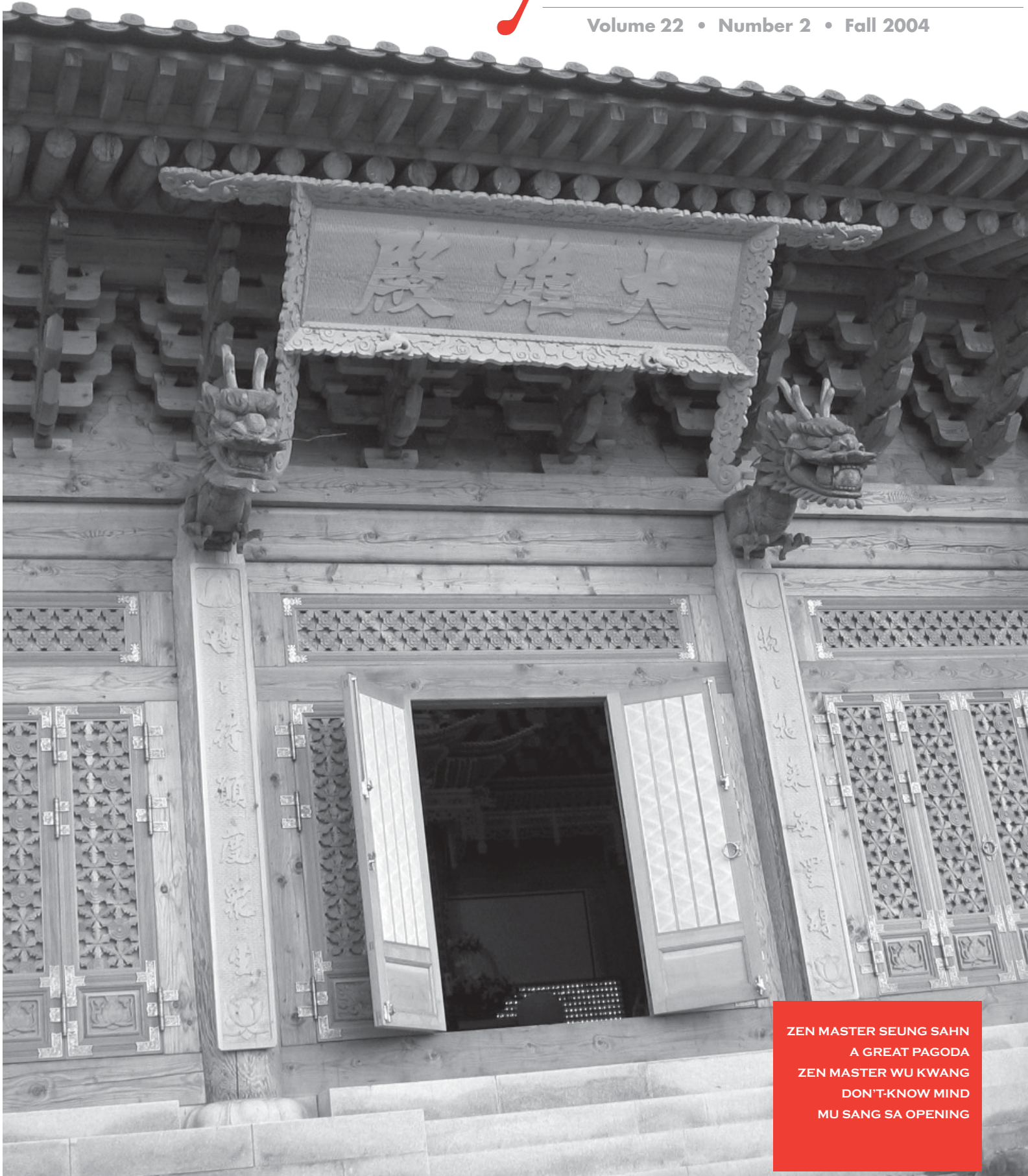


# Primary Point



Volume 22 • Number 2 • Fall 2004



ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN  
A GREAT PAGODA  
ZEN MASTER WU KWANG  
DON'T-KNOW MIND  
MU SANG SA OPENING

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## Primary Point

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Published by the Kwan Um School of Zen, a nonprofit religious corporation under the spiritual direction of Zen Master Seung Sahn. Zen Master Seung Sahn, 78th Patriarch in the Korean Chogye order, is 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 has given transmission to Zen Masters, and “inka”—teaching authority—to senior students called Ji Do Poep Sa Nims, “dharma masters.”

The Kwan Um School of Zen supports the worldwide teaching schedule of the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sa Nims, 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 29. The circulation is 5000 copies.

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

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# CA

# Great

## A GREAT PAGODA

*Zen Master Seung Sahn*

*From a talk at the end of Winter Kyol Che 2004*

Hae Jae means put it all down. So, a Hae Jae dharma talk means putting down everything you have attained for the last three months and letting go. If originally there is nothing, what else is there to put down? The Sixth Patriarch said originally there is nothing, yet he made a great sutra. So, our job is neither to make anything nor to put down anything, but to leave it alone. Then just seeing, the sky is blue, the ground is brown and water flows down. Just seeing means not making even one single thought appear, then our mind is clear like a mirror.

The mountain is blue, water flows down, a dog is barking. Seeing, hearing—any experience—everything is dharma.

When we are in that state of practice, then Hae Jae, or no Hae Jae, Kyol Che, or no Kyol Che, it doesn't matter, there is no hindrance.

Those who practice can say there is no hindrance. But for those who don't, they say there are many hindrances. That's why today at Hae Jae, we are having a dharma talk. Dharma talk means we must place at the center of our mind a great pagoda of what we are going to do. As we raise each pagoda step, the higher the pagoda, the further we can perceive. The lower the pagoda, the less we can perceive.

If we practice with great persistence, we can help many beings. If we don't practice, we cannot even help ourselves. If we cannot even save ourselves, how can we possibly help other beings? One way to get closer is by "putting it all down." Moment to moment, if we put it all down, everything we see, hear and feel, all of it is the truth. There is nothing that is not truth. The sky is blue, water flows down, the dog is barking, woof, woof; sugar is sweet. Which one is not truth?

So, our job is to keep this direction, attain universal truth and save all beings from suffering.

Today is Hae Jae Day, which means put it all down. All of you, what will you put down? Rather than putting it down for Buddha or eminent teachers, we must put it down for all sentient beings. Hae Jae means practicing to put it all down for all beings so that all beings can ride together on the same boat to Buddhahood. That is Hae Jae Day.

Now my Hae Jae dharma talk is finished, so please ask any questions.

Q: My prajna boat is too small—how can I make it bigger?

ZMSS: When you throw away “small,” it becomes bigger. Original prajna boat is not big, not small. Don’t make anything!

Q: Every now and then, I experience great sadness. What shall I do?

ZMSS: Who is it that is experiencing sadness?

Q: [no answer]

ZMSS: Don’t know? Keep that don’t know. Then there is no problem.

Q: What does *practice* mean?

ZMSS: Who is asking the question?

Q: I am.

ZMSS: Who is asking? You have to find this “I,” OK?

Q: All of us being here together and practicing is not an accident. Please explain how nothing happens by accident.

ZMSS: Who is the one who is talking, asking the question right now? Who?

Q: One who is sitting here...

ZMSS: What is the “one who is sitting here”?

Q: Don’t know.

ZMSS: Don’t know?

Q: Yes.

ZMSS: Hit the floor. [*student hits the floor*] OK. Open mouth to explain not necessary, OK?

Q: These days your body is not in good condition. So, your mind from when you were young and your mind now, are they the same or different? How different?

ZMSS: If you say “same,” you get thirty blows. If you say “different,” you also get thirty blows.

Q: I am experiencing great suffering. My suffering is far bigger than yours. What shall I do?

ZMSS: When you say “bigger,” what do you mean? You mean to say your suffering is far bigger than your teacher’s? How do you know that?

Q: [no answer]

ZMSS: You don’t know. So don’t pretend you know something.

Q: Zen Master Seung Sahn, are you the reincarnation of Mahakashapa from Buddha’s time?

ZMSS: Stop this nonsense. That is useless speech. It’s an old tale. Zen means right now, moment to moment, studying what is appearing and disappearing in our mind. Whatever happened to Mahakashapa, or what became of Buddha, all of it is useless, none of your business. You have to find out right now what is this thing that is sitting here, breathing in and breathing out. That is why, a long time ago, a great Zen Master burned all the sutras and threw the teaching records of eminent teachers into the garbage. All are unnecessary. Zen does not need that. You have to find out and attain clearly your true self. What is it that is moving around?

Q: If Zen is the practice of being moment to moment, then before physical death comes, how can we go beyond death?

ZMSS: From moment to moment, what is this moment that is speaking? In moment to moment, already there is no life, no death. That’s why, moment to moment, when our mind is clear and we perceive that everything is truth itself, then no problem. But if you get stuck in the moment, that’s no good. Moment means one second divided by ten million. That means one moment is very short. The continuation of this moment is what we call meditation. So throw away thinking. Good. You are bowing with hands in hapjang, that’s good.

Q: When you first started practicing, Koreans were fighting with each other, north and south—it was very sad. What do you think now about Korea and Korean Buddhism?

ZMSS: After you eat breakfast in the morning and you open your door and go outside, you see many animals fighting and trying to eat each other. What do you think of that? People are the same. So in Zen we say put down your “situation.” Just put it down. Good or bad, coming or going, high or low, put it down, put it down. Put it all down. Put it down, OK?

Q: How can I cultivate compassion inside me and save all beings?

ZMSS: “Cultivate inside me,” itself is already a mistake. In Zen, we say “put it all down.” Put it down. If you put it all down, you become one with the sky is blue; the ground is yellow, the dog is barking woof, woof, and sugar is sweet. That is universal truth. When the universal truth and we become one, then our action is Buddha’s action. Put it all down.

Q: I want to practice more, but the more I practice, the further I get from my parents.

ZMSS: If you practice correctly, you will become more devoted to your parents. When I first went to America, nobody helped me. I had to teach Buddhism, do the chanting, and teach meditation. At that time, Americans did not understand the meaning of the word meditation.

When I went to the kitchen, they also came to the kitchen to work with me. Then when there was time, I would sit facing the wall—just sit still. Then they also followed and we sat together. Later, we did not just sit still together, I taught them how to keep a Great Question. This Great Question slowly, slowly, grew bigger and bigger, so now Korean Buddhism is all over the world. Do it like that. All of you also do it like that.

Q: Thank you very much Dae Soen Sa Nim. Hearing your dharma talk after a long time, my heart is elated. Now you are advanced in years, and soon will enter nirvana while we remain practicing. If someone asks “what is your teacher’s teaching?” how could we answer?

ZMSS: The one who is talking right now, who is it?

Q: Right now, we can practice with your guidance, but later, when we are left without you, what is the best way to follow your teaching?

ZMSS: Put it all down.

Q: Those who understand your teaching well can do it, but what if others cannot, what will they do?

ZMSS: What does “what if” mean? Throw away “what if,” and when I say put it down, put it down. You are making too many delusions!

Q: These days our sangha can practice in three different places. First the main temple Hwa Gye Sah, and now Mu Sang Sah, and since last year, Hyon Jong Sah. Some people may choose to practice at Mu Sang Sah, others may choose Hwa Gye Sah. I would like to ask you what is the best practice, place, and method. Is it all right to go to different places according to one’s personal preference and practice?

ZMSS: Your speech is very low class. “Personal preference?” There is no such thing! When you don’t even know who you are, what kind of personal preference exists? When the Great Question is clear, then you can attain who you are.

Q: My Great Question is clear. When what is asking this question is clear, then what do we do?

ZMSS: What are you asking about?

Q: When the Great Question gets bigger and when it is clear who it is that asks, what does one do?

ZMSS: This question is clear?

Q: Yes.

ZMSS: How is this question clear?

Q: I keep “who am I,” so I am clear, and I have a question.

ZMSS: What is clear about the question “what am I?”

Q: I am clear; I have this question.

ZMSS: Don’t explain, give an answer. What is this that is saying, “I have a clear question?”

Q: It is don’t know mind.

ZMSS: Don’t open mouth, but answer! Answer!

Q: *[hits the floor]* The floor is yellow.

ZMSS: You see—just keep that and continue. Too much making!

ZMSS: If there are no more questions, then we will end. Only keep this Great Question, Don’t Know Mind! When your mind is completely filled with don’t know mind, the whole universe is don’t know mind. When the whole universe is don’t know mind, you will attain that this don’t know mind is you. So keeping don’t know mind, this question persistently, is our kong-an, our correct path of practicing. So, all doubts are resolved, no more doubts?

Q: You said “keep this Great Question,” what does it mean?

ZMSS: What is this now? Who is talking?

Q: *[hits the floor]*

ZMSS: Then just keep that! But still making too much! 🌀

*In June 2004, Zen Master Seung Sahn was officially conferred the lifetime honorific of “Dae Jong Sa,” or Great Master of the Chogye Order. This is the highest title which the Chogye Order confers.*



## OPEN CLOSE, CLOSE OPEN

Zen Master Dae Kwang



*[holds up the Zen stick, then hits the table]*

Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Things are always changing and because human beings are attached to these things—attached to name and form—they suffer. Today we celebrate the opening of this new Buddha Hall at Mu Sang Sah. Zen Master Seung Sahn said that if you attain “everything is always changing,” then you attain the true Buddha Hall.

*[holds up the Zen stick, then hits the table]*

No form, no emptiness. This is the name of our true self, but because of suffering we can't stay at this point—one more step is necessary. This is our great vow to save all beings.

*[holds up the Zen stick, then hits the table]*

Form is form, emptiness is emptiness. Above, the roof shelters us from the rain and snow. Below, the foundation is strong. Inside, there is a lot of room to practice.

Which of these three points best fits our situation today?

HO!

Congratulations to the Mu Sang Sah family on the opening of their new Buddha Hall.

First, I would like to thank Zen Master Seung Sahn for his tireless efforts throughout his life to spread the dharma and provide us all with places to practice the true way. Without him, this opening today would not be possible. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to the Mu Sang Sah sangha, whose generosity, hard work, and perseverance in the face of many difficulties made this temple possible.

One day, Zen Master Man Gong told the following story to Hyo Bong Sunim: “Long ago, the King of Heaven picked up a blade of grass and put it back into the ground. He then said to Shakyamuni Buddha, ‘I made a big temple here.’ The Buddha only smiled.” Do you understand the meaning of this story? If you understand, then this new Buddha Hall is not necessary and you can help all beings. If you don't understand, then even if you visit all the Buddha Halls in Korea, you will not be able to save even yourself.

Several years ago, at our Zen Center in Los Angeles, a student said to Zen Master Seung Sahn, “You are truly a great Zen Master; you have built Zen centers all over the world to help people practice and find their true selves—thank you.” Then Zen Master Seung Sahn said, “I only have two empty hands.” Actually, each of us has just this situation—we only have two empty hands. The big question is: What will we do with our hands to help our world?

*[holds up the Zen stick, then hits the table]*

Opening is closing, closing is opening. For 2500 years, many Buddhist temples have been built—they are always coming and going. On this mountain are the bones of many old temples—what were their names? Who built them?

*[holds up the Zen stick, then hits the table]*

No opening, no closing. Buddhist temples point to only one thing: what are you?

*[holds up the Zen stick, then hits the table]*

Opening is opening, closing is closing. You already understand this point, so, which is correct, open or close?

HO!

Open the doors so that many people can come together, practice, attain the True Way, and help this world. Thank you. ☸

# GREAT HERO HALL

*Mu Shim Sunim JDPS*

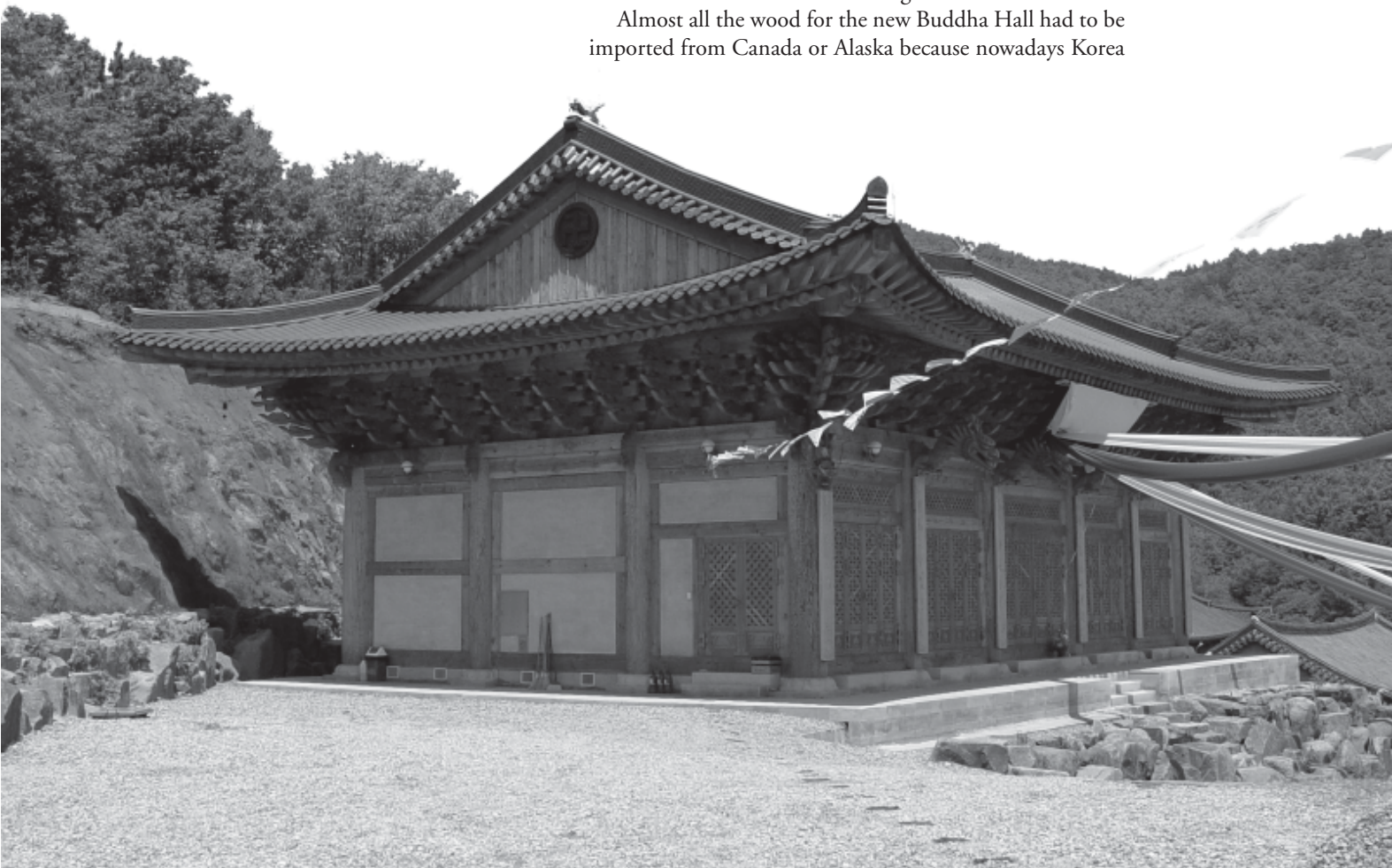
For the last two years here at Mu Sang Sah Temple we have been in the midst of an intense project, construction of our new Buddha Hall. Our campus consists of two large buildings which support our ninety-day biannual retreats and now a new Buddha Hall. The shell of the building was finished last November (2003), then the inner work, including the three altars, altar canopies, and Buddhist paintings, took an additional six months to complete. Finally, everything was ready for the Grand Opening Ceremony held on Saturday, May 15, 2004.

Zen Master Seung Sahn's vision was that this hall should be built in a traditional and grand style. Although our other buildings are structural concrete, it was decided early on that a traditional wooden hall was needed as our crowning glory. A traditional wooden structure can last well over a thousand years (the one at Su Dok Sah was built in 1308) and also resonates a feeling which only wood can provide.

Building a Buddha Hall of this scale in Korea requires the interest and help of many people. Zen Master Seung Sahn, our sangha brothers and sisters, and many, many dharma friends contributed generously to help with the construction, sometimes under difficult circumstances. During that time at Mu Sang Sah Temple, we continued to hold Kyol Che and also did extra kido chanting to encourage the workers and others to make a great Buddha Hall.

Almost all the wood for the new Buddha Hall had to be imported from Canada or Alaska because nowadays Korea

[7





does not have any trees of the size that can be readily used for the columns and the big beams that are central to the construction. The wood for the beams, columns and floor is Douglas fir, and the wood for the roof rafters is red pine from Korea. The beams were intricately carved and interlocked in such a way that no nails were used during the construction. The roof tiles are pure copper and last much longer than a traditional tile roof. As they age they acquire a green patina which gives a quite interesting visual effect. Each end of the main roof ridge is capped with a dragon head of cast copper. In addition, there are six carved wood dragons above the front doors symbolizing long life and prosperity for the temple.

Entry to the hall is through one of twelve wooden doors, each elaborately carved with different lotus flower designs. Made of red pine, they are massive and feature large brass fittings. From the inside looking out, these same doors have a simple rice paper appearance quite different than from the outside. This signifies that once you are inside the Buddha hall, you leave behind the worldly realm and enter the utter simplicity of the sublime.

The main altar, which has three levels, is dominated by a large gold statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. To the Buddha's right is Manjushri







Bodhisattva, Dae Ji Munsu Sari Bosal, and on the left is Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, Dae Haeng Bo Hyon Bosal. These two bodhisattvas are cast of solid bronze with gold gilding, and represent Great Wisdom and Great Action. On the right-hand wall, as you face the main altar, is the altar for Hwa Om Shin Jung, the Army God, leader of all those who protect the dharma. On the left wall is the altar dedicated to those who have recently passed away. This altar represents the Pure Land of Amita Buddha, and is used for memorial services.

The back-drop for each altar is a Buddhist painting (taengwha) filled with various scenes relating to its function. The taengwhas were done in the Koryo dynasty style. The main altar, made of red pine, has elaborate carvings showing the six realms, and a large elephant and lion, which are the animals traditionally ridden by Samantabhadra and Manjushiri Bodhisattvas. Hanging above the main Buddha are two dragons fighting over a magic ball, representing transcendental wisdom. On the ceiling, twenty-five feet above the floor, is a frieze of four carved dragons. The overall effect is one of awe and sublime inspiration.

Over the main entrance is a large carved calligraphy which reads, Dae Un Jon or "Great Hero Hall." On each of the six columns in the front are calligraphy signboards



which have teaching words from the morning bell chant sutra and Zen Masters for all those who enter to read—they say:

The blue mountain of many ridges is the Buddha's original home.  
The vast ocean of many waves is the palace of stillness.  
Be with all beings without any hindrance.  
Life after life vowing to save all beings.  
Kye Ryong Mountain has Guksa (National Teacher) Bong Peak.  
No low, no high through the ten directions.

Please feel welcome to visit our temple at Mu Sang Sah and experience this spectacular Buddha Hall for yourself. ☯





an excerpt from  
Zen Master Wu Kwang's  
new book

## DON'T-KNOW MIND: THE SPIRIT OF KOREAN ZEN

Zen Master Seung Sahn's *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*

*Understanding that all things are one;  
Do you also understand that the ten thousand things  
forever remain distinct?  
If you fall down in emptiness, you may lose your life.  
No point giving medicine to a dead horse.  
Become one,  
Distinctness, clinging to nothingness.  
What is it that transcends these?  
Look!  
Above blue sky,  
In front of the door green trees,  
Below your feet the brown wooden floor.*

During the early days of Zen in China, there was one master who was fond of using this teaching phrase, "The whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel."

One day a monk came forward in the assembly and said, "Master, you always say the whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel. How is one to understand that?"

The Zen master responded, "This whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel. What has understanding got to do with it?"

The next day, when the master was walking around the grounds of the temple, he saw the monk and said to him, "This whole world in the ten directions is only one bright jewel. How do you understand that?"

The monk replied, "This whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel. What has understanding got to do with it?"

The Zen master said, "I knew you were making your living in a ghost cave on the far side of the mountain," and walked away.

Seen from a certain perspective, this is a story about flexibility. One time, "What has understanding got to do with it?" The other time, "How do you understand that?" All the while holding to this one point, "The whole world in the ten directions is one bright jewel."

Flexibility means free functioning. How can we perceive something in this moment, yet let go of it in the very next moment? How can we perceive something from one perspective, then from another perspective a moment later? How can we sometimes see something from two perspectives simultaneously? And most important, how can we use that clear seeing to function freely and help this world?

Zen Master Seung Sahn has one kong-an that he uses to test students, called "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha." This kong-an emphasizes the different aspects of Zen seeing and functioning. But before going into the kong-an, let me say a little about my teacher. Seung Sahn Dae Soen Sa Nim (*Soen Sa Nim* is Korean for Zen Master; *Dae* means great or complete and is a title given to older, respected teachers) was born in 1927 and is the dharma successor to Zen Master Ko Bong. After the end of the Second World War, when he was in his late teens and feeling that his academic studies were not satisfying his deeper questions, Seung Sahn became a novice monk. Shortly thereafter he went to Won Gak Mountain to do a hundred-day solo retreat during which he chanted the "Great Dharani of the Mystic Mind Energy," a long mantra associated with the bodhisattva of universal compassion. Near the end of the retreat, he had a deep awakening and wrote this enlightenment poem:

The road at the bottom of Won Gak Mountain  
Is not the present road.  
The Man climbing the hill with his backpack  
Is not a man of the past

Tok, tok—his footsteps  
Transfix past and present.

Crows out of a tree.  
Caw, caw, caw.<sup>1</sup>

When Seung Sahn descended from the mountain, he joined a small Zen community of laypeople at Magoksa Temple. There, in 1949, he met Zen Master Ko Bong, who asked him the kong-an,

Why did Bodhidharma come to China?  
Joju [Chin., Chao-chou; Jap., Jōshū] answered,  
"The cyprus tree in the garden."  
What does this mean?

[ 1 ]

Seung Sahn understood, but because he was new to Zen, he did not know how to respond. He replied, "I don't know."

"Only keep this don't know mind," said Ko Bong. "This is true Zen practice."

In the fall of the same year, Seung Sahn went to Sudoksa Temple to sit the three-month winter retreat. There he heard monks and Zen masters engage each other in dharma combat and began to master the style of Zen language. When the retreat ended he went to Seoul to see Ko Bong again. On the way, he had interviews with Zen Masters Keum Bong and Keum Oh. In their dharma combat with Seung Sahn, each acknowledged his awakening. When he again met Ko Bong, they had an intense interview during which Seung Sahn was stuck for a while, for Ko Bong refused to accept answers to the kong-an he had posed. The two sat facing each other in tense silence for fifty minutes, then suddenly the correct answer appeared to Seung Sahn, and Ko Bong said, "Your flower has blossomed and I am the bee."

In 1950 Seung Sahn received dharma transmission from Ko Bong, making him the seventy-eighth patriarch in that particular line from Shakyamuni Buddha. Ko Bong said, "Some day Korean Buddhism will spread to the whole world through you. We will meet again in 500 years."

Seung Sahn spent the next three years in silence to deepen his experience and understanding. After the Korean War, during which he served as a chaplain in the army, he became abbot of Hwagyesa Temple in Seoul. He also looked after his aging and sick teacher Ko Bong. He was the visiting Zen master of five temples in Seoul and the instructor in Zen at Dongguk University.

An interesting episode from this period concerns the bones of five hundred dead kept in what had been a Japanese temple in Seoul, which was now under the control of some Korean laypeople. At that time there was still considerable bad feeling toward the Japanese. The people in charge of the temple wanted to throw away the bones of their former enemies. When Zen Master Seung Sahn heard of this, he had the bones removed to Hwagyesa Temple, where he chanted the rite for the dead spirits for days on end. He proclaimed: "Whether these bones were once Korean or Japanese is immaterial. Dead bones are dead bones!" A few years later, when Korea and Japan resumed diplomatic relations, some Japanese came to Hwagyea and carried the bones of their ancestors back to their homeland. Out of appreciation and deep respect for Seung Sahn's action, the Japanese invited him to go to Japan. Thus, during the 1960s, he also taught in Japan, as well as in Hong Kong.

In 1972 Seung Sahn decided to come to the United States to teach. After spending a short time in Los Angeles, he went to Providence, Rhode Island. He had almost no money and knew only a few words of English. He took a job repairing washing machines in a Korean-run laundromat, then rented an apartment—meanwhile taking a course in English at Harvard University. Soon some students from Brown University began coming to study with him, and the Providence Zen Center was born.

Within the next few years, Zen centers in Cambridge, New Haven, New York, Berkeley, and Los Angeles began to form around his teaching and under his guidance. Later Seung Sahn went to Poland and other eastern and western European countries where more centers were formed and evolved. Eventually, all the meditation centers became part of the Kwan Um School of Zen. By then, he had fulfilled Ko Bong's prophecy that Korean Buddhism would "spread to the whole world through you."

In the years that followed, Seung Sahn's kong-an, "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha," became a major teaching tool. It says:

Someone comes into the Zen center, blows smoke, and drops ashes on the Buddha. If you are there at that time, how can you fix this person's mind?

The first question, of course, is, "Who is this person who comes into the Zen Center, blows smoke, and drops ashes on the Buddha?" Well, surprise, surprise! From one perspective, it is none other than ourselves. How are we making a big smokescreen and obscuring what actually is? How are we covering things with our own conceptions, opinions, and ideation? How are we dropping ashes on the Buddha and covering it with dust?

This kong-an also poses some other questions, for instance, "What is the Zen Center? Is it this room? Is it some particular place?" And, "Is there *coming into* or *going out of* something called the Zen Center?" If you think there is coming into and going out of the Zen Center, you have missed the original Zen Center. But, on the other hand, if you think that there is a Zen Center apart from coming into and going out of, that is also not seeing clearly. Form is emptiness; emptiness is, itself, form.

I was reminded of this the other day when I received a catalogue from Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, in California, which is led by Jakusho Kwong Roshi, a successor of Suzuki Roshi. They sell such things as incense, meditation beads, Buddha statues, books, and tapes in their store. The title of the catalogue was *Zen Dust*. Once I went to the New Haven Zen Center and found a rack with incoming and outgoing mail. They had one shelf holding flyers from every meditation center in the universe. They had labeled it "Dharma Junk. If you want something, take."

From the most fundamental, radical perspective, of course, many things—the incense, the gold Buddha, the beads—even these chapters—are junk, or "dust." But sometimes dust is quite useful; it depends how you use it.

In the classical kong-ans of *The Blue Cliff Record*, there are two cases that make similar points to the "dropping ashes" kong-an. One is called "Mu-chou's Impostor":

One day a monk approached Zen master Mu-chou (Jap., Bokushu; Kor., Muk Ju), and Mu-chou asked, "Just now, where are you coming from?"

The monk shouted, "KATZI!"

Mu-chou said, "You shouted at this old monk once." [That means, "Your shout is not bad as a first response, a demonstration of the nameless energy that

*everything emerges from, but is that all? Or is there something else that you have to present?" ]*

The monk shouted a second time.  
Mu-chou said, "And after four or five shouts, then what?"

The monk was speechless, so Mu-chou hit him and said, "You impostor!"<sup>3</sup>

Where are *you* coming from just now? Moment by moment, coming from where? From one perspective, everything comes from this unnamable, ungraspable, inconceivable point. But if you are attached to that, then you become completely blind. That is why Mu-chou said, "After four or five shouts, then what?"

A second related case is a story about Dok Sahn (Chin., Te-shan; Jap., Tokusan) and Wi Sahn (Chin., Kuei-shan, Jap., Isan). When Dok Sahn was a young monk, he was very fiery. He had had some kind of breakthrough experience and had a lot of fire in his belly from this experience, presenting himself fiercely and radically. Eventually, he got a reputation as that kind of fellow. He came to have an interview with Zen Master Wi Sahn and, the story says, "He came into the dharma room still carrying his bundle."

When monks at that time traveled the roads from one temple to another, they would keep their ceremonial dress in something like a knapsack. When they got to a temple, they would take off their dusty road-traveling clothes and put on their ceremonial monk's clothes before going into a dharma hall or meeting the Zen master. But here it says that Dok Sahn came into the dharma room "still carrying his bundle." It is a telling expression. Carrying what? Holding on to what?

Then he walked from east to west and west to east, across the room, and said, "There is nothing, nothing."

*Nothing*, in Chinese, that is the word *wu* (Kor. & Jap., *mu*). After "Nothing, nothing," the compiler of these stories—they probably existed for a few hundred years before being turned into anthologies—wrote a comment, almost a little heckle: "Completely exposed." Then the story continues:

And [Dok Sahn] walked out. But when he got to the gate, he thought to himself, "I should not be so brash." So he composed himself, put down his bundle for a moment, and came back into the dharma room and did a prostration. But then he held up his sitting mat and yelled out, "Master!" Wi Sahn grabbed for his horsehair whisk and held it up." [*In those days, the Zen master would have had a horsehair whisk as a symbol saying, "I am the Zen master."*] Then, Dok Sahn suddenly shouted, "KATZ!" whirled around, and walked out of the dharma hall. He put on his straw sandals and left.

The compiler writes in again, "Completely exposed." The story continues:

That night Wi Sahn asked the head monk, "That newcomer who was here this morning, what happened to him?"

The head monk said, "When he got to the door, he put on his straw sandals and never turned back."

Wi Sahn said, "Some day that fellow will go to a high summit, build himself a small hut, and go on cursing the Buddha and the patriarchs."

After that, the compiler writes, "Adding frost to snow"<sup>4</sup>—redundant.

If you look at the person in the "Dropping Ashes" kong-an, you see a similar position: What is completely exposed there?

In one way you have to admire that person. There is a certain tenacity, really holding to a position and not letting go. As Zen Master Seung Sahn says, "This man is very strong. To any speech or action of yours, he will only hit you. This man thinks, 'I already have enlightenment. I already am Buddha.'" No life, no death—he has attained one point. But he is attached to his one point, attached to emptiness.

However, tenacity can turn into rigidity when you are afraid to let go and face creative uncertainty, and that becomes a problem. What is Dok Sahn afraid to let go of? His *nothing*. It has become his prized possession. "Nothing, nothing! KATZ!" And what is the cigarette man, the man blowing smoke and dropping ashes on the Buddha, afraid of letting go of? His view of oneness, that all things are one, and empty of name and form: cigarettes, ashes, Buddha, they are all the same for him.

Once an eminent Zen master, addressing the assembly, posed a question: "[The mind is] like a mirror casting images. When an image is formed, where has the shine of the mirror gone?" "The shine of the mirror" means that if the mirror is completely empty, then it is just brightly shining. Our mind, like a mirror brightly shining, continuously casts images; thoughts are flowing nonstop. When an image is formed, where has the shine gone? At that time, where is the mind's original radiance?

That is like saying that in meditation my mind may become still, quiet, serene, clear, one-pointed, focused; then all of a sudden images, images, thinking, thinking, feeling, feeling, all these things appear. Where has original quiet gone? Where has original brightness gone at the moment thinking begins to appear and form?

After the Zen master asked his question, various people came forward, presenting different answers. But he did not like any of them. Then a monk came forward, bowed, and said, "Still not far off."

"Still not far off"—that is called Zen faith. Even at the moment of image after image appearing, still not far off. Intimately close, in fact. Closer than is imaginable. So image after image, form after form, that is called miraculous display. No problem. At that time: Original radiance is still not far off.

But the cigarette man does not understand this. So he clings to oneness, without seeing oneness in diversity. He makes a lopsided oneness, then attaches to it. He loses

his ability to function and respond to circumstances appropriately.

Zen Master Seung Sahn sometimes likes to teach the cognitive aspect of Zen understanding by using loosely organized schemas. At one time he would use a circle and point to the different degrees on the circle as indicating different facets or aspects of Zen mind. Now, of course, in a circle 0 degrees and 360 degrees are the same point, which means that where you start from and where you complete the circle are not different points. This is a representation of “Zen mind is beginner’s mind”; there is no before and after; no coming and no going. Most radically, this means this moment in its completeness. Seung Sahn would also always be careful to warn students that ultimately the circle and its degrees do not exist. It is only a teaching device that was not to be attached to or reified. To use a teaching schema or device is certainly not new in the Zen tradition. During the Tang Dynasty in China (618-907 CE) there were five ranks that described five different ways of viewing the relationship between the absolute and the relative and between the real and the apparent. The Lin-chi (Jap., Rinzai) tradition also had its formulas. There were classifications of host and guest, the host being that which never moves and the guest being something that comes and goes. Lin-chi would also talk about the four different functions of his famous Zen shout, “KATZI!”

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Another form of presentation of Zen Master Seung Sahn’s teacher describes three point, which are clearly stated: substance, truth, and function. “First, we teach substance by using one action, such as holding up a finger, shouting KATZI, or just hitting the floor. Next, we teach about *truth world*: the cushion is yellow, the floor is brown, the wall is white, the sky is blue. There is nothing that is not truth. Everything is truth, everything is clear. If we can attain this truth world, then we can use it in our function—to help suffering beings everywhere. We call this function the *bodhisattva way*.”<sup>5</sup> The “Dropping Ashes on the Buddha” kong-an is a way of testing the student’s attainment and assimilation of these various facets of Zen mind.

In the doctrinal and sutra traditions there is a similar schema called the *four wisdoms*. The first is the wisdom of great equality (being able to see that all things share the same basic principal or substance or essence). The second is the great mirror wisdom, seeing things as they are (mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers). The third is the great discernment wisdom, or perceiving the exact characteristics of all things. One could say that discernment wisdom is a refinement of the mirror wisdom; one perceives that the mountains are high and that rivers are flowing. The last is the perfecting of action, or using the perception of equality and the exact characteristics of all things, people, and situations to help this world, in compassionate, selfless action.

Not long ago I received a newsletter from the Providence Zen Center containing an interchange between Zen Master Seung Sahn and a student. The student said, “This world is continuously changing. So how come there is only one correct answer to a kong-an?”

Dae Soen Sa Nim replied, “This world is constantly changing? I did not know that. I thought this world was completely empty.”<sup>6</sup>

The point is that if you see this world as changing, changing, changing, that is your perspective. Someone else says, “No, no, this world is not just changing, changing, changing. This world is completely empty. Form is emptiness.” But a third person says, “No, this world is not completely empty, this world is truth.” That means, if your mind is completely empty, like a bright, shining mirror, then each and every thing is reflected therein. Its true nature and true being appear in the mirror. “Sky is blue” appears, “tree is green” appears, “floor is brown” appears. Each is just expressing the truth of its particular being and nature.

Or think about the ocean, an image used frequently in Buddhist philosophy. First, perceive the essential nature of water. Then, consider that this ocean is giving rise to wave after wave, each with its own unique character, form, and qualities at any given moment—and each an expression of the power of the entire, essential ocean.

Yet, also observe that each particular wave is in relationship with many others. So from that perspective, there is nothing but relationship. This wave is interdependent with that wave. That wave is interdependent with this wave. Likewise, I am talking, so you are listening. You are listening, so I am talking. So that is about relationship; there is nothing but relationship. If there is nothing but relationship, then what is our correct relationship with each and every thing, moment by moment?

Someone says, “This world is not empty world, this world is truth world.” Another person says, “No this is not just truth world, it is great love, great compassion, bodhisattva-function world.” That means, if your mind is clear, if you perceive the depth and then reflect clearly, perceiving each thing just as it is and honoring each thing for its own unique expressiveness, then what is your relationship to this, that, and the other? How do you use yourself in this world? Are you self-centered? Or not self-centered? How? That is where function and relationship appear.

Now, back to the guy with the cigarette and the ashes: He only understands that everything is all one. When he drops ashes on the Buddha, that is like saying, “Buddha, ashes, everything is all just one.” Like pea soup. You cook up all the peas until they lose their distinctness and become just puree. The man with the cigarette has become attached to that perspective. He does not perceive that each thing simultaneously maintains its distinctness and its own characteristics; he also fails to perceive his own relationship to all these things.

So how can we help him fix his mind? How can we fix our own, so we perceive all of these together and realize that everything is unified in some way, that we are all somehow of the same family? And that even though this is true—that we are all of the same family and all one—there are still distinct characteristics that must be respected

and honored and appreciated. If we do that, that is true freedom.

There is also the notion that the attachment of the bodhisattva—the vow to save all beings—is actually freedom. The bodhisattva's *saving* has a particular kind of meaning. In that sense, to *save* something is to see its value and to take care of it. Taking care of something is a very different kind of attachment. Entering into a life of caring and of being cared for is not the same as clinging tightly to something out of fear of letting go—fear that then the whole thing may fall apart and I may die, or God knows what will happen.

Remember Dok Sahn's "*mu*," or *nothing*? There's not much to hold onto there. Yet Dok Sahn walked into the dharma room still carrying his bundle—his *mu* bundle—and exclaimed quite loudly, "*Mu*." So the commentator wrote, "Completely exposed."

Holding momentarily is not a problem; it is rigidity that becomes the problem. If you clutch to something as if the whole of existence depends on it, then nothing comes of it.

A student once said to me, "I've recently come to New York from Kansas and am having culture shock. There are so many people here who seem to need things, to need help, and I don't know how to help them. Sometimes it seems that it may be better not to help them."

I said, "Yes, not helping may actually be helping them in some instances."

The student responded, "I feel really confused in my practice and in knowing how to help people. Am I holding onto ideas I brought to New York from Kansas?"

I replied, "Kansas is quite distinct from New York, so you left the kong-an of Kansas and entered the kong-an of New York. Different kinds of kong-ans hit different areas of your mind. The New York kong-an is a complicated, complex one, with no easy solution. With some kong-ans, you have an intuitive flash, 'Oh yes, simple!' The New York kong-an is not quite like that. One can spend several lifetimes working on the kong-an of New York City. Don't be too despondent after a few days of being here. It is disorienting at first. From one perspective, the kong-an of New York is something that you may never pass or solve. But whatever you do with sincerity—in any particular day, any particular moment—is an expression of your compassion. When you see so much suffering and don't know what to do, or feel a certain sense of remorse coming from your heart, that is the expression of your enlightened activity at that moment. Sometimes, out of that, something else will become clear: Perhaps a feeling of something to do, or something not to do. And sometimes you will just be confused. I hope you enjoy your stay in New York. I think you will learn a lot here."

Here is a short story about Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) that speaks to this point of not holding rigidity, and about functioning in a helping way. Several years ago, Zen Master Soeng Hyang (actually, this happened before she became a Zen master) wrote an article describing her work as a hospice nurse.<sup>7</sup> She told about making a home visit one day to a woman who was dying

of cancer and suffering a tremendous amount of pain. She had worked with this woman and her family for some time, and had introduced visualization exercises and sitting in silence. The family was Roman Catholic, so sometimes they would try a silent prayer. On this day, she gave the patient a shot of morphine to ease the pain, then said to the woman and family members, "Let's sit silently and pray for ten or fifteen minutes." When they looked at each other again, the patient smiled warmly at Soeng Hyang. Apparently the morphine, along with the meditation, had worked. Soeng Hyang recalled thinking, "Yes, this is how it's going to be." The woman would have this wonderful home death, and her smile reminded Soeng Hyang of Mahakashyapa's smile when Buddha held up his flower. How satisfying it was to be this wonderful hospice nurse, providing this wonderful home death.

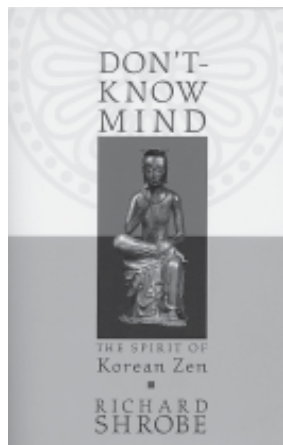
But then the woman's condition changed, and Soeng Hyang worried, "That's not how it is supposed to be. What happened?" That thought arose over and over again as the woman's disease and her own adaptability took unusual turns. It was not "this smooth, wonderful home death that I, this wonderful hospice nurse, give to you." In reporting this process, Soeng Hyang genuinely reveals the way that she, at that time, would get stuck, then have to reflect back on herself and find some way of letting go while opening to the next experience. In a death and dying situation, the course of events and the flow of life will rip you open at times, almost as if there is no choice but to go with it.

At the end of the story, the woman passes away and Soeng Hyang joins the family after the funeral. They had their Catholic ideas and prayers, she said, and she had her Buddhist ideas and practices. But no one, she wrote, knew where this woman had gone. Catholics could not adequately tell where she had gone; neither could she, a Buddhist. No one really knew. All they knew was that during her final days, this woman's process had been a great teaching to all of them.<sup>8</sup>

Don't hold anything.

1. Seung Sahn. *Bone of Space*. Cumberland, RI: Primary Point Press, 1992, p. 57.
2. Seung Sahn. *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. Ed. by Stephen Mitchell. New York: Grove Press, 1976, p. 85.
3. *The Blue Cliff Record*. Trans. by Zen Master Seung Sahn. Cumberland, RI: Kwan Um School of Zen, 1994, p. 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 15.
5. *Primary Point* 5, no. 1 (1988): 1.
6. *Primary Point* 14, no. 2 (1996): 1.
7. *Primary Point* 5, no. 1 (1988): 3.
8. *Primary Point* 5, no. 1 (1988): 3. ☉

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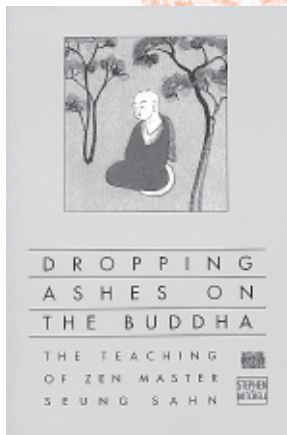


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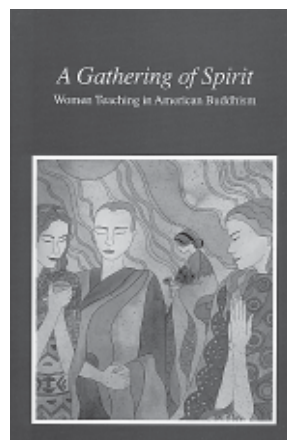
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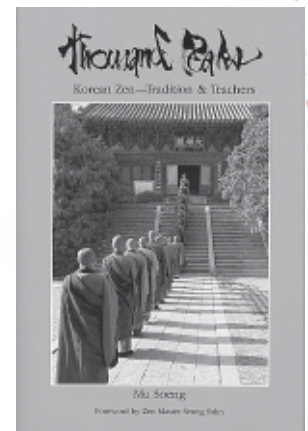
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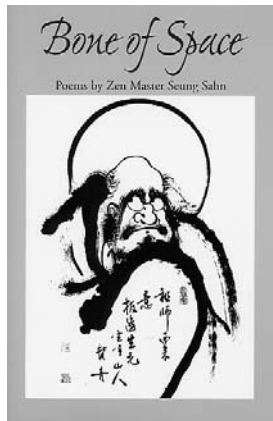


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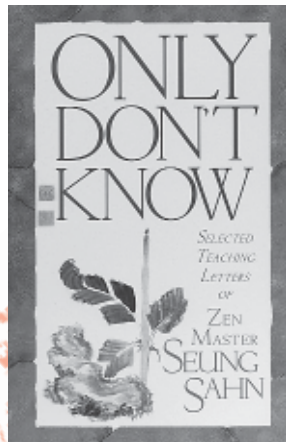


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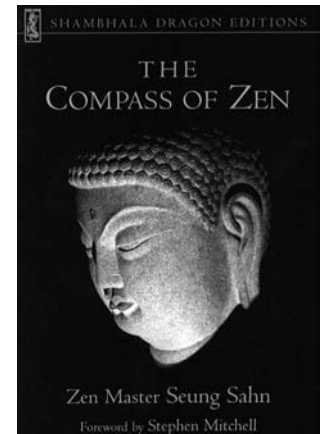


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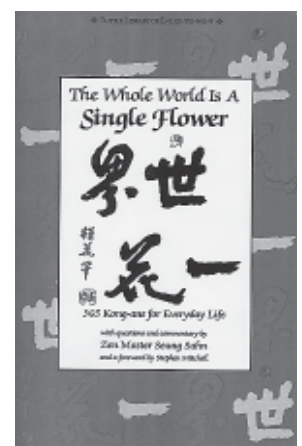
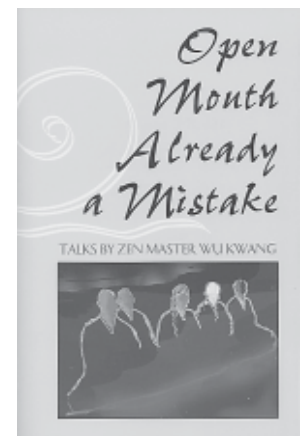


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## WHAT IS HUMAN?

Father Kevin Hunt

*A talk at a Christian-Buddhist retreat  
at Providence Zen Center*

All religions have an anthropology, that is, an understanding of what it means to be a human being. This understanding is expressed in different ways depending on the culture in which a particular religion was first articulated. The easiest way to see how a particular religion expresses its anthropology would be to ask: “What is a human being, or man?” Or, “Who am I?”

Zen Master Dae Kwang has just given us the traditional Buddhist anthropology. The Judeo-Christian tradition has its own way of expressing its understanding of what it means to be a human being. It is not expressed in the way that a modern anthropology defines itself. It does not use a special terminology. Just the opposite. It differs also in that it uses personalistic words, such as you, me, I, thou. It uses words that anyone, even a child, can understand, expressed in story. In modern scholarship the term for stories such as these is myth. In this context “myth” does not mean that we have a work of fiction; rather, it is an insight into a reality that can not be proven scientifically, nor historically, but rather it embodies a truth that has the experience of the ages supporting it. Even we moderns tend to think and express ourselves in this manner.

Take, for example, the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. The possibility that young George actually chopped down that cherry sapling is pretty remote. For one thing, the first evidence that we have for such an incident is recorded about forty or fifty years after the death of our first President. Yet a goodly number of books have been written trying to prove or disprove the historicity of that act. The purpose of this particular story or myth is not to record a particular action of young George, but to teach us that honesty is the best policy.

So the Judeo-Christian tradition speaks to us in stories, or myths, because we humans tend to think that way; we pass on truths to following generations in such a way that they are easy to remember. And stories are very easy to remember. The first anthropology that the Judeo-Christian tradition teaches us is found in the very first book of the Scriptures, the Book of Genesis. It is a story that we are all familiar with, even if one is not Jewish or Christian. It is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Most of us, when we read or hear the story of Adam and Eve, we assume that it is simply the story of the first sin and its punishment. Yet the early Christian monastics found in it truths that were far more reaching than just sin and punishment.



We must realize that the first Christian monastics were men and women of their time and culture. Their understanding of this episode in the Garden was a part of their culture’s understanding of what it means to be human. The monastics might have reflected on this history more deeply than many of their contemporaries because of their lifestyle and their goal, but the fundamental understanding would have been part of the general Christian culture.

Adam and Eve were created from the dust of the earth. They were placed in the Garden of Eden as the culmination of that creation. Creation was seen as complete and peaceful. In Genesis, chapter 3, we have the story of the Fall. The early Christians accepted the fact of the existence of evil in the world. They had to, it was all around them. What struck them in this chapter was not so much the story of the Fall (verse 1 to 7), but what occurs in the next verse (verse 8). Remember that Adam and Eve ate the fruit, then realized that they were naked. So they made loin cloths of fig leaves, but hid among the bushes when they heard God walking in the Garden in the cool of the evening. The early Christians loved to listen to and reflect on the words of Scripture. So they asked themselves: “What was God doing walking in the Garden in the cool part of the day?” The answer that their tradition gave them can be found in a “gloss” that became part of some traditions of the Scriptures. (A gloss in Scripture studies is a remark that was written between the lines or on the margin of the verses of the Scripture. Over a period of time they



sometimes were introduced into the text. Remember that these were handwritten texts and, not infrequently, a scribe would realize that he had left out some words, and would go back and put them in between the lines, or make a comment and put it in the same space between the lines or in the margin. Subsequent readers often could not distinguish between words that were simply comments or words that had been left out. Then, frequently, the left-out words and comments were simply included when a new copy of the text was made, thus becoming part of the text.)

This particular gloss went something like this: God was walking in the Garden in the cool of the day, “for He often conversed with Adam and Eve.” The early Christians, especially the monastics, understood that Adam and Eve were made to “converse with God.” To be human means that we are God-converse(ers). Remember that one of the definitions of prayer and meditation in the Christian tradition is “to talk, or converse, with God.” The early Christians, especially the monastics, concluded that to be really human is to be a God-talker. We have a tendency to think that to converse means to chat. Yet, we have all experienced that form of conversation where no words are spoken. Look at two lovers who walk hand in hand and not a word is spoken. Yet, what a conversation is taking place! Or, see a mother looking at her new-born baby. The baby looks at the mother and the mother looks at the baby, nothing is said. So “conversing” with God does not necessarily mean or need words. “To converse” is to

get to know someone, so this conversation leads to knowing God. This knowing is not a knowing of words or concepts. Actually, the type of knowing that the early Christians meant was a knowing beyond concepts or words.

When the early Christians spoke of returning to the “paradise” state, or returning to the Garden; or, when monastics spoke of the monastery as a garden, or the way of prayer as paradise; they were pointing to this innate capacity of the human to be with God. Also when one runs across terms like “innocence” or “angelic” in such a context, the early Christians are not indicating that someone is naive or lacking in sophistication. The paradisaic life is not thought of as lying in some dream like a drug high, or running around naked in some nudist colony. It means that one is being as perfectly human as can be arrived at in this life. It is a return, as near as is possible, to being like Adam and Eve when they walked with God in the cool of the evening.

This return is not automatic in this life. It takes effort and practice. We must find our way. Nor is intellectual understanding and conceptualizing enough. The early Christian monastics felt the way that the Buddhist monastics do about ideas and concepts when it comes to the Absolute. Ideas just aren’t enough. It was not enough, they thought, to have a notional concept; one had to make it a real, effective part of one’s being. There are some stories of the early Christian monastics that have come down to us, something like Zen kong-ans. The collection of these stories is called the “*Apophthegmata Patrum*” (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers). In this collection, there is the episode of a famous Abba (Father) Evagrius of Pontus. Evagrius was the first real intellectual among the early hermits of the Egyptian desert. He had studied at the most famous universities of the age at Athens and Antioch, the equivalent of our Harvard and Yale. When Evagrius was still fairly new in the desert, there was a discussion, probably on some point of prayer or Scripture. Evagrius held forth, but one of the other monks (these men were, in the majority, uneducated) interrupted him, saying: “Abba, we know that if you were still living in your own country, you would probably be a bishop or great teacher, but you sit here as a junior.” Evagrius was filled with compunction.

It is not enough to simply have an idea that we humans are made to be united to God, the Absolute. It is necessary to make that idea or concept real and personal. So we have to practice prayer and meditation, and practice again and again. Prayer and meditation must become part of who we are. The fact that we are here today is a manifestation of our innate desire to be what we were created to be... meditators. Today you will be learning some basics that will help you achieve that goal. But these basics can not just be left here. Learn them, and take them with you. It takes effort, work. One does not have to appear to be a winner, but one must try. Remember that the more you grow in prayer and meditation, the more you will realize your true self. ☉

## Solitude

Solid-tude:  
Sitting still,  
Breathing in,  
Breathing out,  
Enraptured glow.  
A lone zinnia in a vase.

Zinnias bought from a farmer with strawed teeth  
in overalls  
standing next to pick up truck  
At Farmer's Market  
of basil: shouting green on a table of red, red tomatoes;  
mounds of string beans, peaches, apriums, and purple  
potatoes.

At home: dicing and stir-frying zucchini, eggplants in  
Korean sauce  
sparkled with Mediterranean basil,  
served on a dining room table for family and  
a friend who had given me plastic bag of cumin and  
a recipe for East Indian lentil curry,

Connected like brussel sprouts on a stalk of being.

*Chae Sungsook*

## February

Wild rose shoots push out  
over drooping, yellowed stalks.  
Blackcaps dart through the thicket  
peeping in the sun.  
Seagulls wheel and squawk  
with more vigor than the hunt  
for food demands  
while the swan begins her nest  
far too near the road.  
Only the crocus in her bulbous wisdom  
waits beneath the ground  
here in hibernal New England.

*Mark Bauer*

## Winter

Sounds  
travel far in the crisp, freezing air.  
Invisible breath  
becomes visible.  
Darkness  
quickly conquers light.  
Quiet follows.

*Michael Zinke*

## The Spirit of Florida Zen

1.

Raindrops of shifting signifiers  
Wash the path clear of pine needles  
A red maple leaf kisses the windshield  
A camelia floats in Yoda's green bowl

2.

Why hide in the mountains or pretend to like snow?  
Does anyone ever see that red-crested crane in the pine?  
Where plastic flamingos grace many a lawn  
It's zen without winter . . . unholy? or just wrong?

3.

Atlantic waves ride best in a hurricane  
. . . Wet cushion sets and mantras . . .  
Surf-riders and maniacs paddle out from the beach  
Surfing's a source that can slam you with Now

4.

When cold water flows in autumn streams  
wild grey geese fly honking south  
Where the sluggish Econlockhatchee River meanders  
And leathery old alligators feast on . . . KATZ!  
Florida Zen

5.

Adding frost to snow  
Replenishing sand on the beach  
Watering the lawn during a tropical storm  
Just open the blinds and watch them fall

*Chong Do*



## HARD PRACTICE

Anne Rudloe  
Excerpt from her book *"Butterflies on a Sea Wind"*  
(Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002)

*Students who would like to study the way must not wish for easy practice. If you seek easy practice, you will for certain never reach the ground of truth or dig down to the place of treasure. Even teachers of old who had great capacity said that practice is difficult.*

*Zen Master Dogen*

The Providence Zen Center, a huge rambling building covered with New England gray shingles, sat on a slight rise, overlooking an open meadow in Cumberland, Rhode Island. Behind the main building and across the pond, the monastery was perched on a hillside studded with granite outcrops beneath the trees.

A cold front had passed and the rain-washed air was crisp and clear. The light was so precise and glittering that it made everything it touched seem 100% in the present. Every leaf of every tree sparkled as brightly as did the sunlight glittering on the pond at the foot of the hillside. The slender trunks of young hardwood trees in the forest around the monastery stood like pillars in the sea of rustling flashing leaves. Even a big black ant running across the deck shone with the bright light, every hair on its body was crisp.

Massive wooden beams held up the huge blue tiled roof above the light brown stucco walls. Sunlight poured through glass doors into the meditation hall and gleamed on the golden oak floor, white walls and dark wooden beams. The high open raftered ceiling gave the room a spacious quality. The massive elaborately carved altar with its brightly colored fruit and flowers, gold Buddha statue, silver candle and incense holders was a glittering gem. Long ranks of sky blue meditation cushions awaited the forty or so people who would be sitting in a few hours. A solitary voice chanting and the rhythmic tock-tock-tock of a wooden moktak sounded from across the pond where somebody was doing a solo retreat in an isolated cabin.

This was my first visit to a major Zen center. The upcoming retreat would last for several weeks instead of just a weekend. I was a knot of hopeful anticipation and nervous dread over the challenges that lay ahead.

After supper, all of us who were embarking on the mental adventure of this long retreat gathered in the meditation room. We shared tea, the teacher gave an introductory talk and then we sat on our cushions for a little while, settling into the silent world we would share.

The next morning, the monk who would signal the beginning and end of the sitting periods sat on his cushion, motionless and still as the morning sky, one by one, the other people silently filed into the room. It was time to begin in earnest.

Stars glittered in the brisk predawn air through the branches of the huge old maple tree. As we sat, the stars slowly faded and the earliest dawn birds sang gloriously, all but one squawking! It squawked along vigorously, thinking itself as melodious as all the others. Or did it? More likely the bird didn't compare itself to others or envy them, it just squawked one hundred per cent.

For the first time, there was no agenda for this retreat. The goal was just to sit—to be still inside and out and see if I could maintain it over a retreat schedule. In several years of retreats, I'd never done it yet but maybe this time would be different.

As in any other retreat, each day began with one hundred and eight full bows—from a standing position to hands and knees with forehead to the ground and then back up again. It wasn't an act of worship, we weren't bowing to the Buddha. We weren't exactly bowing to anything, we were just bowing. It was a physical meditation, another technique to get the mind still and receptive to whatever insight might arise. It was a way of letting go of egotistical certainty in a concrete way. Like any intense physical effort, bows stopped the mind's chattering and brought full attention to the present moment.

For those of us who weren't used to bowing everyday, it was a tough thing to get through and quickly became "just do it" practice—do this bow right now, don't worry about whether it's number thirty-two or number ninety-seven. Paying attention to the breath happened automatically as I became more and more breathless.

It was a sort of Zen calisthenics. There was no ignoring how fat and out of shape I was and everyone could tell who had been doing bows daily and who had not from the level of panting it produced. It woke us up and got a good sweat going and was as beneficial as any other regular exercise. But what exactly did bows have to do with spiritual practice? For a long time I didn't understand it at all. It wasn't for lack of trying. I'd been trying to do bows every day at home and didn't like it now any better than I did to begin with.

On most days at home, bows were a quick way to fit some formal practice into a hectic schedule when there was no space for sitting or chanting—like fast food spiritual practice. But doing them was still a chore, like housework, and my bowing tended to be pretty hit and miss.

At that retreat, bows finally began to come into focus. In keeping a commitment, even a small one, faithfully, we establish an inner sense of integrity. We learn to believe in ourselves and our own strength. That in turn gives us courage to accept the full responsibility for our life and for how we experience whatever develops. Then our honor, strength and integrity no longer depend on what mood we happen to be in and the down moods seem less frequent and strong.

Maybe this was a lesson of doing bows each day. Instead of making it a commitment to the teacher and an exercise in trusting the practice methods, I could make it a commitment to myself. Out of this practice could come the ability to control my own mind with its endless opinions and dislike of the physical exertion of the bowing. As long as it was a commitment to somebody else, bowing had a forced quality but once it became a personal commitment, it was easier to do. Noticing when bows were easy and when they were a struggle to finish, and steadily continuing to do something for which I didn't have much affinity, I slowly began to realize that while likes and dislikes will never disappear, an important part of Zen practice is to simply not let either of these govern one's actions. I might not "like" bows but that need not be a hindrance to just doing them.

If we can learn to let go of likes and dislikes as the dictator of our actions, then we can apply this to other difficult aspects of life that we must engage, be it a personal relationship, a work situation, or a health problem. Likes and dislikes never disappear but they can lose their dictatorial power in life.

Some days, the bows went smoothly. Occasionally they caused a sensation of effortless flowing with conscious mind irrelevant to what was happening. If bows were like that all the time, they would be a daily reminder of how to live. On other days, doing them wasn't smooth at all. Getting into the zone was one thing, staying there was another. At least this wasn't Tibetan Buddhism where people start by doing one hundred thousand bows that can take several years to complete. By golly you've really done something when you get done with that—and what do you get? You might be told to do a hundred thousand of something else. There's no end to bows, there's no magic prize in spiritual practice, just the endless doing of it.

All week we sat and watched each day pass—the sun moving from one side of the sky to the other and piercing dawn calls of birds in the suburban forest that blanketed the rolling New England ridges around the center. I tried to focus on the breath, watching my mind more aggressively than usual. A lot of the benefits of Zen practice can't occur until this first basic skill of sustained focus is really mastered. I would try to make that my main effort during this retreat.

It was incredible how much of my mental activity was endlessly repeating and replaying conversations and statements I had made in the last few days before the retreat. As soon as I forgot to focus on my breath, the broken record started again.

Getting up at 4:30 in the morning was fine for the first time ever. Sleepiness and exhaustion had ceased to be problems and there was no caffeine craving or the splitting headache that often goes with a sudden total absence of caffeine.

During a predawn period of walking meditation we left the building and walked in a long line outside on the grounds. The moon was nearly full. Only a few of the strongest brightest stars that could penetrate the moonlight were visible that morning. None of those stars were saying, "I'm bright, I'm strong," they were just shining regardless of whether their image was visible or not. The stars taught what they had to teach by being themselves with no self-awareness or wanting anything back. As we headed back to the building, the night's darkness found its last refuge in the black backside of a tree silhouetted against the bright dawn sky.

During the next sitting period, I tried to sit peacefully and calmly, and succeeded a good bit of time. Sometimes sleepiness came but not too often, and sometimes a backache but not too bad. Maybe sitting became easier because I quit wanting anything from it except the experience it gave. This state was the first stage of slowing down, and moving into the peaceful slow rhythms of nature — dawn, midday, dusk, sun, rain. If you do that long enough, peace and quiet seeps into our hearts and minds. When that peace is present, so is the possibility of insight.

At the end of the sitting, we left the meditation hall in the dim gray light of early morning. When we came back after breakfast for the late morning sitting, the room was full of sunlight with the shadows of willow leaves playing on the floor—a gift with no giver. The rows of silent gray clad sitters blended perfectly into the overall image of the open, airy, beautiful room. The uniform clothes not only removed distractions, they also allowed us to become part of the overall aesthetic composition of the setting. We released some individuality in order to briefly become part of a larger whole. Individual minds struggled to perceive the role of the individual within the whole reality. The formal beauty of the still line of seated figures against the white walls and sunlit glass doors, the sharp contrast of sunlight and shadow on faces, these were part of the heightened awareness of visual beauty and sound that always came during a retreat.

"I really like this," I thought.

Then, something answered.

"You fool! You went to Zen to learn how to avoid attachment and the suffering it causes but now you're just getting attached to the method for avoiding attachment." Another long retreat was not something that I could do again anytime soon while the kids were small. Only when I was old and unattached would this be okay. There would be suffering in that too—loneliness, probably.

Attachments and anticipations never stop arising. The point of Zen practice isn't to totally eliminate them, but to allow us to recognize them quickly before they have a chance to dig in and cause suffering. Enjoy the momentary thing but be free of needing it.

During a retreat, everything becomes intensified into a kaleidoscope of experience. The moments when we can't stay awake, the moments when the taste of honey or the sharpness of an apple are intensely present, the dance of energy in one moment and the mental blockage in another, these are the raw materials with which we work.

The morning sun streaked across the wooden deck that wrapped around the hall and shone on some trees on the hillside next to the building. A breeze passing through the area shook their leaves. Morning sunlight and breeze in a forest—it was so lovely and clear. Yet most people in the morning leave the house, get in the car, sit in the office and are totally removed from simply seeing sun and breeze in a forest.

There were individual interviews with the teacher that morning. The main purpose of these interviews was to work with kong-ans, the famous verbal puzzles of the Zen tradition. These are questions that have no rational answers. What is the sound of one hand clapping? Can you show me your face before your parents were born? There are correct answers, but they will only be attained after all the rational answers, all the clever approaches are exhausted.

When I entered the room, bowed and sat down, the teacher immediately said,

"Zen Master Hyang Eom said, 'It is like a man up a tree who is hanging from a branch by his teeth—his hands cannot grasp a bough, his feet cannot touch the tree—he is tied and bound. Another man under the tree asks him "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" [Bodhidharma was the Indian monk who came to China and founded the Zen sect]. If he does not answer, he evades his duty and will be killed. If he answers he loses his life. If you are in the tree how can you stay alive?'"

The Zen Master leaned back, smiled and waited to see what I had, but I had nothing, nada. After an endless minute or so, she laughed.

"That's don't know mind. Just keep that mind."

She posed another kong-an. I took a wild guess and she shook her head.

"You're scratching your right foot when your left foot itches!"

Another shot in the dark. This one yielded, "The dog runs after the bone." Whatever that meant, it clearly wasn't a compliment.

"Maybe it would be better if there were not so many kong-ans coming at me at one time," I complained. She said "No, do more!" and released a barrage of questions until my analytical egotistical mind imploded and there really was only not knowing.

I sat there like a block of wood and she laughed.

"The gift of the kong-an is the question. It creates 'don't know mind.' The kong-an you've answered is dead. The one you haven't answered has the potential to bring the mind to a focus that will cut through all ignorance. Kong-ans aren't about keeping score—how many are answered, how many aren't. They're a dynamic dance of energy going back and forth between the teacher and the student. If you don't know the answer, just don't know! don't know! until out of that not knowing the answer will come."

Back in the meditation room, my mind kept spinning—"you're hanging there—what can you do, what can you do??" It was a stone wall of don't know mind. Kong-ans are designed to produce that mental state in case daily life doesn't.

Kong-ans teach in parables and provide simplified models of how to act with clarity in specific situations. They are also used to train the mind in making small intuitive leaps—one kong-an answer at a time—which in turn prepare the mind for the huge intuitive connection which is enlightenment.

A kong-an interview is a little like riding a rodeo horse. The student is the rider, trying to stay focused while meeting the verbal challenges poised by the teacher in a free, spontaneous, intuitive manner. The teacher is the horse who tests the rider's insight to his or her uttermost limits. The game isn't about never being thrown, it's about how long the rider will stay up. The difference between the rodeo and the interview is compassion. The horse only wants to get rid of the rider, only cares for itself. The Zen teacher, having thrown the student, picks him or her up, brushes off the dust and tries to show the student how to stay up longer next time.

There are several ways to answer a kong-an. We may work through a lot of wrong answers, closing in slowly through a process of elimination, picking up a clue here and there from the teacher's comments. It's a fundamentally rational process, but one that requires some understanding of Zen practice. There's usually a lot of this systematic approach in the first kong-ans we answer.

But if we focus on the situation in the kong-an until we are living it ourselves, then boom! The answer is there and obvious, and it's the only possible way we could respond. The answer appears out of nowhere, with no conscious thought or effort, with absolute confidence. We really begin to understand that there is a spontaneous intuitive side to consciousness and that we can trust it to appear as we become more clear in our practice.

In either case, we struggle with the paradox and fail to resolve it until we finally reach a state of "just don't know," of

stillness, the point before thinking. This is the launch pad for discovery, for new awareness of self and other, the core of the practice.

There are many kong-ans with many answers but in some way they all ask the same thing. They set up a given situation and then demand “show me reality!” or “show me how one behaves in this situation, knowing reality.” The student answers by demonstrating reality in the situation described in the kong-an.

The answer is always simple and intrinsic to the story in that kong-an. But getting that answer is only a small part of kong-an practice. In answering kong-ans, we begin to experience intuitive nonlinear thinking. If there is underlying clarity and awareness, answers will arise spontaneously. For most of us, it takes years of rigorous practice to get to that point.

The answer must be consistent with the situation in the kong-an. An approach that works for one kong-an is summarily dismissed for another. There is no absolute way that always works, so we have to be flexible. While working with a kong-an, one may attain an intellectual understanding of the question and be able to answer the kong-an rationally, but the teacher never accepts such answers. Rather the teacher waits for the spontaneously arising non-logical answer that illustrates how the understanding can be applied to daily living in a concrete situation. A rational answer is merely abstract principal, while the “right answer” involves living and enacting the point of the solution, not just stating it.

As we work with kong-ans, we learn a lot about ourselves, and how the ego protects itself. We want to successfully answer the question posed so persistently by the teacher, and because of that desire to succeed, attachment, desire, and ego is in full bloom. When the answer comes, we learn something, we feel good, proud of ourselves a little, and the insidious ego gets fed. It's there again and again, demanding food when we least expect it, and we see it fully exposed through this process.

If we really get stuck on a kong-an, we will try every possible answer over months, or sometimes years, and they're all wrong and finally we find the one that has to be correct and it's wrong too. There's a lot to learn in this situation. Feeling the frustration, the anger, the aggravation that arise, we ask “what is this?” Thought I was past all that, thought I was pretty clear already. Fooled again!

Unanswered kong-ans keep us honest, and make it impossible to develop yet more egotism based on spiritual effort. Kong-ans are there to keep us from coasting. They are a teaching technique that keeps retreat practice from becoming tedious. They convey teaching in a playful way and keep us a bit more humble and questioning.

The major difference between a seasoned Zen sitter and a beginner isn't in the ability to answer kong-ans. Most kong-ans can be answered given enough interviews. Settling for knowing a few kong-an answers misses the point. That is like a bird watcher adding names to a life list without perceiving

the birds themselves. The critical difference is the willingness to live the rigorous spare life of a Zen retreat day after day after day, and sit still hour after hour and see what happens.

In the next interview early the following morning, the hanging from a branch kong-an was still hopeless. After a few minutes, the teacher started challenging the few correct answers I had for other kong-ans. She was checking to see if I believed in myself enough to stay with those answers regardless of what an authority figure said. I did respond correctly but too slowly and hesitantly—she almost had me.

Traditional Zen practice comes from an Asian authoritarian system. Western students, particularly Americans, are often uncomfortable with this fact. Hierarchical systems of any sort have enormous potential for becoming oppressive. In order to function in a helpful way, such systems are dependent on the personal integrity and wisdom, compassion and energy of the individuals who are in authority. Such systems also require that those who accept that authority have a good understanding of why the system is structured the way it is. If the people in authority are not clear and compassionate, problems and abuse will almost inevitably arise in this type of system.

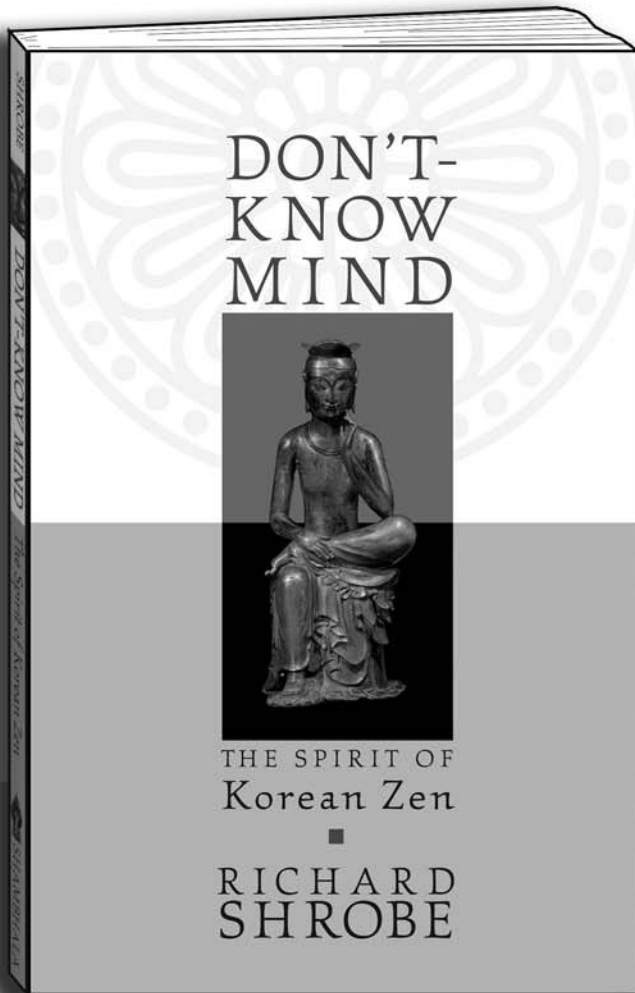
However, the hierarchical approach in Zen is full of mechanisms for challenging authority. The formality provides endless tests to determine when the student has become clear and strong enough to see through the hierarchy. The system is designed to totally empower the individual but does so through struggle and experience rather than by intellectual discussion in a group setting. One cannot progress in Zen training if he or she does not cut through the hierarchy, and challenge the authority figure in a clear and profound way that is based on one's personal insight.

Traditional kong-ans are full of these challenges. They occur in the interview room, in dialogue with the teacher. Attempting to dismantle the formalism and techniques of the retreat itself is not necessary. In confronting formal authority, one can achieve an unshakable belief in one's self as well as a more profound understanding of the nature of that self.

The teacher constantly challenges and tests one's strength and confidence in order to gauge how to best help the student's progress. He or she may start to deny every correct kong-an answer the student has. Such denial is a method for encouraging independence, and weaning the student from the need for the teacher's approval. When the student at last knows who he or she is and has solid confidence, it is possible to defy the teacher's efforts to create confusion. This is what the teacher was aiming for all along. Strength and confidence that is untested is never as sound as strength that has met a test successfully. The teacher's authority also keeps the student from settling for a superficial, comfortable answer to the fundamental questions of life when the teacher knows from his or her personal experience that further effort will reveal an even more profound picture.

*Continued in the next issue* 🌿





“Wonderful! Wonderful! But too many words! How do you attain the point of these many words and speech? Go to the kitchen and drink a glass of cold water!”

—Zen Master Seung Sahn

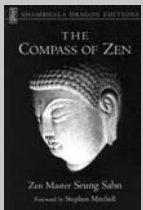
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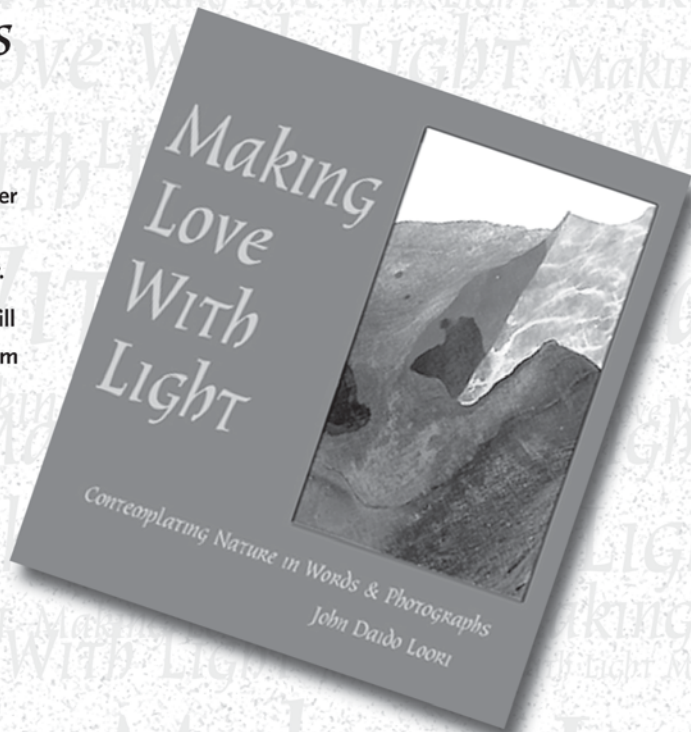
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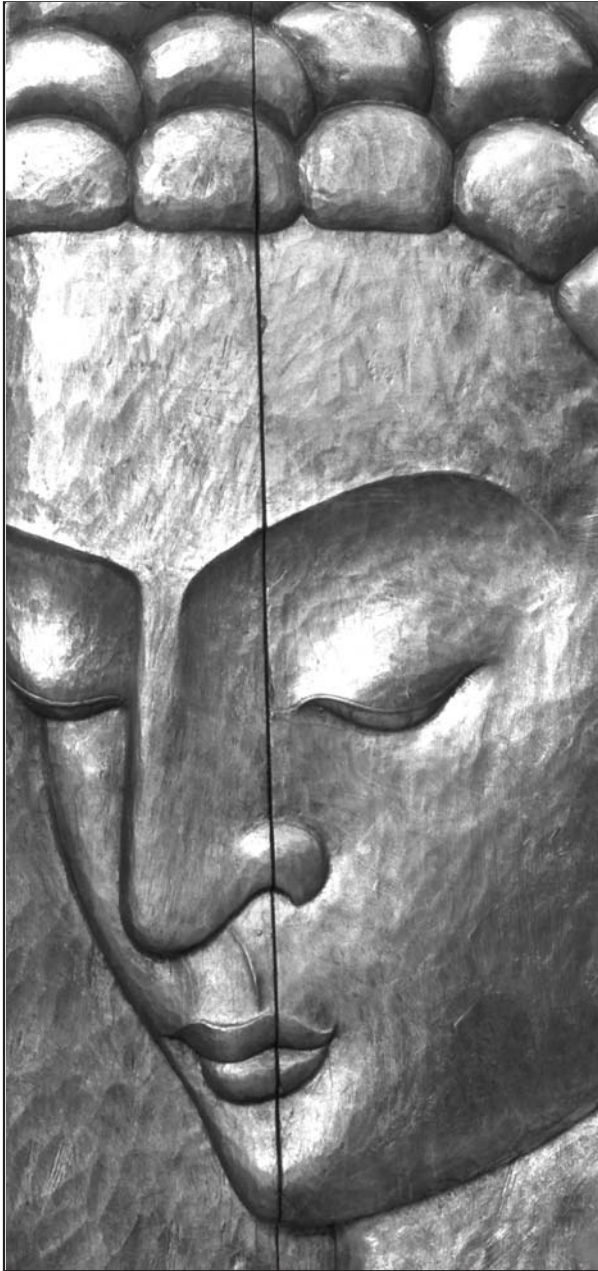
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