

# Primary Point



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# 2019-2020 Winter Kyol Che (90 day Zen Retreat)

November 11, 2019 - February 8, 2020

Entry Dates: November 11, 23 / December 7, 14, 25 (Intensive week entry) / January 4, 18, 25



Zen Master Dae Bong



Hye Tong Sunim JDPS

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Guiding Teachers: Zen Master Dae Bong, Hye Tong Sunim JDPS, Visiting Teachers from the KUSZ

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## Winter Kyol Che 2020 January 4 - April 3

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The Kwan Um School of Zen supports the worldwide teaching schedule of the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sas, assists the member Zen centers and groups in their growth, issues publications on contemporary Zen practice, and supports dialogue among religions. If you would like to become a member of the School and receive Primary Point, see page 31. The circulation is 1,800 copies.

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## IN THIS ISSUE

### Midwest Sangha Weekend: Talks on the Four Vows

<i>Zen Master Jok Um</i> .....	4
<i>Zen Master Hae Kwang</i> .....	5
<i>Zen Master Ji Haeng</i> .....	5
<i>Zen Master Bon Hae</i> .....	6

### Seeing the Person in Front of You:

#### An Interview with Zen Master Bon Hae

<i>Ian White Maher</i> .....	7
------------------------------	---

### Coming Together to Inquire:

#### An Interview with Nancy Brown Hedgpeth JDPSN

<i>Ian White Maher</i> .....	11
------------------------------	----

### Emergency Landing

<i>Jo-Alma Potter JDPSN</i> .....	14
-----------------------------------	----

### When Will the Cypress Tree Become Buddha?

<i>Bon Sun Sunim</i> .....	15
----------------------------	----

### Just Do It and Enjoy: Kyol Che in Gak Su Temple

<i>Eduardo del Valle Pérez</i> .....	18
--------------------------------------	----

### The Joy of a Rotten Tooth

<i>Shana Smith</i> .....	22
--------------------------	----

### Cold Mountain Blues

<i>Jan Potemkin</i> .....	23
---------------------------	----

### Book Review: The Mountains and Waters Sutra

<i>Jess Row</i> .....	24
-----------------------	----

<b>Kwan Um School of Zen Centers</b> .....	28, 29, 30
--	------------

<i>Membership in the Kwan Um School of Zen—America</i> .....	31
--	----

[3



Cover: Dharma painting of Ho Tei by Zen Master Bumju, courtesy of Palma Zen Center. Digitized by the University of the Balearic Islands. The text reads “Every day is a good day.”

# Midwest Sangha Weekend: Talks on the Four Vows

Dharma talks given in Kansas, at the Kwan Um Midwest Sangha Weekend, April 12–14, 2019

**Sangha in unison:** Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all. Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all. The teachings are infinite; we vow to learn them all. The Buddha Way is inconceivable; we vow to attain it.

**Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel):** Thank you for four mistakes. When it works from the outside in, it provides a useful architecture, but it's not yours. It's something that holds you up. When it springs from the inside out, it doesn't matter how you say it, it's how we live it.

I'm supposed to talk about the first vow, but I can't explain it because it's not something you understand. And I can't give instructions because I don't think it's something we do. Maybe it has something to do with how we live in the space that we are currently in. So that doesn't belong to me, other than for me. And it belongs to you, for you. To the degree that we completely own that, then the vows are complete. And to the degree that we're borrowing that, if we borrow it wisely, it's good external architecture to give some space for it to spring from the inside.

The translation we use—"Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all"—sounds like we're doing something for somebody or doing something to somebody or doing something at somebody or even doing something. And of course, we're always doing something, but maybe we're doing too much.

We translate *jung saeng* as "sentient beings," but apparently it just means "many beings." *Mu byon* means "endless," and *so won do* is about helping you cross to the other side. Baker Roshi at San Francisco Zen Center mentioned a translation

that said, "Being is without end; I vow to be with it."

The vows sound beautiful. And they are in some way, but what's more beautiful is when it springs from you.

Here are a couple of things about how I approach it, because I think that's all I'm qualified to say. One aspect is that I'm starting to learn how to receive others as my teacher. And so that makes me a student. And if I'm a student, then in that mindset there's some quality of generosity and gratitude and receptiveness and kindness and engagement and listening and receiving and giving, because that lives in the mind of a student. That would make everybody else my teacher. If you're my teacher, then you save me, and if you're the person who saves me then you're a bodhisattva. So if I live in a way that allows other people to be bodhisattvas for me then I've already saved all beings. Does it really work like that?

Somebody once asked me, "Sentient beings are numberless: what does that mean?" I asked "Why do you make sentient beings suffer?" If we don't make sentient beings suffer, then we're saving them from us. And that's kind of all I have the power to do. If I do it at all, that's because I have a little bit more authority over that than over you.

Hui-Neng once said that this vow doesn't mean that "I, Hui-Neng, save you, sentient beings." It means "The sentient beings in my mind of their own accord return to their fundamental nature." If you splash water and it goes up, then it goes down by itself. It never wasn't water, and it does return to its waterness.

Whatever we create in our mind has life; we just gave it life. There are countless sentient beings in my immediate world that I'm creating and participating with, and now they have life. If I allow those to express and return to fundamental nature, then they're already saved.

So I practice relating in that way, letting my mind already be on the other shore. And maybe that's a gift. And maybe that's all I have the power to give. Because then if Stan teaches me Stan, and Judy teaches me Judy, and Thom teaches me Thom, I have some capacity to relate to them as they are, because they're helping me learn what that is.

All we have is how we live and occupy this moment. If we

4]



Photo: Sven Mahr

embrace that with the full depth of its meaning, then that vow takes care of itself.

**Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stan Lombardo):** Zen Master Jok Um just brought up Hui-Neng’s “own nature” teaching—the sentient beings that are my own nature, we vow to save. We actually have that phrase in one of our chants, the Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra. Toward the end of sutra there are the four great vows: *Jung-saeng mu-byon so-won-do. Bon-ne mu-jin so-won-dan. Bom-mun mu-ryang so-won-hak. Bul-to mu-sang so-won-song.* Then the vows are repeated with the addition of *ja song*: *Ja-song jung-saeng so-won-do. Ja-song bon-ne so-won-dan. Ja-song bom-mun so-won-hak. Ja-song bul-to so-won-song.* The phrase *ja song* means “own nature.” So Hui-Neng’s teaching became incorporated into our practice: everything in the four great vows—sentient beings, delusions, teachings, Buddha nature itself—all this is our own nature; it is our own nature that we’re dealing with in the vows.

The second vow as we recite it now is not how we always recited it in our school. We now recite the second vow as “Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all.” Up until 1992, in the Kwan Um School of Zen, it went differently. Until then the first word of the second vow—*bon-nae*—wasn’t translated as “delusions” but rather “passions.” So the vow began, “Passions are endless.” And then it continued: “We vow to extinguish them all.” Now we say, “Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all.” I don’t know where that original translation came from, but in 1992 we reexamined it. Actually, I brought up the issue that “passions” is not the best translation of *kleshas*, the Sanskrit word that the Chinese translated as *bon-nae*, the first word in the second vow.

*Klesha* is a Sanskrit word that is often translated as “afflictions,” in the sense of emotional and mental obstacles to our practice and our lives, to functioning clearly, to realizing our own nature, to helping all beings. The early Chinese Buddhists’ translation of *kleshas* as *bon-nae* is formed of two characters meaning “fire” and “head,” so “passions” is not a bad translation of *bon-nae*, but it highlights the emotional side of the *kleshas* and leaves out the mental side.

So I pointed this out at a teachers’ meeting in 1992, and Zen Master Barbara Rhodes said she too had a problem with the word “passions” in our translation. I remember her saying something like, “Yeah, extinguishing passions, that’s not so good because people might think that we’re vowing not to be passionate about our practice. And we are passionate about our practice, we care a lot about it.” Language is a tricky thing.

We considered many possible alternate translations of *bon-nae* and finally settled on “delusions.” “Ignorance” was a close second. In early Buddhist teaching ignorance is one of the three poisons—desire, anger and ignorance—that are the source of suffering. The Sanskrit

original for ignorance is *avidya*, literally “not seeing,” and is in Buddhism (and classical Yoga) the number one *klesha*. But we didn’t want to use “ignorance” in the second vow because we thought it might sound like, “Well, you’re just stupid.” Not that you’re not seeing clearly but that you’re just uneducated, stupid and ignorant. So we went with “delusions” to replace “passions.”

And so delusions are endless, and we vow to cut through them all. We changed “extinguish” to “cut.” You extinguish passions, but you cut through delusions. And that’s just what the Chinese word *dan* means: “cut, cut off, cut through.” A deluded mind is like a house of horrors, full of cobwebs and imaginary, spooky things entangling you every which way. You’d never get out of this mess that is your mind but for your sword of wisdom, your prajna sword, and with that you can cut through all the delusions and find your way out into the world of freedom and light.

You could go on retranslating this vow, and all the other vows, forever. It doesn’t matter really quite what the language is, as long as you understand the direction. There are many lists of *kleshas* in the sutras. I did a count once and I came up with thirty seven, many admittedly synonyms. Some were emotional, and some were cognitive, or mental. I made my own personal list once and came up with nine emotional and mental afflictions I am particularly subject to. You might want to make your own list.

The *kleshas* arise and cause us problems not only when we’re trying to meditate—they are always arising in our lives, and they cause our minds to become clouded. *Avidya*, this not-seeing-clearly our own nature, produces all of our anxiety, negative emotions, distractions, delusions and whatnot. And all of this anxiety and whatnot clouds our minds even further and deepens our *avidya*, blinding us further to this world and all the beings in it. So it’s a feedback loop, a vicious cycle. And that’s what we really have to cut through.

**Zen Master Ji Haeng (Thom Pastor):** I feel in a way blessed that I got this particular of the four vows, the third one. “The teachings are infinite; I vow to learn them all.” Already it’s set up with a hook in it about learning something, like “Well, which book should I buy?” And it’s quite taking us in the opposite direction from where we want to go with it.

Zen Master Bon Hae sent me an email that said, “Even compassion is not anything to aim for, if it’s a feeling. If it’s an action, maybe you feel the feeling of compassion, maybe you don’t. It doesn’t matter. What are you doing in this world? What is the direction of your life? What is the purpose of your life? Is it only for you? If it is, then you have a problem.”

Moment by moment, things appear for us that are the teachings. We don’t have to go searching for anything. It all is presented uniquely for us in each moment. Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, “What is your



correct function and relationship to each situation as it appears?” This is a flow. It’s not something that’s chiseled in any kind of granite setting of teachings that we need to encompass. If you sit, you have to give your mind a job. It’s not enough to just sit in the correct form and then let your mind meander around like in this big mental movie. As things appear, that’s cutting through the delusions of all this. Encased in that are the infinite teachings that are available to us.

Lao-Tzu said “If you are depressed you are living in the past. If you are anxious you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present.” And allow me one more quote, from a friend of mine, a qigong teacher, Lam Kam Chuen:

Your body is a field of energy. If you were to place it under a huge magnifying glass, you would see it in its entirety and stunning clarity. If you increase the magnification to the power of an ordinary microscope, nothing would seem solid. You would start to see the minute particles of which solid matter seems to be composed. Aha! If you are able to place your body under the world’s most powerful electron microscope, it would have seemed to have dissolved. You would only glimpse the traces left by subatomic impulses. Seen as a whole, your body would resemble a matrix of fluctuating signals forming a standing wave pattern in space. From this perception, a web of interpenetrating energies is our existence.

It sounds pretty awesome, to put things in those kind of terms, but really, what we consider a construct of an “I, my, me”—this body sitting here tonight, your ears listening, my mouth moving right now—is phenomena. And all phenomena are changing, changing, changing infinitely. There’s nowhere to grasp. Nothing to hold on to. The wisdom of this practice is to let go and take this single step off the hundred-foot flagpole, as they say. This free fall into the next moment, trusting that the energy, the precision and intelligence that is each moment—not that we give to each moment, not that we present through our intellect, but the precision and intelligence that is this moment—will always afford us whatever it is that we need to have to address that moment outside of a separate I, my, me; a separate ego entity, a separate clinging, and a separate consciousness.

Compassion is not something that we can aspire to. That sounds contrary, doesn’t it? Compassion actually is our original nature. Compassion is what appears when we let go of all these constructs of I, my, me. Then all the teachings, the infinite teachings, become apparent. We’re there, this moment [*claps his hands*] just that sound, is the dharma. Thank you.

**Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman):** One thing no one has mentioned is the grammatical structure. All the vows begin with some kind of noun phrase: (1) many be-

ings, (2) *kleshas*, (3) teachings, and (4) Buddha Way. And then *mu* something. *Mu* means “no.” In the fourth vow, it’s *mu sang*, which means “no above” or “nothing higher.” And then all the vows have *so won* which means “vow vow.” The repetition is emphatic—we’re really vowing this! Actually, we’re not sure who’s vowing it, because there’s no pronoun. In English, you need a pronoun. But in Chinese, apparently you don’t. In most Buddhist groups, they say “I vow.” But we say “we vow.” This is very interesting. “We” is this Mahayana vision where you are not alone. I am not separate. You are not separate. Everything we do is together with all beings. This giant “we” permeates our chants.

And the last word in this fourth vow is *do*—“tao,” or way.

The word-for-word translation of the fourth vow is “Buddha way nothing higher vow vow way.”

So *mu sang* means “nothing higher.” Generally “nothing higher” is translated as “unsurpassable.” “Way” is a little strange—in English it’s a noun, not a verb. But here it’s a verb, usually translated as we do, “attain.”

But we don’t say unsurpassable or none higher or nothing higher. We say “inconceivable,” and that is a total mistranslation. It’s not there in the Chinese. But it’s a wonderful mistranslation because, just as Thom was talking about and just as Ken was talking about, if you have an idea, then you can’t touch reality. If you have an idea, that’s cutting you off from reality. So the Buddha Way is inconceivable. That means we can’t conceive it. That means thinking about it won’t help. And that’s why we can attain it! If we could think about it, we couldn’t attain it. We’d be thinking about it. We’d have an idea about it. And we’d be relating to that idea, or our idea of that idea would be relating to that idea. And there we’d be, with all these ideas. So we couldn’t attain it. Instead, just [*hits the floor*].

You can only attain things when you’re not thinking about them. “The Buddha way is inconceivable; we vow to attain it.” That’s why we can attain it.

It’s not like an asymptote, like in mathematics. It’s not like there’s nothing higher and you’re going to approach it and approach it and approach it. It’s not even like there’s nothing higher, and you’re going to somehow hit it. Thinking is not going to help you; that’s why you can attain it. I just love that.

That’s the serendipitous mistranslation in the fourth of the four great vows.

I want to end with something about the first vow. When I first started practicing a millennium or so ago, all the dharma talks would end in “and save all beings from suffering.” And I said to Dyan Eagles, who’s a very tiny woman, “I don’t get it. How can you save all beings? You know you can’t.” And she just stood on her tip toe and patted me on the head and said, “You’ll get it.” I hope we all do. ♦

# Seeing the Person in Front of You

*An interview with Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)*

**Ian White Maher:** I sent you an email asking if you could send me some articles that talked about your teaching and you sent me back this great email that said “Hi Ian. I’m a little puzzled by ‘express your teaching,’ because I don’t think of myself as having any particular teaching.” But yet people go to you as their teacher, so how does that all fit together?

**Zen Master Bon Hae:** First of all, I don’t think of people as being my students. One of the wonderful things about the Kwan Um School of Zen is you have the guiding teacher of your Zen center and you might have other teachers affiliated with your Zen center, but you’re encouraged to sit with other teachers. It’s not this sense of a one-on-one relationship; it’s more like you’re in graduate school and you have your thesis adviser, but you also work with other people. That’s sort of how I think of it. So there isn’t this sense of “my students” or “my teacher.” It’s broader. Obviously there’s a closer relationship with the people that you see all the time, but there’s also this broader vision. So my teacher—now that I’ve said that we don’t have students and teachers—my teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, would say “I don’t teach Buddhism. I only teach don’t know.”

So if I were to say “My teaching is that all things are one” or that “Everything is emptiness,” or anything like that—anything that you can capture in a phrase, anything that you can capture in a sentence or a paragraph or a book—that’s automatically not don’t know. You’ve pinned

something down; you’ve made something. So how could I have a particular teaching? Also if you say “This is my teaching,” then what happens is you’ve closed off everything else. Then the other things can’t be your teaching.

There’s a Chinese teacher who died in 1985, Hsuan Hua. He set up the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, California, in the center of pot country. It’s this huge, ornate, Chinese-style place. Although he had a reputation for being autocratic, he described himself as “a good, knowing adviser.” I don’t think he was giving advice, but there you are—you’re people’s companion. You’re there to respond to the needs of the people in front of you. It’s like Buddha. He said different things to different people depending on who he was talking to.

“What is Buddha?” “Mind is Buddha.” “What is Buddha?” “No mind.” (That’s Zen Master Ma Jo in the eighth century). The same question gets different answers depending on who you’re talking to. So you’re responding to the person in front of you. And so that’s why the notion of “This is my teaching” just doesn’t resonate with me. It narrows things. It closes things off.

**IWM:** What was so helpful to me, listening to a talk of yours, was this: At first, I sort of rolled my eyes and wondered, “Why won’t she just tell me?” But then there was this point of “Oh!” It was as if you were saying that there’s a teaching coming through me, or I’m here as just a companion. But then there are all of these people who are coming to see you and depend on you. How do you, as



*Photo: Geraldine Dotson*

[7

you guide them, help them separate you from the teaching?

**ZMBH:** The best thing a teacher can give a student is for the student to believe in themselves. So, people would come and listen to Zen Master Seung Sahn, and what you would get from him is to not be attached to his words. And what you would get from him is this incredible energy and this incredible centeredness, and this incredible clarity, and the realization that you could also have that, and in fact you already had it. That's the best thing the teacher can give the student

It is not for the student to believe in the teacher as this exterior authority, but for the student to realize that what this teacher has, you already have it. It's yours. You don't have to go somewhere else to get it. So to me, the job of the teacher is to encourage people to practice, encourage them to find that for themselves, encourage them to really believe in themselves. That's what my job is.

And to believe in their true self. Not in the sense of "Oh I'm the greatest this" or "I'm the best that." Not that kind of belief in yourself. Belief in this true self that doesn't belong to you. It's much bigger than you are. Believe in that, and then everything you do comes from that. Which of course never completely always happens, not even with Zen Master Seung Sahn, not even with Buddha. But as much as possible everything we do comes from this center, comes from this true self, which we don't own. It's not ours. And it's completely ours.

**IWM:** I imagine because you're a mathematician that people are always trying to get you to talk about math and Buddhism and how that relates. In your article about kong-ans in *Buddhadharma*, September 2018, you say something like, "Being clever is not going to help you." Which really struck me in a funny place because I realized you must operate in these two worlds where, around the faculty table, being clever must be highly prized. And then you go home, or you go to the Zen center to work with students and you're like "by the way, don't be clever." I'm wondering how you navigate those two spaces, or perhaps I'm misunderstanding how the faculty table works.

**ZMBH:** Yeah, well at the faculty table people generally weren't very clever. "Being clever isn't going to help you." So you got it right. First of all, there's a misunderstanding there about mathematics. When you do mathematics it's actually very similar to working on kong-ans. If you try to control the situation too much, you're not going to get anywhere.

What happens when you work on mathematics, it's sort of like holding up a jewel to the light, and you just turn it around and you look at it. Your mind has to be very open. You just keep turning it around and looking at it, and you turn it another way and suddenly you see a way in. So it's very much like working on kong-ans. It's not about cleverness. It's about being observant in this pe-

culiarly abstract world. It's about being observant in a way that's not about your senses, but it's a very similar thing where you're just looking at something and you're turning it around—you're trying to find the little crack that will let you in. Like Leonard Cohen said, "Let the light in." It's more like that. So it's actually not at all a contradiction. There's definitely a kind of cleverness that people in academia tend to have. But that's not really relevant to the real work; it's just kind of this patina that you can have or you don't have to have. Not everyone is clever around the faculty table. And, you know, it's useful in a certain way but it's also useless in a way. It's not the point.

**IWM:** Do you think that your encounter with math guided your Zen study, or was that just two parallel tracks?

**ZMBH:** I don't even know if they're parallel. It's just, you live your life and you do all these things. Nobody ever says "Does your cooking affect your driving?" No one ever asks that. You just do all these things in your life. Why do you have to have this unified life where everything leads to something else? You know you are not a unified being, right? That's one of the great observations that you make as you sit on the cushion. You begin to realize that you're not this little marble. Stuff arises and it goes away, and it dissolves and it appears, and you're a thousand things at once, and none of them have any real existence, and what the hell is going on here? So this whole idea that you have to be this unified being: Why? You're not.

**IWM:** Still, I think of them as both kind of mystical pursuits in a way. When I think about math at the level that you are working on, like you said, quite abstract.

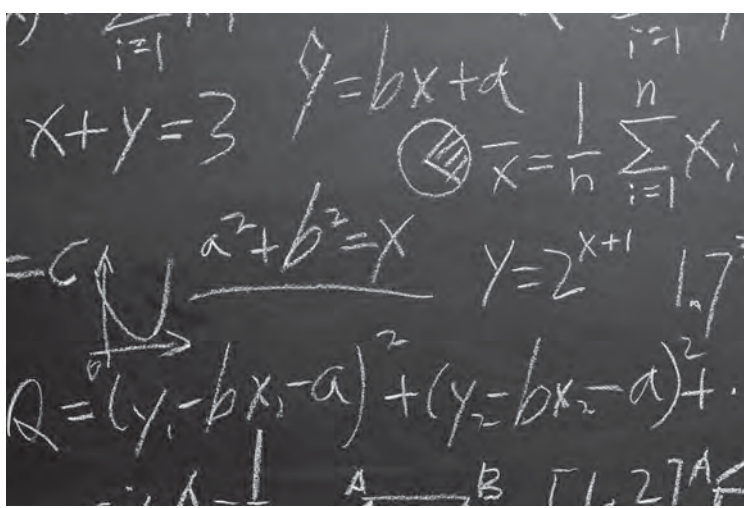
**ZMBH:** The set theory I worked on was about empty sets and models of the universe. I worked on consistency results. That means statements that you can't prove and you can't disprove. So you find a model where the statement is true and another model where the negation is true, and these are models of the whole universe! The whole mathematical universe! How mystical can you get? So yeah, I guess you could say that, but it's just what I did. It's not special.

**IWM:** But then you also wrote about Nagarjuna and the Tetralemma.

**ZMBH:** That didn't originate with him. This is ancient Indian philosophy. There are many forms to describe the tetralemma. One form is this: (Fill in any noun for X—you can tell I'm a mathematician.) (1) X is. (2) X is not. (3) Not X and not not X. (4) X and not X. There are other forms of the tetralemma. The idea is you have these statements, and the whole point of the tetralemma is that none of them are true. So "The sky is blue" is not true. And "The sky is not blue" is not true. And "The sky is not blue and the sky is not not-blue"—that's also not true. And "The sky is both blue and not blue"—that's also not true. So what that's really pointing to is don't know. It's saying whatever we think we know, we actually don't know.

That's all it is. It sounds very fancy. There's this won-





derful book by Nagarjuna—*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*—translated as *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. The translation by Jay Garfield is a fantastic book. Its commentary is amazing; I highly recommend it. But again it's just pointing to don't know. It's saying that our thinking mind is going to get us into trouble all the time, because the minute things enter as thought, and as language, then that means that we've lost something. We're missing something when we do that.

**IWM:** What is it that we're missing?

**ZMBH:** You can't say it. If you could say it, you'd be missing it. It's like when a newborn baby opens his eyes. It's that mind.

**IWM:** In this same article in the September issue of *Buddhadharma*, you're talking about what kong-ans are and what they're not. You give the example of Nam Cheon's cat. You said, "He really is killing a cat, and this really is your life." I think sometimes people come into the interview to do kong-an practice, and it's a little about being clever. Or it can feel that way. What do you mean when you say, "This is your life. The answer to this kong-an really is your life"?

**ZMBH:** Well obviously I can't give away the answer. But, I'm really glad you got to that, because things were getting abstract there, and I was getting uncomfortable. What about compassion? And what about suffering? And, you know, how did Buddhism start? It started when Buddha looked around and said "Whoa! Everybody's suffering. What's this suffering about, how can I end this suffering?" When we usually think of ending suffering, it's "I want to end my suffering." People start practicing, because they want to end their suffering. At least that's how I started. I didn't start with Zen; I started with relaxation response, because I was so miserable. I mean I was suicidal; I was delusional; I was all kinds of things. I eventually had this great shrink who was able to help me. But I started meditating because of that, because I just needed a way to calm down. People come to the Zen center like that. They need a way to calm down. But then after a while you realize you can't end your suffering until you end all beings' suffering. Because we're all connected. We're just so completely connected. And it's not even like all these discrete beings are connected. It's like if you look at the fingers of your hand, and then you cover up so you can't see the palm, and you

look and it's like four little puppets on a stage. You know it's like four little puppets on a stage and you think "oh those are different puppets." But then you uncover your palm and you say, "Whoa, wait a minute. They're deeply, deeply, connected." It's like that. What Buddha realized is—and this is the whole Mahayana—your own suffering is just part of this ocean of suffering, and we all have to work together.

That's what a lot of the chants in the Kwan Um School of Zen say. They say things like, "Together we vow to achieve enlightenment," in the same moment at once. Simultaneously. So there's this great cosmic vow that all beings take. We're so inexorably entwined. That's what Thich Nhat Hanh means when he talks about interbeing—this intrinsic connection that we have, and not just with human beings, but with all creatures. Even bacteria. We're all part of the same thing; and we're not even part of the same thing. We're all the same. You can't really say it, right? But this deep sense of connection. And this deep sense of recognizing suffering, not trying to escape from suffering, but really acknowledging it and working together to help each other in this ocean of suffering. Of course, this is not saying that we don't have wonderful things too, because those exist, but I want to focus here on the suffering part.

Nam Cheon's holding up this cat. I always imagine he's holding it by the tail, and that the cat is doing all this screeching and whatever a cat would do in this situation. And then he takes out his knife, and then there are five hundred young monks, all in their teens and early twenties. Right—they're kids! And they're fighting over this cat because each group, the western hall and the eastern hall, they all want this cat for themselves. And he grabs it and picks it up, and he's got this knife. He says, "Give me one word or I will kill this cat!" And they are all stuck: "What am I going to do?" So then he kills the cat. That's the situation. And what in that moment are you going to do?

And that's our lives. That's actually what our lives are like right now. I was walking down the main street in our little town with some friends—this is true—and there was a guy who looked homeless, lying down on the sidewalk and moaning. He looked really sick. Just really really sick. Like something was terribly wrong. He was obviously in a lot of physical pain. We stopped. And we said to him, "Are you OK?" And he sort of pulled himself up to a sitting position and said, "Yeah I'm OK. Yeah I'll be fine." Like he just didn't want us to call an ambulance or something. I don't know why, but he was sending out this vibe: "I don't want to be taken to the hospital. I don't want the police to be called." You know just a "leave me alone" kind of thing. And so we said "Oh, OK," and we walked on. As I was walking away I was thinking "Maybe I should just sit here with him for a minute. Maybe I should just sit with him quietly and make sure he's OK and maybe talk to him for a little bit." But I had someplace to go. I was supposed to be someplace in five minutes. You know?

I could have taken out my phone and said, “I can’t meet you in five minutes, because I’m hanging out with this guy here, and I think he needs a little bit of help. And maybe you can come over here and join me and see if we can help this guy.” But instead I just said “OK” and I walked on. So I flunked. I flunked that kong-an.

That’s what I mean by “it’s our life.” We’re just constantly hit with these things. How do we respond to them? What do we do? Again, the Mahayana vision is really useful here, because there’s this tendency to think “I alone have to fix everything,” and then we feel hopeless, and we give up. But no, it’s more like we’re all working together. So where is my part? What is my job? Where is the situation that I can step in? That I can do something? What’s appropriate in the moment?

Zen Master Seung Sahn always used to talk about correct situation, correct relationship (which means relationship to the situation), and correct function. So what actually is the situation that we’re looking at? That’s the first question. What is the situation? Not what do we think it is, but what is it actually. And then what is our relationship to the situation. The example I always use is this: You’re walking along and you see someone drowning. If you know how to swim, you jump in. If you don’t know how to swim, you holler for help. What is your relationship to the situation? And then third of all, what is your function in the situation? That’s very important. And that’s Nam Cheon killing the cat. That’s what that’s about.

There’s a story we tell a lot in precepts ceremonies. About knowing when to break precepts. A farmer’s in the field and a rabbit comes hopping along and then disappears to the left. And then the hunter comes and asks, “Where’s the rabbit?” The farmer points to the right, so they just lied; they’ve broken a precept. But they just saved the rabbit’s life. Know when to hold the precepts; know when to break the precepts. But then there’s this twist, because the hunter comes, and what if it’s a guy with a starving family, and they haven’t had any food in days, and the farmer knows this. And so the hunter comes along and the farmer points to the left, so that the hunter will kill the rabbit and feed his family.

My husband was telling this story in Arkansas, and a woman in the sangha in the back raises her hand and says, “Well if I were that farmer I would just invite the family in for soup.”

**IWM:** Right. It’s a good answer.

**ZMBH:** Yeah!

**IWM:** Kong-ans really are just appearing every moment, I guess is what you’re saying. There are times in my practice when I feel very connected to my direction, to my question, and then there are times when I feel that the desires are so strong; they’re so attractive. And for me particularly it’s like anger and self-righteousness. God I love them.

**ZMBH:** Yeah, they’re really seductive.

**IWM:** They’re like my parents, I love them so much.

**ZMBH:** Yeah, people love them. You know you exist because you’re angry. Yeah, you’re angry and then you know you exist. It’s really wonderful.

**IWM:** Yeah, I feel power.

**ZMBH:** Exactly.

**IWM:** Which leads me to believe, afterward, I’m sort of dealing with the hangover of it: “Why do I feel so powerless that I need this fantasy of power?” And I’m wondering what advice you give to students who are wrestling with these, the attractiveness, the seductiveness of these fantasies.

**ZMBH:** Everybody wrestles with those. I’m sure the Buddha wrestled with those, and not just before he woke up. I’m sure he wrestled with them his whole life; everyone does. So, what is their substance? You investigate that. What is the substance of this anger? And if you look really closely; it dissolves.

And the second thing is, actually it should have been the first thing I said, whether or not it dissolves: You stay on that cushion until the time is up. You don’t let it run your life, even to the extent that you get up from the cushion early.

The most important thing about these strong emotions—and I should add that joy is another emotion that can prevent us from seeing what’s happening—they cloud our vision. No matter what the strong emotion is, the strong feelings, the strong ideas, don’t act on them. That’s the most important thing. If they’re pleasant, you can appreciate them, but you don’t act on them. Once I was in college, and there was some kind of crisis in my life. I called a friend of mine and started talking like a person in crisis, and he said, “Don’t cry. The sky is blue.”

That’s not helpful. That’s an example of a so-called positive feeling getting in the way. So don’t know is so important. Not to act on your anger, and your desire, and your ignorance; not to act on any of that. But just keep with the practice, keep with the schedule, keep with what it is you’re supposed to do. Just do that. That’s extremely important. And then that stuff doesn’t control you anymore. And that’s the point. To have this mind that is, like Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, “clear like space.” And have a mind that is clear like space, and to function in the moment exactly as you need to function. ♦

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*This and the next article are adapted from interviews by Ian White Maher for the Kwan Um Zen podcast, “Sit, Breathe, Bow.” For more, please visit [kwanumzenonline.org/podcast](http://kwanumzenonline.org/podcast).*

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# Coming Together to Inquire

*An interview with Nancy Brown Hedgpeth JDPSN*

**Ian White Maher:** There's a quote I heard of you where you're talking about how you came to the dharma, how you came to start practicing. And there's one portion of that I loved so much. You said, "It seemed like the places in my life that were the most dissatisfactory, where I experienced suffering, where I felt like I was contributing to other people's suffering, seemed to have to do with habits of mind." And what I really loved about that genesis quote was not that you were noticing your own suffering, but that you were noticing that you were contributing to other people's suffering. I wonder if you could say a little bit about the realization that your own suffering also caused other people to suffer.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, that was my experience. I think it's probably most people's experience that we identify with and we live our places of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. We see not only the hurt that we feel, but the hurt that we cause other people: The fear we feel, the shame we feel, all those things are completely connected with how we are in this world. The more I read about Buddhism, the more I felt an affinity for how Buddhism talked about mind and action and karma—our mind's habits, the law of cause and effect. Buddhism has a very practical approach to how we function and how we see our hearts and minds in relation to everything and everyone. People and animals and plants and our earth—there's nothing that you can identify that needs to be left out of that.

I had a certain sense, which I think everyone does, of wanting to be helpful. I kept noticing that when I wanted to be helpful and tried, if I only followed my own ideas, I just tended to make more of a mess. This would contribute to problems rather than actually help.

**IWM:** I know that you worked on a farm for a long time, and I'm wondering if there was some overlap with how you approached the dharma and your approach to farming.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** That's a work in progress for me. I was listening to a Wendell Berry interview by Bill Moyers the other day, and he talked about meeting the place as it is, and what it asks for in terms of how to live on this earth in a sustainable, generous, cohesive way. And it really had to do with not imposing my idea. That goes back to what we were talking about before—meeting the place and the moment as it is and asking what it needs, what's called for.

**IWM:** And what does your experience say about that?

**Hedgpeth PSN:** To me it's a mixed experience. For instance, here at Providence Zen Center, last year we asked the community what it wanted to have planted, and a lot

of tomatoes were what residents wanted. Last year we had put in garlic and potatoes and flowers for the altar and a lot of tomatoes. There was a need to balance what we wanted and needed with the need to improve the fertility of the soil over last year. We had added compost, left part of it fallow, and started a crop rotation, where different plants could help other plants over the long term. So then it was balancing that with tomatoes, garlic, potatoes and flowers. What does the community want? What does the soil want?

There's something about being present in the garden that's just the same as being present with another person or with a job or at play. Whatever we're doing, when we just completely do it, we're not separate: We are not making separate. When we meet the garden, what's called for? I try to enter it and look around and see what's there—what looks dry, what looks like it's thriving exactly as it is, what place needs some weeding to let other plants thrive. Just see what's going on and try to respond to it, with the plants in mind and with the needs of the community in mind. How is it? Start with where we are exactly in this moment. What our eyes see and our ears

[11



*Photo: Arūnas Kulikauskas*

hear. Just be in the moment, see how it is, and then respond—we hope appropriately—learning to be available to this moment. Practicing is that, being available to this moment.

**IWM:** There's a quote from Job that has always struck me as very compatible with my Zen life. "But ask the animals and they will teach you. The birds of the air they will tell you. Ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you." And to me I've always just took that like "Yeah go out and have a relationship with the earth that isn't me trying to figure out what I think is best, but really try to be in relationship.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** That's beautiful.

**IWM:** Because if there is a deep listening it comes alive. Just like all relationships.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, it's in that moment, listening to how it is, and they're teaching us how to listen by simply doing what they do, being as they are.

**IWM:** I've heard you speak about the touching-earth mudra of the Buddha as an opportunity for us to ground ourselves in the face of "the demon armies of our habits of mind," as you say. When Mara is appearing, and you just touch the earth. I'm wondering if you've had that experience in your own life. How does the earth mudra appear for you, personally?

**Hedgpeth PSN:** There are some phrases that I use that help me. The one that points to that most is "How is it just now?" The touching-earth mudra is a witness to this moment, it is bringing ourselves to this moment. How is it? With that quality of inquiry, of open mindedness, open heartedness, how is it just now? The earth witness mudra to me isn't so much "Please earth, witness how clear and wonderful I've been and am therefore entitled to be Shakyamuni Buddha." Rather, it is revisiting this connectedness, this being, this quality of openheartedness, open-mindedness with the moment.

**IWM:** Could you say a little more about the mudra?

**Hedgpeth PSN:** It's simple. The left hand stays on the lap in the universal mudra, and the right hand reaches down and touches the earth.

**IWM:** There's something beautiful about it—it's sort of a kinesthetic practice. When your mind is like, "Oh my god, I don't know if I'm doing this right." Whatever the doubts are. And then you just reach down and you touch the earth. And all of a sudden, there is a witness.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** There is connection.

**IWM:** Yeah. To the relationship of all being.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, and even that idea can fall away, of relation to all beings, and there's just fingers feeling it. That actual, as you said, kinesthetic reaching out and touching—its idea falls away in that moment. And then there's just that experience.

**IWM:** You also have lived in a number of residential communities. I'm wondering if you can say a little bit

about what it's like to live in community. What that does for your practice. Why somebody might want to do that. Why they might not want to.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** I'll tell you, the reason I actually moved in in the first place was to help me start a meditation practice, because I tried at home, but I just couldn't seem to get started. Finally out of desperation, I just said, "I have to move in and go to a place where it's happening twice a day, and I have to go." I'm one of those horses that need the whip. Not just the shadow of the whip.

So I moved in, and it was wonderful. You know, the practice morning and evening, the talks, the support—you get all of that. The group practice and support for trying that and just showing up no matter how you feel has at least for me been hugely helpful. The first time I had a fight with someone or an argument, I went and lay on my bed, and I said "Oh gosh. I can't stay here. This is awful. I had this fight." But then the *moktak* was hit, and it was time to go to practice. So down I went and sat down and just let myself sit with that. And let that digest. And it's not comfortable. That's a very significant piece of living in any community: seeing our likes and our dislikes and all of our opinions appear. Not getting what we think is the right thing, not getting what we want, and sitting with that. Seeing what we don't like in ourselves, seeing all the comparisons and the judgments and the evaluations of self and others, and seeing our attachments to those, because certainly that's part of what we do as human beings—we grasp on.

The beauty of it being a Zen center is that we all go back to the practice, and we practice together. It's not just bumping up against one another in community; this happens everywhere, in any kind of community. It has this essential piece of returning to practice together. That's the one thing that brings us all together. It's a motley crew in any Zen center.

We're not there as an intentional community about, for instance, sustainable farming. You know, we're here to practice, and we don't necessarily pick the people we live with, but we all come together. We're all here to practice, and there is such beauty in that. It's a relief as a human being to be able to just come together and inquire. Come together and just sit and chant and try to make harmony with the chanting, and sit and try to digest whatever appears. And so that happens in community, and it helps us bring that into the rest of our lives as well. It's the old potato cleaning theory. Anyone who has lived in one of our Zen centers has heard it. You can clean potatoes individually, or you can throw them into a great big pot with water and start stirring. And they bump up against each other and clean each other. Not always comfortable, but quite beautiful.

**IWM:** When I'm telling people about living in a Zen center, I say that it's quite different from other sorts of collective places or communal living places,



because behind the decision to live together with other beings is this teaching that the living together is also part of the teaching.

You have the opportunity to see your karma as it arises in your relationships. In other communal living situations, that intentional focus is just not present. For example, if somebody doesn't do the dishes, well, they're a jerk for not doing the dishes. But at a Zen center, it's more "Oh yeah, what's appearing for me . . ." rather than just "they're not doing it." Sure, they're still not doing it, but the focus is more about what's appearing for me in that. And we look at what's the right action, which is such an interesting layer aside from just the sitting and bowing and chanting.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Absolutely. We get to see our own part in the whole dance.

**IWM:** I see it as a microcosm for society at large. We may not have the extremes here where you can see how ideas can spin right out into extreme positions. But it's still all present, right here in the sangha. One of the reasons, I think, to live in community is if you want to see why society acts the way it does, then come to a temple.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes, come to a temple and sit with yourself.

**IWM:** And see what your contributions are to it.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** We get to see how our mind functions—just as everyone else's functions. We may have our own eccentricities, but it's all mind functioning: human mind functioning.

**IWM:** Which then also allows you to be helpful. If you've come to see how your mind functions, then you can also see how to be helpful.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** Yes. Compassion can grow out of that.

**IWM:** You've been practicing since 1979. I'm wondering if there's any part of your practice that's sort of come alive to you more recently, or if there's something you've returned to recently.

**Hedgpeth PSN:** There is. We touched on it earlier. I'm going to read this quote of Zen Master Seung Sahn's and then talk a little bit about it. It dovetails with what we were talking about with the earth mudra. Here goes:

Human life has no meaning, no reason, and no choice. But we have our practice to help us understand our true self. Then we can change no meaning to great meaning, which means great love. We can change no reason to great reason, which means great compassion. Finally, we can change no choice to great choice, which means great vow and the Bodhisattva way.

I just gave a presentation at a class on the philosophy of Buddhism last week, and this was a quote that I used along with the story of Kyong Ho Sunim. When I look at this world simply intellectually, it's really hard to find any nonshifting foundations—something that actually gives some grounding. Zen Master Seung Sahn used this expression, "our true self," which is pointing to that which we share with this whole universe. When we do anything completely, that's already our true self appearing in that moment. If only for that moment.

So we practice being present, we practice being in this moment, being available in this moment, and we begin to string together the experience of moments of presence. We can talk about that as true "self" and also as the interconnectedness that we have, our interbeing, as Thich Nhat Hanh talks about: The complete connection and oneness that we are with this universe. And that experience is not extraordinary. Everybody—every human being—has that experience. Every day. Many many times a day. We just don't string those moments together enough to always notice them.

We practice that, and we find out for ourselves, from our own experience, that we are completely connected. Our school Zen master, Bobby Rhodes, once used this example, which I just loved. She held up her two hands and she said "So my right hand is stronger than my left hand. But my right hand never says to my left hand, 'You're no good. You're inadequate. I don't like you.'" You know. They help each other. They work together. They're part of the same body.

These experiences of being connected to this universe and to one another, we can build on those, and we can see for ourselves that another person is part of us. That veil that can be so thick between us and others, or us and this moment, can begin to soften and get gauzy, and we get to experience it ourselves. Not as an idea, but actually as a truth. That we're not separate from the world. Anytime we do anything completely, that's the case. We practice being present; we practice inquiry into this moment, open-mindedness, openheartedness, to this moment of our life and bring that into even the places where that's hard to do. Those places where we feel the fear, where we feel the shame, where we feel separate, where we believe we are separate. We practice so that we can bring that very inquiry and openness to those places allowing our true nature to function with less hindrance. ♦



Photo: Sven Mahr

# Emergency Landing

Jo-Alma Potter JDPSN

Recently I was taking a connecting flight from San Francisco to Chicago, and I experienced—as well as survived—an emergency landing. The landing gear had developed serious problems, the pilot could not see if the landing gear had engaged, and two of the tires on the left side exploded shortly before we were to land. In this situation, the student in me—along with everything else—awoke. First, an immense silence appeared in my mind, followed by a thousand questions, not the least of which was the question of the death of my body. What might that be like? I was learning very quickly about intense fear in the mind and body, along with immense gratitude for life. Simultaneously, I was reminding myself to stay alert, to watch the breath, to live! Live until I die. A mantra appeared during the 30 to 40 minutes that it took to finally place my feet on the ground: “Awaken. Notice. What is this?” I repeated these words over and over. My capacity as a student to learn exploded.



14] Defining the words *student* and *teacher* is useful in a descriptive sense. But if we drop descriptive definitions, then suddenly the dance floor of life extends in all directions forever and we face the present moment in its vastness.

After I became a Ji Do Poep Sa, someone told me it meant only that I was a very senior student. At first, I was confused. Student and teacher appeared as two things, so which one was I? However, removing the word *senior* from her description, I grasped that this was and is the truth: we are students in all moments of life, while at the same time we participate in many other roles.

The clarity I gain from hours on the cushion in meditation continually teaches me that my mental models create or form the situations I face daily. The way we perceive life depends on the filters, preconditioning, opinions and experiences—and more—all of which form the imprint for our unique set of mental models of how to be in our life. Investigating the mind during meditation gives us insights into the mental models we have set up, and so we can perceive clearly, like opening the curtains to reveal a bright, sunny day.

Zen practice continually teaches me how my mind creates and uses mental models to frame or color the situations I face daily. Already at a very young age, we learn how to set up and polish these mental models. What do we accept as true or reject as false? What appears suspicious to us? What makes us feel we are among our own tribe? Rather than evaluate each experience separately, these models filter our

impressions down to a manageable few, and they are neither “correct” nor “incorrect.” The real question is how we learn to be fully human—the vast thing beyond words that is what in Zen we call our true self. Our practice exposes how we justify our points of view, hemming us in to a very small space that we call our self.

When I was a beginning Zen student, I separated the concept of student from the concept of teacher. Now I observe the incessant micro-shifts between these two: one moment I am a teacher and the next I am the student. Sometimes I am both simultaneously. Interestingly, my learning about Zen accelerated greatly when I started to teach Zen.

All present situations are in a continuous co-learning/co-teaching relationship. At the very time that I approach a situation, the situation simultaneously approaches me. I offer the totality of myself with all the filters and past conditioning to the situation. The situation does the same in return. In this sense, we cut through the illusion of a duality: I extend my awareness to the white wall; the white wall reflects exactly this extension.



As our plane finally landed into a chilly blue-black night and we could leave the cabin, I stepped out onto the asphalt. A small pond of hydraulic fluid spread under the left tires, and two of the four tires were crushed. Dozens of fire trucks and ambulances lit up the night in flashing red and orange. First responders came running toward us. I was neither student nor teacher at that moment. I was only great gratitude. ♦



Painting: Sven Mahr



# When Will the Cypress Tree Become Buddha?

## Bon Sun Sunim

I recently finished a two-month solo retreat in Cameron Highland, a mountain province in Malaysia. My daily schedule included a thousand bows. But this was impossible in the beginning, because within one week of my retreat I injured my leg, and my skin broke out as a result of allergies. Zen Master Dae Kwan, my guiding teacher at Su Bong Sa Temple in Hong Kong, and Chuan Wen Sunim PSN at the Kuala Lumpur Temple, had both encouraged me to consider relaxing in this retreat, as life in our temple in Hong Kong and my work as a monastic is already pretty tough.

In that moment of injury and allergy, I stopped and remembered what my teachers had advised. I relaxed and followed the developing situation and *listened* to my body. Doing this, along with some luck, my body slowly improved. This helped me to learn when I should do more and when I should do less. My body taught me the middle way. Slowly, by paying attention to what my body could really do, I found that I could do the daily thousand bows toward the end of my retreat.

One day during my retreat I was stretching on the balcony and I remembered the following story:

A student asks Joju: “When will the cypress tree become Buddha?”

Joju answers: “When the sky comes down to the earth.”

I was enjoying the sun shining on me and feeling my body stretching, when I suddenly experienced that the sky already had come down to the earth and in reality, sky, earth, this person and everything were never separate! This day was a tremendously happy day for me.

During this solo retreat, I would sometimes think of my temple—Su Bong Sa—and the many people who come regularly and connect with and help us. At the same time, I remembered people who came or knew of us but who did not connect with us, no matter how hard we tried to offer the Dharma to them. I perceived my

mind becoming heavy and sad thinking of them. At those moments I would consciously return to my breath and ask “What is this?”

When I did this, my mind would soften, lighten up and fill with love. Everything was OK: no problem. I experienced my mind like a huge digestion system with me that functions only when one’s mind becomes clear and bright. It can digest anything.

Now I am back in Su Bong Sa, taking care of the many things that appear in the typical Hong Kong life. I am grateful to the friend who first brought me to the Zen center when I was 23 years old. I am grateful to the owner of my retreat place, where I spent these two months in the lovely sunny and cooling environment. What I most appreciate about my retreat is the wonderful time I spent with my very best friend. This friend was born in the same year, the same month, the same day and exactly the same time as me. This very friend will leave the world in the same year, month, day and time as I will. You know who that is? My breath. ♦

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*A Malaysian nun, Bon Sun Sunim began practicing in the Kwan Um School in Singapore in 1998. In 2002 she began haengja training at Mu Sang Sa Temple. In 2003 she ordained as a nun at Su Bong Zen Monastery. Since then she has practiced and continued her nun’s training in Hong Kong. During all these years she also often joined Kyol Che retreats at Mu Sang Sa Temple. Currently she is the head nun at Su Bong Zen Monastery in Hong Kong.*

[15



Photo: Francis Lau





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# Just Do It and Enjoy: Kyol Che in Gak Su Temple

Eduardo del Valle Pérez

The compassion and clarity that pervades every corner of Gak Su Temple in Hong Kong, and on display in their monastic team, touched my heart deeply and was like a strong wind that took away my heavy karma for several weeks in 2019, letting me see beyond my own limitations as a human being. The simple and profound principles of *just do it and enjoy*, embodied by Zen Master Dae Kwan and her students—both monastics and laypeople—create an atmosphere of harmony that interpenetrates with the beauty of the forests and mountains that surround the temple, leading practitioners to return to a relaxed and joyful mind, opening the doors to their original home where the orange sun sets quietly over the vast blue South China Sea.

## Location

Gak Su Zen Retreat Temple is located in the powerful and beautiful natural environment of Lantau Island, deep in the mountains and surrounded by ancient Buddhist temples with a long tradition of strong practice that has been kept for centuries. The beautiful dharma room of Gak Su has a large window through which one can see green trees and blue mountains and hear the life of the temple. During the day—and many times at night—the

beautiful poem of the Morning Bell Chant came alive in the forests surrounding the temple, filling my heart with joy while sitting silently in meditation:

*Sitting quietly in a mountain temple in the quiet night,  
Extreme quiet and stillness is original nature.  
Why then does the western wind shake the forest?  
A single cry of winter geese fills the sky.  
Become one: infinite time, infinite space Buddha.*

## Schedule

The Kyol Che schedule of Gak Su Temple is, without any doubt, the most balanced I have ever experienced in any previous Kyol Che or short retreat in the Kwan Um School of Zen.

There are periods of formal practice combined with one period of free practice outside in nature, along with two periods of physical exercise. The period of free practice takes place in the morning, and students can choose to continue sitting formally in the dharma room or go meditate outside, walking or sitting in a beautiful, quiet, natural environment, surrounded by the forest trees and the old temples that populate the mountains, and in the distance the beautiful view of the South China Sea. The opportunity to meditate in the middle of the nature was

18]



Photo: Eduardo del Valle Pérez



a great teaching for me because the flowers, the small insects coming and going, and the bird song taught me the flow and impermanence of the natural world. And at the same time, as weeks passed and my ability to keep a not-moving mind grew, I could experience the joy of deeply appreciating the beauty of life due to the combination of keeping a don't-know mind and perceiving a constantly changing world.

Twice a day, in the morning and during the afternoon, we practiced Taoist and “Bodhidharma” exercises taught meticulously by Myong Hae Sunim JDPS that helped us to strengthen our bodies and prepare for the long periods of sitting. One interesting aspect of those exercises, which we practiced outside the building by the forest, is that I felt through the weeks of practicing them how my body became strong and at peace and—more interesting—in harmony with the green trees, the mountains, the blue sky and all beings living in nature. This deep feeling of belonging, of being part of the natural world, provided my heart and mind with a deep joy where solitude and any feeling of separation were not possible.

## Teaching

The teachings of Zen Master Dae Kwan, or Sifu as her students name her, always emerge from the present moment, reflecting the students’ situation. This quality of connection with the present situation allows students to grasp and digest the teaching directly, as it is not born from the theoretical framework of the teacher’s mind but rather from the moment itself that the student is living. The result is that the teaching appears out of students’ real experience, allowing them to transform it through its own wisdom.

It was interesting to observe how the dharma of Sifu (which means Teacher or Master in Chinese) has its own flavor and at the same time the living brilliance and taste of the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch, Zen Master Seung Sahn and Zen Master Su Bong. Those great teachers and their dharma are always present in one way or another at Gak Su Temple.

I would like to present in this section three short examples of the living teaching style of Zen Master Dae Kwan that I enjoyed at Gak Su.

### 1. Don't make; do it with joy.

One morning, while we were practicing the Bodhidharma exercises, I could see that many students and myself were physically tired, as it takes several days or even weeks to get used to doing these exercises. Then Sifu appeared and said, with her soft, clear and kind voice: “Don't think *tired*. *Tired* is only a label, if you believe this label then you will feel tired. Don't make *tired*. Instead do it with joy: you like, do it with joy; you don't like, do it with joy. And smile—joy is very important. Enjoy, do it and relax. Then harmony will appear.”

When hearing that I just tried her teaching. I put

down the word *tired* in my mind and decided to observe the green trees moving with the wind *sssshhhhhhh* while I continued doing the exercises. As soon as I did it the feeling of tiredness vanished by itself, and I was able to just do it and to end joyfully my round of exercises. I was truly surprised at how the don't-make-anything teaching from Zen Master Seung Sahn became suddenly alive, no longer just theory but instead very practical advice that I was able to put into practice easily.

It is interesting to note that Sifu wakes up every day at 2 a.m. to practice and is a very busy person. But she always smiles and seems to have a continuous flow of clear and harmonious energy.

### 2. Don't hold.

One day, after the meal and after cleaning her bowls, Sifu took them with both hands and said: “If you want to experience the Buddha’s teachings, the way is not to hold anything. Don't hold anything that appears, don't hold any emotion, only put it all down. If you hold your bowls in your hands all the time then you cannot do anything else with them, but if you put your bowls down [*putting her bowls on the floor*] you can use your hands freely to do anything, and also use these bowls. If you don't hold, if you put it all down, you can be happy in this moment and you get true freedom.”

### 3. The importance of using the correct words.

One day during a dharma talk, Sifu explained the following:

The words *don't know* point directly to before thinking. If you say to yourself, in answer to a question, “don't know,” then this is a first step, as these words point directly to your before-thinking experience. Next step is to ask “What is this?” and then perceive. There is no realization without questioning.

So to use the exact words of Zen Master Seung Sahn and the Sixth Patriarch is important as their words are meticulous and point directly to our true self. This is the reason why when doing a translation of a dharma text it is crucial that the translator be an experienced practitioner.

Zen Master Dae Kwan and Zen Master Dae Kwang’s translation of the Sixth Patriarch’s *Platform Sutra*, available now in a beautiful second and improved edition, has been chosen by the Sixth Patriarch Temple in China as the best English translation among more than a hundred translations by well-known international translators. It will be presented in this temple to celebrate the 1,200th anniversary of this temple.

### Kong-an practice

Another interesting aspect I appreciated deeply, during the kong-an interviews I had with Sifu and Myong

Hae Sunim JDPS, is their clear ability to use kong-an teaching not only to check students' wisdom and center, related to the particular kong-an at hand, but to reflect meticulously the students' karma by pointing directly to aspects of their karma that they need to work on in their everyday life.

A good example of this ability from my first kong-an interview with Sifu: She suddenly told me, without any particular reason, softly but clearly, "I know you have done many retreats, that you have had many kong-an interviews with many teachers, that you have a lot of experience, but know that here I will treat you as if you are no one!" Boom! Her words deeply hit my mind and heart. It took me days to digest them, but thanks to Sifu's words I was able to return my beginner's mind to don't know, and thanks to this strong medicine I could put down my expert mind, where the pride and the heavy load of years of practice had become a dangerous hindrance in my practice.

Another example during a kong-an interview with Myong Hae Sunim JDPS: She was asking me a kong-an question when I interrupted her energetically and gave the answer before allowing her to finish the question. She smiled and, instead of approving my kong-an answer as I expected, she pointed to the fact that I had interrupted her, not listening her words until she had finished and not giving her enough space to express herself. Then she added: "This is how you communicate with other people in your life?" Her words hit my mind and suddenly I could see a blind spot in my behavior with concrete people of my everyday life whom I would answer in exactly the same

way I had just done a moment before. Then Sunim very kindly and compassionately taught me how important it is to listen carefully, being soft and centered when exchanging with others.

### Conclusion

For years I wished to practice for more than 10 days, the maximum period of retreat practice I had experienced before. The 21 days I lived in Gak Su Temple truly changed my life in many aspects and allowed me to re-discover the dharma of Zen Master Seung Sahn and the Sixth Patriarch in a completely new, helpful and amazing way through the living and joyful style of Zen Master Dae Kwan and Myong Hae Sunim JDPS. I believe that Sifu's background as a Theravada nun and her practice in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for a decade, including two years of intensive solo retreat in Tu Boo Cave, is a treasure that manifests itself in her teaching and in the balanced and harmonious practicing way and teaching style of Gak Su Temple, with great benefits for practitioners. In this sense I would like to pay homage, with this article, to Sifu's Theravada teacher, the great Master Phra Ajahn Pongsak. ♦

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*Eduardo del Valle Pérez is bodhisattva teacher at Palma Zen Center in Spain and has been practicing in the Kwan Um School since 1990. He lives with his family on the island of Mallorca, where he leads the digitization and open access unit of the University of the Balearic Islands and also works as a professional pilot for Panamedia International Flight School.*



Photo: Eduardo del Valle Pérez





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# The Joy of a Rotten Tooth

Shana Smith

As most of my longtime friends can attest, I am a Pollyanna. Don't drink, don't smoke, don't swear. (But I have been known to let out a couple of "SHIT-AKE MUSH-ROOMS!") It has never been hard to find the brighter side of things, and often annoyingly so, like when I tried to reassure my friend whose wedding got rained out that "at least the trees and flowers got nourished." In fact, when I first heard the Zen saying "Every day is a good day," it all made sense. Bad day at work? I am alive to experience it all, and help others have better days. What a miracle! The world is in peril? I am alive and well. I can help this world. What a miracle! Even when my dad died and I cried for three days without stopping, there was a simultaneous sense of wonder that I was alive to experience such grief, and how lucky I was to have known such love as to mourn his loss so viscerally. What a miracle, these experiences, this life.

Every day is a good day.

22]

That is, every day *was* a good day until two days ago, when my back right upper tooth started to hurt. We're not talking hurt a lot. We're not even talking hurt like hell. We're talking hurt-so-bad-why-don't-you-just-kill-me-now hurting, the kind that is so excruciating that you want to cut half your face off just to make it stop, or take massive amounts of drugs and alcohol, or both. The kind that brings forth a torrent of expletives so fierce and decidedly *un-Pollyanna* that even a sailor would cringe. The kind of pain that makes you wail, "Why meeee!?! This is too much! This is *not good in any way* and I wouldn't wish this experience on anybody!"

Just to drive the kong-an in a little deeper, this event happened on July 4, when no dentists were available. In fact, no dentist would be available until July 8. I knew I could not survive four more minutes with this pain, no less four more days.

"Every day is a good day" is a fantasy!

In desperation, I called my primary-care doctor and explained the circumstances. Somewhat reluctantly, they agreed to see me, agreed the tooth and everything around it looked very angry, confirmed I had a terrible toothache, said it wasn't infected yet, and sent me home with oxycodone and mouthwash.

The newly un-Pollyanna me popped the oxycodone like it was a baby aspirin, then went to bed.

One hour later, I was up and writhing with uncontrollable oxycodone-induced allergic itching and no pain relief. Took Ibuprofen. Took CBD oil. Wallowed in maximum misery. Cursed myself for even considering oxycodone. Cursed in general.

And then, out of the inky late night forest, an owl sounded out my window: "Who? Who? Who?" For just an instant, I forgot that every neuron in my body was firing with either intense itching or extreme pain. Just "Who?"

After that instant was over, the sensations came flooding back in. Pain. Itching. Mental torment. Waiting.

But what if I let go of the one part I *COULD* control—the mental torment? With tremendous effort, I focused on allowing the pain and itching to fire without my anguish and mental desperation adding to the mix. I was astonished to notice how hyper my mind had become in direct proportion to the physical discomforts: Oh no! Not again! Now itching too? I can't bear this! What else can I take? What else can I do? I'll do anything! Instant after instant was an exercise in releasing this barrage of thought and letting pain just exist.

It wasn't an instant relief technique. The pain was just as intense. But the quality of it, and my relationship to it, shifted almost immediately. And, to my amazement, my angry tooth had simmered to a slightly pissed-off one today, with just a few sensitive flare-ups.

From the moment that shift occurred—the shift of allowing the pain to exist exactly as it was—little tormented "me" became a much smaller voice in the background of just this, just this pain, just this owl, just this itching, just this. Just "ouch!"

And I am alive, so alive that I can feel the fiery wrath of every tiny inflamed and living nerve on this fragile, mortal, wondrous whole body, gifted for just a few precious decades. And I have a great dentist who will bring relief tomorrow. And when I meet someone else who has a toothache, or any ache, I will hug them, and do everything I can to relieve their pain. And when I think of others far away who are surely suffering, my heart melds with theirs, and I feel waves of gratitude that we can be alive together, and somehow find each other through the cosmos of compassion.

If not for this rotten tooth, my heart wouldn't have opened bigger. What a miracle!

Every day is a good day indeed. ♦

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*Shana Smith is a mom, musician, meditator, marine biologist, teacher and writer. She is an avid and longtime student of Zen and Buddhism, a decades-long yogini, and a much sought-after kirtaniya, or devotional chanting leader. Shana and her family live in Gainesville, Florida, where they run their meditation- and yoga-based Gainesville Retreat Center, which attracts many renowned teachers and practitioners. For more information, phone numbers and e-mail addresses, go to [www.gainesvilleretreatcenter.com](http://www.gainesvilleretreatcenter.com).*

# Cold Mountain Blues

Poem by Jan Potemkin

with notes and capping verse by Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel)

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Is there no fresh snow?<sup>1</sup>  
I find my footprints everywhere,<sup>2</sup>  
From shoes I don't have anymore,<sup>3</sup>  
Back and forth,<sup>4</sup>  
Stepping on old tracks.<sup>5</sup>  
Sit on a cold round rock,<sup>6</sup>  
Wondering—is there somewhere to go?<sup>7</sup>

#### NOTES

1. In the heat of the summer, Jan knows what to look for.
2. Quite the thing, while walking on the ocean.
3. Ah, if that were all.
4. If it's not here, it must be there.
5. No one else can find them, so it must be you.
6. Chilled to the bone, finally, he rests.
7. That's the right question. Sit there and ponder it more.

#### CAPPING VERSE

Pine needles  
Eternally green  
Covered with snow or dew  
If you want to know the season  
Look through the trees

[23

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Jan Potemkin is a longtime practitioner in the Kwan Um School of Zen, at Chogye International Zen Center in New York. He is an attorney and lives in New Jersey.



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# Book Review

## *The Mountains and Waters Sutra: A Practitioner's Guide to Dogen's "Sansuikyo"*

By Shohaku Okumura

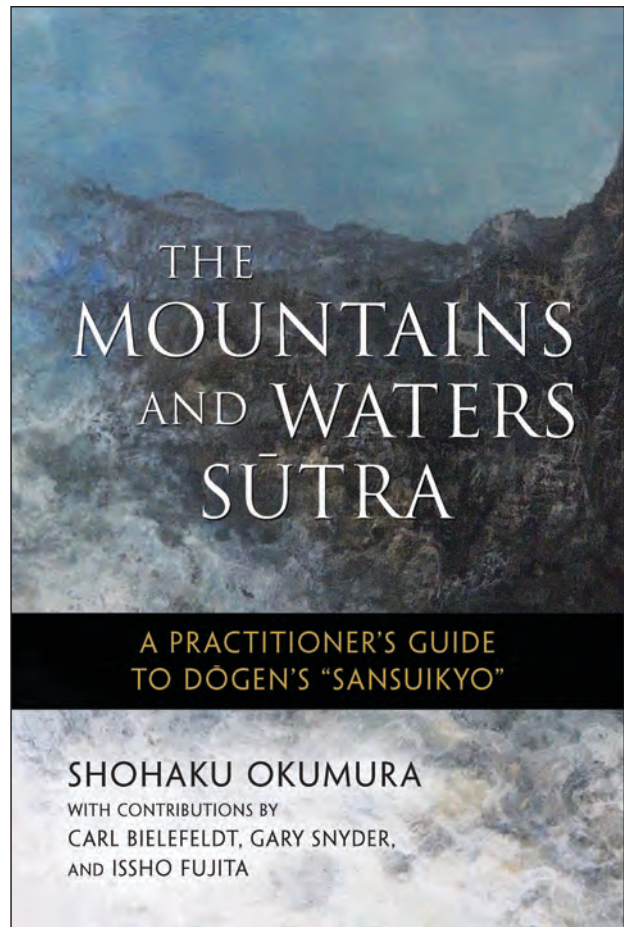
Wisdom, 2018, \$17.95

Review by Jess Row

"Just as grammarians begin with reading the alphabet, the Buddha teaches doctrines that students can bear," the Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna once wrote. "To some he teaches doctrines for the reversal of sin; to some, in order to win merit; to some, doctrines based on duality. . . . To some, he teaches the profound, frightening to the fearful, having an essence of emptiness and compassion, means of achieving highest enlightenment." Whenever I think of that last category—"the profound, frightening to the fearful"—I think of Dogen's *Sansuikyo*, the "Mountains and Waters Sutra," perhaps the most challenging chapter in his massive anthology of writings, the *Shobogenzo*, or "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye."

If "Mountains and Waters Sutra" followed the traditional form of a sutra, it would begin with "Thus have I heard," and go on to describe a Buddha, bodhisattva, or other holy being delivering teachings on a certain subject (presumably, in this case, mountains and waters). In the *Sansuikyo*, it's the mountains and waters doing the teaching. Using Zen Master Seung Sahn's terms, we might say that Dogen is interested in a very precise, painstaking investigation of what it means to follow the progression that goes "like this," "just like this," "subject just-like-this," "object just-like-this." In other words, how can we directly connect to reality, outside of our own limited perceptions? Take the word *mountains*, Dogen says. We think we know what the word means, but then a Zen teacher says, "The blue mountains are constantly walking," and we no longer know what it means. What happens then?

Even when we have the eyes to see mountains as the appearance of grass and trees, earth and stone, fences and walls, this is nothing to doubt, nothing to be moved by; it is not the complete appearance of the mountains. Even when there appears an occasion in which the mountains are seen as the splendor of the seven treasures, this is still not the real refuge. Even when they appear to us as the realm of the practice of the way of the buddhas, this is not necessarily something to be desired. . . . Each of these appearances is the particular objective and subjective result of past karma; they are not the karma of the way of the buddhas and ancestors but narrow, one-sided views. . . . There are words that are free from such realms: they are "the blue mountains constantly walking" and "the East Mountain moving over the water."



Most Zen students are very familiar with the importance of tautological statements: "the wall is white, the floor is brown" means "the wall is white, the floor is brown." For Dogen, this is a little too easy; it allows us to assume that we know what *wall* and *white*, *floor*, and *brown* mean by simply describing them on the level of conventional appearance. "East Mountain moving over the water is just 'East Mountain moving over the water'" is something else again. It's not a metaphor for enlightenment, and it's not a reaffirmation of conventional language. It's something like enlightenment *in* language.

The text of the *Sansuikyo* is short (about 11 pages in English translation) but it distills all of Dogen's studies and his many hard years of practice, in Japan and China, where he traveled as an eager young monk looking for the essence of Zen, only to be passed from teacher to teacher in the Linji school, finding a lot of shouting and riddles and sectarian backbiting, none of which seemed to represent the dharma. After two years of searching, he found Tiantong Rujing, an austere and withdrawn master in the Caodong lineage, who refused all of the honors and official positions common to Zen masters of Song-Dynasty China, and who taught a single-minded, minimalist approach to Zen called *zhiguan dazuo*: "Only stopping and sitting." Translated as *shikantaza*, this became the foundation for Dogen's Soto school, which became the great rival

of Rinzai (Linji) Zen in medieval Japan.

Dogen's teacher, Rujing, refused to accept the common description of Zen as "not depending on words," which was the central teaching of the Linji school, and Dogen, in *Sansuikyo*, doesn't mince words in his criticism of Linji teachers who used barks or shouts or short riddles as their only teaching. "Their idea is that any saying that is involved with thought is not a Zen saying of the buddhas and ancestors," he writes. "They are to be pitied. They do not know that thought is words; they do not know that words are liberated from thought."

"Dogen tells us here that eliminating thought is not our practice and is not enlightenment," Shohaku Okumura writes in his commentary. "Instead, we need to understand how to use this ability as a tool to perceive reality more deeply and intimately." He uses the analogy of a map, which is always distorted because it's a two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional space. "Zazen," he writes, "is not a method to correct the distortions . . . or throw the map away. Rather, our zazen places our entire body on the earth, on the ground of reality, not on the map. . . . When we see that this map is not perfect but distorted, we are liberated from our own system of opinions."

Okumura is a fascinating teacher—a Soto Zen monk who has primarily worked in overseas Japanese organizations

but has a longstanding relationship with the San Francisco Zen Center. In the Soto school in Japan, Dogen is studied formally and at great length, but because his writings are considered so challenging even in Japanese, very few Japanese Zen teachers are willing to present their own commentaries in English. This is why, over the last fifty years, most of the Dogen translations and commentaries in English have come from American Zen teachers. Okumura's approach is much more detailed, drawing on the full range of Buddhist teachings Dogen was intimately familiar with: the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Abhidharmakosa* (Vasubandhu's encyclopedic teachings on Buddhist psychology), the *Kalahavivada Sutta*, and so on. Okumura also takes the time to explain Dogen's creative use of Japanese and Chinese words and expressions—which in this case is essential because almost nothing in the *Sansuikyo* should be taken at face value.

It's especially helpful to see this book labeled a "practitioner's guide," because it's meant to be read and reread over time. *Sansuikyo* for me is one of a small number of texts—others include the *Sandokai*, the *Xin xin ming*, Uisang's *Ocean Seal Inscription*, and poems by Han Shan and Su Dongpo—that I return to over and over because of the sense of wonder they evoke. Wonder as the essence of the Buddhadharma, so to speak. Shohaku Okumura's book is a great way to open that door. ♦



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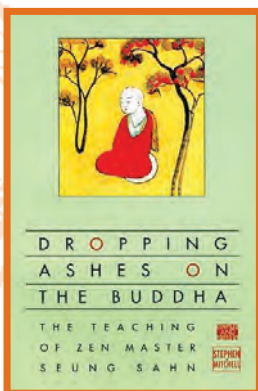
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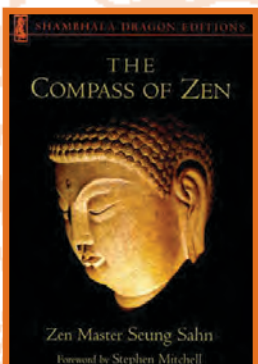
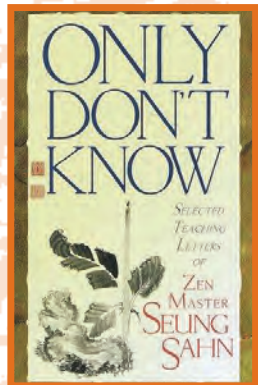
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# Join Our Sangha Today!

## The Kwan Um School of Zen

The heart of the Kwan Um School of Zen is our practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn very simply taught "Don't Know". This

means in each moment we open unconditionally to all that presents itself to us. By doing this, our innate wisdom and compassion will naturally breathe and flow into our lives.

The Zen centers of the Kwan Um School of Zen around the world offer training in Zen meditation through instruction, daily morning and evening meditation practice, public talks, teaching interviews, retreats, workshops, and community living. Our programs are open to anyone regardless of previous experience.

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[31

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