

ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

Opposite Worlds, Absolute World, Complete World, Moment World

Zen Master Seung Sahn



Human beings have a lot of opposite thinking: like/dislike, good/bad, happiness/sadness, coming/going and so on. This opposite thinking creates opposite worlds within each one of us and our ignorance makes us hold on to these opposite worlds. These opposite worlds are always in conflict with each other, so there is tension and suffering. This is the basic teaching of Hinayana Buddhism:

all suffering comes from opposite thinking.

The Buddha taught how to go from opposite worlds to absolute world. Absolute world means the world before thinking. What is before thinking? Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." If I am not thinking, then what? Descartes did not explore this question but Buddhism has always talked about before-thinking. If I am not thinking, there is no I. If there is no I, there are no opposite worlds because opposites are created by "I." When "I" disappears, opposite worlds also disappear; this is called emptiness or nirvana.

So it is said that when mind disappears, dharma disappears; dharma disappears, name and form disappear; name and form disappear, coming and going, life and death, happiness and suffering, all these opposite categories also disappear. When there are no opposites, it is nirvana. Its name is Absolute, its name is Stillness, its name is Emptiness. So going from opposite worlds to absolute world is to move into the nirvana world. This is the teaching of Hinayana Buddhism.

Mahayana Buddhism begins at the point of emptiness, the absence of self-nature of things. If you attain "no self," it is possible to move to complete world. Complete world means if your mind is complete, everything in the universe is complete. The sun, the moon, the stars, everything else in the universe is complete, one by one. Complete means truth. When you cut off all thinking there is no "I"; when there is no "I" your mind is clear like space. Clear like space means clear like mirror; clear like mirror means a mind which just reflects: sky is blue, grass is green, water is flowing, sugar is sweet, salt is salty. The mirror-mind only reflects what's in front of it. In the mirror-mind what you see, what you hear, what you smell, what you taste, what you touch — everything is just like this. Just like this is truth. Just like this is complete world, so complete world is truth world.

If you attain truth and complete world, you can understand

correct situation, correct function, correct relationship. Then helping others is possible; helping others means only to love others, to have compassion for others. We call love and compassion the Bodhisattva Way. So, the teaching of Mahayana Buddhism is how to follow the Bodhisattva Way, how to help others. If you want to follow this path, you must attain the truth world first; truth world means keeping moment to moment correct situation, correct function, correct relationship; truth world means great love, great compassion, great Bodhisattva Way. This is the teaching of Mahayana Buddhism.

Next is Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhism never talks about opposite worlds, never talks about absolute world, never talks about complete world. It only points straight to our mind, to our true self. "What is Buddha?" "Dry shit on a stick." This is a Zen answer. There is no talk here, no explanation. Only just a swift, direct pointing that cuts through all discriminations. In the history of Zen many people got enlightened as a result of this style of direct pointing and were able to help many people. So in Zen there is no speech, no words, only practicing. Talking about opposite worlds or absolute world or complete world is an intellectual style where more explanation, more analysis becomes necessary. Zen only points to the moment world, the world of this moment. This moment is very important; it has everything in it. In this moment there is infinite time, infinite space; in this moment there is truth, correct life and the Bodhisattva Way. This moment has everything, also this moment has nothing. If you attain this moment, you attain everything. This is the teaching of Zen Buddhism.

Excerpted from a lecture series entitled "Compass of Zen," delivered by Zen Master Seung Sahn at retreats in 1988.

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Health Update

Zen Master Seung Sahn's health continues to improve. He has rested in Korea since July, and will visit the United States during November and December. Thank you for all the good wishes on his behalf. □