

The Lion's Head

BY ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

Following a kong-an reading at the Providence Zen Center, Zen Master Seung Sahn gave this informal talk.

A long time ago, Korea was divided into three countries, all of them constantly fighting. Silla was the smallest, in the Southeast; Paekche was a little bigger, in the Southwest; and the biggest was Koguryo in the North. Silla people wanted more power, so they began army training schools. Many people went to them and for over fifty years there was nothing but war, war.

In one family both the grandfather and father were famous generals, and both of them died. Then only the grandmother was left to care for her little grandson, who had a strong body but a cry-baby mind. He would go out to play, and other children would hit him and he'd start to cry. So the grandmother thought, "His father and grandfather were both great generals. Why is this one such a cry-baby?" He only wanted to pray to Buddha, "Kwan Sae Um Bo Sal, Kwan Sae Um Bo Sal, Kwan Sae Um Bo Sal."

One day she got an idea. She called to the crybaby to come with her. She took him in to his grandfather's room full of swords, guns, and fierce war pictures. The crybaby was always afraid of that room, so he went in trembling.

"Bow to your grandfather's picture!" He bowed. "Today I'm going to give you a special thing — our family treasure. Your father and grandfather had it before you and every time they went into battle with it, they won and became famous. Now you are growing up, so I am giving it to you. It will give you special energy and other boys won't be able to beat you up anymore."

"Is it true? I want it!"

"O.K. Don't worry. Soon you'll be strong!" The grandmother took a beautiful cloth off a fine wooden box in front of the grandfather's picture. She opened the wooden box and inside was a shiny silver box.

She opened that and inside was a bright gold box! Inside the gold box was a small dried-up lion's head with shining little eyes and a fierce mouth.

"This is a special energy head able to do anything. Keep it next to your body here under your clothes in this bag and then there will be no more problems. Whenever you fight, you'll win. Never open this bag. No one should ever see it. It's secret."

Soon the cry-baby felt a great surge of energy and was completely unafraid. He believed in this lion's head and the special energy 100 percent. He wasn't

frightened of the room anymore. He touched his grandfather's sword — wonderful! He touched the guns — wonderful! Then he went outside. The children yelled, "Hey, here comes cry-baby! Let's go fight!". One ran over and POW! The cry-baby knocked him down with his fist. Another came up and the cry-baby gave him a kick in the stomach. Very strong. The cry-baby became the Number One boy. "This lion's head really works," he thought.

At school he started doing very good work. A few years later, he went to army school and later he went to war. First he beat Paekche, then he beat Koguryo in the North, and all of Korea became one country, called the Silla Dynasty. He returned to the capital in triumph as a great general to a big parade. After that he went back to his village.

By this time, his grandmother was very old. She went into her altar room. "Thank you very much, Buddha. My grandson has become a great general and come home once more!" Every one in his neighborhood thought he was wonderful. They had parties, gave him presents.

One day his grandmother asked him, "Do you still have... that thing."

"If I didn't, how could I have won all those battles," he said. "The enemy was always terrified of me because I never thought of life or death. I always pressed on, only believing in my special energy. So I always won! This treasure is fantastic! You really told me the truth. Thank you very much, Grandmother."

"Yes, yes," the grandmother said.

Then she took him into his grandfather's room. "Let me see your special energy prize."

She took the lion's head and said, "Look, this isn't any treasure. It's the head of your grandfather's walking stick. It isn't anything special."

The grandson was astonished.

"You didn't believe in yourself. The other children kicked you around the block. So I gave you this. The special energy you felt came from you, not this little thing."

This story is very interesting, about being dependent on something, attached to something. For Zen students it is the same. Maybe you think you understand, but then you see something, you hear something, you are attached to it, so your mind moves. If you cut off this mind-moving, cut off all thinking, then you are already Buddha. To do this, you must believe in your true self 100 percent. This means, don't check your mind, don't check your feelings.

But when bad karma appears, your mind moves, then what? In Oriental medicine they say, if you have hot sickness, hot medicine is necessary. So if

you are attached to name and form, practicing is necessary — chanting, bowing, wearing these robes, lighting the incense, sitting Zen. When you chant, only hear this chanting; when it is time to bow, only bow; when the incense is lit, only smell. Only practicing means cutting off all thinking. Then you can see, you can hear, you can smell, all things are just like this, already Buddha. So only go straight, keep not-moving mind, "don't know" mind. O.K.? O.K.

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