

# Roots of American Buddhism

BY ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

*This talk was given at the end of the second annual congress of the Kwan Um School of Zen, in July 1984.*

Thank you very much for coming here to the school congress. This is the second year of our new school. We are planting seeds in the ground, the seeds of American Buddhism. It has taken twelve years to make this particular form of American Buddhism, so it's important for people to understand the significance of this new school.

The Kwan Um School of Zen represents the correct roots of Bodhidharma's teaching. As the school grows up, and as American Buddhism grows up, many other forms will appear: one, two, one hundred flowers. But these different forms will be no problem as long as we keep the original roots.

Twelve years ago Korean Buddhism came to the United States and our new school appeared, a type of Zen school that does not exist in China or Korea or Thailand. In Korea, celibate monks control Buddhism, and lay people follow their ideas. The Kwan Um School of Zen, which has created many different positions within it (Ji Do Poep Sa Nim, senior dharma teacher, dharma teacher bodhisattva teacher, traditional monk) is not just a monk's idea, but a human idea. This is the American style, but it has the original roots.

Our school has branches in many different countries: Poland, Spain, Brazil, Canada. If we just brought an American idea to them, they wouldn't necessarily like it or accept it. Our school is not just an American idea. The correct American idea is that when you go to another country, you must understand: that country has its own idea of what is correct for it. American Buddhism is like Buddhism anywhere; it is universal.

Many people have fixed ideas about what is American, but in fact there are countless ideas. Some of these ideas lead to difficulty, and some help many people. If we cling to one idea of what is American, we become narrow-minded and the world of opposites will appear, just as communism and capitalism appear in the political realm. The true American idea is no idea. The true American situation is no situation. The true American condition is no condition.

When any religion is brought into the United States, it's digested, and a new style appears. For example, Hare Krishnas do not exist in India. Indian Hinduism came here and an American style of Hinduism developed. This is true of any religion, philosophy, or business that comes to the United States: it mixes with what's here and a new style appears. The correct idea, situation, or condition in any country doesn't matter; it's all the same.

The direction and meaning of our school is to let go of your opinion, your condition, your situation. Practice together, become harmonious with each other, and find our true human nature. Find our correct direction, truth, and correct life. So these are our new seeds, just planted. In the second year some growth has appeared, and next year the plant will grow even more. But everything has roots, whether it is a religion, story, house, family, or any kind of group. If a plant has no roots, it will fall over.

So what kind of roots does our school have? A long time ago in India one man appeared and got enlightenment: Shakyamuni Buddha. That's our root. Then the twenty-eighth patriarch, Bodhidharma, came to China. At that time there were already many kinds of Buddhism being taught, including the sutras, but Bodhidharma brought something new: the teaching of how to correctly perceive mind, or Zen meditation. When he came to China he didn't bring anything. He only taught "don't know."

So the transmission of this "don't know" teaching came from China and Korea and then here to the United States. The teachings of Bodhidharma are the roots of American Zen. If you have strong roots, a great tree will appear with many branches, leaves, flowers, and eventually many fruits. So it is important to examine our roots, and understand how we are supported by them.

Nowadays in China there is communism, where there used to be many kinds of Buddhism. Bodhidharma's roots have already disappeared in China; there are no longer any Zen centers. There used to be great Zen centers in the mountains of China, and great meditation masters too, but they have not reappeared.

Japanese Zen has a different story. About a hundred years ago in the Meiji dynasty, there was a great general who liked Western culture, any kind of Western education or clothing or forms of society. So he invited many Westerners to Japan, and over the next forty years, everything started changing to a new style. Instead of samurai style with a topknot and kimono, men began to wear their hair short, Western style, and to wear neckties and shoes and suits. Then the general said all the monks could get married. The monks were delighted. After all, monks have desires too. If marriage was the new style, why not get married? It was irresistible. Many monks got married and now you can hardly find celibate monks in Japan. That's Japanese style Zen.

What is Korean style Zen? It's an important issue for our new school, which has Korean roots. Back in the Li dynasty (starting in 1392 CE), and for a period of five hundred years, there was intense persecution of Buddhists by the ruling Confucians. It was so great at one time that no monks were allowed to enter the capital city of Seoul. There were four gates to the city, each guarded by the army. If you were a monk you were not allowed in. Even a dog could come and go, but the Li dynasty considered monks less than human beings. At that time there was an old Confucian tradition of wearing special mourning clothes for a period of three years following the death of your parents. Part of the clothing was a hat which completely covered the head, so

it was impossible to tell if someone was a monk or not. Only in this manner, wearing mourning clothes, could monks pass through the gates of Seoul.

But persecution is a strong force, and it pushed great people to appear. Many great monks and Zen Masters appeared in Korea during that time. Korean monks also got the reputation of being strong fighters. In one famous series of battles in the 1600's during the Hideyoshi invasion, Korean warrior monks helped repel a Japanese force so decisively that the Japanese had to retreat. As a result, the Japanese were still afraid of Korean monks even in 1910 when the Japanese became colonial rulers of Korea. When the Japanese occupation began, the Soto school of Japanese Zen wanted to control Korean Buddhism, so they proclaimed that all Korean monks could get married. They allowed monks to travel freely, to cut or not cut their hair, and to wear any kind of clothes. They told the monks, you control the minds of your countrymen, so anything you do is no problem. You can make money, come and go in Seoul without hindrance, and do any kind of business. These proclamations made the monks very happy.

In a very famous story about Korean Buddhism, the Japanese governor Minami Chun Dok was in control of Korea at the time. He invited all the abbots of the thirty-one large temples of Korea to a great assembly at the government house in Seoul. Zen Master Man Gong, my grand-teacher, was abbot of the head temple of the Chogye order then, so he and the other abbots came to this meeting. The Japanese governor told them that Japan wanted to help Korea and asked how it could help Korean Buddhism. He spoke to the abbots, telling them they were great monks and leaders of their people. They were very flattered by this, and told him about the severe persecution during the Li dynasty. Because they had had so much suffering before, and now felt free, the monks had only good things to say about the Japanese government. Perhaps their personal feelings for the Japanese were not so good, but at least their words were complimentary.

At this important meeting, Man Gong was the last to speak. He pointed at the Japanese governor, Minami Chun Dok, and said, "Mister Minami, you have already gone to hell! The Amita Sutra says, if someone breaks the precepts of even one monk, he will go to hell. You have broken the precepts of three thousand monks, so you will go to hell!" There was a murmur of horror in the assembly. Why had this crazy monk made a speech like that? The Japanese governor grew angry. Man Gong continued. "Originally this world is pure and clear. Why then do the mountains, the river, the sun, and the moon appear? KATZ!" Now the translator had a terrible problem. If he translated correctly, perhaps the governor would become even more furious and have all the monks killed. They too were afraid of the effect of Man Gong's speech. The governor ordered his translator to make an accurate translation. "Yes, sir!" The poor man did his job, translating correctly. Then there was a great hush in the assembly. At last Minami, who was a Buddhist, bowed deeply to Man Gong and said, "In Korea, there is still one great Zen Master.!" He wanted to give Man Gong many gifts and do many things for him, but the Zen Master would accept nothing and soon departed. After that meeting there were no further difficulties with the Japanese government. This is a famous story about our lineage, the Chogye order.

After the Second World War, there were 7,600 married monks but only 600 celibate monks. The Chogye order, which consisted of celibate monks, fought the family monk order for control, and after much fighting won control of Korean Buddhism. The family monks went off to start different schools, some going to Taiwan. In Korea now, the whole Chogye order is only celibate monks. That is our lineage, and the roots of the Kwan Um School of Zen.

In America now we are making traditional monks, bodhisattva teachers who can marry, as well as dharma teachers and five precept students all living together. That is Korean Buddhism coming here and changing its form. But roots never move. So yesterday we had an opening ceremony for our first monastery, which will be the home for traditional monks. These roots, which are the correct roots from Bodhidharma, almost died in Korea. Although they were almost lost, in Korea these roots have been kept, and now they have come to the United States.

In building a monastery, the Kwan Um School of Zen now has correct roots, from which will come correct seeds. This is very important. Some people have asked me why must we support this monastery. But this is not correct thinking, not the original style of Buddhism. For example, if you go to Thailand and you become a monk, all the people will help you. Every morning some people make food, take it into the city and give it to the monks. Perhaps our style of support will be different, but that's original Buddhism. In Buddha's time, there was no cooking in the monastery. All the monks went begging for food, and then they would eat. Other Buddhists would help the monks.

So we have a new form appearing, and it's not a good attitude to think "I like this style" or "I don't like this style" of having monks. Also, don't judge the monks. Whether a monk is good or bad or even crazy, it doesn't matter. A monk is a monk. Support is necessary. If you say, "I only want the fruit, but I don't like the root," you will have a problem. If you support these roots, the tree of American Buddhism will be strong. Leaves, flowers, fruits will appear. But if you do not support these roots, the tree will fall or soon rot and die.

In the future, American Buddhism means supporting each other; we must help them. We must help each other. After all, what is the root? The tree? The branch? The flower? What is the fruit? This is a very important question. If flower and fruit fight each other, if trunk and root fight, the tree will soon die.

As our Zen centers grow up, many opinions, many likes and dislikes will appear. This is not so good. If someone disagrees with you, follow them without hindrance. This style of mind will be necessary. "No, I won't change until I die!" This style of mind is a big problem. Please let go of your opinions and help each other. If you say, "I am a senior dharma teacher, so you listen to me!" you are creating difficulties. Just ordering people around won't work. So don't hold anything. Our school's direction is putting down our opinions, conditions, and situations and only helping other people. If you don't help each other, you make problems. Monks are the original root for our whole school. If we support them, we support the whole tree. So how can we help

each other? We must understand our job correctly and do it. That's the correct job, no matter what your position is.

We have been meeting here for two days, doing hard training. Our sangha is already thirteen years old, so it has problems. Becoming a teenager means even more problems. These future years until we are twenty-one are very dangerous years. Be careful! The correct American idea is no idea. The correct American condition is no condition. The correct American situation is no situation. No idea, no condition, no situation means great idea, great condition, great situation. Everyday mind is Zen mind. The American idea is also the Zen idea. So please everyone, put it all down. Moment to moment, what is your correct idea, correct condition, correct situation? Find that and do it; then you will have no hindrance.

I often use these basic kong-ans: Why do you eat every day? Why is the sky blue? When does sugar become sweet? These are simple, but they have great meaning. Zen Master Joju often said "Go drink tea." But why drink tea? That's very important. Just one action. What is Buddha? Zen Master Guji held up one finger. That one finger is primary point. "One finger" mind is the whole universe, all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. But one finger is just one finger. Dry shit on a stick is just dry shit on a stick. Three pounds of flax is three pounds of flax. My hand is my hand. That is what we call correct view. When you see east, don't make west. East is east, west is west. Don't add your idea. If you do, west changes to east, and then you have problems. West is west. Don't change it into east. This is a very important mind to keep. If you add your idea, everything changes.

So put down your ideas. Just sit, just hear, just smell, just taste, just touch, just think. An eminent teacher once said, "Without thinking, just like this is Buddha." That means, without thinking, when you see, everything is correct, everything is truth. Then use this truth to make your life correct. That is our correct direction. So the American idea and the Zen idea are never different. I hope everyone will put down their ideas of whatever sort, help each other, find human nature, get enlightenment, and save all people from suffering. Thank you.