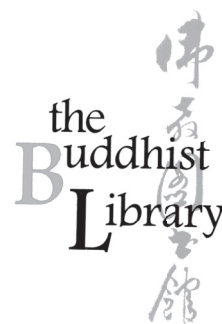


# the Path of Joy



## Bhante Says

LESSONS FROM THE TSUNAMI

**A**s you all know, the tsunami has taken so many lives – more than 300,000. Some countries were hit more badly than others. I was not going to talk about why it happened or why there was no protection for the victims. I don't pay much attention to those things. But if there's anything we can do for the affected people, that's more important.

But later, I saw a few articles in the newspapers about the tsunami. Some people asked – *Where was God when the tsunami came? If he's almighty, why did such a thing happen?* One writer said - *'I still believe in God, I know that God exists because I feel God exists. The only thing is that God is not almighty. He cannot stop everything in this world. Certain things are not within his control.'*

I'm not interested in speculating whether God exists or not. Neither am I going to criticise theistic religions. Everyone is entitled to his or her own belief, whatever it may be. I just want to talk about Buddhist teachings because some people asked me what Buddhism has to say about these things.

The beauty of Buddhism is that Buddhists are not required to believe in anything. The Buddha taught us instead to direct our attention to reality. Buddhism is based on the reality of this world. As Buddhists, we need only improve our knowledge of the reality of this world, day by day, and maintain our awareness all the time to understand reality.

We all know that the Buddha was not the creator of this world. The Buddha never claimed that role. So we cannot ask – *Where was the Buddha when the tsunami happened?* The Buddha never said he could save humanity from disasters because they were his creatures.

But this does not mean we can take this event lightly or adopt an apathetic attitude. There's another aspect of this problem which we should pay a lot of attention to. *How do we respond to this tragic situation?*

It has already happened. It's very tragic and sad. No Buddhist can

escape from this aspect of the problem. The victims have died and their families are in pain. Some families have only one or two members left. In other families, only children are left. More than one million people were made homeless in Sri Lanka alone. That's only in one country.

Buddhists always talk about love and compassion as taught by the Buddha. If we are real followers of the Buddha, this is a special opportunity for us to practise these qualities. We have to do something within our capacity to reduce the pain of the victims. I say – *'within our capacity' – because we should not expect people to perform beyond their capacity.* Compassion goes with wisdom. We may be emotionally affected but we still have to try to be wise.

The tsunami struck during the school holidays, just a few days before the school was scheduled to reopen in Sri Lanka. The children had bought all their textbooks, stationery, everything, waiting to go to school. But now in some areas, all the textbooks and stationeries are gone. Therefore, it's our duty to help them. In fact, some kind members of Buddhist Library did contribute stationery items for these students.

Buddhism gives some understanding of the nature of the world. So if we're familiar with Buddhist teachings, we need not occupy with metaphysical questions about God. Instead, we should do what's possible to help the victims.

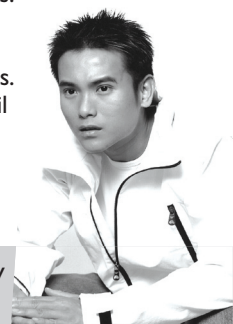
Nevertheless, some Buddhists have given their answer to the question of why the tsunami happened. They said it was due to karma. I don't think that that's a very good or helpful answer. Some people said that the victims may have done bad things together so this is collective karma. We should not put everything down to karma. That is too simplistic. Can we say all these people are bad people? More than 300,000 of them? It's not possible.

Some opportunists even tried to use such a tragic occasion to promote their beliefs by saying that certain kinds or groups of people died because they were punished by God.

During my first visit to Sri Lanka (after the tsunami), we went to a centre for affected people set up in a temple. In the first three days, they had more than 5,000 people. When I went there, there were still about 2,500 people. All of them were Christians. In that area, there were many fishing villages. Most of the people in the fishing industry in Sri Lanka happened to be Christians.

Then, in some areas, Buddhists were affected too. In other areas that we visited, the majority were Muslims. Their houses and boats were destroyed. We met Tamil people who were affected as well.

So it's plain that people of various races and religions suffered from the tsunami. They lived near the sea and so they were affected. They were not affected because they were fishermen or they belonged to any



**"TV star Nick Shen talks about his Dhamma practice" (page 6)**

# Bhante Says

particular religion. They were affected because of their physical proximity to the sea. That's how I look at it. Another reason was that most of them were very poor and their houses were not very strong. Some of the dwellings were made of planks, others of cement. But even the cement houses were poorly built.

So, as Buddhists, we should not try to find one single reason – whether God, karma or whatever - to try and explain away this whole tragedy. There were many reasons.

The Buddha taught that this world is marked by three characteristics – impermanence, suffering and non-self.

In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha said –

*Not in the sky, nor in mid-ocean  
Nor in a mountain cave  
Is found that place on earth  
Where abiding  
One will not be overcome by death*

There's no place on earth where we can escape death or danger. We can find some kind of safety but there's no 100% guarantee. Look at the September 11 tragedy. Before that day, Americans used to think that their country was very safe. Nobody could attack them. They had the most sophisticated weapons, the most well-equipped armed forces. They had so much money. The world's only superpower. Now it's become one of the least safe countries. Their way of thinking was just a belief, a myth.

The Buddha taught that impermanence is the first characteristic of the world. The world may be safe today. But not necessarily so tomorrow.

If things are impermanent, they bring sorrow, sadness and suffering. This is the second characteristic of the world. We only need to look at the pictures of the tsunami victims and the destruction shown on television and the newspapers to see for ourselves the truth of sorrow, sadness and suffering.

In ordinary terms, when we need things, we acquire them. In common language, we say that these things belong to us. But, in reality, nothing actually belongs to us. Children do not belong to their parents. Neither do parents belong to their children. We can't even say that our bodies or our lives belong to us. If our bodies really belong to us, we should be able to protect them and make them do what we want. Yet, we can't even keep ourselves free from illness, not to mention death. Our bodies change all the time. So do our minds. One minute we're calm and peaceful, the next moment we're angry and hateful. So neither our bodies nor our minds can be said to be our selves. 'Non-self' is the third characteristic of the world which the Buddha taught.

When we look at the world with these three characteristics firmly entrenched in mind, the tsunami, as tragic as it is, is not really a surprise. In reality, tragedies and disasters can – and do – happen from time to time. They've happened in the past, they're happening now (somewhere in the world) and they will happen again in the future too. There's no way to stop them.

But, of course, that does not mean that we should be helpless or fatalistic. We have to be vigilant. If we're aware of our vulnerability, we can take steps, as far as possible, to avoid harm in the future. In some countries, wild animals managed to escape harm from the tsunami because they were able to use their instincts to escape. In

Sri Lanka, one of the worst affected areas has a national park. The animals managed to run away. Some people managed to escape when they observed the animals running away.

The governments in this part of the world are working on a regional early warning system. But, even as ordinary human beings, we can do something positive. We can do our best to co-operate with the authorities to try and avoid harm in the future. And we can train our minds – while we still have time - to overcome our negative emotional feelings and maintain love and compassion for others in case we experience this kind of unfortunate situation in the future.

We must learn to respond wisely. Not reacting irrationally like being too emotional or developing too much fear. According to newspaper reports, some people refused to eat fish because they thought that the fish might have been contaminated. If we avoid eating meat because we feel that life is precious to animals, just as our own lives are precious to us, that's good. But we should not refrain from eating fish just because we feel (despite assurances given by the relevant authorities to the contrary) that the fish may have eaten dead bodies and are unsafe to eat. This is not compassion or love. Nor is it wisdom.

If we're mindful or aware, even bad things that happen can give us an opportunity to develop love and compassion. We must try and take the opportunity to develop our very best. But human beings are sometimes like a bottle of soda water. When you open the

***“... as Buddhists, we should not try to find one single reason – whether God, karma or whatever - to try and explain away this whole tragedy. There were many reasons.”***

bottle, gas escapes in a spurt. But, after a while, there's no more gas left. In the same way, when things happen, some people run here and there to help, sometimes even beyond their capacity. After a while, they forget everything. Unfortunately, that's human nature. Let's try to go a bit further than that. Try to develop awareness. Practise love and compassion as part of our daily life.

One last thing I would like to mention before I end. Singapore started the civil defence programme some years ago to prepare for future disasters. So, now, although Singapore was not directly affected by the tsunami, it was able to help the affected countries very effectively.

In a way, I can say that this is very much similar to a Buddhist attitude. If Buddhists take the Buddha's message to heart and practise their religion sincerely, they would not lag behind others in awareness, preparedness and wisdom. But first, we need to improve our knowledge of the reality of this world, day by day, and maintain our awareness. This is, of course, not easy. But we can start by taking heed of the painful and valuable lessons that the tsunami disaster has taught us.

**Bhante B Dhammaratana**  
Religious Advisor  
Buddhist Library

# EDITORIAL

## BLESSING - REALLY?

When people talk about 'blessing', they normally think of receiving some benefit, whether spiritual or material, emanating from a higher object, say, God, a deity, a priest or monk towards another, lower object, the person being blessed. Of course, as human beings, we need something tangible - something we can see, hear, touch or feel - before we believe that we're being 'blessed'. And so, I suppose, ceremonies or rituals were born.

Buddhism has its share of blessing rituals. In the Theravada tradition, a monk sprinkles water on a devotee as he chants an appropriate sutra. And in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a lama places an image of a deity or the Buddha on the head of a devotee. Many Buddhist traditions share the practice of giving a blessing cord to devotees as a symbol of blessing.

Devotees also feel particularly blessed when they perform rituals or ceremonies on special days like Vesak Day. Or when they perform *pujas* or meditate at holy places, say, Bodhgaya, the place where the Buddha attained his enlightenment.

But what really is blessing? Does it really work?

Last October, I went to Nepal to visit a monastic school. There, my friend suggested that we go to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha.

We set off early in the morning and boarded a 'tourist bus' for the five-hour journey. It was a bumpy, shaky trip. The bus was not exactly state-of-the-art and it had to negotiate many narrow, winding, unpaved and potholed mountainous roads much of the time. Often, cows, even people, chose to ignore the traffic, forcing it to slow down or stop.

I looked at the driver. All our lives depended on this one thin, frail looking, middle-aged man and his state of mind. To make matters worse, as there were so few of us 'tourists' on board, the bus became a local bus. It stopped at every opportunity to pick up and drop passengers.

On the way, we saw a huge boulder at one side of the road. A burnt-out skeleton of a bus lay further down the slope, not far away. Later, at the hotel, I would read in a local newspaper that the boulder had killed 9 passengers 3 days ago.

The hotel we were booked into stood near a village, a highly recommended tourist attraction. As we walked along the road, we reminded each other to sidestep the ubiquitous potholes and cow dung. There was, however, nothing we could do to avoid the smell. Children sat and played on the road, moving only when vehicles, often huge trucks carrying construction material and earth, arrived. The children greeted us cheerfully as we approached, their melodious voices ringing in the air. Huts with pink walls and thatched roofs lined both sides of the road. 'The walls are made of cow dung, it's antiseptic, you know,' my friend said. 'It's interesting. Nothing seems to have changed since the Buddha's time.'

We engaged a guide. He was none other than the hotel manager, and, at dinner time, our waiter. This intelligent, resourceful, well-informed, self-proclaimed Hindu-cum-Buddhist undergraduate was on a one-month vacation.

The next day, he brought us to a local Buddhist temple in the sprawling Lumbini Gardens. As we entered the temple, an old monk cried out, 'Where are you from? Come here. Come here.' He had a monk's cloth satchel in his hand from which he took out a couple of blessing cords. My friend knelt down and the old monk tied a cord to her wrist. Then he did the same for me.

Just as we were getting up to leave, the old monk said - 'You know, I have to spend money for the cords too'. He opened the satchel wide as he spoke. We were appalled. But, to avoid a scene, we quietly dropped some money into the bag and left.

The next day, as we discussed our tour of Kapilavastu - the site of the old Sakya palace where Prince Siddhartha, the future historical Buddha, grew up - the guide apologised to us. 'I'm sorry about that old monk in the temple. He gives a bad impression.'

At the end of the trip, as the taxi sped away from Lumbini, I asked myself what the trip had meant to me. Not being a particularly devotional Buddhist, I did not feel 'blessed' by my visit to this holy place. Much less did I feel 'blessed' by the old monk and his blessing cords. All I could honestly say was that I felt sorry. Sorry for the villagers. Sorry for their abject poverty. And sorry for the fact that despite their having been born and living in the place where the Buddha was born, they hadn't been able to benefit from his teachings. After more than 2,548 years.

Back home in Singapore, I was reading a book entitled *Stages of Meditation* by His Holiness, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama when I came across this definition of 'blessing' -

*'Let me begin by explaining what we mean by blessing when we talk about a lama's blessing or the blessing of the Dharma in the Buddhist context. Blessing must arise from within your own mind. It is not something that comes from outside... When the positive qualities of your mind increase and negativities decrease, that is what blessing means.'*

*The Tibetan word for blessing (byin rlab, pronounced 'chin lap') can be broken into two parts - 'byin' means 'magnificent potential' and 'rlab' means 'to transform'. So 'byin rlab' means transforming into magnificent potential. Therefore, blessing refers to the development of virtuous qualities that you did not previously have and the improvement of those good qualities that you have already developed.*

*It also means decreasing the defilements of the mind that obstruct the generation of wholesome qualities. So actual blessing is received when the mind's virtuous attributes gain strength and its defective characteristics weaken or deteriorate.'*

Reading this passage brought back memories of the old monk and his blessing cords. At the time, I was perturbed by his conduct, concerned that it would create a bad impression - of Buddhism in general and the Buddhist Sangha in particular - especially among non-Buddhists.

In his definition, His Holiness placed the onus clearly on the devotee to earn his blessing, so to speak. A devotee needs to do more than just kneel down and pray. He needs to create the causes for blessing. He needs to be mindful.

I remember a conversation I had with a friend of mine. Her brother's very religious. To say that my friend and her brother



do not get along is probably an understatement. She considers him selfish, judgmental and close-minded. Recently, he went on a pilgrimage. When he came back, I asked my friend, 'How's your brother?'

'Oh, he's fine,' she replied.

'Has he changed?' I enquired, mischievously.

'Well, he said he felt blessed by his pilgrimage. Yeap, he's blessed alright,' she said. Then, with a chuckle, she added, 'Blessedly - selfish, judgmental and close-minded.'

My friend may have been joking but we all know how easy it is to be distracted in this way if we're lose our mindfulness.

Another friend to whom I showed a draft of this editorial pointed out - 'If it's just a question of improving the good qualities of the mind (or whatever), then there's no need for any third party, regardless of whether it's the DL or the Pope or whoever, to actually give their blessings to anyone.'

Personally, I don't see any problem with that. How often has someone, when something bad has happened and somehow we managed to avoid harm, said to us - 'You're blessed!' Besides, Buddhism has always stressed the individual's responsibility

for his own liberation, rather than dependence on an external saviour, God or deity. And a 'blessing' doesn't necessarily have to be something pleasant either.

Lance Armstrong, the six-time Tour de France champion cyclist, claims that being a cancer survivor was the best thing that ever happened to him. Even better than winning the championship itself. To Gavin Harrison, author of *In the Lap of the Buddha*, contracting AIDS was the turning point that transformed his life and gave it meaning. And more recently, the devastating effects of the tsunami brought home to us in a highly dramatic and effective way the truths of suffering, impermanence and interdependence of this shrinking world, truths taught by the Buddha all those thousands of years ago.

But whether we're able to embrace nasty events like cancer, AIDS or a tsunami - or even much less unpleasant, if somewhat disturbing ones like the old monk and his blessing cords - as 'blessings' is entirely up to us - and what we do to our minds while the sun still shines.

As always, I wish you all pleasant reading.

**Chwee Beng**  
Editor

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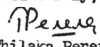
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Dear Ms. Rahman,

Thank you very much for your generous donation of spectacles sent through Ms. Malathi Marunadasa, which were distributed among some elders at our Elders Homes.

We greatly appreciate your donation towards the needy elders and enclosed please find some photographs taken at the distribution ceremony, for your perusal.

Wishing you all the best for the New Year.

Yours sincerely,  
  
 Mrs. Thilaka Perera,  
 President.

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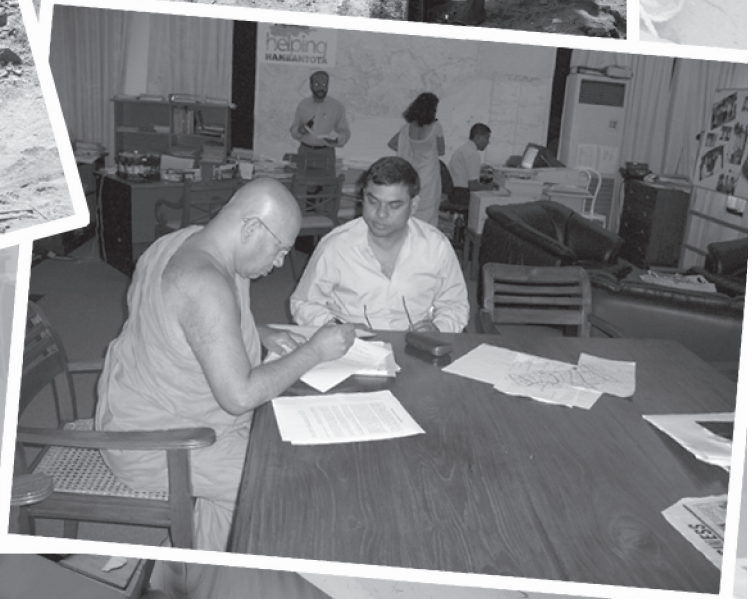


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# INTERVIEW WITH **NICK SHEN**

5 FEBRUARY 2005

by Chwee Beng and James Chiang

Local television star Nick Shen appears at the interview simply dressed and relaxed. He speaks well and answers questions frankly and spontaneously, even perceptively. Though only recently introduced to Buddhism, he appears determined to be more than just a nominal Buddhist. And he seems to have made serious efforts to integrate Dharma practice into his busy life. When asked to help generate greater interest in the Dharma among the young, he agreed to give the interview without the slightest hesitation.

## ***Tell us something about your work, Nick.***

I'm a full-time artiste with Mediacorp. I've been in this job for the past 4 years. I joined acting classes in 1999. Then I participated in Star Search. I came in first for Singapore artistes and was offered a contract for 2 years.

## ***How do you find acting life?***

Acting is very interesting because I learn a lot from each role that I perform. I can experience different things. For example, I've acted as a mute, an autistic youth, a drug addict, a gynaecologist, a chef. Whenever you're given a role, you have to do research. So for the autistic role, I went to the autistic school and observed how autistic children behaved, their thinking. I also acted as a coffee boy in *Kopi Tiam Part II*.

It's an interesting life but also very stressful because the working hours are very long. You have to memorise a lot of script. You have to live up to the director's expectations. And there's a lot of pressure because Singapore is a highly competitive country. But, fortunately, Buddhism helps me a lot.

## ***So you're very happy with your job.***

I think in Singapore, if you have a contract with a television station, it's quite secure during that time. You get a monthly salary. It's like any other government job.

## ***Are you involved in business?***

I'm not business-minded at all. Many colleagues have approached me. One started a hair salon. I joined them for a while but I stopped. I didn't like it. It's not suitable for me.

If I want to do something I have to be passionate about it. So that's why, if you ask me whether I'm happy in acting, despite the competitiveness in my job and the uncertainty after my contract expires, I really feel contented. Every time I come home, I have a sense of accomplishment.

I wanted to be an actor when I was very young. I joined Teochew street opera when I was 14. In school, I was in drama class. When I talk to friends during reservert, most of them say they're working just to make a living. I feel fortunate to be doing something that I really love.

## ***How does Buddhism help you to deal with the stress and pressure in your work?***

I try to focus on the present moment. Don't worry too much about the future. Meditation also helps.

## ***What kind of meditation do you do?***

Metta (loving kindness) meditation. I do it everyday. I also listen to Buddhist songs and chants when I drive. In the past, I used to listen to pop songs.

I find metta meditation easy to apply because I can do it for my family, my neighbours, my friends and colleagues. I find that I can concentrate better in metta meditation than in breathing meditation where my mind tends to wander.

## ***How did you become a Buddhist?***

I was born into a Daoist family. As a child, I went to a Christian school and I attended a few churches with friends. Later, after my national service, I lost contact with my Christian friends.

Last year, my brother brought back some free distribution books on Buddhism. When I read them, I had this very peaceful feeling which I'd never experienced before. I learned that Buddhism was not about being superstitious or believing what others say. It's more about making the effort to improve myself.

The book that impressed me was 'The Path to True Happiness' by Venerable Thubten Chodron. For the first time for a long time, I actually finished reading a whole book! Later, I read more books on Buddhism and began to make Buddhist friends. I also attended a metta meditation retreat by Venerable Mahinda. And I started to do voluntary work for Phor Khak See Monastery.

## ***How do you think Buddhism can help the young?***

The most important thing in life is to be a happy person and live a meaningful life. I never knew this happiness before. I now realise that I have so many things in life right now. This is what Buddhism can offer the young.

## ***How can Buddhism reach them?***

Slowly, slowly. This year, for Vesak Day, Phor Khak See and the Buddhist Lodge are organising a stage show in Orchard Road. Hopefully, they'll attract a big crowd. Phor Khak See also has a youth ministry. They've a lot of activities.

Last new year's eve, Awareness had a countdown party. I went there. It was pretty good. They distributed leaflets in Orchard Road. But all these need a lot of volunteers.

NTU (Nanyang Technological University) and NUS (National University of Singapore) also have Buddhist music albums. They have Buddhist youth groups. They organise camps.

Buddhist Fellowship is also very strong. They have their Buddhist Ministry. They have a very strong group of youth who are all very enthusiastic.

We have to keep the fire burning. It's very important. We must change the perception that Buddhists are very boring people, sitting down to meditate and chanting all the time. So there must be some re-packaging.

***We must change the perception that Buddhists are very boring people, sitting down to meditate and chanting all the time. So there must be some re-packaging.***

## ***You've just come back from Indonesia. Tell us something about that.***

I went to Aceh for ten days from 21 January 2005 to 30 January 2005. We went there to do a form of therapy, trauma relief, similar to but not massage, called ASSIST. It helps to calm the

Cont on page 12...

# WINDOW TO THE BUDDHIST WORLD

## SOUTH KOREA

### INTERVIEW WITH MUJIN SUNIM

1 JANUARY 2005



Mujin Sunim is a western nun practising in the Chogye order of Korean Zen Buddhism. Originally from Canada, she's practised Dharma in Asia for nearly 3 decades. Together with the late Won Myong Sunim, Mujin Sunim started, and taught at, centres in many countries, including South Korea, Europe, Ukraine and Russia.

Listening to Mujin Sunim talking about Zen is like watching an action-packed thriller. You can't afford to let your mind stray even for one second or you'll miss something interesting or important. She speaks freely with verve and vitality, yet so clearly. You ask the lead question and off she goes. Her passion for Zen is palpable, even infectious. In the end, you may feel breathless. But your mind has been challenged.

Here, Mujin Sunim talks about a range of topics ranging from her initial involvement in Zen Buddhism to her advice to Singapore Buddhists.

#### Mujin Sunim's personal involvement in Zen Buddhism

I was working here in Singapore. Then in 1976, I went to Sri Lanka for ordination. I lived in Sri Lanka and India for about ten years.

I was ordained in the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka under Venerable Ananda Maitreya Mahanayaka Thera, who died 5 or 6 years ago at the age of 102.

Ananda Maitreya was a teacher of Mahayana Buddhism, in particular, Madhyamika philosophy. One day, a Korean monk came to visit him. The monk asked me to visit Korea. I was going to China at that time so I thought on my way to China I would visit Korea. I didn't even know that Korea was Zen Buddhist.

I'd spent 10 years practising Theravada Buddhism in which I'd learned that everything was suffering, unsatisfactory. The Korean monk looked at me for 2 seconds and said – *Everything is perfect*. And this, for me, was just incredible. Because I was still quite new to all this and it gave me a big shock.

I always loved to read about Zen because when you read Zen articles, there's no logic, no academic thinking. Your mind just flies away. I loved that feeling of no more thoughts. But I had this feeling that it's no good just reading. I needed somebody to teach me.

#### The nature of Korean Buddhism

Korean Buddhism is basically Zen. It comes from the Chan school (of China). The main order is Chogye. It's just pure, unadulterated simplicity. The temples are empty, the halls are empty. There's just, maybe, one Buddha statue. You sit in the meditation hall. There's a picture, usually, of Bodhidharma. That's it. And I like this simplicity.

I was taken by Won Myong Sunim to my temple near Pusan. We met the old nun there. She was about 75. She talked for about 4 hours and at the end, we came down from the mountain and I asked the monk – *What did she say? Nothing, he said* (laughter).

And I began to understand this mind. The western mind is always inquisitive. We had a Danish physicist who used to visit us in Sri Lanka. Every day, he had so many questions. I began to understand that you come to know (things) naturally. It's good to ask questions but actually, with the practice, things become clearer little by little.

The way of Zen is to sit, just sit. And you work. And you cook. You go to the toilet and you wash. And you are absolutely concentrated on being aware. I find this very refreshing. When we are in the meditation hall for 3 months, there's no reading, no writing. You do nothing but sit. It's not some kind of austerity. It's just the idea of completely concentrating on that fresh, natural mind. And this I found fascinating.

The other practice of Korean Buddhism, which is very important, is bowing. I regret not doing more bowing. I did 3,000 bows and the mind was so clear. Because of the physical exercise, your mind becomes completely clear.

#### Differences between Korean Zen and Japanese Zen

The Japanese are much more formal than the Koreans. They're much more exact, technical. The Korean tea ceremony, for example, is so simple. Even our robes. When we tie our robes, they always say – *Don't align it well. Just let it fall where it falls*.

*... the core of Zen Buddhism, the reason why we sit, is to study our heart.*

In Korean Zen, we sit much longer hours. We will sit a lot of the rest of our lives, in Japanese Zen, they sit in one-week sesshin, then it's finished. In Korea, we ordain for life and live in communities for the rest of our lives. So inevitably, the style is much more natural, comfortable. This is my thinking. People may not agree.

The Japanese have much nicer incense than we do (laughter).

In my temple, we have three meditation halls, about 100 women during the meditation season. In the traditional Korean system, everybody has a certain duty. So you have one part of the people meditating, one part working and you still have the younger ones