

## A ZEN STUDENT WRITES TO HIS HINDU FATHER

(The following letter to his father in India was written in 1980 by Dhananjay Joshi, a director of the Chicago Meditation Center, shortly after he sat his first Zen meditation retreat with Soen Sa Nim at Providence Zen Center. Following this retreat, Dhananjay and Dixie and Bob Ray started the Chicago Meditation Center, which offers a blend of Vipassana and Zen teaching. When asked if it was a problem practicing Vipassana and Zen together, Dhananjay said he didn't find a difference. "Coming from India, forms don't intimidate me. You can always look behind the form and see the unity. What Vipassana teaches and what Soen Sa Nim teaches is the same.")

Dhananjay was brought up in India and came to the United States in 1970 when he was 23. His was a devout Hindu household in which his father performed a daily Puja (devotional service) to the deities and to the family teacher represented on the altar in the family shrine room. In Indian philosophy, Dhananjay explained, a man goes through four stages: the son, the student, the householder, and the spiritual life. He must complete the responsibilities of each stage before he enters the next. In the household stage, the son has the duty of caring for his parents who have entered the spiritual life, or renunciation stage.

Dhananjay's father was amused by the following exchange between his son and the Zen Master, but felt the retreat was a very moving experience for his son.)

Dear Dada,

I received your letter yesterday as I returned from my trip to Providence Zen Center. I wanted to just sit at the airport and write to you right then. It was such a wonderful trip. There is so much to tell you that I don't know where to start. I went on a retreat led by Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn. He is no doubt an enlightened soul and it was a wonderful experience talking to him, especially during interviews.

I don't know how familiar you are with Zen practice. The schedule was like the one I sent you, getting up at 4:30 a.m. and ending at 10 at night. Zen is direct pointing to reality. The key is stop the thinking mind. The question one asks is, "What is the nature of the mind before thinking?" or "What am I?" The mind before thinking is the clear mind which reflects the truth: "The sky is blue and the grass is green." The truth is just like this. It is pure and clear.

What is the nature of enlightenment? When I am hungry, I eat. When I am sleepy, I sleep. It is that simple. One has to put down everything to understand this. The clear mind is what Soen Sa Nim calls "don't-know" mind. The practice is to keep don't-know mind throughout the day and then there is no problem. On the one hand, Zen is very simple, like a child. On the other hand, it seems so difficult when you try to think rationally about Zen state-

ments. When someone asked Zen Master Joju about the nature of the soul, he replied, "It is windy this morning."

What do you think about this statement?

So Zen is living with don't-know mind moment to moment. Meditation is to establish this primary point. It is also like the zero balance point of a scale. Clear mind is always returning to that primary point. Clear mind just reflects the changing nature of the universe.

The sittings emphasize not moving, so that inner and outer can merge. There is an interesting ritual during Zen sittings. When sitting starts, one person very slowly and mindfully walks to the statue of the Buddha, bows, and picks up a long flat stick. Holding it in front of him, he walks slowly without disturbing anyone in front of people in meditation. We sit with our eyes half closed and looking out at about a 45 degree angle, observing the breath rising and falling, or just trying to keep clear mind.

We may feel drowsy and droopy and nod off. If the stickmaster sees this while he is in front of you, he will gently touch you on the shoulder with his stick. Then you wake up and both of you bow to each other. You stay in the bowed position and he gives you two hard swats on the back. You bow to each other and he continues on his walk.

Everyone takes turns doing the stickmaster's duty. I think there is a great significance to this: wake up! At the end of the day everyone get these two swats administered by the Head Dharma Teacher. It signifies the dream nature of the world and tells you to wake up to the world of enlightenment.

You may also ask to be hit if you notice your own sleepiness. You put your hands in the namaskara (hapchang) position. Then the stickmaster knows what you want and bowing to you, administers the HIT. It is said that many Zen Masters attained enlightenment at the instant of the HIT. The waking up was instantaneous. Of course, a true teacher would know the exact moment when the student was ready to be HIT.

There is a lot of bowing in Zen. That is to lessen the small I. It is not that one bows to anyone in particular, but the small I bowing to the big I, until only the big I remains.

Now to tell you about the interview. Each participant gets a personal interview with Soen Sa Nim. The method is rather intense questioning and answering, and if followed correctly and with full attention, it can point out very clearly where you are. I went in, and after bowing three times, sat in front of Soen Sa Nim. He always has a pretty thick stick in his hand.

"Where do you come from?" said Soen Sa Nim.

"India."

Touching my hand with his stick, he asked, "Whose hand is this?"

"Mine."

Touching my leg, he asked, "Whose leg is this?"

"Mine."

"So the person whose hand and leg this is, comes from India. Where does your true self come from?"

"Nowhere."

"Nowhere?" Turning to Bobby Rhodes, the Head Dharma Teacher, he said, "Everywhere, I think."

He explained what don't-know mind was. Then he asked, "When the mind is don't-know, is the substance of this stick and your substance the same? If you say the same, I will hit you thirty times. If you say different, I will hit you thirty times. So, what is the answer?"

I kept silent.

Hitting me, he said, "Stop thinking. You are always thinking, thinking. Ask Bobby."

I asked Bobby the question. Instead of answering, she hit the floor.

Soen Sa Nim said, "That is the correct answer. When don't-know mind is there, all substance is the same. Your don't-know mind and my don't-know mind are the same. But there is no speech, because there is no one to speak. So only the demonstration, only the sound of hitting the floor to indicate the truth."

And so it went on, the questions confronting you until you are completely stuck, and also getting hit if you try to rely on your thinking to find an answer.

So here I am, somewhat in a state of amazement and also wonder and awe! What does all this really mean? It is like a spiritual review being taken somewhere deep inside me. Where have I been and where am I going?

I remember the days when you taught me how to do Puja at our house and I was just a kid. It was such a thrill that I had the honor to replace you in that duty which is so big. As I grew up and studied and thought about things and read the Bhagavad Gita, I remember questioning everything as I sat on the bank of the river at the Engineering College. (You thought I was attending classes. Now you know!) I went everywhere with mother, meeting many holy people, asking questions. Yet the questioning mind remained. How many times we sat and discussed the path of devotion and the path of knowledge, and the discussion always ended with a call to the dinner table!

I am wondering if you would think that a devout Hindu son has strayed a bit. Knowing you, I am sure you won't. In one sense it all blends together like a lovely tapestry. All substances, all philosophies, all teachings: what's the difference?

Right now, I am just very grateful! With love and affection,  
Dhananjay

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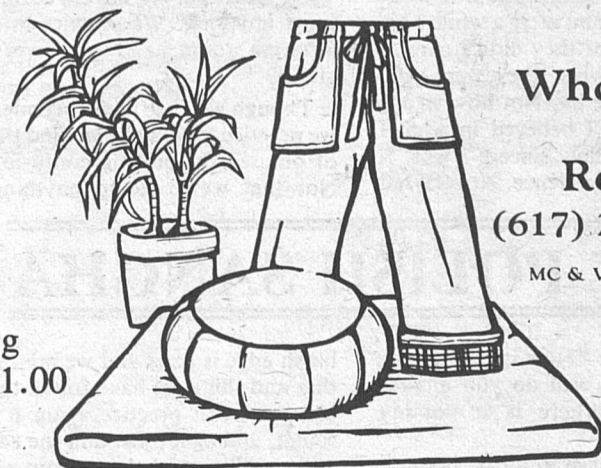
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