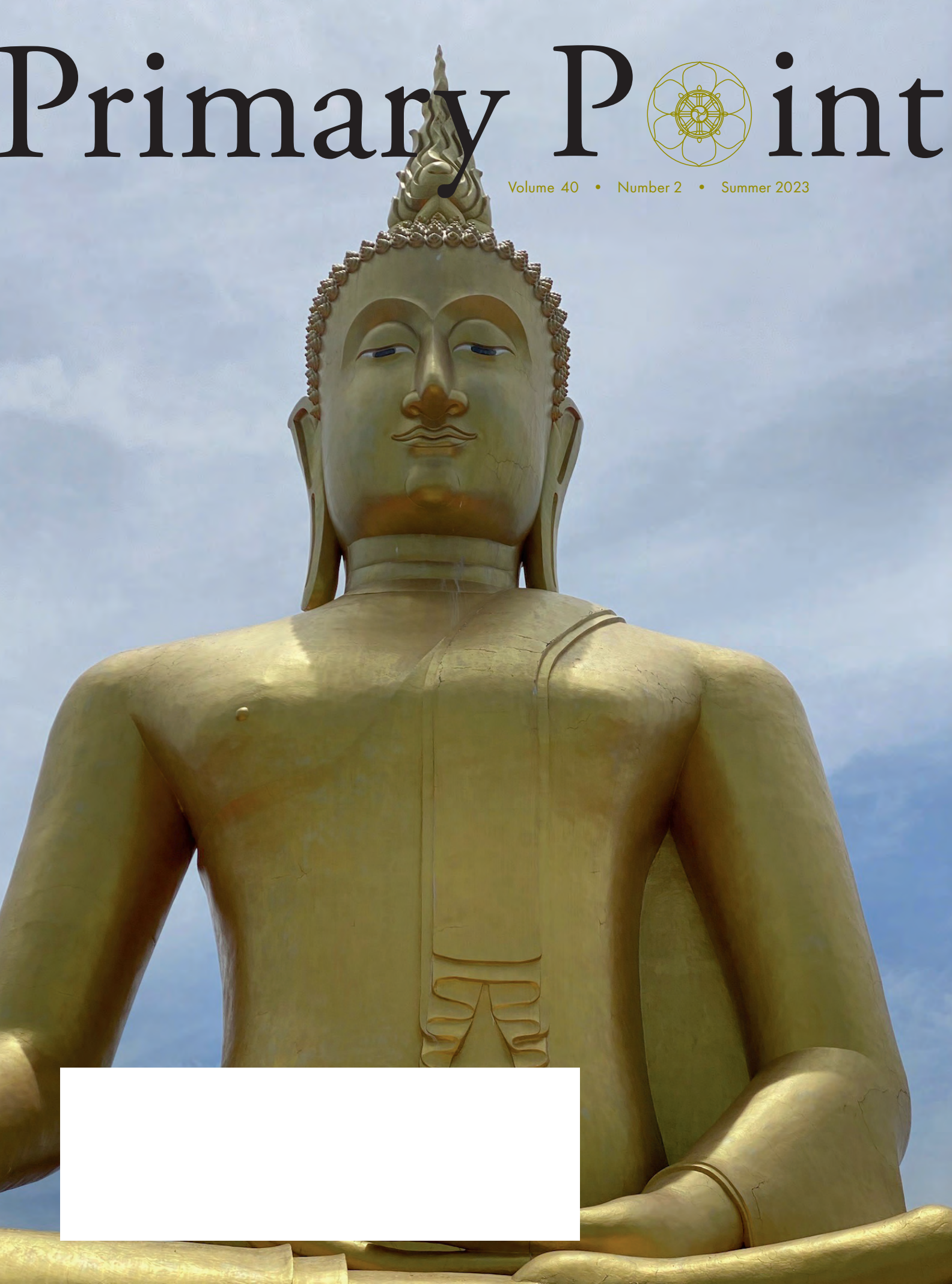
Primary Point

Volume 40 • Number 2 • Summer 2023



MUSANGSA 2023-2024

Kyolche

Winter NOV 27, 2023 - FEBRUARY 24, 2024

Summer MAY 22, 2024 - AUGUST 19, 2024

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Published by the Kwan Um School of Zen, a nonprofit religious corporation. The founder, Zen Master Seung Sahn, 78th Patriarch in the Korean Chogye order, was the first Korean Zen Master to live and teach in the West. In 1972, after teaching in Korea and Japan for many years, he founded the Kwan Um sangha, which today has affiliated groups around the world. He gave transmission to Zen Masters, and inka (teaching authority) to senior students called Ji Do Poep Sas (dharma masters).

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 1,400 copies.

The views expressed in *Primary Point* are not necessarily those of this journal or the Kwan Um School of Zen.

IN THIS ISSUE

Cover: Buddha statue at Wat Bang Chak temple, Koh Kret island, Thailand. Photo by Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN.

Looking for Human Beings

Zen Master Seung Sahn

Mu Sang Sunim helped Zen Master Seung Sahn in the writing of these poems. He says that working with Dae Soen Sa Nim was a joy.

Shower

Please give my Buddha doll a shower, OK?
Please give my Christ doll a shower, OK?
Please give my Confucius doll a shower, OK?
You come too!
OK.

Sha! Sha! Sha!
Sha! Sha! Sha!
Sha! Sha! Sha!
Clean! Clean! Clean!
Clean! Clean! Clean!
Clean! Clean! Clean!

Buddha's smiling.
Christ's very happy.
Confucius has a warm glow.

Did you have lunch?
No.
Then let's go eat.
Chop! Chop! Chop!

Dancing Time!
Around! Around! Around!
Hugging Buddha, dancing.
Hugging Christ, dancing.
Hugging Confucius, dancing.

La! La! La!
Li! Li! Li!
Dong! Dong! Dong!
Dang! Dang! Dang!
September 1, 1982

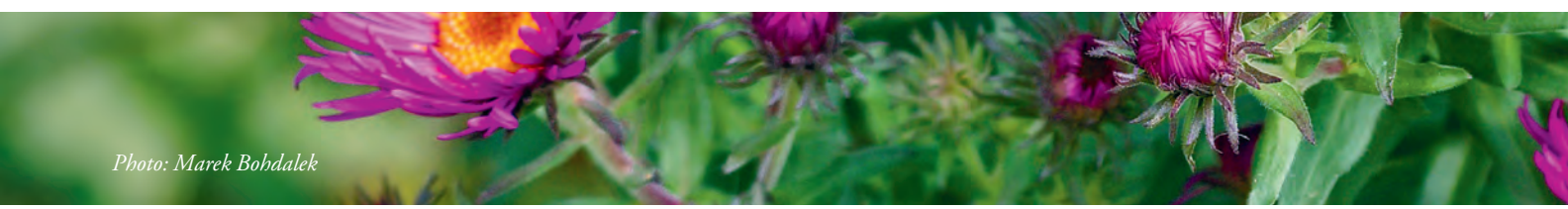


Photo: Marek Bohdalek

Looking for Human Beings

No human beings! No human beings!
Not in New York, not in L.A., not in Washington!
Not in the mountains, not in the rivers.
Where'd they all go?

Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!

Look at me!

Hellooooo!

Ah!
Here's one!

Don't cry! Don't cry, OK.
Would you like some chocolate or some ice cream?
July 1982

If No I

Looking at green mountain.
Only green.
Looking at river.
Only flowing.
Singing together with the birds.
Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!
Dancing together with the rabbits.
Dong! Dong! Dong!

Great! Great! Fantastic!
A-Ha! Ha! Ha!
Eh! Heh! Heh!

Duh-dung-dung-dung!
Da-dang-dang-dang!

My darling, my darling!
Want to go home?
Let's go!
Clump! Clump! Clump!

Sun sets over Western Mountain
Moon rises, East Mountain.
July 1992

Sound

Water, Dol! Dol! Dol!
Bird, Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!
Wind, Woosh! Woosh! Woosh!
Dog, Woof! Woof! Woof!

Where are these sounds coming from?
Coming from the water?
Coming from the bird?
Coming from the wind?
Coming from the dog?

No! No! No! No!

My ear?
No! No! No! No!

My mind?
Maybe!

Where does you mind come from?
The sound and your mind, are they the same or different?

Same!
Hit thirty times.
Different!
Hit thirty times.
Don't know!

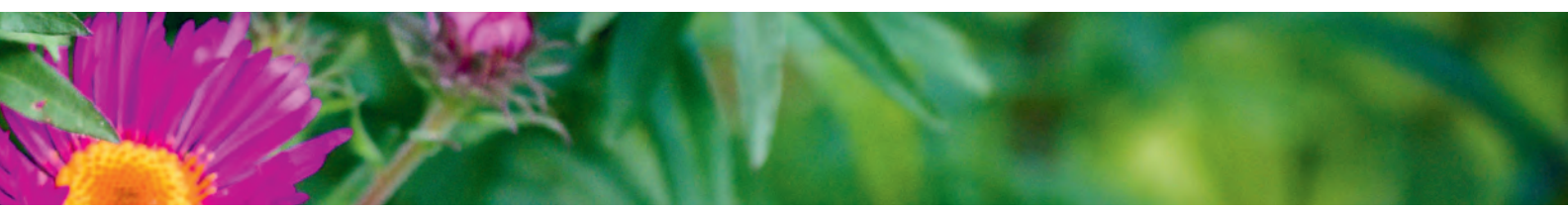
KATZ!

Wooden bird, riding water sound, flies to Heaven.
Stone dog, carrying wind sound, into Hell.

Crazy, crazy!

Wake up!

Water, Dol! Dol! Dol!
Bird, Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!
Wind, Woosh! Woosh! Woosh!]
Dog, Woof! Woof! Woof!
August 8, 1982



You and Me

Are you me?
Am I you?
Where did you come from?
Where did *you* come from?
You don't know!
You don't know!
Don't say *you*!
Don't say *you*!
Only don't-know!
Only don't-know!
Don't-know!

YAAT! Hit!

What did the bird say?
Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!
What did the dog say?
Woof! Woof! Woof!

Heard the sound of the chicken.
Heard the sound of the dog.
Go and dance!
Boom-ba-da-bam-bam!
Boom-ba-da-bam-bam!
Boom-ba-da-bam-bam!—*Bam*!
August 8, 1982

Who Are You?

Are you a man or a demon?
You're making demon sounds.
Make your own sounds.
What do you want?
Do you know that demons become men, and men become demons?
Do you mean, men and demons are the same?

Put it all down!

Just bring me a book.
Hit it once.
Duh-dung-dung-dung!
Da-dang-dang-dang!
Demons and men dancing together!

Wonderful! Wonderful!
Aha-heh!

Wind blowing.
Trees dancing.
Mountains deep.
Sky, wide.
July 1982

Transmission Ceremony for

Zen Master Hye Mun

On April 1, 2023, Barry Briggs received transmission from Zen Master Bon Haeng at Providence Zen Center in the U.S.A. and became Zen Master Hye Mun.

Dharma Combat

Jason Quinn JDPSN: It's April Fool's Day and you and I are sitting together. Which one is the fool?

Zen Master Hye Mun: You already understand.

Quinn PSN: So I'm asking you.

ZMHM: My name is Barry *[extending hand].*

Quinn PSN: Thank you for your foolish answer!

ZMHM: You're welcome.

Question: Now that we have ChatGPT to give us the answers, why do we need a Zen master?

ZMHM: You don't need a Zen master at all. You're already complete, my dear.

Q: Oh, please tell me more.

ZMHM: That's not enough?

Q: Thank you.

Question: I'm learning to trust my don't-know. But I don't know where's it's coming from. Where is it coming from?

ZMHM: You already understand.

Q: I . . .

ZMHM: Already appeared!

Q: OK . . .

ZMHM: Keep that! That's the gift. Keep it!

Dharma Speech

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

The ten thousand dharmas return to the One. Many of us have heard this—it's in Zen Master Seung Sahn's poem in *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*. But did you also know that the One gives rise to the ten thousand dharmas?

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

In truth, there are no ten thousand dharmas. And, in truth, there is no One.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

The ten thousand dharmas are simply the ten thousand dharmas—present in each moment with name and form. The One is simply the One—also present in every moment, before name and form.

Which of these statements do you prefer?

KATZ!

The ten thousand dharmas and the One are present just now in your lovely faces.

A long time ago, in Tang-dynasty China, there was a teacher named Baoshou who was a dharma heir of Linji. One time a monk came to him and asked, "Sir, when the ten thousand things come at you all at once, what can you do?"

Baoshou exclaimed, "Don't try to control them!"

These expressions, the "ten thousand things" (or dharmas) and the "One," originated in the earliest days of Chinese culture and are the constant threads throughout our spiritual tradition. The ten thousand things refers to the myriad, uncountable world of experience, the nonstop flow of phenomena—thoughts, feelings, impulses, sensations, and all the rest. In our tradition, we refer to the One as primary point, but of course the One has many names—Tao, God, the Absolute, and so on.

Photo: Albert Lee

The ten thousand things and the One appear in the first verse of the Tao Te Ching, where it says, "The Tao is the mother of the ten thousand things."

A few hundred years later, when Buddhism came into China, these indigenous teachings of the ten thousand things and the One were incorporated into the Zen tradition. We find them in the early Zen poem, "Trusting in Mind," by the Third Ancestor, Sengcan. In fact, we can view the entire poem as an exploration of the relationship between the ten thousand and the One.

A few hundred years later, a monk came to Joju and asked, "The ten thousand dharmas return to One. Where does the One return?" And that's the question that has come down to us over the years. At the turn of the twentieth century, young Man Gong Sunim was asked the same question, "Where does the One return?" and he kept this question until, later, at the sound of a temple bell, he had an awakening.

When the monk came to Baoshou and asked, "Sir, when the ten thousand things come at you all at once, what can you do?" Baoshou responded, "Don't try to control them!"

My sense is that the monk was struggling with the many troublesome thoughts, emotions, and feelings that arise in mind. Perhaps you also have similar concerns. And perhaps, like this monk, you also want relief. Who among us doesn't want relief from the ten thousand things? Baoshou gave the monk the best possible guidance: "Don't try to control them!"

Of course, we do try to control the ten thousand things. We do everything possible to arrange the world so that it won't trouble us. And—as maybe you've noticed—the world really doesn't cooperate with our attempts at control. Actually, the world doesn't care much about our likes and dislikes. It isn't interested in what we want or don't want.

It occurred to me some years ago, when I was trying to control a difficult situation, that maybe there was another way. Perhaps, rather than demanding cooperation, I could respond to what the world asked of me. I could bring myself into alignment with the ten thousand. That's possible for any of us.

And, in fact, that's our practice tradition—to sit in community, breathe in, and ask a question—"How is it, just now?"—and perceive what appears. How do the ten thousand things manifest in this moment? And then, on the exhalation, don't know—returning to the One, returning to primary point.

This heritage goes back 2,500 years. Zen Master Seung Sahn didn't invent this, although he brilliantly made it come alive. May we all feel deep gratitude for this offering. We're here today because of the community made possible by this teaching.

I want to thank those who have supported me over the years, and while I don't want this to become an Academy Awards speech, I do want to speak from the heart. First, I'm so grateful for my daughter, Susie, who is the greatest blessing of my life.

I don't have time to recognize all the teachers, practitioners, and colleagues who have helped me on this journey, but please know that I hold you in my heart.

I had the really good fortune to live at Cambridge Zen Center for a few years. It's a wonderful place to train and I encourage all of you to experience it.

After I left Cambridge, I moved to a mountain town in southeast Arizona of about 5,000 people and inherited a small Zen center that local people had established fifteen years before. Our sangha is so precious, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have landed there.

Over thirty years ago, when I started practicing in Seattle, a fellow named Tim Lerch (now a Ji Do Poep Sa) showed up. Throughout the years, Tim has guided, challenged, and loved me in ways that I never knew I needed. Thank you, Tim.

And, of course, I'm profoundly grateful to Zen Master Bon Haeng (Mark Houghton), who has remained committed to me, even in times when I wasn't committed to myself. Without Mark's support, I wouldn't be here today. Thank you, Mark.

Finally, my gratitude to Zen Master Seung Sahn for bringing this practice tradition to the West. Just yesterday I saw some of his teaching on Instagram: "This world is always changing, changing, changing."

The dynamic flow of the ten thousand things offers a point of entry. How do we align ourselves with this change so that we can help this world? How do we align ourselves with the reality of this world, so we can heal this world? How do we stay present with whatever arises in mind?

One time Layman Pang toyed with this notion of escape, asking a pointed question of his teacher, Great Master Ma: "Sir, who is the person that does not accompany the ten thousand things?"

Perhaps Pang was wondering if there might be someone not bothered by mind. But Ma didn't indulge Pang's fantasy. Instead, he told Pang that if he could swallow, "in a single gulp the entire Western River," then he would understand.

It's important for us to love the life we have. It's important to use the life we have. And to do this, we only need to relinquish the demand that the world cooperate with us.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Lao-tzu said, "When you realize that the ten thousand things are always changing, there is nothing you will try to hold on to."

What does this mean?

KATZ!

After this ceremony, we'll take off our robes and go eat cake! Thank you! ◆

Transmission Ceremony for

Zen Master Tan Gong

On April 1, 2023, José Ramírez received transmission from Zen Master Dae Kwang at Providence Zen Center in the U.S.A. and became Zen Master Tan Gong.

Dharma Combat

Question: You asked me for a signed copy of my book, so I thought the best moment to do it is now. But I wrote for my friend, Zen Master . . . And then I realized I don't know your Zen master's name now. So, before you get your Zen master's name, what is your Zen master's name right now!

Zen Master Tan Gong: You already understand.

Q: No, I don't.

ZMTG: I'm José, you're Manu. *[Then Manu signs the book.]*

Question: So, all these old Zen masters have all these great attendants, and you don't have an attendant. So, who's going to answer all the questions that you ask?

ZMTG: You already understand.

Q: No, I don't.

ZMTG: Are you free?

Q: *[Shakes his head laughing and gives a thumbs up.]* Call me up!

ZMTG: You got the job!

Question: So, you and Nancy co-host a dharma teachers' training, and we're reading the Platform Sutra. And the pattern seems to go that a student goes to the Sixth Patriarch, asks a question, then the Sixth Patriarch says: you're a fool, listen to my poem. So, what's your transmission poem?

ZMTG: You already understand.

Q: Doesn't rhyme.

ZMTG: You're a fool.

Dharma Speech

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

"El delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido," said the Spanish poet Calderón de la Barca. A human being's greatest crime is to have been born.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

At a monk's burial service Zen Master Joju said, "There is just one dead man and so many people sending him off." Then he added, "So many dead people sending off one living man." To die is also a great crime.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

The two lanes of life and death—are they the same? Are they different?

Zen Master Joju said, "The person of the Way asks about life and death." What is there to say about life and death?

No life, no death, what do you say?

Photo: Albert Lee

Photo: Albert Lee

KATZ!

Happy April Fool's Day!

Life is like a floating cloud which appears.
Death is like a floating cloud which disappears.

These are two lines from "The Human Route," a poem we first encounter when we start kong-an practice in the school. It is not clear who wrote it. One theory is that the fourteenth-century Korean Zen master Na Ong wrote the poem; another one is that his sister wrote it. Zen Master Tan Wol told me, "One clear thing is that the poem has been in the text of Buddhist funeral chants since a long time ago." These two beautiful, poetic lines give us a glimpse of what we understand intellectually; however, we usually ignore their meaning, or act as if we are going to live forever.

In early November 2014, I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, AML, one of the two major types of leukemia. When you get that diagnosis things happen fast—very fast—they want to admit you right there and then. I managed to convince the doctor to let me go back home for one night to notify family, some friends, some teachers in the school, and get "collectivated," as Tigger would say. That night was a night of great sadness, because I knew the odds were not good, that the process was going to take a long time, and I felt I was letting Brenda and Oriana down.

"The Human Route" continues:

The floating cloud itself originally does not exist.
Life and death, coming and going, are also like that.

Yes, originally "no cloud"—but the sense of I, of me, is so strong. "Why me?" Yeah, why me? I eat healthy; I'm vegetarian; I meditate; I, I, I. Zen Master Wu Kwang said that "when you really face the fact that there is nowhere to go and no choice, then you enter your situation completely." To stay alive, I had no choice but to be compliant and follow the situation completely, moment by moment by moment. But "most of the time we have no awareness of the tissue-thin nature of each moment," as my Zen-Master-brother Barry wrote to me in an email. That tissue-thin nature points to the immediacy of the infinite here-and-now, of seeing things as they come to be, of paying attention versus being in control, of getting the sense of self out of the way—no *I-my-me*; just do it.

Life has coincidences. Zen Master Dae Jin also had leukemia, the same kind that I had, even to the subtype; he got it a year before I did. We would talk and compare notes, and he would tell me not to get the transplant, because he was having a hard time after he got his. Within a year, he passed away, and the other side of "why me?" appeared. I'm still alive—why me? More recently, Oleg Šuk JDPSN also passed away after a long battle with leukemia. I'm not sure what type he had but, again: why me?

I was raised Catholic, and my primary and secondary school years were with the Jesuits. Now the Jesuits, or Compañía de Jesús, were founded by San Ignacio de Loyola, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who was in trouble with the Spanish Inquisition for being one of the *alumbrados*, one of the enlightened ones. In Buddhist circles enlightenment is a desirable quality, but back in sixteenth-century Spain, enlightenment was truly a matter of life and death.

My dear Father Hunt once said, "All I've ever wanted to do was to see God, and Zen has provided the best way for me to do it." And before you get any ideas, Zen ideas, he also says that "G-O-D is a three-letter word."

Continued on page 26

[9

Inka Ceremony for

Marshall White

On April 1, 2023, Marshall White received inka at Providence Zen Center, U.S.A.

Dharma Combat

Question: Marshall! It's so nice to see you in the flesh! To this day, I only knew you as a phantasm on Zoom! How do I know which is the real Marshall?

Marshall White JDPSN: You already understand.

Q: Oh, tell me what I understand.

White PSN: Hello! My name is Marshall!

Q: Hi! My name is Tommy!

White PSN: It's so great to meet you in person! Thank you very much!

Q: Thank you for your teaching.

Question: So, from now on, we'll practice, and I'll be a student and you'll be a Ji Do Poep Sa Nim. How are we different?

White PSN: You already understand.

Q: I don't think I do.

White PSN: What color is this floor?

Q: Brown.

White PSN: Is that Ji Do Poep Sa Nim truth or student truth?

Q: Don't know.

White PSN: Keep that mind.

Question: In a lot of our chanting, we say the phrase, Dae Ja, Dae Bi: Great Compassion, Great Love. What is Great Compassion, Great Love?

White PSN: You already understand.

Q: I don't. Teach me.

White PSN: *[Gets up and hugs questioner.]*

Dharma Speech

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Day follows night, night follows day.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

No day, no night.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Day is just day, night is just night.
Which one of these statements do you like?

KATZ!

Sunlight coming through the windows reveals many bright faces.

Starting at about ten years old, I would go for long walks alone at night. They started around my neighborhood, then expanded to sports fields, parks, churchyards, and down into the canyons of San Diego. I would think about things, ponder the stars and the moon, and talk to God. I imagine people who have a favorite tree or secret place in nature experience something similar to the peace I found.

Photo: Albert Lee

Because of these walks, I never had much interest in attaining enlightenment, or (in the Christian context I grew up in) going to heaven. Peace or heaven was always already available to me on my late-night wanders. My big problems were waking up the next day and dealing with my family, going to school and dealing with the other kids, and worst of all: hopeless romantic crushes. As a chronically shy kid from a family with expectations, my big questions have always been "How do I relate to other people?" and "How can I become somebody, fit into this world, and make my family proud?"

So my life consisted of a nighttime world where everything made sense, and a daytime world I found completely overwhelming. I had a lot of good ideas from those night wanders: What's really important in life? The nature of God is love? How to love everyone? But as we say in our school, all that understanding could not help me. I could not translate those good ideas to the daytime pressures of home and school.

On my sixteenth birthday, some school friends dragged me to an aikido class. There, Martin Katz Sensei taught me how to find my center, move from my center, and connect with others from my center. And best of all, I only needed to say maybe two phrases in Japanese the entire class. *Onegaishimasu! Arigato Gozaimashita!*

Sometime after, another aikido student gave me a stack of spiritual books. Along with the usual Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, and the Tao Te Ching, was this strange book called *Only Don't Know: Teaching Letters of Zen Master Seung Sahn*. I devoured this book, but here are two points that stood out.

In the very first letter exchange, Zen Master Seung Sahn writes that he spent time in the hospital because of his diabetes. There was a man in the bed next to him who has a good job, a good family, and a good spouse. This man was like the Buddha before the Buddha went forth to practice. He has all the good things in life. Zen Master Seung Sahn asks the man, "What is the purpose of your life?" The man answers, "Nothing."

This story pointed directly to the biggest fear of my life at the time. I was afraid that I would grow up, forget all about my nighttime walks, and work very hard to get the things my society tells me are important: a high-class job and a picture-perfect family while keeping too busy to think or feel much. And at the end of my life, someone would ask me a real Question: What's the purpose of your life? What's most important? I would exclaim, "Nothing. I'm lost. Nothing."

Funnily though, Zen Master Seung Sahn did not say, "What a pity, the man in the bed lost his way." Instead, he seemed to say the man was on the right path, only that he needed to go further. The man *understands* "nothing," but that understanding cannot help him, so he is suffering, just like me. He needs to attain this nothing. Zen means attaining this nothing mind, and using nothing mind to help others.

I did not understand what that meant at the time. But I did get loud and clear that what I thought was a dead end, a wall of despair, Zen Master Seung Sahn said was a doorway, and on the other side of that door is a new kind of life in which helping others is possible.

The other point from the book that stood out to me was the closing salutation at the end of each letter, which most of us here have memorized: "I hope you only go straight—don't know, keep a mind which is clear like space, attain enlightenment, and save all beings from suffering."

I wondered at the order of the last two lines: attain enlightenment and *then* save all beings from suffering. In most conventional forms of religion (for example, other varieties of Buddhism or conventional Christianity), loving and helping other people is in service to a higher goal: getting enlightenment or going to heaven. So, you'd expect "attain enlightenment" to be at the end.

But Zen Master Seung Sahn clearly means that practice, up to and including attaining enlightenment, is all in service to saving all beings from suffering, which means connecting with and helping others.

I remember thinking as a teenager, "Finally! Someone who has their priorities straight." From then on, I always understood the purpose of any practice:

Why pray to God, sing hymns, read the Bible? To connect with and help this world.

Why meditate, chant, and bow together? To connect with and help this world.

Why put on the *keikogi* and practice aikido? To connect with and help this world.

Why go on long walks at night? To connect with and help this world.

But don't stop there!

Why eat every day?

Why wake up and put on clothes?

Why brush your teeth? To connect with and help this world.

And why lie in the hospital bed? You already understand.

At twenty-three years old, I was sitting in the introduction to Buddhism class at the University of Montana in Missoula. Professor Alan Sponberg (later given the dharma name Saramati) was lecturing on the four noble truths. Sitting there at the ancient desk, taking notes, I had a visionary experience.

First noble truth, suffering. I saw a huge wall rising between myself and other people.

Second noble truth, the cause of suffering. Where does suffering come from? Suffering comes from deep craving. *My* craving to be somebody; my craving to connect with other people; my craving to be safe and accepted. That craving itself builds and sustains the walls between me and others.

Third noble truth, the cessation of suffering. Just let the craving be. Let go of that need to be somebody, to know others. No need to violently smash or tear anything down. Let the craving go, and the walls dissipate by themselves.

Fourth noble truth, the path of practice, the way to end suffering. Tools like meditation help ease that deep craving and release the walls. Here, the teachings shift from being yet another set of good ideas to actionable instructions: just do it!

But one more step was necessary, I didn't see at the time—maybe a fifth noble truth: How to use these walls of karma to help others. Then the walls become doorways, and helping others is possible.

From our temple rules:

> Originally there is nothing. But Buddha practiced unmoving under the Bodhi tree for six years. And for nine years Bodhidharma sat silently in Sorim. If you can break the wall of your self, you will become infinite in time and space.

As it turns out, for much of my working life, I have been the one bothering the person in the bed. First at eighteen as a Hospital Corpsman in the U.S. Naval Reserves at military hospitals, then as an in-home caregiver for some years, and for the past eighteen years as a professional hospice chaplain.

When you go visiting with someone who may be in the bed, maybe very ill or just not feeling so well, or feeling grief or a lot of sadness, here's a practice that may be helpful: Take Zen Master Seung Sahn's words to the man in the bed, "What is the purpose of your life?" Turn that question around and ask yourself, "What is the purpose of my life *right now*?" Oh yeah! What am I? HIT! Only don't know! Which means no *I-my-me*, no agenda. Then you and the other person can find your purpose easily.

It's the same when you wake up in the morning, feel the sunshine, walk outside and breathe the morning air, and talk to your loved ones and strangers. It's the same whenever you or I are the one in the hospital bed!

In this talk there are many, many mistakes, beginning with opening the mouth. At one point I said, "Attaining enlightenment is in service to saving all beings from suffering." That is a very big mistake. So, I ask you: attaining enlightenment and saving all beings from suffering—are they the same or different?

KATZ!

I am speaking; you are hearing my voice.
Already this talk is complete.
Thank you very much. ◆

Photo: Albert Lee

Marshall White JDPSN first became interested in Buddhism and Zen as a teenager when he started practicing the Japanese martial art aikido and read one of Zen Master Seung Sahn's books. He began practicing Buddhism in college and spent several years living in Asia, practicing Soto Zen in Japan and Tibetan Buddhism in India. On returning from Asia in 2000, he began practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen. Marshall is a graduate of Naropa University, where he met his wife, with whom he has two children. He currently has a sixth-degree black belt in aikido and works as a professional hospice chaplain in the San Francisco Bay Area. Marshall received inka on April 1, 2023, from Zen Master Bon Soeng.

'You Just Have to Stick With the Practice'

Hang Ruan, Ian T. Pocock, and Howard Ruan

Editor's Note: *This is an excerpt from a peer-reviewed article published in the academic journal GROUP 47 no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2023). Citation format has been modified to make it more suitable for* Primary Point. *This article discusses long-term weekly mindfulness meditation groups, a unique mindfulness treatment modality that emphasizes ongoing training and support for developing and sustaining routine mindfulness practice, which have been in continuous operation for more than ten years at a large veterans hospital. The protocol utilized for these mindfulness groups, which includes meditation practice and discussions, was developed by one of the authors (Hang Ruan), a senior dharma teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen. Fundamentals of mindfulness and common challenges, such as issues of avoidance, grasping, and dissociation, are articulated as guidelines for the therapist's facilitation of the group process and individual members' practice routines.*

Fundamentals of Mindfulness

In this section, we discuss the fundamentals of mindfulness that (a) best support the development and maintenance of formal and informal routine practice for members and (b) orient the therapist in guiding members during meditation and discussion toward adequate self-regulation of individual practice regimens. Although each group follows the same protocol, every group session is unique because members bring different issues and questions to the group each week. While the protocol provides structure and predictability to each group, the open-ended format of the discussions offers a flexible space for members to reflect on and inquire into various aspects of mindfulness as concept and as practice. The discussions provide the space for members to develop conceptual understanding of mindfulness, and the experiential mindfulness exercises facilitate practical integration of mindfulness.

Nonjudgmental Awareness

The core of mindfulness practice is to engage with the present moment in a nonjudgmental way, as Jon Kabat-Zinn and others have described in numerous publications. At a very fundamental level, as soon as we perceive and experience something, we immediately categorize it as pleasant or unpleasant; that is, we judge and appraise the experience. Then, based on the quality of the judgment and appraisal (e.g., "I don't like this feeling of restlessness"), we react to the experience accordingly. It is a very human tendency to avoid unpleasant experiences and move toward pleasant ones, and this tendency drives our approach to most endeavors in life, including mindfulness practice. Fortunately, in mindfulness practice, there is an opportunity to see this tendency with more clarity and to break free from it through training. In mindfulness training, one simply notices experience as it is, without pushing anything away or grasping on to anything.

Judgments and appraisals about one's experience will often be uncovered during reflections and discussions (e.g., "I was annoyed by the ticking sound of the clock"). This provides an opportunity for the therapist to highlight the fundamental work of mindfulness practice in recognizing and letting go of judgment. For more experienced group members who have a catalog of prior meditation experiences with which to compare and contrast, judgment may show up as appraisal of one's own mindfulness practice (immediate or longitudinal). In fact, it is not uncommon for members to abandon mindfulness training if the negative judgment toward their own practice (e.g., "I'm not making any progress") fails to be recognized and released. On a more self-reflexive level, members may also learn to recognize judgment about judgment (e.g., "I have so many judgmental thoughts") and practice the mindfulness technique with that in the same way—simply noticing judgments about judgments, observing their associated emotions, and experiencing the act of releasing them.

Routine Practice

Like other types of training, mindfulness involves regular practice outside of formal training sessions. The bulk of learning and integration occurs through home practice. One of the biggest challenges the author (Hang Ruan) has encountered in his years of teaching mindfulness is for clients to develop and sustain a routine practice of mindfulness, as I've noted elsewhere. Catherine Crane and others, in one publication, and Christine Parsons, in another, conducted studies suggesting that routine formal mindfulness practice is correlated with positive treatment outcomes and reduced risk of relapse posttreatment, but routine practice is often one of the first things to drop off a client's daily schedule when the client becomes preoccupied with life obligations and needs.

Mindfulness group provides a community where members can support each other in developing and sustaining a routine practice. Checking in on their formal mindfulness practice over the past week reinforces the importance of home practice and normalizes any inconsistencies and discrepancies in practice that any member will inevitably experience. Group discussions often include reflections about the benefits of a stable routine practice, the chal-

lenges of practicing in a home setting, and the maintenance of a previously established routine practice. Members have the opportunity to learn from and inspire each other as they return to group each week and witness the ebb and flow of home practice as it manifests in the lives of other members. It is validating to see that no one is able to practice consistently each day without fail, and yet it is possible to keep moving toward the goal of developing increased stability and consistency in home practice.

Another function of the check-in around formal practice is to help members learn to differentiate between formal practice (a time and place they set aside to do nothing but practice the mindfulness technique) and informal practice (e.g., other mindfulness-related or mindfulness-like activities in which they may have engaged during the past week, such as yoga, art, or music). Although formal practice and informal practice (mindfulness in daily life) start to blend together after an extended period of mindfulness training, it is helpful to clearly differentiate the two so that formal practice can be specifically operationalized and tracked. This enables the member, especially in beginning stages of the training, to have a clear view of their engagement (or lack thereof) in formal practice, which is the foundation and cornerstone of growth.

Nonreactivity

Most group members have one or more DSM-5 diagnoses, with substance use disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and anxiety disorder being most prevalent. As both Stefan Hoffman and Angelina Gómez, as well as Jon Kabat-Zinn, have noted, with the preceding challenges, mindfulness skills offer a way of relating to our experience that promotes nonreactivity and flexibility. Whether following an episode of anger, a relapse close call, or an anxiety attack, members have the support of the group each week to reflect on the challenges they experienced in the past week and how they might have used mindfulness to cope. With sustained engagement in routine practice and group practice, they begin to see increased flexibility in the way they respond to stressful situations. Members often share the surprise they feel when they "automatically" take a breath in a moment of stress "and start doing some mindfulness" in the moment, allowing them to respond in a way that is less reactive to stimuli and judgments and more congruent with their values.

Sometimes the opportunity for mindful awareness and nonreactivity may arise during a group session. It is not uncommon for members to arrive in a group session already frustrated and stressed due to a long commute, parking challenges, and so on. During group practice sessions, they can experience and practice a different way of relating and responding to those emotions and feelings. As members incrementally develop the capacity to see the option of choice in each moment and learn to choose their response as opposed to reacting (i.e., psychological flexibility), they begin to taste true empowerment.

Patient Monitoring

Although mindfulness is often portrayed in the media as a panacea, one study by Jared Lindahl and others has shown that meditation and contemplative practice, particularly when engaged in a sustained and intensive fashion, may result in a range of distress symptoms and functional impairment. Certain difficulties are necessary stages of practice that can be resolved by passing through those stages, and consistency of practice can remedy meditation difficulties that are expected and transient in nature. Therefore it is critical that clinicians providing mindfulness training to clients have the breadth and depth of knowledge and experience to detect, address, and support clients who will inevitably encounter difficulties in one way or another. Some common issues to monitor during mindfulness training are reviewed in the following sections.

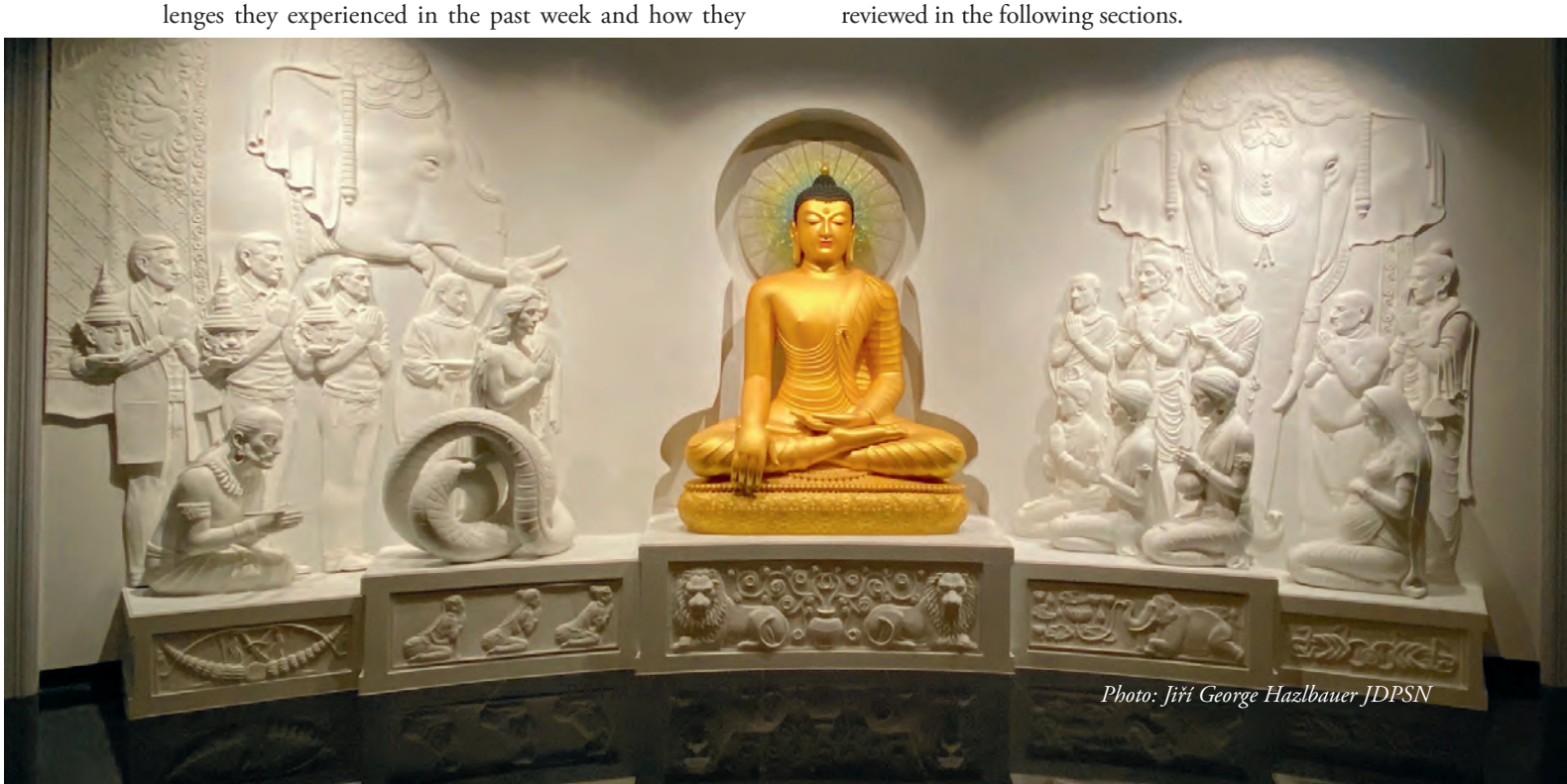


Photo: Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN

Dissociation

Mindfulness is making contact with the present moment as it unfolds in both internal and external environments. Nicholas Van Dam and colleagues found that it is not the same as practices that restrict external environmental stimulation and narrative processing through internal sensory focus (e.g., qigong, autogenic training, relaxation), which may result in a range of unintended effects, including autonomic hyperarousal, perceptual disturbances, traumatic memory reexperiencing, and psychosis. When clients habitually "tune things out" to achieve particular mental states that are perceived to be peaceful, they may be inadvertently practicing a non-mindfulness technique that could lead to any number of adverse effects.

The reflections and discussions in group offer the therapist a window into the way the members are relating to and engaging in mindfulness technique. For instance, if a member regularly discusses their mindfulness practice in terms of "blocking things out," overfocusing on internal sensory stimuli, or suppressing emotional, cognitive, or physiological experiences, the therapist has an opportunity (and responsibility) to inquire into the intention behind that approach and to redirect the intention and technique back to those that are consistent with mindfulness.

Window of Tolerance

Mindfulness is a practice of opening up to experience as it is. In doing so, one becomes more aware of internal experiences that may have been previously tucked away. According to David Treleaven, trauma-sensitive mindfulness is an approach to teaching and practicing mindfulness whereby therapists and clients collaboratively monitor the client's responses to meditation in an active way and adjust as needed. The key to this monitoring lies in recognizing when one is outside of one's "window of tolerance," a term coined by Dan Siegel to describe an optimal zone of arousal where one can function and manage in everyday life. The increased openness and awareness cultivated by mindfulness training will naturally result in contact with experiences that are outside of one's window of tolerance. Effective navigation of this process requires activation of a variety of coping skills, including but not limited to mindfulness technique, calming and grounding techniques, self-care activities, and distraction.

With steady and consistent routine practice, the capacities of awareness and letting go grow in tandem. When both capacities develop in parallel, brief ventures outside of the window of tolerance can be managed in a safe and productive way that leads to growth. The therapist's role in the mindfulness group is to encourage steady practice and discourage erratic patterns of practice, especially ad hoc sessions of extended practice or intensive meditation retreats without the proper foundation of steady training and skill building. When members exhibit signs of moving outside of their window of tolerance and struggling in their coping, the role of the therapist is to normalize this experience and calmly guide them back to the optimal zone by using whatever techniques are most appropriate for that particular individual. The permission to "retreat" from the intolerable experience is necessary for safety and long-term growth, lest the member feel the need to "push through" and becomes retraumatized. ◆

Afterword for *Primary Point*

In our school, Zen practice means to attain our true self, and moment-to-moment perceive our correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function. However, clients who come to mindfulness training may not be looking for attainment of their true selves, and to impose that on them—explicitly or implicitly—would be unethical. So how do I connect my Zen practice with teaching mindfulness at the VA? How do I use skillful means (upaya) to share meditation practice with clients in a way that connects with them and honors their treatment goals? Those have always been central questions for me. Over the years, it gradually became clear to me that, while clients might not be here because they want enlightenment, they are here because they are suffering. The suffering is rooted in some barriers to living out their values—being able to function fully in their roles in life, and being able to connect with others, themselves, and the world. The mindfulness technique of nonjudgmental awareness means letting go of judgment, which means letting go of opposites thinking, and returning to this moment. Whether you call that Zen, don't-know, or mindfulness, it doesn't matter. What matters is that, when we practice doing that, some space opens up, some flexibility develops, and some possibilities appear. And within that opening and creativity, there is freedom to move toward our values and to function correctly.

From "'You Just Have to Stick With the Practice': A Long-Term Weekly Mindfulness Group at the VA." GROUP*, Volume 47, Number 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2023). By Hang Ruan, Ian T. Pocock, and Howard Ruan.*

Hang Ruan is a senior dharma teacher and started practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen in 2001. He has a masters degree in social work from the University of Chicago and is a clinical social worker and psychotherapist. He is also a musician, and his new ambient album Flowers Bloom on a Withered Tree *will be released in fall 2023 on Polar Seas Recordings.*

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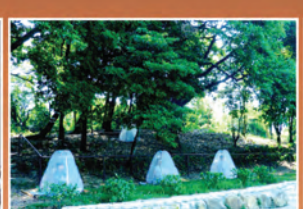
Oct 28, 2023 - Jan 28, 2024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How I Understood the Name of Our School

Manu "Won Jin" Garcia-Guillén

The first time I heard about tonglen practice was in the interview room during a summer Kyol Che a long time ago. Although she didn't mention the word *tonglen*, Zen Master Soeng Hyang told me then about that compassionate meditative practice that consists of inhaling the suffering of the world and exhaling love in exchange.

"Imagine that your body is like a transformative machine that can change pain into love," she said. I remember that it lightened a little something inside of me. That perspective was so beautiful! It was so different from all the self-help literature that tells you to inhale the positive and exhale the negative. It was actually exactly the contrary! Like a generous version of the selfish "fill yourself with the positive and throw away the negative into the outside world." On that day, I left the interview room with that beautiful idea, but for some reason, I never really got into practicing it.

Time passed. Almost ten years later, I found myself in another interview room with Zen Master Jok Um, telling him about a problem that had become invasive in my life: I was suffering from what I was seeing as a lack of compassion from my fellow humans toward those who commit mistakes. One thing I have to say about myself is that as long as I remember, I always had compassion-for-the-bad-guy karma. What I mean is that I easily feel empathy and compassion for the person who committed something bad after they are caught and become everybody's number-one enemy. It is not of course that I sympathize with what they have done, but I think I'm sensitive to the loneliness of someone who suddenly attracts all the world's hate, seen as a monster and no longer as a legitimate member of human society. For example, I felt compassion for the Boston Marathon bomber for surviving his brother and being arrested alone. I felt compassion for the murderer of George Floyd when I heard his wife divorced him without seeing him again.

Of course, those feelings are not easy to share, and they have put me several times in difficult discussions with my close ones, leaving me with a painful feeling of not being understood and of humans being too rough on each other in general.

When I sat in the interview room with Zen Master Jok Um on that day, it wasn't the first time I was telling him about that problem of mine. It had been a continuous subject of discussion for a while. But on that day, the Zen master really touched something in my story. I said, "Whenever I try to bring the idea of universal compassion extended toward bad people despite what they did, people get upset, and I don't know how to deal with their anger."

Zen Master Jok Um simply asked, "Where does their anger come from?"

"Probably from their own suffering, I guess," I answered.

Then the Zen master said that magical sentence that would change everything. He said, "Then, instead of trying to deal with their anger, why don't you rather try to talk to their suffering?"

That sentence really struck me, not so much for the advice it gave me, but because by hearing "Why don't you talk to their suffering" I suddenly realized that, despite all the great compassion I was able to have for the bad guy, I was somewhat ignoring the suffering of the other side. I guess the logic in my subconscious had always been "well, everybody already has compassion for the victims, so they don't need mine as much as the guilty one does." Whether that statement is true or not, the result is that I was neglecting one side in my practice of compassion.

Right after that interview with Zen Master Jok Um, things started to move in my mind, but they were not totally clear yet.

At that time, I was preoccupied by a new lack-of-compassion story: one of my French countrymen, a famous comedian, while on drugs, had caused a terrible car accident that severely injured a whole family. The whole thing was very sad, and my sadness was naturally heightened by the outburst of hatred against the comedian that arose on social media and in comments on newspaper articles on the internet. I felt a craving to do something and be useful, but I didn't know what to do, so in addition to feeling sad, I felt totally helpless.

Photo: Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN

In the middle of those feelings of despair, I was visiting my in-laws in Oregon, and there, in the middle of nowhere, in a very tiny secondhand bookstore, I miraculously found a French version of a Pema Chödrön book called *Tonglen*. Although I

had never found that prolific author appealing before, I felt a call to buy that tiny book.

I read it in a few hours, and I immediately recognized that behind that mysterious word *tonglen*, the Tibetan practice was about exactly what Zen Master Soeng Hyang described to me ten years ago. I decided to try it right away by following step-by-step the instructions of the book. I started by doing ten minutes of meditation, because as the book explains—and as I would understand later myself—one can't jump right away into tonglen practice without preparing the mind by doing an objectless meditation before.

After ten minutes, I visualized a picture that was supposed to help to open my mind and heart. That step wasn't clear to me at first. The book suggested imagining the sky seen from the window of an airplane, because of the feeling of immensity and openness it carries.

The next step is to follow your breath and feel all the stuckness and suffering that resides in the inhaling, and all the relief and letting-go that comes out with the exhaling. I did that for a few seconds, and then here I was: I could pick someone I had in mind who was suffering and needed love, and I could start to inhale their situation and exhale sending them love, support, compassion, clarity. Then I was supposed to extend that practice to all sentient beings who were in similar situations of suffering. Without hesitation, I decided to pick that French comedian. For ten minutes, I inhaled his suffering for causing an accident, I inhaled all his shame, all his cries, all his injuries, all his loneliness, all his drug addiction, and my exhaling was full of "It's gonna be OK, buddy," "One is not reduced to one's mistakes," "You're not only that," "You deserve love, too," "I love you," and so on.

The funny thing is that I never liked that comedian before. I never watched his shows, and I had zero affinity with his personality and political views. And yet, I was there telling him "I love you" as if he were in front of me, and it felt so good. Something magical happened: suddenly I was feeling useful! Finally! I was doing something to help in that situation, although it was just a private action and experience.

By the end of that first tonglen session, I extended my love to all those in the world who are driven by their own demons and cause suffering around them without wanting to.

On the next day, I did tonglen again for the comedian. But that time, after a little while, I said to myself, "OK, now what about doing it also for the victims of the accident he caused, and also for all the people who are still upset at the comedian? It doesn't cost anything to try." So I tried, and by doing so, I eventually understood the suffering of those upset people. Maybe some of them had a close one who died or was injured in a car accident. Or maybe they knew someone who knew someone who had been injured. Or maybe also they were just people who were scared at every moment of losing a loved one through someone else's negligence.

This is when that practice of tonglen became transformative for me. I started to do it every day, for any person I knew who was suffering. I was doing tonglen for them *and* for the person who caused their suffering. For the first time, thanks to that practice and to the words of Zen Master Jok Um, my compassion was eventually becoming complete.

Sometimes I did tonglen for myself, and by extension for all people who were in a situation similar to mine. One day I found myself struggling to do tonglen for someone for whom I was holding rancor, so I did tonglen for all people who had difficulties doing tonglen for someone who hurt them in the past. I realized then the infinite power of tonglen practice, given that any struggle—even the struggle in doing tonglen itself—can become an object for tonglen!

Day after day, that practice made me feel how in every conflict there is suffering, even if it doesn't seem obvious at first. So in addition to doing tonglen for people I knew who were suffering, I also took up the habit of doing it for each person who hurt me with their words or actions, even if I wasn't seeing their suffering in the situation. By doing so, the question "Why are they doing that to me?" slowly became "What is their suffering?" That is, what is their singular story? Who are they? It may sound silly, but many times I felt that I better understood someone's mind by doing tonglen for them.

Today, I still do tonglen every day. During my morning meditation, I always include ten minutes of tonglen practice. It crossed my mind at some point to wonder if it was correct to include a Tibetan Buddhist practice in the middle of my Zen practice. Shouldn't I do bows or Kwan Seum Bosal chanting instead? But I quickly came to the conclusion that tonglen is in fact not different than chanting or bowing. For me, the practice of tonglen made me understand the name of our Zen school, that beautiful name that condenses so powerfully in two single Korean words the bodhisattva's job: Kwan Um. Listen to the cries of the world.

Hear the suffering in every life, spread great love and great sadness, and save all beings. ◆

Manu "Won Jin" Garcia-Guillén took the sixteen precepts. She lives and practices in New York, where she teaches kindergarten and leads a meditation training program for teachers. Manu is the author of a meditation book for kids and of a thesis on psychoanalysis and Zen, and she collaborates to the online magazine La Pointe*, where she writes and hosts a podcast about Zen in French.*

Memory, Desire, Understanding: What Is the Struggle Now?

Carter Thornton

From an introductory dharma talk given at Chogye International Zen Center in May 2021.

There is a good deal of literature and discussion about the intersection of Buddhism and psychotherapy. While not everyone in a Zen audience is a therapist, or even interested in therapy, considering some of the threads that connect both practices can be helpful in pointing to some core principles that we discuss frequently in this school.

Let's explore a concept from the psychoanalytic literature by Wilford Bion and see how it applies to my experiences both on the cushion and in the therapist's chair. And from there we can relate it to one of our school's daily chants.

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion was an interesting guy. Born and raised in India, his difficult experiences as a tank commander in World War I led him to seek out training in psychoanalysis and medicine. He wrote a great deal, and there's one therapeutic tenet he repeatedly returns to: striving for a mind state that is free from memory, desire, and understanding. (For more on this topic I recommend Bion's work *Attention and Interpretation*. Additionally, Paul Cooper has written a good deal about Bion in his work on the crossover between psychoanalysis and Zen.)

Take each of these terms: *Memory. Desire. Understanding.*

Memory. I'm sure that every Zen practitioner has had the experience of finding themselves in a faraway past while meditating. Who knows how you got there from the dharma room. You wake up all of a sudden, realizing, "I was just twenty years and five hundred miles from here. How did I get to this place? I'm not sure, but it's time to come back." The same things happen frequently in therapy sessions. You find yourself in distant times and places, on long narratives, and down winding side streets. While these journeys often shed light on how the current thought-moment is shaped, the question almost always comes back to "What is the struggle now?" or "How can we work with what is here?"

Desire. While memory deals with the past, desire deals with the future. During meditation it's easy to get caught up with thoughts like "Wouldn't it be great if things were just like this (imaginary) scenario or if I just had this (imaginary) thing?" Fantasizing about a desired alternate reality has so much natural pull. Likewise, in therapy I often find myself with a client, fantasizing "If only . . ." when there's a hard reality sitting right in front of us that needs focus and attention. It's easier to dream about what could be than to open up to what one feels about a difficult reality here and now. What can we do to connect to it? And then what can we do about it?

Desire can also come up in less time-bound ways. Early on when I started regularly meditating, some heavy material started coming up in my mind. I found myself having weird and vivid dreams. At the end of long sittings, I'd start seeing disturbing things in the grain patterns of the wooden floor. Sometimes I'd have strange fear-based visions. I eventually started to speak about this in the interview room, and one teacher commented that when you start to sit diligently, it's as if you've been running around a racetrack, chasing your desires and being chased by your demons, and when you stop running all of your demons suddenly crash into you. Then your desires lap the track and crash into you also. There you are in a demon-desire pileup. What to do? Your tendency is probably to get up and start running again. But if you just sit in the pileup, it probably stops wriggling and eventually settles down. The longer I tried to sit there without running, the more I found that to be the case. In therapy, we often find that if we allow ourselves to slowly feel the pain we've been dissociating from—often by chasing various desires—then we learn that the fear of the thing is worse than the thing itself. And it can usually be transformed with a little patience and compassion.

Understanding is another thing that's very easy to get caught up in. What am I experiencing here? How can I get my head around this and make sense of it? We all know from kong-an practice that this is where you'll hit the wall again and again. Inevitably you come to the core question, "What is this?" It does not have a conceptual answer, no matter how much you want one. You have to admit that you don't know, which becomes its own profound compass.

I've found this compass of not-understanding useful in all kinds of ways in practicing therapy, because most of the time I literally do not know: I don't know where we're going together, I don't know where the narrative is

headed, and I don't know if the person is making progress—another trap one can fall into in terms of desire. There's a pressure to know, to be an expert, to make impressive linkages and articulate thoughts and interpretations. But there's a different way, which is just sitting with what's in front of us. And then, when you stop distracting yourself with all of these thoughts, some kind of organic, helpful direction will come up or unfold. It's hard to make that leap no matter how many times you've done it. But when it succeeds, my job feels like it becomes primarily to hold the center—or try the best I can—and hope that we can maintain curiosity about what's going on without clinging to wholly cognitive explanations.

There are some other important ingredients here, which I think are well addressed by one of the stanzas of *Homage to the Three Jewels*, where we invoke the four great bodhisattvas: Munsusari Bosal (Manjushri Bodhisattva), Byo Hyon Bosal (Samantabhadra Bodhisattva), Kwan Seum Bosal (Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva), and Ji Jang Bosal (Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva). Each has their own complex story, energy, and direction.

Munsurari holds a sword. I think of this as a flaming sword that cuts through bullshit. If people saw a guy with a flaming sword coming down a street in New York, everyone would get the hell out of the way. To me, he is cutting through delusions with the four great vows. When I recite these vows, I often picture him with his flaming sword cutting through all delusions. To relate it back to therapy practice, often somebody will go off on a long chain of associations that may have little to do with the core matter at hand. I'm not so violent as to pull out a flaming sword, but I do often try to cut through somehow to get the focus back in some sort of gentle and hopefully tactful way.

The second bodhisattva figure is Byo Hyon Bosal, who rides a big elephant and can represent action in the world—also a powerful image. Nobody's going to get in the way of an elephant. I think the elephant is about strong intention. Elephants are also graceful animals, as giant as they are, and can symbolize carrying action into the world in a nonforceful way. We spend all this time sitting, but then we get up. What do you do then? You may spend a lot of time in psychotherapy gaining insights into different things and exploring ideas about your life and history and your motivations. How do you bring that into the world and apply it to your life and relationships?

The third figure named in this stanza is Kwan Seum Bosal, a central figure in our practice and chants. Her symbolic manifestation of compassion gives form to how we are with others. As a therapist, I can't establish a real connection unless I can put myself in another person's shoes. It's true of how I am in that role and also all of my personal relationships. Unless I can put aside some of my own nonsense and have compassion and empathy for the other person, there is no real functional foundation. Likewise, having compassion for yourself—sitting with rather than running away from your demons and desires—can be highly transformative.

Finally in this stanza we come to Ji Jang Bosal, a powerful figure who travels to the underworld after people die and suffers along with them. Through his suffering with them, he's able to bring them out of hell or in some way alleviate their duress. This is an idea I turn to in the most difficult times of sitting with clients in their pain. Sometimes there are experiences of trauma that are almost unthinkable, such as deep grief or histories of abuse. To sit with the pain, follow their thoughts even when they don't make logical sense, and serve as a witness and resonator can lead to healing in surprisingly powerful ways. This brings us back to Bion, whose explorations of the helping professions of psychoanalysis and medicine seem to have been related to the trauma of war and witnessing the literally unthinkable. If we accept this version of the narrative, it's not much of a leap to say that he gives a fantastic example of the range of these principles by emerging from terrible suffering with the question we hear so many times in our school: "How may I help you?"

The culmination of all of this personally is how my own practice of vows, precepts, sitting, bowing, and chanting informs my work as a therapist and all the other roles I play in life. Each of these practice areas support each other and ultimately point to the same stance, the same moment. Sitting brings us back again and again to what is happening now, what we see in front of us, and what we hear without all of the echoing rings of our thinking as it colors experience. Some precepts help to diffuse anger, others help to ease addictive tendencies that might otherwise cloud our focus. Bowing teaches us to literally put ourselves down. Chanting reminds us of the ideals of great kindness and that everything is interconnected. I can think of many examples of how each one of these practices has helped give me direction when I felt like a confused therapist, an angry father, a distracted meditator, or an unanchored human being. Regardless of our life situation or vocation, these teachings give us powerful tools. We're lucky to encounter them in this lifetime. ◆

Carter Thornton has been practicing in the Kwan Um School since 2015, becoming a dharma teacher in 2023. He is a psychoanalyst with a private practice in Westchester County, New York, and has worked as a music therapist in hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, schools, and clinics in the New York City area. He is also a performing musician who has toured internationally and is a father to a boy, a dog, and five chickens.

It Takes as Long as It Takes

Caren Weisglas

I was raised by my atheist mother to not believe in God and to refuse to believe that any higher being would have allowed the Holocaust. When I was a high school senior, chemistry class refuted her atheism. I was filled with awe when introduced to the periodic table of the elements, awe that everything in the universe is composed of elements found on that chart. The intelligence pervading all of existence is beyond imagination. I awakened spiritually. Yearning to experience that intelligence, I began decades of spiritual practice.

My first practice was yoga meditation, which began in Carbondale, Illinois. During the first week of my husband's graduate program, The *Southern Illinoisan* posted a front-page article and photo with the headline: "Yogi Hangs Loose in Carbondale." My husband and I immediately met with the yogi, who had arrived directly from his ashram in India. We received power mantras from him and practiced with him all year.

By the end of the academic year, we flew to the ashram in India. Although we received philosophical training, little time was structured for meditation. The ashram's emphasis was on service. I briefly taught geography to eight-year-olds in the local school run by the only foreign yogi, an Australian. Then, because we were among the first Americans to visit the ashram, and the yoga society was expanding at home, I changed my service to writing a book that documented the yoga meditation philosophy. My husband added a Sanskrit–English dictionary. We self-published the book, *The Path of Bliss*, upon our return to the United States and distributed it to the numerous groups that had emerged.

Just before my husband and I returned home, the Australian yogi told us the truth about initial mantras. They were not the powerful, custom Sanskrit sounds that had been promised. There were only two initial mantras, and they were assigned based on whether our first name began with a vowel or consonant. This information so discouraged us that we quit the meditation practice.

Several years later, after my husband and I divorced, I moved to Berkeley with our young daughter. I began studying with a Gurdjieff spiritual teacher. Gurdjieff practice is known as *via negative* or negative path. The teacher, who was also a psychotherapist, focused on behavior that negatively impacted our daily experience. As students, we worked within groups where we took aims to bring awareness to our negative behavior. Toward the end of my time with the group, the practice challenged me deeply, and it assured me that I have the capacity to take care of myself. I had become so engaged with the teacher, however, that I had given over my power to her, which she welcomed. After several years, I realized that she was creating a cult. I escaped. Shortly thereafter, she lost her license to practice psychotherapy in California and moved to another state. Many of her students moved with her.

Photo: Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN

I had given so much of my personal agency to the teacher that I worried about working again with another charismatic authority figure. So I practiced informally on my own for more than twelve years. Then the writings of the Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck fell into my lap, just as a personal crisis made clear the necessity of training my mind. The awareness gained through my challenging personal situation was as potent as the aim I had taken years before, the aim that had taught me that I can take care of

myself. The Zen readings reinforced my confidence in this capacity. I knew I could now work with a teacher without giving away my own authority.

I began practicing Soto Zen, working closely again with a teacher. She taught us to observe the language we use as we speak to ourselves and others. We learned to use fluid language such as "anger arises" rather than solidifying language such as "I'm angry." She taught us to note the kinds of thoughts that arise, such as justifying, judging, rehearsing, and reviewing. Breath and posture were also important, but without a focus on a specific place in the body.

Although I learned a great deal from her and grew to respect and love her as a teacher, after several years I began to notice aspects of her approach and behavior I found distressing. Increasingly I felt that she was no longer the right teacher for me. And because I had learned how to fully engage with a teacher without giving away my agency, I trusted my intuition and asked her for a referral. Because I loved the five years I practiced with her, I knew I was searching for a Zen teacher. She suggested three: two Soto Zen teachers and one a teacher of Korean Zen.

In checking them out, I immediately was drawn to one, which is how I began practicing at Empty Gate with Zen Master Bon Soeng (Jeff Kitzes). I am moved and delighted by the Kwan Um School of Zen, by its teachings, practices, and culture. I also feel grateful to have Zen Master Bon Soeng as my teacher.

I learned two important teachings from him in my first interview. When he asked where I bring my attention during meditation, I said, "Between my shoulder blades." "Why there?" he asked. "Because that's where it hurts the most during meditation." So he taught me about breathing into the lower abdomen, about its power as our energy center, as the power center of the body. He said that when we bring attention to breathing in and out of the lower abdomen, our experience of meditation can deepen profoundly.

He also suggested I use the great question "What am I?" during sitting practice. I responded enthusiastically. After years of psychotherapy, I knew that early conditioning profoundly shapes one's sense of self. I now began to explore my mind in a new way: how does the conditioning of my childhood affect the thoughts that arise and my reaction or response to them? What am I without my mother's anger, without her horrified response to the Holocaust, without the conditioning of my parents' lives, which included the Depression and World War II? What am I without the social conditioning to be a good girl, a good student, a good daughter and, someday, the perfect wife to a successful man?

By breathing deeply into my lower abdomen and asking the great question, I have experienced silence in the mind. In Zen, we call it before-thinking mind or beginner's mind. Silent mind is before conditioning. Silent mind frees us to hear the sound of our own breath and the sounds around us, to see the light on the floor, to feel our buttocks on the seat, to observe the thoughts that arise. Silent mind allows us to be present in this moment. Silent mind gives insight into the thoughts that shape my reality. It brings awareness to thoughts that anticipate future issues or review past experiences, to guessing games that fill the mind until an interesting thought arises, to daydreams.

Asking the great question has made me powerfully aware of the thoughts of self-preservation that have dominated my entire life. These thoughts imagine difficult situations or troublesome activity that might occur, and they develop responses to protect me. I now see that, early in life, I imaginatively saved myself from my mother's frequent wrath by devising short, clear, clever responses. I developed the ability to present convincing statements in the fewest words possible.

Silence allows response to the world. Response is freedom; reaction is conditioning. In explaining my meditation experience, I am using the words *I-me-mine*. But what am I? What is me? What is mine? What am I before thinking? What fills the mind with thoughts—thoughts that constantly create an experience of *I-me-mine*, thoughts that perpetuate the conditioning that shapes my life, my reactions to feelings that arise in me and others? Do I create the thoughts? Or do the thoughts create "I"?

I've learned from my years of practicing in the Kwan Um School that thinking is nonstop, that it constantly takes us away from this moment. I've learned that mantra is an important tool that enables us to preclude thinking. Although my resistance to mantra was huge, when I read in *The Compass of Zen* that mantra can be as ordinary as "Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola," I was freed from the mystique of yogic mantra. Mantra now arises automatically when I catch myself in random thinking.

My Soto Zen teacher kept two beautiful quotations on the wall beside her altar: "Never Say Too Late" (Suzuki Roshi), and "It Takes as Long as it Takes" (*New Yorker* editor William Shawn to a young John McPhee). I have these quotations on my home altar. I have engaged in spiritual practice for fifty years. I still feel like a beginner. Never say too late. ◆

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Throwing Away Enlightenment

George Fernandez

"I am dying." This was the thought that appeared clearly on the evening of May 17, 2002. It was the clearest thought I had ever had.

It was my first true "wake up!" experience. I had not yet started practicing Zen, and I had never heard of Zen Master Seung Sahn. I was strapped to a hospital bed, experiencing convulsions, and vomiting violently. I was twenty-six years old, and I had been using drugs consistently for almost ten years in a fruitless attempt to find a solution to the I-mine-me problem. I had entered the hospital for detox, and the doctor decided to administer naloxone in my case. The result was twofold: I experienced rapid detox from opioids, and the intensity of the opioid withdrawal—normally spread over a few days—was experienced all at once. I admit, I had lied, and this in part led to what I experienced that night. The doctor had asked me if I had ingested any opioids that day, and I had said no. (My habit of lying was quite ingrained.) When he administered the naloxone, I began feeling an intense heat—it was as if someone had trickled gasoline into my veins and lit a match. I remember thinking, "He injected me with something wrong. I am dying." I entered the realm of hell for the next few hours.

That experience, like all others, passed. But it was only the beginning. My attachment to chemicals, from which my father also suffered and died when I was a teenager, was just the tip of the iceberg. I maintained abstinence from all drugs, including alcohol, and dove into twelve-step support groups. It worked . . . to a point. I managed to abstain, but many other attachments appeared, each with its own unique karmic unraveling. Then, in 2007, my wife and I discovered Zen Buddhism. I had some experience with meditation before then, but nothing like formal Zen training. For most of my life I had been trying to find a solution to *dukkha* (suffering), although I didn't know it by that name. I never realized the irony of efforts to save my "I" when my attachment to it was the core of the problem in the first place.

Photo: Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN

We discovered the Kwan Um School of Zen and Zen Master Seung Sahn's teachings in 2010. Things didn't change right away, but slowly karma started getting digested, and waking up more consistently became possible. This may sound strange, but in many ways, words and concepts can act like drugs. During all the years I was ingesting those poisonous substances, it felt like they provided something: energy, motivation, euphoria, peace, happiness, hope. After abstinence began for me, I had to find other things to produce these emotional states. Now don't get me wrong, there's nothing incorrect about experiencing these emotional states, but my attachment to them was still an issue. I found myself turning to food, shopping, relationships, self-help books, and more to produce a salve for my still-existent existential dissatisfaction. Now, I had heard the word *enlightenment* before, but at some point, I became convinced that this was the ticket. In my mind, a concept was born—one that equated enlightenment with bliss for the rest of my life. What could be better than that?

I become intoxicated with the idea of enlightenment. Once I visited a yogi's ashram, and I recall the yogi sitting against the wall, elevated on a platform, with his students sitting in a semicircle on the ground in front of him. They all had this glazed look in their eyes as they hung on to his every word. I ran out of there as fast as I could, but was I really any different? One thing I have grown to love in Zen practice is the razor-sharp sobriety of it. What appears is what appears, just like this. Don't make something out of it—but if you do, don't check your making, and if you check your making, don't check your checking: words to live by. To me, Zen Master Seung Sahn went from being just another sage or teacher to my Zen master when he cured me of what he called a Zen sickness. He did this, by the way, well after he had died.

The sickness was brought to light perfectly for me

as I worked on the kong-an about the man dropping the ashes on the Buddha. This kong-an pushed me to read Zen Master Seung Sahn's book of the same name about a hundred times. I became quite familiar with the Zen circle teaching tool. The kong-an is both illuminating and infuriating. But I saw clearly that I was the man dropping the ashes on the Buddha—attached to the idea of enlightenment, attached to the idea of emptiness, attached to the idea of spiritual advancement. "How can you cure this man of his attachment?" "Don't know" was my only reply for quite some time. My ideas, my concepts, my thinking only served to distract me from what was right in front of me. Another irony: the idea of enlightenment becoming the number-one obstacle to waking up. It wasn't just the concept of enlightenment; it was all of the so-called self-help stuff I had been reading for years. The goal always seemed to be to shut the mind up, or to stop thinking. Conceptual thinking was the enemy—my mind (or "small mind") was my problem. My habit of creating duality (for example, good/bad) had snuck in again through the back door. These ideas kept me from waking up to what was right in front of me.

Zen Master Seung Sahn sometimes referred to the use of teaching words as "word medicine." I discovered that, just like the medicines I had abused for years, words too can be used incorrectly. Using word medicine skillfully, to help all, takes tremendous wisdom. Even with that wisdom, however, the listener can still become attached to speech and be led astray.

Zen Master Seung Sahn often uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe clear mind: "When red appears, the mirror becomes red. When blue appears, the mirror becomes blue. When a hungry man appears, feed the man." This means using whatever appears and taking correct action. How can I help? All that appears is my karma. How can I use it to help? In a way, our practice is like the practice of alchemy—turning base metal into gold. All karma can be digested and used as fuel to save all sentient beings. Discard nothing. Shy away from nothing. Don't make good or bad. Only go straight, don't know. This direction is elucidated perfectly by Zen Master Kyong Ho when he gave the speech that inspired his student Man Gong to follow him:

> All of you are monks. Monks are free of petty personal attachments and live only to serve all people. Wanting to become a great tree or container of Dharma will prevent you from being a true teacher. Great trees have great uses; small trees have small uses. Good and bad bowls can all be used in their own way. None are to be discarded. Keep both good and bad friends. You mustn't reject anything. This is true Buddhism. My only wish for you is that you free yourselves from all conceptual thinking.

Photo: Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN

It is now 2023, and I'm still married to my wonderful wife. We have a twelve-year-old son; together, we sit in meditation daily, and we read *The Compass of Zen*. So far, I have been able to spare my son the experience I had with my father. I've been practicing in the field of mental health since 2004. I now supervise all licensed clinical social workers for a large health care organization in the county. Aside from seeing patients daily, I also work to help those who are helping others. It is a challenging yet rewarding job, and I often must remind myself of four very simple yet very powerful words: "How can I help?" I have thrown away enlightenment, I have thrown away emptiness, I have thrown away happiness, peace, and spiritual advancement. Am I free from all attachments? Have I digested all my karma? Not by a long shot. But what have I attained?

Fingers moving, the keyboard goes clickety-click, and words appear on the page. How can I help? ◆

Bo Shim (George Fernandez) is a dharma-teacher-in-training and works as a licensed clinical social worker in South Florida. He is a husband, father, son, brother, grandson—and a member of the South Florida Zen Group. A music lover and former musician, he's interested in technology, exercise, and nutrition.

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I'm not going to claim something like that, but Zen and the teachings in the school have provided context, and perhaps alternative interpretations, for some teachings of the Christian mystics. The *alumbrados*, like Santa Teresa de Jesús or San Juán de la Cruz, spoke of *recogimiento* and *dejamiento*. *Recogimiento* has a meaning of *recollect* in the sense of going inside oneself, becoming still. *Dejamiento* has the meaning of self-abandonment, of letting go, in the spirit of Zen Master Seung Sahn's "don't hold on to your feelings"; "don't make anything"; "don't be attached to anything"; and "put it all down."

We have direct and simple teachings in our school, teachings like "don't-know mind," "together action," "just do it." These teachings are so simple that even after many years of practice we don't believe them, and perhaps that is why the teachers have to repeat themselves over and over again. But we also have questions: "When you are born, where do you come from? When you die, where do you go? What are you?" When I started practicing, my guiding teacher, Zen Master Dae Kwang (Do An Sunim at that time), asked me, "Why do you eat every day?" And this is a question that I still carry with me—gracias, Zen Master Dae Kwang. You can give some obvious, intellectual answers, be satisfied, and perhaps drop the question altogether. But if you stick with the question, after a while it makes your thinking stop; it gives you direction. And, for me, that has always been the greatest treasure in this school, the direction of our practice, of our actions, the "one more step is necessary," the "correct situation, correct relationship, correct function." About twenty years ago, a question in a box of Cheerios gave more insight into "why do you eat every day?" Who are you eating them for?

Why? And for whom?

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

"Why me?" appears, and the whole universe is pushed away.

But there is one thing which always remains clear.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

"Why me?" appears, and life and death appear.

It is pure and clear, not depending on life and death.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

No "me." Just do it! The one pure and clear thing appears.

Then what is the one pure and clear thing?

KATZ!

A twofer today! Two Zen Masters for the price of one! I hear there is cake too. ◆

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Prison Groups

Lowell Correctional Institution, Florida

Lowell Annex, Florida

Florida Women's Reception Center, Florida

MCI Framingham, Massachusetts

Old Colony Correctional Center, Massachusetts

MCI Shirley, Massachusetts

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.

The School's purpose is to make this practice of Zen as accessible as possible. It is our wish to help human beings find their true direction and we vow and to save all beings from suffering.

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Your membership in a participating center or group makes you a part of the Kwan Um School of Zen sangha (Buddhist Community). Your dues help support teaching activities on local, national, and international levels. Membership benefits include discounted rates at all retreats and workshops at KUSZ member Zen centers and a subscription to Primary Point Magazine. *(In other parts of the world, contact your local affiliated Zen center or regional head temple.)*

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Phone _____ Email _____

For Family Memberships, two adults and children up to age 26 in the same household are included in your membership. Please list names below.

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Send to: Membership: Kwan Um School of Zen, 99 Pound Road, Cumberland, RI 02864

If you have any questions, contact the office at 401-658-1476 or email us at membership@kwanumzen.org