sahn—in spite of being a globetrotting, “funky” Zen master—was performing within the cultural paradigm of his lineage. By doing so, it would appear that he was reasserting Korea's claim, as premodern Korean Buddhists had done more than a thousand years before, to being the authentic and more pristine root of Buddhism. And in presenting the master narrative of Korean Zen's lineage to his Western disciples, he had also spatially extended the historical competition between Korea and Japan to the West.

The Familiar in the New

Seung Sahn's success in penetrating the American market can be attributed to the fact that the image he projected was both different and reassuringly familiar. As mentioned earlier, his image operates on two levels: a rhetoric of difference charted through the distinction of the Korean Zen lineage, as we have seen, and a practice that draws on the well-trying and the familiar, as seen in Seung Sahn's teachings and practice. Seung Sahn has often said that in spite of the many names that he had given his teachings—Primary Point, Only Go Straight, Donno, Just Do It—there is really only one teaching—the Don't Know Mind. Seung Sahn has often described it as clear mind that perceives "sugar as sweet, sky as blue." When I spoke to his disciples, they spoke of what is unique to them about the school, and why they had chosen it over the other schools available to them. They were remarkably uniform in their responses. Kwan Sah Sunim, a monk residing at the Providence Zen Center, said, "The directions in our school are very clear. Seung Sahn was always concerned about how the Don't Know Mind can help us function every day. His kongans are designed to help us live moment to moment with clarity."³⁸ Andrzej Stec, a Polish Dharma teacher, explained, "Seung Sahn did not want to stop at *mu*, as Japanese Zen did. For him, it is how the Don't Know Mind can help us day to day. He took it a step beyond the Japanese Zen schools which emphasize the attainment of *mu* [C. *wu*]."³⁹ Another long-time disciple of Seung Sahn would push it further. "Japanese Zen is very attached to *satori*, but what is the function of *kensho*? Get enlightenment, get enlightenment, but then what?"⁴⁰

Certainly, one could protest that Japanese Zen schools do more than just aim for "*satori*,"⁴¹ but as the interviews with Seung Sahn's key disciples consistently evidenced, they are "immersed" in a certain understanding of Zen that is different from that shaped by the Japanese. In practice, Seung Sahn also offered some familiar material by an adroit blending of Japanese and Korean Zen practices. For example, instead of adhering to the traditional Korean Zen practice of using a single *kōan* throughout a student's career, he opted instead for a more elaborate system of *kōan* training, such as the *Ten Gates Collection*, a system that was more closely modeled on Japanese Rinzai models.⁴² Also, in Korea, meditation retreats last for the ninety days of summer and winter, but in America, in addition to these long retreats, Seung Sahn also offered weekend, three-day, and one-week retreats, which were more like a Japanese *sesshin*. Stec explains, "In Asia, monks and nuns work within a cultural context. But in America, context is missing. And Seung Sahn clearly saw that too much rule would not work in this environment. His aim was to throw out the net as wide as possible to catch the big fish."⁴³

The organization of the school's hierarchy, conforming to stages of training, seniority, and levels of attainment, shows further evidence of this skilful blending of the new and the familiar. For example, the monastic robes—which would have been worn only by monks in Korea—are also permitted to be worn by Dharma teachers in Seung Sahn's schools. As one of the monks explained to me:

The system is a way of offering candy. Seung Sahn saw that the American mindset responds to these incentives, and in fact needs these markers of achievement. So in our system, after you train for a few years, and have taken the ten precepts, you get this title, then after another few more years, you get some other title, and so forth. Dharma teachers and monks and nuns fall under this system of hierarchy.⁴⁴

But far more radical than the permission to wear monastic robes by those not ordained is the presence of married Dharma teachers. This is clearly a concession, in view of Seung Sahn's own stance against married clergy in Korea. But his willingness to adjust the strictures of traditional monastic discipline for his new American disciplines again points to his larger goal of throwing his net as wide as possible. By adapting this aspect of Japanese Zen style where monks could—and do—marry, Seung Sahn makes tacit acknowledgment of the successful immersion of Japanese Zen in America.

Alterations to the Image

Early on, Seung Sahn introduced the ritualistic reading of his correspondence with his students, whereby a letter from a student would be read, followed by his reply. This took place as part of morning and evening practice at all his residential Zen centers. This correspondence between the Zen master and his students had come about because Seung Sahn was always traveling from center to center.⁴⁵ The letters and his answers to them were collected into "kong-an books." *Only Don't Know* (1999), *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* (1976), *The Whole World Is a Single Flower* (1992) are some of these books regularly read at these sessions. What is striking about these dialogues is that they clearly follow a pattern of dialogues between master and disciple found in the collection of letters written by the Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) to his students.⁴⁶ Seung Sahn's letters, which remain the only material repository left today of that dynamic exchange between master and student, now function as important, historical records. But by virtue of being ritually performed, these texts undergo a process whereby they become sacred. These documented records of

his teachings and his exchanges with his students—each of whom was asking on behalf of another who had similar questions and concerns—became a means by which a new student with his or her own queries and doubts entered into a relationship with the late Zen master. In being performed ritually twice a day after the morning and evening sittings, these texts served as the closure of an elaborate ritual. Under such circumstances, where the texts become performative ones within a ritualistic setting, something else happens to the text. The hermeneutic meaning becomes irrelevant. It is read without discussion and concluded with *hapchang* (hands put together, J. *gassho*). In this context, it is the non-hermeneutic relations that gain importance in this process, as the text interacts with other ancient texts and other similarly enacted rituals held elsewhere in another part of the Buddhist world.

In introducing this ritual to his students, Seung Sahn was teaching his students to perform his image of Zen, and by doing so, to uphold the Zen master's image, as well. As I had claimed at the start, the image of Korean Zen in the West has become synonymous with the image of Seung Sahn.⁴⁷ By ritualizing the correspondence between him and his students, these texts all but attain sacred status. In doing so, the image of Seung Sahn is also being performed in the way he wants to be remembered and honored for the reading of the letters between master and disciple recalls the paradigmatic exchange of ancient Zen masters and disciples, and in this single stroke, reinserts the Zen master back into his lineage even as he becomes even more alive in their presence.

A Zen Patriarch in a Modern Age?

What Seung Sahn's biography sets out to achieve, as I have shown, is to locate the master within the larger Sinitic Buddhist tradition, and specifically within Korean Zen tradition by referencing key patterns in hagiographical accounts of Buddhist monks. But modernity and the fabulous make strange bedfellows. Despite Seung Sahn's attempts to control the image presented in the official biography while he was alive, such a fabulous image sits not a little strangely in the technology-savvy era of the Internet. In fact, the image of Seung Sahn encounters a modern problem that the pre-Internet Chan and Sŏn patriarchs could not have imagined—moment-to-moment accessibility.

This unprecedented accessibility of the modern Zen master to his disciples can be attributed to several factors, of which expedience and necessity are key. A well-known story still circulating in the Kwan Um School of Zen is of Seung Sahn's early days in America. When he first arrived in Providence, he came face to face with the "wild hippies" that he had only heard of in Korea. He

quickly saw that much of the formality and rituals that typically inform interactions between Zen master and disciples in a Zen monastery in Korea could not prevail in the West. For example, traditionally a certain distance between Zen master and audience was maintained by means of a high chair that the Zen master ascends to give his sermon to the audience, who would be seated on the floor. Any subsequent interaction between Zen master and teacher took place in a question-and-answer format during the Dharma session. And in a formal retreat, a Sŏn monk gets to see the master perhaps once or twice throughout an entire ninety-day retreat period.⁴⁸ In America, this distance and formality was quickly abandoned. Seung Sahn invited students into his kitchen and cooked noodles for them. He sat with them on the floor in a circle, ate with them, and was available to his students at all times. He experimented with his teaching style in order to reach out to his Western students. Stephen Mitchell says of Seung Sahn, "Zen Master Seung Sahn is a born teacher, an astonishingly adept and fertile inventor of skillful means. In the early days, just after he came to America, he would change his slogan every few months. One month it was 'Only go straight,' then, two months later, it was 'Just do it.' Then it was 'Don't check other people's minds.'"⁴⁹ Dae Bong, who knew him for twenty-seven years and was one of his closest disciples said, "He never took a vacation, was available to his students, even at one A.M., when students knocked on his door. Being a monk means living for other people. Do together-action."⁵⁰ Even when Seung Sahn began traveling from center to center across America and the globe, he kept in close contact by encouraging his students to write letters to him.

The problem is that this "together-action" also has the effect of taking away some of the shine from the image of a Zen master in that he becomes human, even ordinary. This is an important point because of the impact it has on the reception of the image of Seung Sahn in the West. One example might suffice to illustrate this. When Seung Sahn lay dying in the hospital, he received many calls inquiring about his health. Dae Bong recalled:

Towards the end of his life he was quite ill; he couldn't travel anymore. He was in the hospital for six weeks. We slept there with him. When people called up to enquire about his health, the Korean abbot who was there would say, "He's in Hong Kong at the moment!" The thinking was that enlightened people don't die. Or they sit up straight and die. Western students had no problem with that. Asian ones had a problem with that. He's sick because he lived with us. The delusion that appears in Asia is that great Zen masters don't get sick. Well, Buddha died because he ate bad food.⁵¹

This remark by Seung Sahn's Western disciple is particularly telling. It points to a disjunction between the Asian reception of the Zen master's image and the Western one. The suggestion here appears to be that students of Seung Sahn who come from Asia, where a formal and ritualistic relationship between master and disciple are, more or less, still apparent were in complete denial of the Zen master's death, or expected his body to stay in a certain position after death. The source of this disjunction in perception could be summed up in this way: Seung Sahn's image of himself as Zen master—one designed to be in alignment with the historical lineage of Zen patriarchs—is at odds with the “funky” image that he—by necessity or expedience—projected in his interactions with American students. To his students, he was warm, funny, and accessible. Students reflecting on those days say, “He was making a lot of the form as he went along, closely watching the young American mind and finding the right remedies for the sometimes powerful imbalances.”⁵²

Seung Sahn, in tacit acknowledgement of the image he engendered, has referred to himself as the “funky Zen master.” Yet this all-too-human image is clearly at odds with the elevated idealized image that he was trying to create through his biography. As I suggested earlier, the image of Zen patriarchs of yore is a reconstructed one; a combination of fact, yarn, and lore in which their “greatness” appears to emanate from the great distance, and from the inaccessibility of the person behind the image created in the hagiographies and scholarly writings. Seung Sahn did not have the benefit of either. He had had to write his own “biography” and to cross cultural and language chasms by closing the distance between himself and his American students. In the end, he appeared as human as those around him. He got sick like everyone else, and he died.

This all-too-human image was also a product of the many YouTube mini-shows that featured the Zen master. Leaving little to the religious imagination, the arrival of the Zen master in the living room provides a wonderful opportunity for preaching the Dharma, but at the same time it also threatens to strip away some of the “magic” of the image that Seung Sahn had hoped to create through the official biography. The Zen master who is all too human and always accessible presents, as such, a conundrum in that the image that emerges—despite his own valiant efforts to control it—is clearly at odds with the self-constructed image of the Zen master, where the important signifiers such as the antinomian behavior and the surreal circumstances surrounding birth, enlightenment, and death signify a special “enlightened” being worthy of reverence, awe, and even worship. These signifiers of quasi-divine status had long fed the religious and cultural imagination of Buddhist Asia. For Seung Sahn's Western disciples, this kind of image clearly holds no allure.

Concluding Remarks

The image of Seung Sahn is still in the making. In Dharma lectures given by his disciples—many of whom continue to teach the “Don’t Know Mind” in the different Zen centers across the globe—stories about the Zen master and stories by him are repeated and generated anew. In some instances, they have begun to gain a folkloric quality, and in other instances, they have attained a fabulous quality as each of the disciples—perhaps because they are still missing him—plumb the depths of their memory to tell stories of their beloved Zen master. They eagerly add and embellish every detail, aware that they have become custodians of the image that their Zen master has left behind. But each of the disciples in his or her own way is trying to protect a personal image of Zen master Seung Sahn. More than that, they are protective of the image of Seung Sahn for the fact that their own image is the one that will be imparted to those who have never met him, and who will, therefore, be dependent on these stories for a sense of their Zen master.

As I have shown, the image of Korean Zen in the West is indivisible from the image of the Seung Sahn as Zen master. Through his official biography, we see that the Zen master has modeled his image after Zen patriarchs of the Korean Sŏn tradition. Distinct patterns and tropes point to paradigms and models familiar to the Chan tradition. With these clearly marked signifiers, such as the role of the *Diamond Sutra* and the Buddhist monks’ resistance to Japanese influence in religious and political matters, Seung Sahn has shaped an image for himself that references not only his Korean identity but also his role and status as the seventy-eighth patriarch in a lineage that allegedly goes back to the historical Buddha.

Seung Sahn’s ambition was to spread the Dharma to the West. As the quotation at the start of the chapter suggests, he intended to teach the bone of the Buddha’s teachings. But the politicocultural reality in the East and in the West taught him a lesson that premodern Korean monks had already learned as they faced times of Chinese xenophobia, and struggled to have a distinct Korean Buddhist practice. The latter became more urgent when the Japanese threatened to influence Korean Buddhist practice in the course of its occupation. By the time Seung Sahn arrived in America in 1972, he found that American Buddhism was already dominated by Japanese Zen. He had to compete, yet again, for a distinct image of Korean Zen that could be welcomed and accepted in America. In trying to get to know his Western students, he was willing to abandon some of the ritualistic formality of the Korean Sŏn tradition while coopting some of the Japanese Zen practices already familiar to his Western students. It was by an adroit rhetorical strategy of promoting himself or his own self-image

that he sought to claim the difference. In aligning the Korean Zen image with his own self-image, he offered Korean Zen as a viable—if not better—option to Japanese Zen, even as he adapted traditional Korean Zen practices to its new home and reappropriated parts of Japanese Zen practice. As Dae Bong noted, “He was going to the West with great cultural pride. But he learned from his students. He was more affected by us. He was the best student, that’s why he was the Zen master.”⁵³ When his school, the Kwan Um School of Zen, officially opened in 1983, he had within ten years trail-blazed across America and was already beginning to spread the Dharma to Europe. In appreciation for his lifetime of teaching, Seung Sahn also received the title Great Master from the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism, the highest honor the order confers.

In the process he became more human, perhaps, at least when compared to the official image that had been carved out for him through his biography. It has been only five years since he died, and his Dharma talks are regularly invoked and made present once again through YouTube, RealPlayer, and other Web sites. The Web has indeed kept the teachings of the Zen master alive and present. But as I suggested earlier, the advantages of YouTube’s and other picture shows are double-edged. In order for an image to flourish, it depends as much on absence as it does on presence. The “reality” of Bodhidharma was captured for posterity in only a couple of “Zen” strokes on rice paper, where the famous eyes lurking under the dark, flying eyebrows serve to remind devotees of his legendary commitment to enlightenment, and to evoke unlimited leaps in religious imagination. The “reality” of a Zen master on YouTube might do the same, but it might also have the effect of curtailing some of that awe. But this is speculation at best. Five years after Seung Sahn’s death, he continues today to be remembered and loved by his disciples. And the multiple media in which he has become available has continued to win him new disciples. The image he left behind of himself is still in the process of being shaped, but insofar as the image of Zen in the West is concerned, there is no doubt that the Zen master has succeeded in planting a new image of Zen—a distinctly Korean one that goes by the name of the “Don’t Know Mind.”

NOTES

1. Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 50.

2. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, p. 80.

3. “Imagining ‘Korean Buddhism’: the Invention of a National Religious Tradition,” in *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*, edited by Hyung Il Pai and Timothy R. Tangherlini (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1998), p. 84; and Robert E. Buswell, Jr., ed., *Currents and Countercurrents:*

Korean Influences on the East Asian Buddhist Tradition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p. 8.

4. Seo Kyung-Bo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism Approached through the Chodangjip* (Seoul: Poryŏn'gak, 1973).

5. Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 401.

6. Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 398.

7. Bernard Faure, "Chan Master Musang: A Korean Monk in East Asian Context," in *Currents and Countercurrents: Korean Influences on the East Asian Buddhist Tradition*, edited by Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p. 153.

8. The *Chodangjip* was discovered in 1920 at the Haein Monastery, Mount Kaya, and consists of twenty numbered volumes engraved on wooden blocks containing the records and deeds of more than 250 patriarchs. They comprise accounts of the Indian, Chinese, and Korean Zen masters who lived at the end of Sakyamuni's life and the end of the Tang Dynasty (483 B.C.E.—952 C.E.). The *Chodangjip* was lost in China, except for one volume containing thirty-six songs of a number of patriarchs, which was found in the Dunhuang, and is now in the British Museum. See Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 4.

9. Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 4.

10. Faure, "Chan Master Musang," p. 155.

11. Faure, "Chan Master Musang," p. 153.

12. Interviews with members of Providence Zen Center (September 2008).

13. Quoted in Hyak Gak Sunim's Inka Speech (2001). <http://www.kwanumeurope.org/article.php?s=3&a=46>.

14. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., "Introduction," in *Currents and Countercurrents*, p. 10.

15. The new temple at Mount Gyeryong in the center of South Korea has attracted a substantial Korean lay practice.

16. John Jorgensen, "Korea as a Source for the Regeneration of Chinese Buddhism: The Evidence of Chan and Sŏn Literature" in Buswell, ed., *Currents and Countercurrents*, pp. 73–110.

17. Seung Sahn, *The Whole World Is a Single Flower* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1992), p. 228.

18. Mu Seong Sunim, *Thousand Peaks: Korean Zen—Tradition and Teachers* (Providence: Primary Point Press, 1987, 1991), p. 213. See also *The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn: Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, compiled and edited by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1976), p. 232; and Seung Sahn, *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*, p. 229.

19. Mu, *Thousand Peaks*, p. 216.

20. Chang Chung-Yuan, trans., *Original Teachings of Chan Buddhism: Selected from Transmission of the Lamp* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 26.

21. Chang Chung-Yuan, trans., *Original Teachings of Chan Buddhism*, p. 148. Also, see footnote 4 on p. 177.

22. Recounted in Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 90.

23. Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 111.

24. Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 35.
25. Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, p. 399.
26. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 5.
27. John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chan Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 68.
28. Korean Sŏn tradition traced its lineage to Mazu Daoyi (709-788), founder of the Hung-chou school. Eight of the mountain schools of Sŏn were founded by Korean disciples of major Chan masters. Of these eight, seven were founded by disciples of first-generation successors of Mazu Daoyi. See Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul*, translated. with an introduction by Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), p. 9.
29. Buswell, *Korean Approach to Zen*, p. 29.
30. Charles Muller, "A Korean Contribution to the Zen Canon," in *Zen Classics: Formative Texts in the History of Zen Buddhism*, edited by Steven Heine and Dale Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 45.
31. Seung Sahn, *The Compass of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 393.
32. "The Roots of American Buddhism," in Second Annual Congress of the Kwan Um School of Zen in Primary Point Article Archive. Volume 1, 1984 <http://www.kwanumzen.org/primarypoint/>.
33. See Dale Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
34. Mu, *Thousand Peaks*, p. 11. Also see Seo, *A Study of Korean Zen Buddhism*, pp. 385-411, for Japanese influence on Korean Buddhism during its occupation.
35. Primary Point Press is the publications division of the Kwan Um School of Zen.
36. Mu, *Thousand Peaks*, p. 218.
37. Mu, *Thousand Peaks*, p. 218.
38. Interview at Providence Zen Center, September 2008.
39. Interview at Providence Zen Center, September 2008.
40. Interview with Dae Bong Sunim, October 2008.
41. See Miura Isshu and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Kōan: Its History and Use in Rinzai Zen* (Orlando, Florida: Harvest Books, 1966) for an "after-satori" training within the Japanese Rinzai koan system.
42. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., correspondence, December 2008.
43. Interview at Providence Zen Center, September 2008.
44. Ibid.
45. Mu, *Thousand Peaks*, p. 219.
46. Buswell, correspondence, December 2008. See J. C. Cleary, *Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997, 2006).
47. Other than the Zen master Kusan, who came to America in 1971 for a brief period of time, Seung Sahn was the only Korean Zen master who stayed behind and established a school.

48. Please see Buswell's *Zen Monastic Experience* for further details of the rigors and formalities of a typical Sŏn monastery.

49. Kwan Um School of Zen, *Only Doing It for Sixty Years*, edited by Diana Clark (Cumberland, R.I.: Kwan Um School of Zen, 1987), p. 20.

50. Interview with Zen master Dae Bong, October 2008.

51. Interview with Zen master Dae Bong, October 2008.

52. Kwan Um School of Zen, *Only Doing It for Sixty Years*, p. 103.

53. Interview with Zen master Dae Bong, October 2008.