

Gray Bamboo DV 3

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The fair skinned *Bhikkhuni* – this Western female Buddhist monk *Sang Deung Su Nim* - was vaguely aware of her surroundings as she sat firmly in meditation. Her floor was of rough-hewn Korean pine while the low wall of white plaster over mud-encased bamboo, some of which had dropped to the floor, revealing a cross section of the wall. She followed the Mahayana tradition of keeping her eyes half shut in formal *Cham-seon* or *Za-zen* over in Japan.

Strangely though, this summer morning all that lay before her half opened eyes, by degrees, became a nothingness until it mushroomed as if covered by a dense ashen cloud. The space between the floorboards saw the dark pegs that held them in place. And it became indistinguishable as did the grain and the color of varnished wood, blanketed by a three dimensional fog.

In her seven long years of strict meditation training, she had learned to approach any thought that came into her mind with an unverbilized question, “What is it?” The oft-repeated words of her ancient teacher, *Ku San*, Nine Mountains, had become her reality: And he spoke, “All mental formations are illusions, dreams. They have no substance. They are ever changing. They do not bring true happiness.

They sneaked then sprang - some meandered - into her consciousness but like a laser gun, her questioning mind, “what is it?”, focused on the surfacing thought, dissipating it, evaporating it. This perception concerning the changes in color appeared before her. Laser gazing, observing thoughts with the deep Doubt as to their reality, they rapidly deconstructed. Her questioning mind had successfully grasped the subtleties of this meditation technique. It had become adept at the practice of Doubting. Again and again and again. Every thought, every impression, every emotion.

According to the ancient teachings of the far, far East of China, of Korea, of Japan, this continuous posturing of the mind, it would lead to enlightenment. In this very lifetime.

Never mind in 10,000 lifetimes. It is understood and of great importance to keep one's doubting mind at the time of death. *Sang Deung Su Nim* or High Class *Bhikkhuni* was in the final analysis, a Mind Watcher. She had learned this, the method of observation, during her novitiate training in Australia. Before coming to Korea for the undefiled monastic experience of Korean zen, she had successfully passed through the aching backs, the burning knees, the oppressive boredoms of intensive meditation practice. Though in her first, that initial year in Asia, being in so different a culture, resting deep, deep in the mountains of the lower Korean peninsula, she was plagued. Loneliness was her companion. And her diet of rice—white, and cabbage--pickled in red pepper, made it worse. When burdened with horribly heavy, worldly doubt, she would always try to speak to the old Master. And when possible, *Ku San* would query back, “Who is lonely?”

“I am.” She would reply.

Then came the reduction to absurdity. “What is ‘I’?” “‘I’ is me.” “What are you?” Asked he.

“I am my mind.” Answered she.

“This ‘mind’, what *is* this mind ?!”

And his eyes would be twinkling and, they raised a wide and genuine smile from *Sang Deung*. This was all it normally took to get her to unlock that door and begin opening up her mind. She would walk away, always leaving with the supramundane Doubting feeling, ‘What is the reality of the mind?’

The direction of this exercise was to develop what the Masters call the ‘Great Doubt.’ It is as if when driving home with your young baby, you charge into the chemist for merely two minutes. Then, upon returning to the car, you see that the baby is no longer there. She is gone. How strong would that first feeling of doubt and self-question be? Why, your mind would be an atomic reactor of doubt! Imagine then, that in every moment of your waking life, you practice the developing and keeping of your consciousness enveloped in so piercing a doubt! With the increasing ability to cut through the contents of her mind, she soon understood the transient nature of that type of loneliness. Her sense

of Doubt became her constant companion. When her mind was empty of thought, she then trained the Doubt on the emptiness.

This was all background for her reality that morning. She was alone with the Doubt. Alone, yet with an evolving, enshrouded fog now taking on forms. Wraith-like human forms, in a near three-dimensional field of vision. These darkened forms, more ebony than gray, blanketed the background. They were distinguishably translucent. But no definite outlines. Just blended into lighter shades of gray. Even other forms. There were countless numbers of them. Their bodies were blurred. The shoulders were discernable and the head, the trunk. Facial organs were mere smudges. So were hands and so were feet. These wraiths of twilight were all in motion, parading helter-skelter, searching. They were lost. There was no logic in their random-like movement. All directions were dense with them. They stumbled through, over and around and under her. As if there was nothing solid beneath, she was hanging suspended in a timeless and noiseless nether world of lost and confused, agonizing shades.

After many uncounted hours of meditation ... and renunciation, the Western monk was now faced with one of the most awesome situations her adult life had encountered. Numerous impressions arose, passing swiftly within the force field of the great Doubting energy. How long this situation lasted, she had but a barely faint recalling. But, at some point there came a tapping, a rapping on her door. This was accompanied by the soft calling of her name, "*Sang Deung Su-nim. Sang Deung Su-nim. Sang Deung Su-nim.*" It was the old monk *Seung San Su Nim* of High Mountain Bhikkhu who lived on top of the mountain, the hermitage two peaks south. He was spontaneous, iconoclastic and a grandfather up into his seventies. He was anything but a quiet silent monk... So this pulled *Sang Deung* back. Into reality. All of the wraiths rapidly melted into the disappearing fog. The gray mass soon evaporated. The wall, the ceiling, the floor materialized. Oh, gazing on familiar surroundings, she gladly stretched her legs. Feeling the solid beneath her and chuckling with open wonderment, she spoke, "*Cham Kahn Man Ki Dalyo Bo Sae Yo...*Please, please wait a moment."

On the porch the old hermit began blowing his bamboo flute...Da duu da duum...

Sang Deung slid the door open. She saw the pine trees covering the sides of the mountain. And down the path the melody of the flute echoed the sound of the wind, rushing, brushing through those thick trees. She, also, had a piece of bamboo in one of her hands. “*Su Nim*” her whisper muted, humbled “Have you ever seen the hungry ghost’s realm?”

The monk smiled then blew again on the piece of long wood. Turning his head back from his shoulders, his smiling look became an almost childish laughter. His wrinkle-less face had a morning glow. His eyes wide and glistening above his mouth and voice, “Nay, nay ...I see it all. *Eveyday*. Half life we stay there!”

Sang Deung smiled. The old monk would hardly answer a question. Certainly not one doctrinally. Down on the floor sat she. And she began to blow such a mournfully wind-swept ode on her flute, that a picture was painted in the room’s air. It was of the charred and barren mountains of war torn Korea. The old hermit let himself remember those desolate rice fields and saw a half-century had past as the Western monk lay down her flute.