

"It Is Very Helpful If We All Do It Together"

Q&A with Zen Master Bon Shim

Aleksandra Porter, Zen Master Bon Shim, is Regional Zen Master for the Kwan Um School of Zen in Europe. She also serves as the guiding teacher of Zen centers in Katowice, Krakow and Wroclaw, Poland; Prague, Czech Republic; and Catalonia. Zen Master Bon Shim continues to live at the Warsaw Zen Center, where she began training and served as Abbot for many years. She met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1978, receiving inka in 1992 and permission to teach in 2006. Along the way, she had two sons and two grandchildren. Zen Master Bon Shim will be living at CZC for an extended winter visit once again in 2017.

SOME PEOPLE INSIST THEY ARE TOO BUSY TO PRACTICE...

Yes, they are. But we make ourselves busy. If you make practice, you have more energy. You're not losing energy, you're gaining energy through practice. People forget about that. They think they need to sleep and they need to rest. Truly, with practice, we gain more energy and more clarity. And then we know what we are doing. We are not wasting so much time and energy.

YOU LEAD RETREATS IN THE U.S., IN ASIA, IN EUROPE. ARE THERE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS?

We have cultural differences, even in Europe. I just came back from Spain. When they hear the moktak, for them, it is a time for coffee. [She chuckles.] They hear moktak, and they think, 'Coffee. Coffee is necessary before practice.' Germans are completely the opposite. Even before the moktak, they are already in the dharma room, already sitting. Polish people are just about in the middle.

WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE IN THE U.S.?

American people are more confident. Your system of education and raising up, is pumping the belief and confidence in oneself. [Americans] don't have to work so hard to believe in themselves. Maybe they sometimes they are too confident, I would say. Here, in Eastern Europe, it is the opposite. We were told always that we just have to obey and listen. Now it is different, it is changing. But I come from this Communist time. I had to do a lot of bows to gain confidence. Asians ... listen to authority too much and that causes them problems. Russia—they are so complicated. I never had such weird answers to kongans like I had in Russia.

ARE THERE ANY WAY TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE PRACTICE?

It's lovely to work with young people. They are more flexible. They are more open minded. They are not so structured like ... older people. [Older] minds are stiff and solid. It's for me—it's hard to break through, to connect [to older students]. I see how difficult it is for them to change their view, to change their opinion, to change their ideas. They have solid—solid as granite—ideas about everything, apparently. With young people, it is much easier.

WHAT DOES 'ONLY GO STRAIGHT' MEAN? HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN TO CHANGE DIRECTIONS?

We have to understand this correctly. Going straight means, sometimes, to turn right or turn left. Our life is not linear. It goes, more like, around. Sometimes we go forward, sometimes we need to take a step back. It's just do it. Keep trying. That's the same thing. Keep practicing no matter what is going on with your life.

CAN YOU SAY ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR CHILDHOOD, ABOUT WHEN YOU STARTED TO PRACTICE ZEN?

I was really looking for some answers, for some direction, for some path. I was raised in a Catholic family, and would go to church regularly, but I couldn't find answers to my questions, to my pain and confusion. Then Zen Master Seung Sahn appeared. Right away, I knew, this is my path. I felt very grateful. That was the beginning of any Zen practice or Zen teaching in Poland. There were no books about Zen or Buddhism, it was an unknown field.

I kept going, getting more and more involved in practice and creating the possibility for other people to meet. It is very helpful if we all do it together. That's how it develops. I was quite involved and connected with the group and with sangha. I have lived in a Zen center for already 30 years. I wouldn't change it for anything else.

YOU HAVE TWO ADULT SONS WHO GREW UP WITH YOU IN A ZEN CENTER. DID YOU ORDER THEM TO MEDITATE EVERY MORNING?

No, never. I never pushed them. I did the opposite. I chased them from the dharma room because they were, you know, children. They wanted to play. They were throwing cushions around. They were bothering people. They wanted to draw attention to themselves. I had to kick them out many times! I never told them, 'you must meditate.' Now,

when parents ask me, how to deal with children, I just tell them the same thing. Never tell the child to sit in meditation. They will follow you. Naturally, children want to know what parents are doing. They are interested—at least until some certain time when they are an adult. They want to be near you. They want to know what you are doing. They sneak into the dharma room.

HOW DID THEY REACT TO A CERTAIN JOLLY KOREAN MONK WHO VISITED?

They loved Seung Sahn Sunim. He was very nice, very kind, always giving them presents, chocolate, money. They loved him. They would always come to the dharma talk and ask him funny questions.

PEOPLE NOT FAMILIAR WITH OUR RETREATS MAY HAVE A BIT OF FEAR ABOUT THEM...

This fear is very natural. It happens to all of us. In Spain, we had one week of intensive retreat with night practice [from 12:00 midnight until 2:00 a.m.] Before this retreat, I myself was just concerned, how my body will take it this time? It is not easy to sit all day long. How can I sit in this weird position? Also, maybe they have a kind of intuition, they don't want to face themselves, confront themselves. There is this fear to confront reality. 'Maybe I will see myself, who I truly am, and that will scare me. Maybe I will see a very bad side of myself and that will give me suffering.' The intuition is right. Things are coming to the surface. Painful experiences. We don't want to experience suffering and pain. We don't want to see, to look more deeply. But eventually it is a choice. If we want to go beyond that, we have to first see it and face it and confront it.