

# Fixing a Pot

BY ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

*At a Dharma Speech at the end of the November Yong Maeng Jong Jin at the International Zen Center of New York, Zen Master Seung Sahn told the following story:*

In the countryside of Korea, people used to come together for big markets that lasted several days. Once a young man went to sell his vegetables and buy some rice. While he was there he saw an old monk just standing completely still in the sun for five minutes. The monk was wearing wintertime clothes, and they were old and torn. It was summer, and the sun was very hot — Korean people don't like this sun — but this old monk just stood still for five minutes.

The young man thought as he watched him, "This old monk, is he crazy? Does he have no consciousness, only standing still like this?" So afterwards, when the monk started walking around, the young man went up to him and said, "Excuse me, I would like to know why you stand still in the sun for five minutes."

The old man looked at him and said, "Lunch time."

"Lunch time? Who is having lunch?"

The old monk showed him the inside of his robe — there were little animals, parasites, like lice. "If I move, they cannot eat, so I only stand still while they take lunch."

The young man thought this monk must have a wonderful mind, to be so kind to little animals, so he asked him if he could become his student.

The monk looked at his face and said, "Not possible."

"Why not possible?" asked the young man.

"Why do you want to become a monk?"

"Well, I don't like married life. I want to find the correct way. You say you give lunch to these small animals, so I have this very strong feeling that maybe this is the correct way. So I like you, so I want to be your student."

"Maybe," said the monk, "Maybe. Where do live?"

"My parents are dead, so I stay at my brother's house. I have no place of my own; I want to come with you."

"O.K.," said the old monk, "come."

Then they went walking up deep into the mountains for a long time, until they reached a small grass house.

In Korea, kitchens are outside of the house. In the kitchen there is a big pot, on a stand, with fire under it. The pot is made of steel, very heavy. It has two parts: one side for water and one side for rice.

So in this house the pot and the stand were broken. Fixing the pot means pouring a little water into the bottom of the pot and making sure it settles exactly in the middle of the bottom of the pot.

The monk said to the young man, "You must fix this pot and stand."

When he had finished, the young man said, "Master, I have fixed the pot."

So the old monk went to check and said, "No good! Again!" and he dumped the water out.

The young man thought, "This Master has very keen eyes, so maybe he sees some mistake." So, he tried again, this time being very careful and checking the level of the water in the pot. When he had finished he said, "Master, I have correctly fixed the pot."

"O.K., I will check." So the Master went to check the pot and again he said, "No good! Again!" and dumped the water out.

The young man was very confused. "Where is my mistake? I don't understand. Maybe it is outside the pot, maybe the stand is not correct." So this time, he prepared the pot and checked all around the outside, the counter area, making sure everything was clean and neat. When he finished up said, "Master, I have fixed the pot — it's very wonderful, very beautiful!"

"No good!" said the Master, and dumped the water out.

The young man did not understand. "Maybe the pot is good, but the kitchen is no good," he thought. So next time he fixed the whole kitchen — the ceiling, the floor, everything. When he finished, he called to the Master, "Master! I have fixed the whole kitchen!"

"Oh, that's wonderful! I will check," said the Master. He went to the pot — "No good!" and turned it over again.

This happened four times, five times, six times, seven times, eight times. Each time the young man thought, "What could it be this time?" and each time the Master answered, "No good!" and dumped the water. Now this man is getting angry. Finally the ninth time, the young man thought, "I do not like this Master, this is the last time!"

So he just set the pot on the stand and said, "Master, I am finished."

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" said the Master.

This Master was testing his mind. Zen is not dependent on anything. You must be dependent on yourself, whatever your own style is. But what is your own style? If you keep your opinions, your condition, your situation, your correct style cannot appear. So this Master tested his mind. Before, each time when the student fixed the pot, "maybe this will pass, maybe this will pass;" much thinking. The last time, no thinking.

Also this Master tested his perseverance mind. ".This young man likes me, but how much does he want to understand his true self?" Usually people try maybe four, maybe five times, then they say, "I don't like you!" Then they go away. Try, try, try is very necessary, then some time the Zen Master will say, "Oh, wonderful!"

Only this mind, try, try, try, is very important. Try, try, try means persevere. So you must only go straight, try, try, try — then you will get your true way.

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