

# Sleeping Zen

BY ZEN MASTER WU BONG

*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* is the title of a widely read Zen book by Suzuki Roshi. Although the book presented Soto Zen teaching as typically practiced in Japan, keeping "beginner's mind" is an attitude which cuts across any school boundaries. In our school, we may call it keeping "don't know," but what is important is not the name but the complete sincerity and openness of a mind in search of the truth. It is the very mind that we had when we first started to practice. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for senior Zen students to fall into a kind of "sleeping Zen" sickness, in which that original mind of inquiry has nearly or completely disappeared.

Not long ago, I suggested to a friend that although he is surely helping many people through his work as a doctor, perhaps he has been neglecting his Zen practice. In response, he said that his work is already his practice. That is very wonderful, indeed, but a vast gulf exists between mere understanding and its actualization. Long ago an eminent teacher said, "the tongue has no bone." It is possible to say anything, but to do as my friend has stated is not very easy without consistent effort through formal daily practice and regular intensive retreats. Even for one very accomplished, there remains the question of the direction of one's accomplishment. Is it for me, or is it for others? If for others, then how can I help the most? Perhaps it is by helping their bodies, but not always. It is for that very reason that students seek the supportive atmosphere of a Zen community in which to practice, while others, unable to move into a Zen center, regularly join in retreats or other group practice.

The Buddha taught us the "Middle Way," eschewing any extreme. This suggests creating a balance between all the various activities in our lives. If we are not quite sure what that balance should look like, that is even more of a reason to pursue practice in all of its forms, in all the moments of our life. Admittedly, that is not always easy to accomplish.

Mr. P'ang, an accomplished layman in eighth century China, whose wife and children were said to have also attained enlightenment, is reputed to have announced to his family: "Difficult, difficult, difficult; it is like trying to scatter ten measures of sesame seed all over a tree!" His wife said in response, "easy, easy, easy; just like touching your feet to the ground when you get out of bed." Their daughter remarked, "neither difficult, nor easy; on the hundred grass-tips, the Patriarch's meaning."

If we understand this exchange correctly, we can find correct practice in our everyday life, and we can also find everyday life in our practice. If we understand this exchange correctly, we can also understand that while all the P'angs shoot sharp arrows, they all miss the bull's eye with their remarks. How do we attain the Patriarch's meaning, then? If we can truly attain it, then in each moment we return to the very mind with which we started practicing.

Thus we prevent the "senior Zen student syndrome," and in fact we can shake off the worst case of the "sleeping Zen" sickness.

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