

# PRIMARY POINT

PUBLISHED BY THE KWAN UM ZEN SCHOOL

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VOLUME THREE, NUMBER 2 JUNE 1986

## A Time Of Complete Transformation

by Zen Master Seung Sahn

(The following is taken from a talk given by Zen Master Seung Sahn on March 19, 1984 at the Providence Zen Center.)

Everything that happens in this world is correct. Things go in cycles: spring, summer, fall, winter. Every year this cycle of seasons occurs. But there are longer cycles too, and this year makes the beginning of both a 60 year cycle and a 360 year cycle. It is a very interesting time.

There is a very large insect called the cicada, that grows very slowly inside a cocoon fastened to a tree. The transformation from cocoon to winged creature takes a long time, about 17 years, and is very difficult. During this time in the cocoon, the cicada's internal body appears disrupted. The skin, the organs, the wings, all appear not to be working. They aren't moving. The body looks as if it were confused and broken.

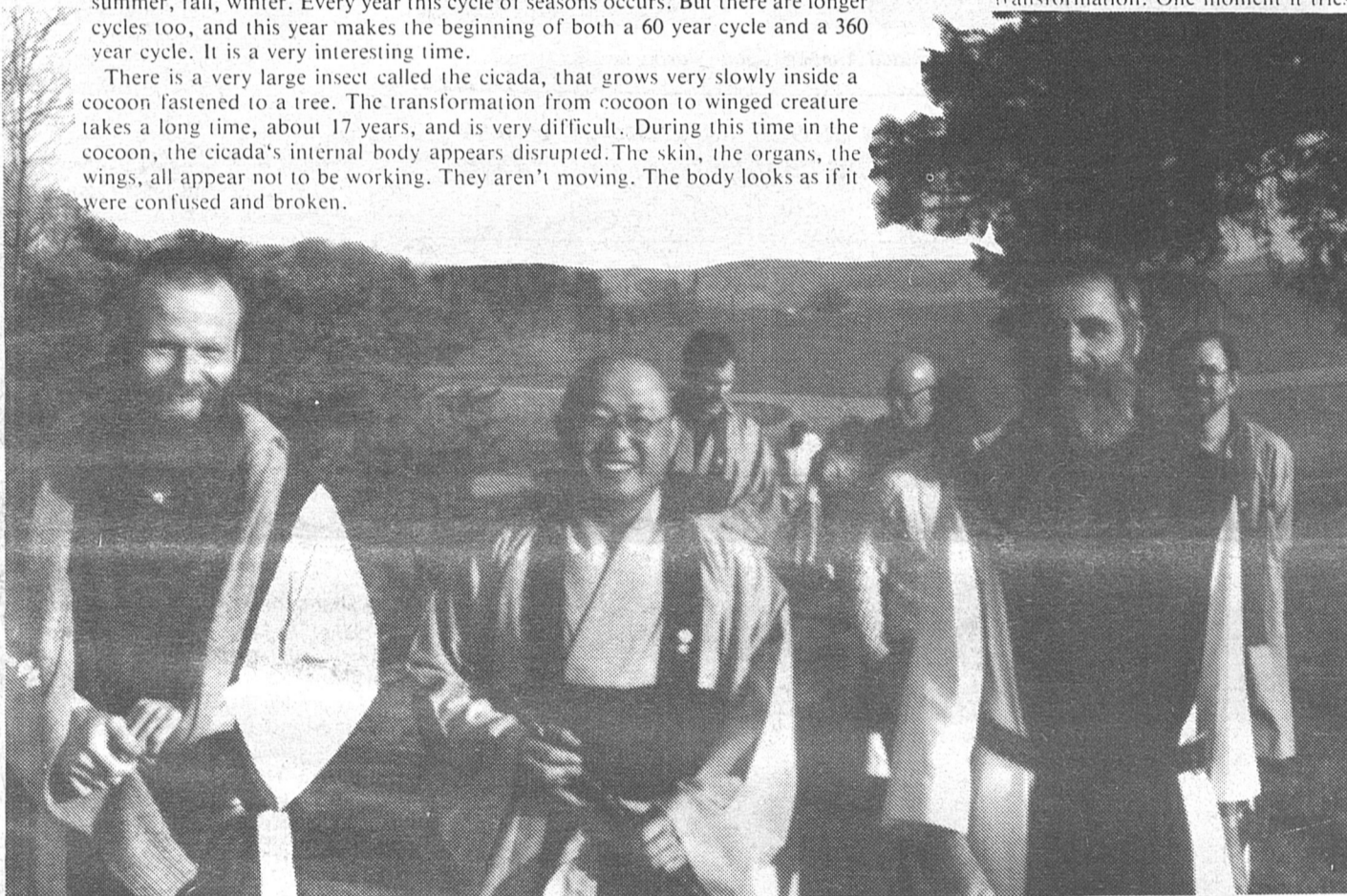
Then slowly the cocoon breaks open and the new body begins to appear. A wing emerges, then a leg stretches forth. At first the cicada's movements are slow and difficult. It crawls out of the cocoon and falls to the ground. At this stage the cicada never thinks about the sky or about flying - it only thinks about how to get food, any kind of food. Sometimes it takes three or four hours between the time it leaves the cocoon and the time it is able to fly. But this is a time of complete transformation. One moment it tries to fly and then it flies!

This year is like that. Things look disrupted, stuck in a state of not working. We are very worried about the future. How can we ever fly? How will our wings possibly appear? How can we get enough food? Many problems are appearing. If we buy a business, we want to know if the future will be good for sales or bad. So we have many worries. But human beings are part of nature. Like the cicada, even if we have already emerged from our cocoon, it still takes time before we understand how to stretch our wings out and fly. Finally we will fly.

There is always change. But changing means not changing. Moment to moment, everything is complete. Everything that happens is correct. If you are attached to name and form, it means that your thinking appears and disappears. If your thinking does not appear and disappear, everything is complete. If your center is not moving, you will have no difficulty even though many new conditions will appear. If you have no center, you will always have problems.

Think of it like this: not much happens in the winter months, the season of cold and ice. No leaves or flowers appear from the frozen ground. When spring comes, the ground thaws. Water goes into the soil and starts working. Everything erupts. The grass grows. Leaves appear and get bigger. Flowers appear. All the colors are changing. Everything is changing, quickly changing.

Continued on page 2



TRAPPIST MONKS SIT CHRISTIAN-ZEN RETREAT with Soen Sa Nim at Gethsemene Monastery in Kentucky, where the late Fr. Thomas Merton lived. Story on page 2.

### KWAN UM ZEN SCHOOL CONGRESS AND ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN'S BIRTHDAY CEREMONY: AUGUST 1-3, 1986

For School members and friends, the annual summer gathering at the Providence Zen Center is an important tradition, the highlight of our year. First and foremost, the weekend is an opportunity to just be together. Ours is a large and ever more far-flung sangha; rarely do we have occasion to congregate in one place.

Secondly, within the program are panel discussions, workshops and small groups. We talk about issues in our School, how we can help our Zen Centers, our practice, each other. Zen Master Seung Sahn and all the Master Dharma Teachers will be present.

Finally, we celebrate our teacher's birthday with tributes, music, food and fun.

For further information, contact your local Zen Center or the Kwan Um Zen School office.

### CARRYING SNOW IN A TEASPOON: The Bodhisattva effort

by Master Dharma Teacher Richard Shrobe

(The following exchange of questions and answers took place during a retreat at the Providence Zen Center on February 1, 1986.)

Q: What is the underlying essence of Zen?

RS: (Lifting up his cup and drinking) Cold water. (Laughter) Soen Sa Nim told me that's what they say in Korea when they want to tell someone to just keep a clear mind, "Go drink cold water." (Laughter) Only that. I had an interesting and useful experience a few weeks ago. I was talking with Ken Kessel, and oldtime student of Soen Sa Nim's [and a director of the Chogye International Zen Center]. He told me that sometimes he likes to practice for two hours straight in the morning. He doesn't walk, he doesn't get up, he just sits there for two hours in his full lotus position, without moving.

I got inspired to find out what that was about. (Laughter) So I tried a couple of times. I got pretty close, one time an hour and 50 minutes. But one of the interesting experiences I had when trying this was coming to a moment when I had the recognition that it was just sitting. There was nothing miraculous that was going to appear, even if I sat for two more hours straight. (Laughter) It was just sitting, pure and simple, just like drinking cold water is just drinking cold water.

Continued on page 7

### INDEX

Trappist Monks Sit Zen .....	2
SSN's Whirlwind Tour .....	2
Zen Dialogues in China .....	3

Growing Pains: an editorial .....	4
Death of Zen Master Baek Cho .....	5
International retreat: photo essay .....	5
New developments in European Zen .....	6
A shakuhachi concert .....	8

Dying to the Self: Christianity and Zen .....	10
Poetry: Parker and Roitman .....	11
"A Still Forest Pool" reviewed .....	12
Bodhisattva Path .....	13
Calendar of Events .....	15

## CARRYING SNOW IN A TEASPOON

Continued from page 1

That's our teaching, our way, and yet it's difficult to believe. Over and over we want to make something, add something, romanticize something. It's very difficult to just believe in the truth of something that simple. So maybe there is no essence of Zen, none at all. (Laughter)

As soon as we start to think about the essence of something, we're already caught up in some subtle conceptual framework because we're looking for something called an "essence." If you sit for two hours straight, you can go on a long journey towards essence. Your nervous system and your mind and everything will do miraculous and extraordinary things in two

On the other hand, when I was studying with Soen Sa Nim around 1976, we were having a discussion with him. We had just moved the Zen Center and were debating whether we could keep a daily practice going as a Zen Center because there was no one living in it, or whether we should call ourselves something other than a Zen Center. Soen Sa Nim subtly baited us. He said, "Well, you can be a Zen club if you want to and get together every so often and occasionally I'll come here." In the midst of all this talking, he finally coerced us into making a commitment. Then he said (this was the first time I'd heard him say it, and he's said it a million times since then), "Ok, so you try. Try, try, try for 10,000 years nonstop."

That's a teaching based on "just try." But the intention of his "just try" and the intention that was being imparted in these

### "Maybe there is no 'essence' of Zen, none at all."

hours of sitting, that is, along with the pain in your legs. So one of the fundamentals of the Zen way of talking is to talk about "no self" and "no trace." No trace means that experiences, phenomena have no trace of something conceptual sticking to them. That means no essence.

There's a story about a sea turtle who comes out of the ocean, crawls up on the beach, buries its eggs, smooths over the sand so that no one can find anything and then goes back down the beach to the ocean and swims away. But this turtle has a tail. As it crawls down the beach, the tail drags back and forth in the sand, leaving quite a clear tracing of just where the eggs were. So, the Zen way emphasizes existing with no trace, no tail. Somehow we have to cut off our tail, or have the patience to endure just waiting until it falls off by itself. It's doubtful to me, at this point in my life, that we could really cut it off once and for all. If you cut it off, it just grows back anyway, like a salamander.

Richie said last night when I came in, that it was good to have the retreat going on here and it was amazing how quickly things fall away and you get back to the simplicity of natural mind. After saying that, he said, "It's amazing how easily things fall away, and also how quickly they come back."

We need the patience just to let these things wear themselves out, over and over, until there's no trace left. It's like sandpaper getting things smoother and smoother. We're all looking for the essence of Zen and that's creating many problems.

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**Q:** When I don't think about effort, it seems like I'm able to do something. When I do think about it, I have come to think there is no such thing as trying. Where do we get that impulse inside ourselves to do it?

**RS:** It's a combination of self-determined focus, on one hand, and a spontaneous emergence, on the other. I think the two come together at a certain point. Words like "try" and "effort" are teaching words, a particular expedient means that someone might offer to encourage someone else. Sometimes, a teacher might say "try" and at other times, "don't try at all."

The other day my 13-year old daughter was home sick and I was there with her. We have a video cassette of the movie "Karate Kid," and we were watching it for about the millionth time (laughter). Parts of it have a Zen flavor. The karate teacher is going to teach this kid karate and they make a pact to begin. The teacher says, "Are you ready to begin?" The kid says, "Yeah, maybe, I guess so."

The teacher then says something like this: "With some things, you can walk on one side of the road, you can walk on the other, or you can walk in the middle, but in karate, if you have this attitude of 'I guess,' you get squashed. So either karate 'do' or karate 'don't,' but there's no 'I guess' karate."

That's a teaching that's based on effort. You have to focus yourself. There's no in-between, you either do it or not. There's a similar scene in the second Star Wars movie, where the master-like figure Yoda is teaching Luke Skywalker to become attuned to the force of the universe. Luke says something like "I'll try" and Yoda says, "Either do or don't. There's no try."

two movies is basically the same spirit. To some degree, effort comes out of a determination to want to do something. If you have this determination, then there's willingness and in that willingness you can find interest, effort, spontaneous emergence. I think even before spontaneous interest or effort comes, there must be a certain willingness to want to do something. That's what we call having a great vow. There's a commitment, and out of that comes interest, which sometimes needs to be rekindled and sometimes just emerges

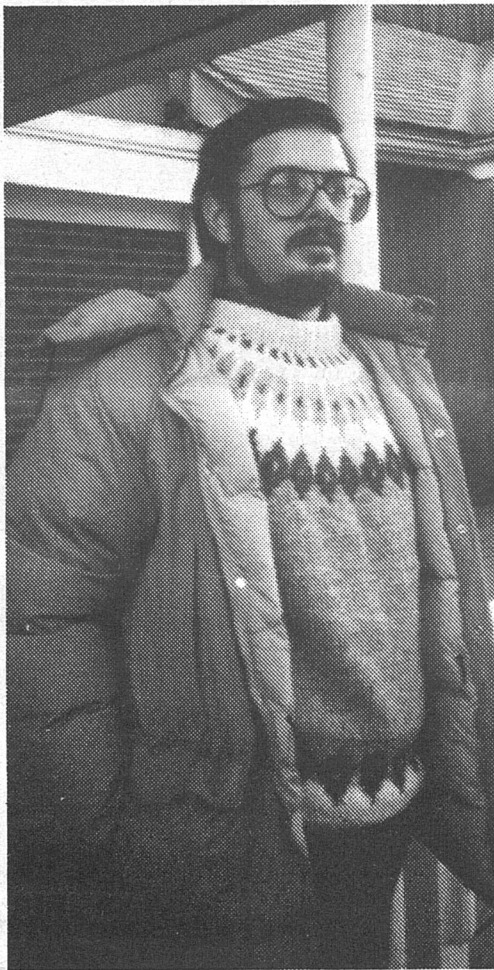


photo by Ellen Sidor

very spontaneously.

At times "I want to do this" comes up quite easily and you don't have to work very hard. You don't have to work at all, except just to get out of your own way, put the conscious, computer-like activities of your mind aside and just let the thing run on its own. Sometimes it's like that. Sometimes when we're sitting in a retreat, we'll have moments or periods like that.

But there are other times when it doesn't come forth like that. You might have to reinstitute your commitment, your willingness to go through what it takes. I think both are important. In a way they come together, when you have a wide open mind that's clear enough at any moment - pfft! -to become one with the point at hand. There's a particular kind of energy that's born of these two things coming together, willingness and intention and getting out of your own way and just letting it happen. It's dangerous to think that it should just occur spontaneously.

Suzuki Roshi was very good at making that point in his writings, that human life is imperfect. It's always leaving traces. Even the word "imperfect" isn't quite right. Our human life, moment to moment, is always

changing. There are always difficulties and limitations coming. At the same time, those particular ways of expressing ourselves and those things that we're doing are the creative activity of the big mind or "don't-know" mind or beginner's mind, whatever word you want to use. On one hand, we're always leaving traces. On the other hand, there's no need to get rid of those traces.

So we say there's some spiritual truth and that truth is embodied in or expressed as everything. But we also look around and see so much disarray in ourselves and others. Why are people suffering? You can explain that away through some philosophical notion like karma, if you want. Not that karma is just a philosophical notion - it might be a reality as well. But while we can explain away painful things through a concept like karma, the real paradox of human existence comes if we don't explain or justify it away. How do we live having faith that there's some truth in the universe and that it's manifesting itself as all this that we see and hear and taste and smell and touch, and at the same time see so much disarray? How is all this disarray truth?

**Q:** How is it?

**RS:** Yes! That's great doubt. Keep that question for 10,000 years—"how is it?"

**Q:** Every morning I get up with everyone else here and take a vow to save all sentient beings from suffering. How can I do that?

**RS:** Do you want to do it?

**Q:** Yes.

**RS:** Then you'll find a way, through getting up every morning and taking that vow. That's an impossible vow. Each one of these is an impossible vow. "The Buddha way is inconceivable—I vow to attain it." How do you attain something that's inconceivable? "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all." How? It brings up the image of some great social worker in the sky—(laughter)—bigger than the whole universe, going to save all beings from suffering.

One time I heard Bernie Glassman Sensei, a teacher in Maezumi Roshi's school (he has a group in New York), talking on the radio. He gave an example of what a Bodhisattva is. He said, there's a well that's dry down on the plains, and up on the mountain tops there is snow. So the Bodhisattva is like a guy who decides he'll fill the well by bringing the snow down to the plains, but the only thing he has to carry the snow in is a teaspoon. So he goes up to the mountain, gets one teaspoon full of snow, comes back down to the plains and

### "The Zen way emphasizes existing with no trace, no tail. Somehow we have to cut it off, or have the patience to endure waiting until it falls off by itself."

puts the snow in the well. Then he goes back up the mountain, gets another teaspoon full of snow, brings it down and puts it in the well, over and over.

That's a ridiculous endeavor. Never in a million years is he going to fill up that well, but what's important is his sincerity of effort - to just do something, whether it's possible or impossible. That effort, that spirit, is a contribution in and of itself that can't be compared to anything else, so it has absolute value. Because it can't be compared to anything else, the spirit of that fills the universe in one second. At each moment that we do that, all sentient beings are saved, because we affirm the absolute value of everything.

We have to do something, even if it's not possible. So the vow points to something like that. At least, that's my view of it.

**Q:** What is absolute value?

**RS:** Relative value is concerned with, "This is good," or "This is not as good as something else." Value is ascribed to something based on a comparison with something else. "My watch is better than your watch, so it's worth more." That's relative value. Absolute value has no basis like that. We can't compare with anything, so it stands on its own just as it is. Sometimes we say subject and object become one—pfft! At that time, there's no comparison of anything with anything else, so the absolute value of something emerges at that point. It just stands or sits on its own.

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PRIMARY POINT is published by the Kwan Um Zen School, a non-profit religious corporation under the direction of Zen Master Seung Sahn. The School supports and arranges the world-wide teaching schedule of Zen Master Seung Sahn and his senior teachers, issues publications on contemporary Buddhist practice, and supports dialogue among religions.

PRIMARY POINT is published three times a year in February, June and October. Subscription cost for one year is \$10.00 (\$11.00 for Canada and Mexico, \$20.00 for foreign). If you would like to become a member of the Kwan Um Zen School, write to the nearest Zen Center or to the School Director.

Average circulation of PRIMARY POINT is 6,000 copies. For information on advertising rates or distribution, contact the business manager.

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PRIMARY POINT is typeset and printed by Weston Graphics Inc., Bellingham, MA.

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**Q:** Your story about the Bodhisattva with the teaspoon reminds me a similar story of the sparrow who tries to put out a forest fire by carrying water in his beak. I told that story to one of my friends and they said, "That's the dumbest thing!" Why didn't he take a bucket?"

**RS:** He didn't have a bucket.

**RS:** But we're not talking about mountains and snow, we're talking about suffering. You can't use a power tool on suffering.

**Q:** I get the feeling sometimes that the sparrow was really dumb.

**RS:** Yes, sure! But dumbness has its place too. Someone might have a really simple kind of faith which is kind of dumb, given what we see all around us, and yet the energy that might come out of that effort might be quite profound. That doesn't mean we shouldn't sometimes look at the instruments we're using. If there's a bucket at hand and you're using a teaspoon, then that's stupidity. But if there's no bucket and you won't choose the teaspoon because there's no bucket, then that's stupidity too.

We talk about saving all sentient beings, every morning when we get up and bow and say our vows. But to have the idea that this little congregation of people here is doing something so profound that it's going to make a dent in the social fabric of this country, is from one perspective, dumb. Yet this is the instrument we have at hand, so we make use of it. □

Richard Shrobe studied intensively with Swami Sachidananda from 1967 until 1972. During that period he lived with his wife and three children for four years at the Integral Yoga Institute in New York. A former piano player, he has a Master's degree in Social Work and did four years of postgraduate training in gestalt therapy. In his private psychotherapy practice, he specializes in the gestalt approach.

He met Soen Sa Nim in 1975 and has been associated with the Chogye International Zen Center for many years. Certified as a Master Dharma Teacher in 1984, he lives in New York with his family.