

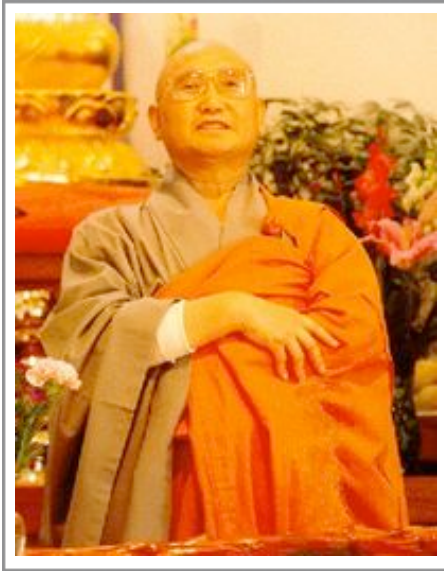
It Is Not Real - Seung Sahn Soen Sa
From a Collection of Works by [Edward Muzika](#)



Seung Sahn Soen Sa



Seung Sahn Soen Sa's Temple, built in 1516



Seung Sahn (1927-2004) was an extremely unusual teacher. He had enormous energy, enormous self-confidence and he changed the face of Zen in America. He was the mold by which all present and future Korean masters are and will be measured. I had the fortune of being his student with intensive study during the early and middle 1970's and off and on through the 1980's.

I never saw him depressed. He had three moods: smiling exuberance, with animated talking; giving each student a sense that they were getting 100% of his attention; screaming at someone over the phone so loudly in Korean that it appeared we he was yelling at someone in Korea directly; a silence so energetic, that he looked like a wound up spring, ready to leap up and talk or yell some more.

He had an unusual way of teaching using very stylized Zen-talk with the purpose of teaching fundamental Zen precepts. It was almost impossible to get him to talk any other way after the first year I knew him, unless you were living in the center with him where he'd ask if you wanted a second bowl of Kimchi or yell at you for putting raisins in his rice because he had diabetes.

This was quite frustrating, as I felt I was talking to a television set with only one program. Speaking of which, he loved to watch soap operas on television during much of the day. Immediately after the question and answer session and eating some fruit or rice, he'd plunk down in front of a television three feet in front of his face, ignoring everyone. He said it was so that he could learn English. However, he was surrounded by English speaking students and didn't much talk to them.

When I first met him, he was extremely open for interaction. He once spent two hours showing Carl Haycock, now a monk at his temple in Korea, and I how to do calligraphy. Yet, two years later he was very different and withdrawn.

One story purportedly about him was that he went to a Muktananda Satsang on one of Baba's tours. If it were indeed him, he let out a bellowing Zen yell, "KATZ" that brought everything to a standstill and interrupted Muktananda's talk. My friend Shankarananda told me that afterwards Muktananda told the swamis that Soen Sa was nuts. This story may be true, as this might be the first

thing he would do, or the last. He was brash, but also he had a sense of propriety. Either could have dominated at the moment.

After a few years, I found him to be withdrawing from his students more and more. He spent most of his time in Korea, where he is a legend. His self-appointed task was to bring Buddhism back to China.

I was ordained as a novice monk in his order, Chogye (or Jogye) Buddhism in 1974, yet I don't think I got anything out of my long relationship with him except admiration for his 100% commitment to every moment of being alive, his ability to make everyone feel welcomed, and his ability to scream so loudly at other Koreans over the phone.

There are many, many stories about Seung Sahn in Dharma combat with his teachers and these are codified in his school's formal teachings, a Zen Catechism. He also had a book containing all the letters written to him over the years, and his responses, which are read by his Inka students at their respective centers as teaching devices. Many of these letters are available in pdf format at his Kwanumzen website. <http://www.kwanumzen.org/?s=teaching+letters>

Seung Sahn was as socially engaged as any of the spiritual teachers I met. He was active politically before he became enlightened and, as a teacher, he built a dozen centers in the U.S. and Europe. The focus of much of his teaching was on "together-action," which means you don't step on another's feet if possible. You try to work together through "correct thinking and action." Take a look at his evaluation of the Chogye monks fighting for control of Chagye Sa in Seoul on the Korean Zen page.

He was all action, totally involved: unlike my teacher, [Robert Adams](#), whose highest act of involvement was to talk at Satsang, go to lunch with a student, or sit in a chair all day looking at a mountain, or walking his dog in a park.



Hermitage where Seung Sahn spent the last years of his life.