

Not Holding “Monk”

BY ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

From a question-and-answer session at Cambridge Zen Center, 6th April 1989.

Monk: I’ve been a monk for about sixteen years, but for the past year-and-a-half I’ve worked as a psychotherapist in a few cities outside of Boston in order to support myself. I’m in a somewhat difficult situation. Because I am a monk I am not supposed to have an outside job *per se*, but at the same time I do have responsibilities to patients. And I do find working as therapist a very helpful aspect of my training – it’s something I didn’t do before... Do you think it is proper for me to continue that for maybe another year or so? Given the fact that I am a monk?

ZMSS: I ask you, “Tomorrow morning you will die. What can you do? Still monk? Still psychotherapy? Still what?” If I will die tomorrow morning – tonight, what to do? But not tomorrow morning – you must die moment to moment to moment to moment, okay? Then there is no problem.

Monk: But still...

ZMSS: Still, you have problem. Still!

Monk: But in a relative sense, because I am a monk...

ZMSS: Okay. If you only keep “monk”, you cannot understand “monk”. A long time ago, one monk practiced ten years in a hermitage. And for ten years a woman helped him – every week, one time, washing clothes, giving food, for ten years. One day this old woman thought, “I helped this monk ten years, but has he got enlightenment, or not got enlightenment? I don’t understand.” If you are practicing ten years, something get, okay? But no news.

So this woman had a beautiful daughter, eighteen years old – beautiful make-up, beautiful clothes, make beautiful (laughter). Then, “You must take food, clothes, give it to this monk, give it to him – you do it.” So this eighteen-year-old girl was very happy – excited, you know! So, food and clothes, happy to make everything very beautiful for this monk.

Then she went and bowed to this monk: “My mother today made special food, special clothes to give to you.”

“Oh, why special?”

“You came to this hermitage already ten years ago.”

“Oh, already ten years! Your mother truly is a bodhisattva. Thank you very much. Thank you.”

Then just at this time this beautiful girl took strong hold of him. Psheeeuw! Then this girl asked him at that time, “How are you feeling?”

Then this monk, never changing his face, never surprised, said: “Rotten log on cold rocks.” No feeling! “Rotten log on cold rocks.”

So this young woman was very happy, because she had beautiful clothes, beautiful body, everything beautiful, but this monk’s mind is like rocks, not moving. So she bowed three times and came back and said “Ah, this monk is a very wonderful monk with strong practice, not-moving mind” – talking, talking, talking.

Then the mother said, “Yes, not-moving mind, strong, but what kind of answer did he give to you?”

“Oh, also wonderful! He said, ‘Rotten log on cold rocks’.”

Then this woman is very angry. Then holding a stick she runs up to the hermitage and hit him: “I’ve only been helping for ten years a demon! You are a demon! Go away!” Then she burned his house. Psheeeuw! Burning house!

So what kind of mistake was made by this monk? You are a monk. So what kind of mistake made by this monk? Somebody – beautiful woman – holds you: “How are you feeling?” What can you do? “I am monk! You go away!” – not possible! (Laughter)

That’s a famous kong-an, okay... Who gets “monk”? Moment to moment, how can I help other people? That’s a very important point. Correct situation at that time – the monk’s situation – the relationship – the student is the woman’s daughter. Function is – how to help this woman? “How are you feeling?” doesn’t matter. How help? If you are a monk, only helping other people is necessary. That means great love, great compassion, great bodhisattva way. Never checking, “I am monk”, holding “monk”. Only help other people.

Monk: That is what I’ve been thinking, and yet at the same time...

ZMSS: Don’t think! Do it! (Laughter)

Monk: ...I’ve been afraid for other people, as I am working as a therapist...

ZMSS: Your center is not strong enough. If your center is strong, any kind of situation, any kind of condition, any kind of feeling comes, you can digest it and help other people. No problem.

Monk: I don’t mean for me personally...

ZMSS: You say I, I, I, that’s the problem. Take away “I”, okay. You are monk, so taking away “I” is necessary.

Monk: You have the title of “monk” – don’t you follow a certain life-style because of that?

ZMSS: I am a monk, but not holding “monk”. Only do it. I never think, “I am a monk.” Only do it. Ha ha ha! So also, you do it! “I am monk”, then you’ll have a problem appear.

Monk: Okay, what would you think would be appropriate “doing it” in my situation?

ZMSS: Your situation? Take away! (Laughter) “My situation”, you have a problem. Always “my” situation, “my” condition, that means you have a problem. Okay?

Monk: If you take it away...?

ZMSS: If you take it away, sky is blue, tree is green, that’s all. Ha ha ha! If that’s not enough, go drink tea.

Monk: If you take away green and blue as well?

ZMSS: Why do it? Don’t take away, just go drink tea. If you have no tea, drink Coca Cola. Then no problem. (Laughter) Put it all down, okay. Everything, put it all down. Always keeping a mind clear like space – then no problem. Always keeping your mind clear like space. That is also the Buddha’s teaching. That is also monk’s mind. That's not “I’m a monk”; only keeping mind clear like space. Then no problem. Okay?

Make something – “I am monk”, “I this”, “I that” – that has a problem, so don’t make anything. Moment to moment, just do it. That’s very important. Try that.