

The Medicine Buddha

An interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn



Zen Master Seung Sahn is the founding teacher of the Kwan Um School of Zen. He was interviewed in June, 1991 by Richard Streitfeld and Mu Soeng Sunim of the PRIMARY POINT staff.

PP: You often use the phrase “Yaksa Yorae Bul” when discussing healing. What does this phrase mean?

SS: Yaksa means Medicine Teacher; Yorae means Buddha Nature; Bul means Buddha. So Yaksa Yorae Bul is the “Teacher of Buddha-Nature medicine,” or “Medicine Buddha.”

PP: What is the origin of this Buddha?

SS: Hinayana Buddhism refers only to Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhist beliefs there are many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as many demons. Hinayana Buddhism means attaining a very simple mind — if you are not holding anything, you already become Buddha. If you achieve non-self, you become Buddha. But Hinayana Buddhism was originally geared to monastic practice, whereas Mahayana Buddhism evolved with a strong lay influence. In society there are many kinds of individuals; they want something — money, sex, fame etc. Much desire, much thinking. With each thought, one Buddha “appears,” also one demon “appears.” If you have no thinking, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are not necessary. If you have much thinking, many demons appear, so many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas appear to help you. That is Mahayana Buddhism.

PP: From a Buddhist point of view, what does it mean to be sick?

SS: There are three kinds of sickness: body sickness, mind sickness and Dharma sickness. Body sickness means my body gets hurt and I have some kind of pain. Sometimes we create body sickness through lack of control; for instance, the mouth wants food but our stomach says, “No, no.” So mouth and stomach fight; we eat too much and sickness appears from this imbalance.

Mind sickness means I am attached to something, or

want something very badly. All human beings have these five basic desires — fame, sex, food, sleep, money. These five desires make mental sickness. Sometimes body sickness will follow — you cannot eat, sleep or digest your food.

PP: What if someone with a body sickness “puts it all down” but is still sick?

SS: If you put it all down, you may still be sick or in pain, but you do not suffer. If you attain not-moving mind, pain and sickness do not produce suffering.

PP: Does all body sickness come from karma?

SS: Sickness comes both from “before-life” karma and from this-life karma. Before-life karma means: every day I act correctly, but my body doesn’t function properly. For instance, my eyes and ears are no good. But my actions are correct. That’s before-life’s karma.

This life’s karma means I have made bad actions in this life — anger, desire, ignorance. Then sickness appears. This kind of sickness is made by your this-life karma.

PP: What if the sickness comes from your parents?

SS: As I said before, my eyes and ears are no good. That’s another sort of before-life karma, karma inherited from your family, what you call genetic.

PP: What does it mean when a baby is born, becomes very sick and dies?

SS: This is also before-life karma. Previously, this baby had very short karma with its parents, so it had to appear and finish that karma.

PP: Is it important that someone understand whether they are sick from before-life karma or this-life karma?

SS: Yes. If you practice, this will become clear. During an interview someone asked me, “I want to do correct practice, but sometimes this mind will appear: ‘I want to kill someone!’ This style of thinking never appeared before; it only came up during meditation. What’s happening?”

So, I told him it was his before-life karma. During

meditation your mind becomes more clear, so the old karma becomes uncovered and comes to the surface. This karma was already present in your consciousness. If you practice, you get to see and understand this karma already present in the mind. But if you don't practice, someday this karma will control your life.

PP: What is Dharma sickness?

SS: When you become a teacher of a religion or ideology, and say "I already understand all of this, I have no problem. You must listen to me." That's Dharma sickness.

PP: So believing in some idea, some teacher, is a problem?

SS: Being attached to something, making something is always a problem. Many Christians become attached to "God." "My God and your God are different." So you make your "God." Zen means put it all down. Don't make anything. If you meet God, kill God. If you meet Buddha, kill Buddha.

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PP: How does the Medicine Buddha help in eliminating suffering?

SS: All sickness comes from the mind. If mind disappears, sickness disappears. If you put it all down, there will be no sickness, and you attain freedom from life and death. But it is hard for us to let go of our mind. Mahayana Buddhism teaches that if you cannot let go of your mind and your desires, a Buddha or a Bodhisattva will "appear" to help you. So, if you try the Yaksha Yorae Bul mantra, all your sicknesses — whether of body, mind or Dharma sickness — will go away.

PP: You often suggest different mantras to help different people. What do these different mantras mean?

SS: According to Mahayana practices, if you try certain mantras, certain Bodhisattvas will help you. For instance, if you have great suffering, try Kwan Seum Bosal mantra; then Kwan Seum Bosal (the Bodhisattva of Compassion) will help you. Or you may not have much suffering but need wisdom for your direction — what is truth and correct life? — then try the mantra for Munsu Bosal (Manjushri), the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. If you have wisdom but don't understand correct action then you cannot help other people. So you must use the mantra for Pu Hyon Bosal, the Bodhisattva of Action. That will give you energy for moment to moment, correct action. Then you can help other people. Ji Jang Bosal is the Great Vow Bodhisattva; his great vow is to save all beings. When you die, Ji Jang Bosal helps you get a good rebirth. Thus each Bodhisattva has a separate job.

PP: Nowadays there is a controversy about people being kept alive by advanced medicine or technology. They can stay alive, but have no brain — only a vegetable. So many people ask, "Is this person alive or dead?" Or, "Should we let this person die?" Is that correct action or not correct action? What does Buddhism say about this kind of situation?

SS: The question in this kind of situation is: how much energy does the sick person take from other people? Sometimes with some energy, a very sick person can be saved. Sometimes despite all the energy being given, the sick person cannot be saved. When this person dies, they must in a future life "return" all of this energy they took. If you die without taking so much energy, you do not "owe" as much the next time. If someone is dying and taking so much energy, it is not incorrect to allow them to die. But if they are not taking people's energy, why die? The teaching of Buddhism is: does my action help other people or does it take too much energy from them and cause them a problem?

PP: Sometimes people are in a coma — cannot see, hear, taste, touch. They are attached to a machine, but there is some consciousness working. The machine is keeping them alive. Why live?

SS: That is a basic question for everyone, not just the sick people. Why do you live? Why do you die? Why does a tree or a cat appear? Why does this tree or cat die? If you practice, you understand your correct job, direction, and situation as a human being. If you are not practicing, how are you different from a tree or a cat?

PP: If someone pulls the plug on this man who is in a coma, does he have sufficient consciousness so that he will have some emotion inside, like anger or happiness?

SS: This consciousness is like half-tree, half-animal. In this consciousness there is no like or dislike; because they don't have like or dislike, they cannot create any karma.

PP: So will this kind of person have a good rebirth, because they have no karma when they die?

SS: They are dying with no karma in that moment but they may have very strong consciousness (residue) from this lifetime. That consciousness is like mercury; it may separate into different "globs" like mercury does; sometimes these globs remain separate, but sometimes they may join with similar consciousnesses and be reborn as a strong personality like Gandhi or Hitler.

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PP: Nowadays many people have problems with drugs and drinking. What kind of karma is this? How can these people be helped?

SS: Sometimes it may be before-life karma, but sometimes it may be because of doing "together action" with others: "I don't want to use drugs or alcohol, but my friends say, 'you try,' and so I do that." This kind of mind already understands that drugs or alcohol are no good. So if they want to fix their mind, they can fix it with meditation. But if they don't care and are only interested in having a good time, they cannot fix it. Your mind makes everything. Buddha said, "All things are created by mind alone." So your mind creates sickness and you fix your sickness with your mind. That's interesting, no?

PP: Yes. Thank you very much. □

What is Your Original Face?

Richard Shrobe, JDPSN



The word "recovery," according to the dictionary, means regaining something that was either stolen or lost. From a spiritual point of view, what you are actually recovering is your perception of something that you already possess. The thief is yourself, disabling you from seeing what you already possess.

Case number ten in the Mu Mun Kwan, "Cheong Sae is poor," illustrates this idea: A monk, Cheong Sae, approached Zen Master Chosan and said, "Master! I am poor and destitute. Please help me!" Zen Master Chosan, without hesitation, just called out the monk's name: "Cheong Sae!" And the monk, without thinking, responded, "Yes, sir!" Zen Master Chosan then said, "It is as if you have already drunk three bottles of the best vintage wine in China, and yet act as if you have not even wet your lips."

One way of talking about this story is in terms of "emptiness" and "fullness." The monk presents himself as "poor and destitute," having nothing. Translation: I have emptied myself completely of words, ideas, opinions, and even a feeling of self. I am completely empty. In that sense, this statement is also a Dharma Combat challenge.

Chosan's response, "Chong Sae!", and the monk's reply "Yes, sir!", are both immediate and non-conceptual. Thus, the monk throws away the last vestige of holding. In spite of his presentation of himself as "empty," the monk was still holding one thing — this idea of emptiness. This holding disappears in an act of spontaneous response: calling/answering, inside/outside, myself/universe all come together in a complete experience of fullness, or healing. Total emptiness was a prerequisite for his awakening.

Basho's famous enlightenment haiku points us in the same direction. Sitting by a pond, he is asked by the Zen Master to give something of his own words, rather than the regurgitated words of the Buddhas and patriarchs. Basho is stuck. He sits there for a long time in a sense of stillness or vacancy. All of a sudden, a frog jumps in the pond. Basho's mind opens up and he says: "Still pond, frog jumps in. Splash!" Still pond, or emptiness, comes to life in the momentary perception of "Splash!", just as