

Kwan Um School of Zen, North America
Sangha town meeting
July 31, 2011

Report from the North American Abbot, Zen Master Bon Haeng:

We had a successful fundraising last fall, so the North American School is well ahead of where it was last year. We're ahead \$40,000 for the first six months. Membership brings in more than donations, by about 2 to 1. Therefore, we want to continue to encourage membership, so please talk up membership to people who practice with your sangha.

We created a scholarship fund for Kyol Che, because it's become clear over the years that those who have time to sit Kyol Che often don't have the necessary funds, while those who have the funds, don't have the time to sit. We've used \$5,000 of the scholarship funds so far this year.

We have approximately 683 members, of those, 255 have ten precepts or above. We have 2 new Zen centers: Deming Zen Center in New Mexico and Orlando Zen Center in Florida.

We also have many satellite groups. Currently, we do not list the satellite groups on our website because that opens the School up to liability. We suggest that satellite groups be listed on the website of their local Zen center, whose management can maintain regular communication with the satellite group.

Any kind of support the School might be able to offer your group, please contact us.

During the trustees' meeting this weekend, there was much discussion about Providence Zen Center. It needs our support. Help is always needed, because they have a huge place, designed for more people, and more residents. PZC is largely dependent on residents for income. Also it would great to have more guests, at times other than sangha weekend. Just the presence of more people makes a difference. PZC is the only place that can accommodate large sangha gatherings, etc. So it's important that we stop taking it for granted, and look at ways to help.

Report from Thom Pastor JDPSN, about the Zen Center of Las Vegas:

ZCLV has a new home. Due to a the drop in the real estate market in Las Vegas, we were able to use our building fund, created over many years, to purchase a very nice property. A generous sangha member then purchased, as a donation, a second property that was linked by road egress to the Zen center's property. These properties together form a walled 2-acre campus, with features including a 9-foot waterfall, Koi pond, swimming pool, Jacuzzi, tennis courts, and a 500-square foot dharma room. We are near the University, and offer daily practice six days a week, yoga and qigong, and have room for six residents. The opening ceremony will be held in April or early May next year. There will be a School-wide invitation for this event.

Report from Zen Master Bon Haeng about his teaching trip to Europe in May:

We went to 8 countries, 11 Zen centers/groups. Traveling in a sangha group is an extraordinary experience. If you're traveling as a sangha group, people are waiting for you to arrive, take care of meals and lodging, take you back to transportation. The only

thing we had to do was practice, and help. Dharma travel offers moment-by-moment engagement and immersion in a different culture. It was a life-changing experience. The practice is the same everywhere. Although the currency and language are different, the humanness is the same. It's a wonderful opportunity to meet people in the freshness of the moment.

The big issue facing the European School is Won Kwang Sa in Hungary. This is a beautiful, Korean-style temple, built with international donations. Chong An Sunim, the guiding teacher and driving force behind Won Kwang Sa, has left the School. The temple faces many legal, financial, and Hungarian sangha issues. There is a big question of what to do with this temple. The European School owns the temple, but doesn't know what to do with it, or how to manage it. A committee has been formed to investigate the situation with Won Kwang Sa.

Remarks from Zen Master Soeng Hyang, School Zen Master: If everybody's practicing, the School doesn't have any problems. There doesn't need to be backbiting and gossip, etc. Please keep coming to retreats. It's very often the case that, when people become dharma teachers, then they disappear from the dharma room. Put down your condition, situation, and opinion and act with others. I encourage you to visit other cultures.

Question 1, from email: "I'm interested in the status and future of our monastic community. It seems like a relatively large percentage of ordained folks have been leaving the school. So what's going on? And how do the senior monks and teacher's group see the place and development of the monastic community in coming years?"

Answer: There are still a number of monastics in the School. Dae Bong Sunim, the head of the Asian sangha, is organizing a meeting for the monastics in Asia to discuss how to structure and support the monastic community in our School. That question is largely up to the monastics.

Currently, Dae Bong Sunim feels that any Westerners interested in monasticism should go do monastic training in Korea, where there is a strong monastic community and plenty of support.

Question 2, from email: Many students and potential students live in areas that are distant to established Zen centers. These remote students may have a sincere desire to train, but may only be able to visit a Zen center once a year, or even less frequently, because of personal circumstances. At least one Soto Zen group (Treeleaf Zendo <http://www.treeleaf.org/>) functions entirely online, thereby bringing Zen training to students around the world who would otherwise never encounter Zen teaching. Would the KUSZ consider establishing a "virtual Zen center" to reach out these remote students? Students could be introduced to our practice forms, guided in the establishment of daily practice, engage in kong-an training, and supported in all the usual ways that one might experience at a physical Zen center.

Answer: Empty Gate Zen Center in Berkeley continues to add virtual practice resources and opportunities to its website and social media pages. Currently, they offer live webcasts of dharma talks, including the possibility to ask questions through chat. They

also offer weekly live streaming morning practice on Sunday mornings. This Sunday morning practice opportunity attracts people from all over, including a practitioner from Ecuador who has become a member of Empty Gate. Empty Gate also regularly posts videos of dharma talks on Facebook.

Cambridge Zen Center also posts videos of dharma talks online, including an automated, rotating “Video of the Week.” They have a practice advice feature called “Dear Abbot,” in which people email practice questions and the CZC abbot answers them. The questions come from all over the country. Right now, CZC has a member who lives in Portland, Oregon, and who will be attending the PZC summer Kyol Che. There is nothing but potential with providing virtual practice opportunities and resources, and CZC would like to expand what they currently offer. The only real limit is the time to do this. They encourage everyone to give it a try. People are out there searching for something, for the truth. We can help them find that.

Providence Zen Center encourages other Zen centers to work on their websites’ search engine optimization. Having the right tags on your website will greatly increase your visibility to new people searching for a practice.

The Kwan Um offices will support branch Zen centers with developing more virtual practice opportunities, by disseminating information and connecting people who are interested in this. Consult with your guiding teachers and other members and see where it goes.

Question 3, from email: “This past year, another sangha member and I started the Dharma School at PZC. It has been flourishing, and I'm sure there is a similar need in other communities. I am curious whether other centers have an interest in joining some form of online community where children's programs can share ideas and materials so that we can learn from each others' experiences.”

Answer: The Dharma School started at Providence Zen Center this past year have been very popular, and proven to be a great way of attracting new people to the Zen center, as well as create a bridge to the larger community (including people who have no interest in practice, but can become friends to the Zen center.) We have two age groups, 4-10, and 11 and up. There is better attendance with the younger group. The Dharma School is offered once a month, during a dharma talk, and runs for an hour and 15 minutes. They do arts and crafts, mindfulness exercises, and stories.

Cambridge Zen Center offers a Little Buddhas program.

Prairyerth also offers a children’s program.

One idea with a facility like PZC is to offer a summer day camp, that would involve both adults and children from the community.

One way of connecting Kwan Um children’s programs would be to start a Facebook page or group. This would be free, and relatively easy, and would allow sangha members to share resources and experiences about the children’s programs. If someone writes an email, or creates a Facebook page, the School can send an email to connect people interested in this.

Question 4, from email: “We get daily requests of Kwanseum and Jijang Bosal chanting. That is fine. My wife, who has not interest in Zen, appreciated the chanting when she had cancer. It would be nice if we had some frequent reminder about the School in some other way: short readings, photos, something not related to death and disease. Weekly notes are probably fine. Like many others, I am getting on and these reminders come in many other forms in my life. It is the other kind of reminder I am also looking for. It is not to negate the first noble truth, just to mediate its force.”

Answer: The School and Zen center websites already have many teaching resources available, and the School Facebook administrator posts teaching articles, videos, and quotes weekly. However, for those who do not use Facebook, perhaps the School can send out a weekly or bi-weekly email of the teaching content posted on Facebook. People would have the option to opt-out of these additional emails, if they wish. Perhaps our members should also be made aware of their possibilities to opt-in and out of various types of emails from the School.

Question 5, from email: “Why must one wait two/one year to take ten precepts after taking five? It reminds me much of the belt system used in Martial arts, your degree is tested not by attainment but by time spent training. Isn't the wish of becoming Dharma teacher, and engagement in the sangha just as important as to wait? All the other "titles" are given/taken after approval of one of the teachers. Shouldn't the ten precepts and the start of the way to become Dharma teacher also be approved by the Teacher?”

Answer: One thing to be aware of is that people often disappear after they become dharma teachers. Because of this, some people think that perhaps the training period should actually be longer. What's being tested with these requirements is your commitment over time, and your immersion in practice over time. This is an essential ingredient in dharma teacher training.

Question 6, from question box: “How would a Taego monk (or other married monk from the Korean tradition) fit into the Kwan Um School of Zen?”

Answer: We're going to give this question to Dae Bong Sunim, as head monk in our School. Presently, Taego monks are welcome to practice in our School, but won't be considered monastics. Hopefully this issue will be cleared up by the monastic meeting in August. We're just happy that the clarification process is going to start.

Other questions raised during this discussion:

If the School recognizes Taego monks, will this encourage younger people to choose Taego rather than the celibate Chogye order?

Is it the sangha's job to support all monastics, including married monks with children?

Until now, it's been the situation that each monastic arranges their own deal with the Zen center they're living in, regarding work, finances, etc. Perhaps that will change. Clarification is necessary, and we must wait for guidance from the monastic group.

Closing remarks from Zen Master Bon Haeng:

We are interested in creating as much transparency as possible. In the past, there were undercurrents of gossip within the sangha. We are family. If there is a question, we can bring it out in the open, make it transparent, and relieve ourselves of the gossip. If you have a question, you're probably not the only one. Let's make it clear. Let's take the drama out of things.