

# Today's Zen

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Born in Poland, an American citizen, living in France, I have a family, am an artist/painter, and I work earning money – I'm a 100% westerner.

I practiced and learned from Zen Master Seung Sahn, who is Korean, Zen Master Dae Kwang, an American and my husband Zen Master Wu Bong, a Polish-American Jew, as well as from many others, during the past 18 years. Almost seven years ago I received "Inga", permission to teach, from Zen Master Seung Sahn. With all this in my background I am glad to share my experience and my understanding.

I would like to start with: BUDDHA IS NOT A PERSON - IT'S A STATE OF MIND

That brings to one point many levels of this practice and gives a specific perspective to it. We are westerners in the 21st century and that is an important way to approach this philosophy and practice.

Let's look from that perspective at this particular practice. First of all Buddha means "awakened one" and the historical Buddha, himself said that everything has that awakening naturally. How did he attain that? How did he come to that conclusion? What example did he give? What did he leave behind?

The suffering he saw all around him shocked the prince Siddhartha Gautama, later called Buddha. This is when he decided to pursue research to understand the world. Trying different methods he ended up in silent meditation. He practiced with an open mind; kept sincere and deep questioning; worked with his own limitations, and thus came to understand himself and others; he came to self-recognition.

He sat in meditation for many years before having this insight, and afterwards started to teach others. He offered pure teaching, sharing his experience, showing the path, encouraging those who were searching within to find their true nature and then help others.

In modern words one can call this SELF-THERAPY - self-understanding, self-recognition, self-freeing.

Finally, the names are not important. Keeping the great question "what am I?" helps us to see in a different perspective the "little" problems we usually are preoccupied with in our everyday life. It puts the line of thinking farther and deeper away from the ego. In "common" therapy there is a great element of dealing with details, whereas in a process of practice the details are only

important insofar as they point to our true self by becoming fodder for the fire of doubt raised by our great question. Instead of concentrating on the little particles of our existence we can at once see the whole picture. As a byproduct of this process, through what can be called personal alchemy, we discover that our limitations and problems are in themselves expressions of truth. This insight is liberating and allows us to wake up to what is called in popular literature the “here and now”. This is actually the true beginning of our practice, which then truly opens to “helping others”.

At the time of the Buddha, as he presented his teaching, there was no “guru”, no “pray to me for better life”; no “I’m a great master so worship me”. There was rather “try to do it yourself”.

With sadness we can see how his teaching is misinterpreted these days. Most people, including teachers, concentrate on building more influential organizations, religious empires or asylums to hide from everyday life. Some of the leaders are creating dependence financially, or worse yet, psychologically. In light of this we can see how important it is to clear the picture of practice itself and make a fit place for it in the complicated life of this century.

More and more lay people are attracted to this spiritual path and to living according to what is commonly called the philosophy of Zen. It is a crucial turning point to this movement, so I have a question to start with: Was Buddha a Buddhist? Or even: was Jesus a Christian? And yet another and quite interesting light into ourselves: does God believe in himself?

Since the Buddha’s time, many structures grew around this path: philosophical theses, interpretations and disputes; different branches of religious or meditative groups; or simply ways of life associated to this philosophy: vegetarianism, new-age movements, social communication, philanthropical actions etc. None of the above is either good or bad, some actually are wonderful, compassionate and horizon-widening movements, but most of them have nothing to do with the pure work with the mind which leads to understanding, compassion, tolerance and freedom.

I said “bring to one point the many levels of this practice” and “make a fit place for it in the complicated life of this century”. Let’s combine the many levels and the many sides that simultaneously will lead us to this “one point”: SELF-INSIGHT.

From the psychological side, as I mentioned already, self-therapy and all the work on oneself that one does while practicing Zen is quite clear. The role of a teacher is simply to guide and to direct, not to give ready solutions for all problems, so he/she is being the “finger pointing at the moon, not the moon itself”. This work has to be done by oneself only.

One of my friends said “it is the epoch of the micro-wave, so people want fast answers for everything” and they expect the teacher to be such a fast answer finder. That means not taking responsibility for one’s own life and actions but rather depending on the spiritual leader.

Zen practice means taking life into one's own hands and helping others. Often people are overwhelmed with the "understand your true nature and help all beings" teaching, so it's important to understand the meaning of this teaching. "Understand your true self" is a job, a path to help yourself. "Help all beings" includes your self as well. In fact you are first in line, help your self so you will be able to help others.

If helping oneself is not taken care of, we will see, as happens too often, the case of "the blind leading the blind"

My Zen teacher says "Zen is understanding your true self", then we ask the question: what am I?

To work with this question is like scientific research. Just like looking at the smallest life form in a microscope or at the sky in a telescope, one looks inside one self, into the microscope/telescope of "what am I?", with wide-open eyes, and a wide-open mind. It takes a certain discipline, a certain amount of will power, consistence, strong self-sincerity and a mix of great pride with a humble mind. It is necessary to be open to confrontation with one self and others as well.

Sometimes people can start right away with the guidance of a Zen teacher, but sometimes it is difficult to deal with all the confusing factors of life and spiritual hunger, so special help is needed before one is able to benefit from practicing Zen. In such cases, therapy with the guidance of a professional while at the same time practicing can be very helpful. In any case, it is important to rely on one's common sense and not to give in to any idea, including the scorn which therapy receives at times from Zen or meditation teachers.

My husband told me that when he started to practice with Zen Master Seung Sahn, while he liked the Zen teaching, he was unable to do the Zen practice. It was simply too painful, perhaps not in the physical sense, but because too many emotional problems were appearing. At that time, his teacher taught him a special meditation technique, more akin to tantric yoga than to Zen. It was this practice that helped him become strong and clear enough to finally begin "Zen" training. Zen is not special, and any tool that will help is finally "good" Zen practice.

I have an artist friend who recently stepped into the computer world. She takes courses and learns a lot. Each time we see each other she shares with me her progress and the new possibilities of creation she has learned. Our mind is like that computer and it takes the will to learn and discover to be able to use all its possibilities. Zen then is a course in self-discovery; sitting in silence and letting you see, learn and understand. There are no outside solutions, no roundabout ways and no running away. It is a straight and direct path.

Helping others does not mean making others do what we believe is good for them. Instead of providing pure and compassionate help, such an attitude leads to strong opinions and power-struggles; the beginnings of so many

conflicts in this world. Rather, good help means helping others become strong and clear, and able to take full responsibility for their life. In turn, they will be able to share their strength and clarity with others.

ZEN IS A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE. Here the term philosophy is understood differently from its common understanding : it is the combination of the philosophical approach with common sense, the high intellect with a child like mind. The work with oneself and on oneself has the effect of coming to clear conclusions, finding simple solutions, a healthy distance to unimportant happenings and making one's life simple and clear. The last one gives us space for extending research and for a deeper and wider view.

The goal of all the above is to help this world.

In order to help one has to understand where the problem begins. When looking at this world carefully and the situation it is in, and the actions of human beings you can see clearly that all sickness starts in one's mind; in too strong opinions, in "I'm right, you are wrong" lack of tolerance, in this "I, My, Me" mind, or in traditional Buddhist terms, in the mind of desire, anger and ignorance. These are the biggest pollutants of our societies.

These days we are dealing with the problem of world terrorism and it is frightening to think where it will end. But if we look closely into this problem we can see where the root of it is. Zen Master Wu Bong recently said that it is not the external terrorists who are a big problem, but rather the terrorist within each of us, and that is the terrorist who is the most dangerous. It is crucial to make peace with this "inner" terrorist in order to create peace around the world.

Venerable Mahagosananda, the Buddhist patriarch of Cambodia, often says that a peaceful, well-wishing, compassionate and clear person can create just such an environment. That means, no matter which culture or time one comes from, one has to begin working with oneself to cultivate the mind that is Buddha.

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