

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Kong-an Practice in America**

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# PRIMARY POINT

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Some of the attendees at "The Global Conference of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival" which was held April 11-15 in Oxford, England.

(European News)

## Poep Sa Nim Attends International Conference On Human Survival

by Do Mun Sunim & Do Haeng Sunim

Our European sangha has continued to grow this past winter and spring with regular retreats in nine countries. The majority of the activity has been guided by Dharma Master Ji Kwang Poep Sa Nim. Her emphasis is on finding practice in the situations and responsibilities of everyday life (monk and lay life). Her efforts in helping individuals to learn how to do this touches many people and has created a large and ever-growing practicing sangha. In addition to leading many retreats and seeing many people in personal consultation, she has recently been interviewed on French radio (an excerpt appears on page 9), appeared as a guest

on an important national television program in Spain and, most significantly, was an invited participant at an international conference held at Oxford University in England.

"The Global Conference of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival," held for five days during the week of April 11-15, 1988, brought together 100 spiritual leaders drawn from all the major religions and 100 lawmakers serving in governments in all the world's major regions. They were not there to represent their churches or their govern-

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SPECIAL ISSUE

## Kong-an Practice in America

(Editor's note: Kong-an is a Korean word. In Japanese, it is "koan", in Chinese, it is "kung-an".)

What is a kong-an? Are kong-ans necessary in our practice to attain clear mind? Are kong-ans merely another attachment for the mind to grasp?

In the accompanying interview, Toni Packer raises these issues provocatively, arguing that the traditional use of kong-ans has become the means to some end, a sort of magical formula that one simply does to reach Enlightenment or an entangling system that becomes just another place to be stuck.

The first part of this interview was published in the February 1987 issue of Primary Point. To accompany the publication of Part Two, the Editors of Primary

Point invited commentaries from several Zen teachers in America who currently use kong-an practice in their teaching.

We asked them to comment on their use of kong-ans. What are kong-ans? Why, how and when do they use them? What is their relevance to modern America?

Master Dharma Teacher Barbara Rhodes, Daido Looi Sensei, Jan Chozen Bays Sensei, and Zenson Gifford Sensei have responded with stimulating essays.

Zen Master Seung Sahn was also asked some of the same questions. His responses are recorded in the interview which begins on this page.

The kong-an articles begin on the next page. We trust you will find them quite thought-provoking. We invite our readers to comment.

## Kong-ans: Mind-to-Mind Connection

An Interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn

PRIMARY POINT asked Zen Master Seung Sahn (Soen Sa Nim) to explain his system of Kong-an practice and its applicability to contemporary American minds. Mu Soeng Sunim conducted the interview on behalf of PRIMARY POINT.

PRIMARY POINT: What are kong-ans? How did they become part of Zen practice?

SOEN SA NIM: Kong-an means public case, or public exchange, public situation, or public document. In old China, when they made copy of a government document, they put a "chop" or seal on the copy in such a way that half of the seal was on the original and half on the copy. So when they had to verify the authenticity of the copy all they had to do was to match the two halves. In Zen tradition, kong-an means student's understanding of a question is one-half and matches the teacher's understanding of the same question which is the other half. When student and teacher share the same understanding, it is called *mind-to-mind connection*.

If you want to practice correctly, you must ponder over old Zen masters' enlightenment stories. If you understand their mind at the moment of enlightenment that means your kong-an practice is correct. Nowadays, all Zen Masters use these old Zen masters' enlightenment

stories to teach their students. This is kong-an practice.

In the beginning there was no kong-an practice. Then the future seventh patriarch, Huai-jang came to visit Hui-neng, the Sixth patriarch. Hui-neng asked him, "Where do you come from?". Hui-jang replied he came from Sung Shan mountain. Hui-neng asked again, "What is this thing that has come here?". Huai-jang could not answer. That became the first kong-an in Zen tradition--"What is this?" It became a big question for Huai-jang and it took him eight years to understand.

Also, even before that there were situations in Buddhist history which became the basis of reflection by future Zen monks. Buddha sat down under the Bodhi tree with a big question: "What is life? What is death?" When Bodhidharma came to China, the future second patriarch came to visit him. Bodhidharma would not talk to him. To show that he was sincere in his quest, the second patriarch cut off his arm and presented it to Bodhidharma. Seeing this, Bodhidharma asked him, "What do you want?" The second patriarch said, "My mind is not rested. Please pacify it for me." Bodhidharma said, "Bring me your mind and I will pacify it." The second patriarch was

(continued on page 3)



**Soen Sa Nim Interview***(Continued from front page)*

nonplused, "I cannot find my mind when I look for it." "There," said Bodhidharma, "I have pacified it for you." So this question, "What is mind?" became inspiration for Zen monks. Many questions came out of these stories: What is this? What is life? What is death? What is mind? All these questions became kong-ans and people started to use these questions for their own practice.

PP: Why do you use kong-ans in your practice?

SSN: Kong-ans are not special. But we use them to teach correct way, truth and correct life. We use kong-ans to teach how it is possible to function correctly in everyday life. Sometimes old Zen masters' answers to a question are not correct. But they used the situation to teach correct function, correct life to others. For example, Joju's answer in Mu kong-an (When asked if a dog has Buddha-nature, Zen master Joju (Chinese=Chao-chou) answered, "Mu" or "No") is not correct but he used MU to teach correct life. Also, the sixth patriarch's answer to "flag moving" kong-an (Two monks were fighting over whether the wind was moving or the flag was moving. Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch, who was passing by, said, "it's your mind that's moving") is not correct, but he used "your mind is moving" to teach correct life. Also, Buddha picking up the flower and saying to Mahakashyapa, "My dharma I transmit to you" (one time Buddha held up a flower. None of the 1200 monks present understood. Only Mahakashyapa smiled. Buddha said, "I give my dharma transmission to you") is not correct. But Buddha used "my dharma I transmit to you" to teach correct direction, correct life.

So kong-ans are only a technique to

directly how to function correctly in everyday life.

PP: Can't Clear Mind be attained without kong-an practice?

SSN: Yes, it is possible. Kong-an is only one technique. It's like this: American people use forks and knives. Chinese people only use chopsticks. Korean people use chopsticks and spoons. Indian



**Zen Master Seung Sahn**

people only use their hands. But they all have a full stomach when they eat, no matter how they eat.

PP: Isn't kong-an practice *making something*?

SSN: If you make something, you have a problem. We use kong-ans to take away your opinion. When you take away your opinion, your mind is clear like space.

***"Kong-ans are not special. But we use them to teach correct way, truth and correct life."***

teach correct direction, correct life. Zen students should not be attached to correct answers or incorrect answers by the patriarchs. We use kong-ans to perceive

Clear like space means only reflect action. Zen means correct conditional reflection. It means you respond to each situation correctly, meticulously. It means to understand what's your correct job in

this moment. That means moment-to-moment keep correct situation, correct function, correct relationship. If you practice correctly, this moment-to-moment correct situation, correct function, correct relationship will appear by itself.

If someone holds a kong-an, is attached to kong-an- "I am doing kong-an practice", or wants something from kong-an practice,

Now we use kong-an practice differently in our school. Enlightenment, no enlightenment, doesn't matter. How we use kong-an practice to make our direction clear, how we use kong-ans to help in our daily life, that's most important. So don't attach to a kong-an. Use a kong-an to function correctly, make your moment-to-moment life clear.

***"If you only want to understand kong-an, then you have a big problem."***

then he or she will have a big problem. If you only keep one kong-an or "Don't Know", all the time without making anything, then correct direction and correct life will appear by itself.

PP: What, then, is the best way to keep a kong-an?

SSN: Old-style kong-ans give us a Great Question: What is life? What is death? What is mind? What is this moment? Correct kong-an practice means Great Question plus Great Faith and Great Courage. Great Question means no thinking, no intellectual-style thinking.

An eminent teacher said, "Ten thousand questions are all one question." So One Question means only Don't Know. No thinking at all. Just do it. That's correct kong-an practice.

But if you have attachment to a kong-an or this style of practicing, then you have a big problem. A kong-an is only a finger pointing to the moon. If you are attached to the finger, you cannot perceive the moon. The most important thing is your direction. This direction is only Don't Know.

PP: What is the relevance of kong-an practice from ancient China to contemporary American society?

SSN: In correct kong-an practice, there is no American mind, no old China mind. Because correct kong-an practice is keeping a *before thinking mind*. In ancient days, people used only kong-ans and practiced very hard to get enlightenment.

PP: What is the best way to answer a kong-an? How does one open oneself up so that a direct and "correct" response is possible?

SSN: So that means put down everything, put down your opinion, your condition, your situation. Moment-to-moment only Don't Know. Then a correct response will appear by itself. Hitting the floor or shouting KATZ is only a technique. Sometimes using this technique is necessary, sometimes not necessary.

PP: Are there dangers in kong-an practice?

SSN: If you only want to "understand" kong-an, then you have a big problem. It's a kind of sickness. Then a very strong "I-my-me" mind appears. Sometimes people are attached to a good answer. That is not correct kong-an practice.

PP: Do you think that trying to pass the 10 Gates leads to a sense of competition? Does it lead to a sense of pride? Isn't trying to "solve" kong-ans particularly dangerous in our goal-oriented society?

SSN: So, correct practice is necessary. When you don't practice correctly, then your "I" mind appears, then competition appears, then pride appears. If you correctly "attain" kong-an, then this kind of mind never appears. Kong-an practice means cut off all (analytical) thinking. That means throw away our attachments to our conditions, opinions, and situations. American mind is intellectual, very analytical. Intellectual mind cannot pass kong-ans. Correct kong-an practice means your mind becomes very simple. In simple mind, there is no *I-my-me mind*. Then practicing kong-ans is no problem.

*(continued on page 7)*

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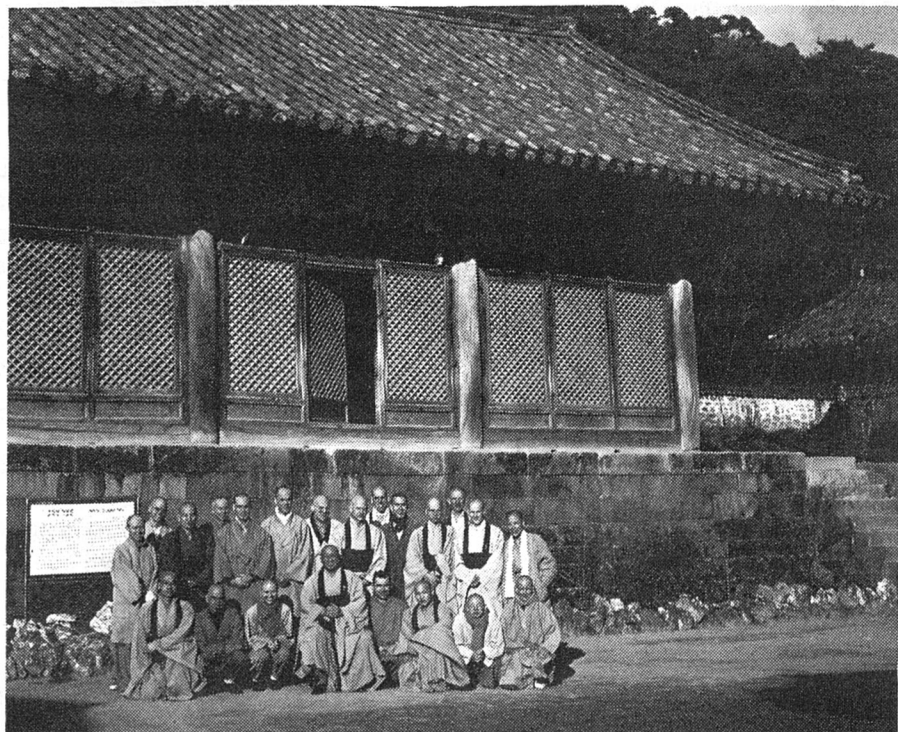
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Jan Chozen Bays- "...One Koan"

(Continued from page 6.)

Another example. A student came to me in sesshin, unsure if she should work on Zen koans because she was a Catholic. I asked her if she had any questions within Catholicism which were bothering her. She said that she had been worried over the question "Is there anything outside the will of God?" Perfect koan! She worked intently on it all sesshin. In Zen terms we could re-phrase it, "Is there anything outside of Buddha nature?" Is jealousy outside the will of God? Is child abuse outside the will of God? Is a toilet brush outside of Buddha nature?

This is precisely Joshu's Mu, the first case in Mumonkan. "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" The exact wording doesn't matter so much when someone has a koan which has grabbed them by the throat and gives them little rest.

There are koans everywhere. Take AIDS. It stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Take it one word at a time. What does *acquired* mean? The dictionary is one of my favorite Zen texts. I use it when I'm stuck and can't get "inside" a word in a koan. Acquire means to come into possession of. It comes from ad + quaerere, to seek, obtain. Do we acquire a thing out of the blue? Do we have to seek it or be accessible to it in some way? Is there a mutual relationship between the thing acquired and the acquirer?

(No, I'm not talking about that tired New Age notion that people bring on their illnesses and can get rid of them if they only try hard enough. And by referring to a dictionary I'm not speaking about an intellectual dissection of each word in a koan. I'm talking about using any tool to help immerse ourselves in the koan the way a swimmer is immersed in water...only more intimate...breathe, eat, sleep, walk and sweat the koan.)

There is the koan "The Buddha Holds Out a Flower". Seeing the flower, Mahakashyapa was enlightened. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and devoted follower, asked Mahakashyapa after the Buddha's death, "What did the Buddha transmit to you besides the gold kesa?" He was hoping to "acquire" the same thing that the Buddha "gave" to Mahakashyapa. What is it we acquire or "un-acquire" with Zen practice?

How about *deficiency*? Is there any deficiency anywhere? Isn't everything whole and complete just as it is? What do we lack that we seek in practicing Zen? This is the koan of Enyadetta, who thought she lost her head and had to work hard to find it again.

Do I use koans with every student? No, only the ones who wish to use them, or those who have already been seized by the throat by a koan they can't shake. Do I follow the entire formal system of koan study? I haven't started a student on it yet, but it may become appropriate in the future. I am too young as a teacher to have settled upon a way of working, and students are too diverse to have one course of study for all.

I feel that my own formal koan study was immensely valuable, testing and deepening in a way that would be difficult to reproduce out of the blue. When it becomes appropriate, I would be honored to offer that experience to another student. I loved, hated, delighted in and dreaded koan study. I looked forward to each new koan like a new food to be tried...kind of like working your way through a huge cookbook, recipe by recipe. I wanted to chew them up and digest them. I'd finish one and be full, and sometimes exhausted, and then I'd be starved for more. Nourishing and delicious.

It was also horrible...when big chunks fell away. Like having your house hit by a wrecking ball. I dreaded going in to dokusan (private interview) to present my answer, to face those hard eyes that brooked no hesitancy and saw any unclarity instantly. I often emerged with sweat running in little streams under my arms. I would go back to the zafu after my "answer" had been rejected, sit, mad, for an hour or a day, sure that I had explored all that a particular koan had to offer, then sigh and plunge back in. Sure enough, another level would open up.

Anyone who practices is working on koans, whether acknowledged or not, whether we adopt or reject the formal koan system. We are working on the koan that underlies all koans, we are this fundamental koan, "Who am I?"

Soen Sa Nim Interview

(Continued from page 3.)

Our style of kong-an practice means not holding kong-an. The old style was to go into the mountains, cut off outside world and just work on one kong-an. Our style of practice means to learn how to function correctly in everyday life through kong-an practice. So, when you are doing something, just do it. In that doing, there is no thinking, no subject, no object. Inside and outside become one.

In our style of practice, correct kong-an practice, correct life and correct direction are all the same. If we make our everyday life clear, then kong-an practice is no problem. Then kong-an practice is not special.

If our everyday life is clear, then kong-an practice is not necessary. Then kong-

an practice is not for me. It is only to teach other people. So we use kong-ans, old kong-ans and new kong-ans, only to teach other people. Sometimes a person's own life may be very clear, but they don't understand how to teach other people how to function correctly in everyday life. Also, they don't understand how to teach truth and correct way. When clear life, truth, and correct way come together in a meticulous way, moment-to-moment, that's kong-an practice. Only "my life is clear" is not enough. For example, if you eat only one kind of food all the time, your body will have a problem. So, your body needs different kinds for a good balance, for a correct body.

PP: Can you explain your system of kong-an teaching? What are the different kinds of *like this* kong-ans you use?

SSN: We use four kinds of *like this* kong-ans:

- WITHOUT LIKE THIS = True Emptiness = Primary Point
- = Silence
- = Complete Stillness

Example kong-ans: "What is true emptiness?" "What is complete stillness?"

- BECOME ONE LIKE THIS = KATZ! = Correct demonstration of Primary Point
- = Hit

Example kong-ans: Buddha picked up a flower, Mahakasyapa smiled. What does it mean?

- ONLY LIKE THIS = Meaning is Truth = True function of Primary Point

Example kong-ans: Spring comes, grass grows by itself. 3x3=9. "What is Buddha?" "Three pounds of flax."

- JUST LIKE THIS = Just doing is correct life = One-point Correct Function

Example kong-ans: Go drink tea. Go wash your bowls.

We can understand these four kinds of kong-ans in this way. You go into the interview room; the teacher places a cup and pen before you and asks you if the cup and the pen are the same or different. The four kinds of *like this* answers will be:

- WITHOUT LIKE THIS = Maintain complete silence, a don't know mind.
- BECOME ONE LIKE THIS = Hit the floor or shout KATZ!
- ONLY LIKE THIS = Saying "cup is cup, pen is pen"
- JUST LIKE THIS = Drink from the cup, write with the pen.

SSN: So, "Just like this" is Just Doing It, Correct Function, Correct Everyday Life.

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