



Ko Un — or What?

Ko Un is Korea's foremost living poet. After immense suffering during the Korean War, he became a Buddhist monk. His first poems were published in 1958, then a few years later he returned to the secular world and became a leading activist. In 2008, he received the Griffin Trust Lifetime Recognition for Excellence in Poetry. Parallax Press recently reissued a book of Ko Un's "Zen poems" and drawings entitled What? (formerly Beyond Self).

Thich Nhat Hanh writes in the Introduction about a meeting with Ko Un in 1995: "The more I learned about his life, the closer I felt to him.... When he was imprisoned by the military dictatorship for his efforts for peace, his deep

Buddhist practice sustained him. Living mindfully in each moment, he knew what to do and what not to do to help himself and others as well." In this section we present three poems from What? along with some of Ko Un's original drawings. In addition, we offer two brand new poems, as well as essays that two of Ko Un's translators have graciously written for the Mindfulness Bell.

"As you read Ko Un's poems," writes Thay in the Introduction to What?, "allow the poet in you to hear his voice.... Enter deeply into the present moment, reflect on each word, and meet the poet Ko Un face to face."

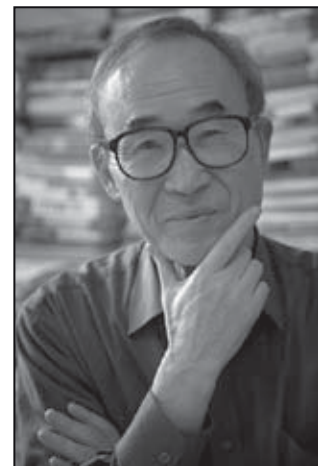


photo by Seihon Cho



A Stone Between Two Fields

Aha, real Buddha's out of doors.

The future world

should be opening like this:

no distinction between inside and out.

And all the long long day

cuckoos chant prayers.

The Path

Take this path. It leads to Nirvana.

Excuse me.

I'll follow my own path.

Over rocky crags or under water.

That's the old master's path, the corpse's path.

Leaving Home

If leaving home is what a monk's job involves,

then coming home

really

really

is what a buddha's job is.

But surely you can only really come home

if you've really left home, can't you?

Ko Un, What? 108 Zen Poems (Parallax Press, 2008). With a Foreword by Allen Ginsberg and Introduction by Thich Nhat Hanh. Translated by Young-Moo Kim and Brother Anthony of Taizé. Used with permission of the publisher.

In a Street

Have you ever
 been another person?
 Have you ever been
 another person? Today
 I have nothing but questions.
 If you say you've never been someone else
 since the day you were born, how will
 a breath of the wind of this world
 ever dare touch your hair? 🍃



The Bell

As I sped down the highway along the East Sea
 suddenly the sound of a bell reached my ears.
 Between the waves endlessly booming,
 at the crack of dawn the sound of a church bell
 reached my ears.

Kwon Chong-saeng's bell in a valley near Andong.

Oh, waking dream!
 Not dream,
 not reality,
 oh, waking dream!

That distant bell rings in my ear ...
 Today
 maybe
 your poverty is paradise
 oh, bell rung by Kwon Chong-saeng. 🍃

Translators' note: Kwon Chong-saeng was a Korean children's writer who'd spent his life in great poverty in the region of Andong. For a time his only paid job was to ring the bell of a small village church.

Poems by Ko Un SSN forthcoming in Songs for Tomorrow (Green Integer), copyright 2008 by Ko Un, Brother Anthony of Taizé, Young-moo Kim, and Gary Gach. Used with permission of the translators.



Translating Ko Un's Poetry as Spiritual Practice

1. By Brother Anthony of Taizé

The monastic community of Taizé, of which I am a member, has always been concerned to bring together in the love of Christ those who are separated, divided by differences of tradition and of discourse. To promote peace in reconciliation and trust is the aim of our lives.

Every human person is, we sometimes remind ourselves, sacred above all by their wounded innocence. The poet, whether Ko Un or any other, writes words that at times (at least) express both sacredness and wound. The translator's task is to find ways of rewriting those words in another language, in such a way that the inwardness of the original text lives on across the great divisions of tongues and minds, histories and hearts.

My concern to be a servant of communion (say 'sharing' and 'communication') across boundaries of time, place and systems of thought or belief has brought me to translate Korean poetry. Ko Un is immensely prolific, writes in a vast variety of styles. As John Dryden once wrote of Chaucer, 'Here is God's plenty.' The people whose lives are recorded and memorialized in the nearly thirty volumes of his *Ten Thousand Lives* are immensely precious by their wounded innocence.

By translating Ko Un, I am brought into a deeper communion with the people of Korea among whom I live and pray, and so with the human family as a whole. To allow the poet's voice to speak through my translations, I am obliged to still my own inner voices until I reach the silence out of which the original poem arose. To allow another's poem to shine out, the translator must become a sheet of transparent glass. This poem is not my poem. I am dispossessed in order that another may speak.

Born in Truro, in Great Britain, Brother Anthony is one of the foremost living translators of contemporary Korean poetry, with over twenty-six titles to his credit. He is currently Emeritus Professor, Department of English Language and Literature at Sogang University, Seoul, where he has taught since 1980.

2. By Gary Gach

Translation can be a Dharma door. Translating, like all mindful writing and editing, asks for devotion to words as lotuses, buddhas to be, radiant texts waiting patiently to purify new realms.

Translating Ko Un answered a calling (and Dharma is also responsibility, an ability to respond). Ko Un's work had been woefully under-recognized when I signed on board, in part due to a ban on his work until the 1980s that included even translation. So I saw an opportunity where I might make a difference. As you can see for yourself, his is a voice well worth hearing, speaking for the sake of all creation.

Ko Un's poetry is Dharma fruit, and its translation invites Dharma teachings into my life. Having taken his poems through as many as a dozen different drafts, I've come to know many better than my own poems. They coexist with my life, a vital part of my personal commonplace book of passages from sacred literature, koans, gathas, epigrams, personal mantras, folksongs, colloquial exclamations, and so on.

Working with Brother Anthony and Professor Young Moo, a minimal Sangha of three, is a collaborative art. Collaborative arts — such as linked verse or singing together, dancing or cooking — are yet another way of stepping aside from the grasping sense of small self, of "me and mine," and touching deeper. Engaging in the larger world, the world of liberation, the selfless.

In Ko Un's poems, I've been grateful to learn more of the uniquely elemental, dynamic, invigorating, cosmic human wisdom and compassion that is Korean culture. I've been reminded of what writing teachers all say: only by being particular to one's own experience can one be truly universal. Translating asks that someone else's particularity become universal.

May Ko Un's words bring nourishment to your own journey.
May all beings be well.



Gary Gach, Joyful Spirit of the Source, is editor of What Book!?! ~ Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip-hop (Parallax Press; American Book Award) and author of The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism (Alpha Books). He teaches Buddhism at Stanford Continuing Studies, and leads mindfulness meditation at the Church for the Fellowship of all Peoples in San Francisco.

The third translator, Young-moo Kim (1944–2001), was Professor at Seoul National University, and is well known in Korea as a literary critic and poet. He published three volumes of poetry and together with Brother Anthony, he translated and published poems by many of the most respected and appreciated Korean poets of the 20th century, including Ko Un.