

# For What and For Whom?

BY ZEN MASTER SOENG HYANG

A Dharma Speech given during the 30th anniversary of the School, April 6, 2002 at Providence Zen Center.

*(Raises Zen stick over head.)*

This stick...

*(Hits table with stick.)*

... this sound... and your mind.

Are they the same or different?

That was one of the first kong-ans that I remember being asked by Zen Master Seung Sahn. One of the really unique things I found about going to Doyle Avenue was the eagerness and the openness, the enthusiasm to teach that I received from him, like a magnet, pulling... come, come, come. And I had my doubts because this tradition wasn't Japanese and everything I had read and really been attracted to had been Japanese style, very simple altar, grays and little hues of black and gold but this *(pointing to the altar behind her)* is what we got.

One of the most important teachings is that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. So, from the very beginning Zen Master Seung Sahn always taught those very simple things: form is emptiness, emptiness is form; then no form, no emptiness; then form is form, emptiness is emptiness. And you can hear those words and you can try to understand those words, but again it boils down to practicing and perceiving these things.

This very simple kong-an—this stick, this sound and your mind, are they the same or different—some people don't understand that kong-an at all. Maybe at the end of this talk I might even answer this kong-an, but half the people in the room won't know I answered it, because they don't understand, and that's the practice. Some people will know I answered it and think, "I understand this kong-an." That's it, so simple, so wonderful. Yet, of those of us that understand the kong-an, most of us haven't really attained it. We always talk about, "understanding cannot help you." These are all things that I learned from Zen Master Seung Sahn. Within five weeks of learning a little English, he had learned how to say those things with so much enthusiasm.

Michael Konstan noted that if you feed a college student, they'll stay around. I wasn't a college student, I was a nurse, but I was staying around too. The food was really good. Zen Master Seung Sahn used to make us homemade noodles. He'd roll out this flour mixture and take a knife and slice these big, flat

noodles and he'd throw them in miso soup and he'd put in tons of butter and kimchee and peanut butter and tofu and potatoes. It would look gross... it would taste good, though. But I remember watching him cook one time and he was cutting up the onions and the skins were falling on the floor and he'd just kick the skins underneath the stove. I'd read all these books about Japanese style and Japanese cooking and I thought, "Oh God, he's kicking the skins under the stove, how do you justify that? It's not correct Zen, you know?" And the soup came out delicious. I started to get that point: for what and for whom. What do you do when you make a bowl of soup? Did it nourish you? What are you going to do with that nourishment? Get the housemaster to clean out the onions later. I was the housemaster.

It was mentioned that students come and go. When I was first asked to give this talk I thought, oh no, don't tell me I'm the one, I'm the oldest, I'm the thirty-year person. I thought, gee, where are all those people, I miss them. Some people left and if only we had done it this way, if only we had done it that way, if Zen Master Seung Sahn had only done it this way or that way more people would have stayed, more people would be here today. And that's what we call checking. That's checking mind. The most important thing is be here, be here. Just (*snaps fingers*) be here and be awake and be alive right now.

There are so many stories about my teacher. One time I was driving home with him from Cambridge. It was about 10:00 o'clock at night and we were both tired. It was summertime, so there were a lot of bugs in the headlights. One bug landed on our windshield. I was driving and going about 65 mph. The bug slapped against the windshield, and its wings kept moving. It hit at 65 miles per hour and it's just this little bug so my logical mind thought... it's dead. But it kept moving as if it were alive. Zen Master Seung Sahn kept looking at it and looking at it from the passenger seat and he suddenly said, "Stop!" I pulled over. He got out and crawled up on the hood and examined the bug. Cars were whipping by. Logically, yes, it was dead, but it looked alive. That little chance that maybe it was suffering, maybe there was a still a chance to put it over on the grass was in his consciousness. That's better than any dharma talk I have ever heard. Just that, live that life of "how may I help you." Is there anything I can still do, even though it looks like it's impossible? Maybe there's something, maybe there's something.

Right now he's very ill. I'm a hospice nurse. I'm hearing this story about him being in the hospital and he's on a respirator and he's on dialysis and he's on a lot of different machines keeping his vital organs running, and part of me goes, let go of that, what's the point, if your heart stops why get it going again. That's just me. I don't have his body. I'm not there, I'm not with him, people want him to live and he wants to live for people. He loves medicine. Anybody who knows him... the pills, the bottles... he's always had lots of medicine in his room and around him and many, many doctors. So, of course that's what he's doing. He's using his doctors, he's using his medicine, he's using all those modern machines and doing it his way. And just like that bug on the windshield, maybe it's still there, maybe there's still life, maybe there's two, three more years, maybe he'll see the reunification of Korea, maybe he'll see the Korean sangha in New York move to Manhattan. We don't know. So, there's that don't quit, don't quit, don't quit mind. Again, it's not right or wrong, whether you just let go and phase out and die sitting up still in a

mountain temple or you're in the hospital, that's not the point. Again, it's for what, for whom do you live, and what am I?

I'm just going to tell a couple of my favorite stories that are in *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. This is a very, very beautiful book. Twice I've done long retreats by myself and taken that book. It has 100 titles in it, so every day I would read a chapter out of that book. One of them is about expensive dharma. It's called "My Dharma is Too Expensive." It's just a great little story, it reminds me of our journey here.

A student meets a teacher and says, "Please teach me. Give me your dharma." And the teacher says, "Oh, my dharma is much too expensive for you. What do you have?" And the student pulls out maybe 75 cents, whatever he has, and says, "This is all I have. This is all of my money. I give it all to you." And the teacher says, "If you had ten billion dollars it wouldn't be enough."

So, the student goes back and sits and wonders, why is that? What's this about expensive? Ah hah! So he comes back and says, "I give you my life. I'll work for free for the temple for the rest of my life. I'll do anything for you." And the teacher says, "Ten million lives like yours is nothing, that's not enough. My dharma's much more expensive than that." And then the student goes back and sits and thinks about it and ponders... ah, now I get it. "I give you my mind," he says to the teacher. The teacher responds, "Your mind is a pile of garbage, I don't want that. My dharma is much more expensive than that." Again the student goes back and sits... what is this? Really sits for a while, and then gets (*claps hands*) KATZ! Gets empty, don't know, that mind. Just that. Really clear, really good. The teacher says, "Oh, my dharma's much more expensive than that. Are you kidding?"

So then the student's really perplexed, really upset. What's better than emptiness? What's better than that one still moment together where there's no idea, no nothing? And then after six months or six years the student gets that second enlightenment that we talk about and he runs up to the teacher and says, "Now I have it." And the teacher says, "What?" And the student says, "The sky is blue, the grass is green." And the teacher says, "Oh my God! That's awful. What kind of a student are you? Anybody can do that." And the master starts to walk away. And the student gets really upset, really angry and says, "You know, you can take your dharma and shove it up your ass!" The teacher keeps walking away, and then he turns around and says, "You!" The student turns around and the teacher says, "Don't lose my dharma." So that was the one genuine thing, just, "Shove it up your ass!" But the student was owning it. It came from his gut, just trusting and believing in himself.

When I think back about Zen Master Seung Sahn, it's that total encouragement to believe in myself and for each of us to be encouraged to believe in ourselves. What are you? What am I? What is this? And that's all he taught. Sometimes I've heard people through the years say, "What are we going to do when Zen Master Seung Sahn dies? What's going to happen?" That doesn't die... that we should be able to just work on believing in ourselves, knowing who we are, what to do. He used to say to me, "You're going to be a nun." I said, "Well, I really like being a nurse." "Oh, there's tons of nurses. Nurses are a dime a dozen. How many women really attain the dharma and

become a great teacher?" I was checking, checking, checking. And I just kept being a nurse. He told me not to do that, but, that's even better— that's believing in yourself. That comes from this (*points to her center*). What are you? What is this?

I read once that the sign of a good teacher is when their students are clearer than they are. You believe in yourself and you stop listening to the teacher and you say, "what am I?", and do it. You don't stop listening to the teaching, that's different. So, paying attention, moment to moment, what am I? That's it. I'm very glad to see everybody here and very glad to stop checking and to be able to appreciate that each of us is coming and going and trying.

The other story I wanted to tell from Dropping Ashes on the Buddha is about the boat monk. These two students were disciples of a Zen Master who was very old and dying, and he gave them transmission. One of them was described as being tall and strong and broad with great teaching, great technique, great dharma. He took over the temple when his master died. He taught hundreds of monks; he was just brilliant, a wonderful guy. And the other monk was smaller in stature and quieter and liked more solitude and a lot of people didn't notice him at all. Once in a while he would say something that people would remember, but he was very quiet.

So he decided to leave and just row a ferryboat back and forth across the river in another province. He let his hair grow and stopped being a monk, stopped wearing monk's clothes. Never married; he was still a monk but he just didn't have any outside stature. Before he left the temple he had told his dharma brother, "I am very different from you, but at some point send me a disciple, send me someone and then I'll fulfill my obligation to my teacher."

The years went by and finally the monk that had stayed and become the great Zen Master found a student for this monk who just ferried people back and forth across the river. This student was very attached to words, but a very clear and wonderful person. So he went and met the boat monk and they rowed slowly across the river. They had a little dharma exchange. It was all words. It was OK, but lots of times dharma combat is just a bunch of words; it wasn't quite ringing.

Finally the monk took his oar and just slapped the student right into the water. And he said, "You know, even the greatest speech in the world is like a tether that you tie a donkey to, and it just goes around and around and it doesn't really hit the mark." The student was trying to crawl back into the boat, and the monk slapped him again into the water. And with that second slap, the student's mind opened and he got it. He got untethered from the words. Then they just sat in the boat together and spent some time and just connected. Then the monk deposited the student on the other side of the river, rowed back to the middle, flipped the boat over and never appeared again. What's the teacher, what's the disappearance? It's not appearing or disappearing, it's just—can you listen, can you wake up and go beyond the words and (*claps hands*) feel the slap and then do your job.

I want to thank very much Zen Master Seung Sahn. I know he would like to be here right now, and he is here. I want to thank him for all that work and not

giving up and just as he isn't giving up today, just taking it out to that last thread. And I hope that each of us finds our way, whether it's riding in the front of a truck, or whatever we need to do, but to do it wholeheartedly and do it not for ourselves but for all people. Thank you very much.

*(Raises Zen stick over head.)*

This stick...

*(Hits table with stick.)*

...this sound... and your mind. Are they the same or different?

*(Raises Zen stick over head and hits table with stick.)*

Thank you.

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