

Healing Stories from the Buddhist Tradition

Mu Soeng Sunim

In traditional Buddhist literature, the Buddha has often been called the “Great Physician.” One could even say that all of Buddha’s teachings are about sickness and healing. Throughout Buddhist history, we find a rich tradition of concepts of healing. Particularly relevant is the insight that, whatever their physical symptoms, most illnesses are mentally rooted. The basic teaching of the Buddhist tradition that “the whole universe is created by the mind alone” is nowhere more apt than in dealing with the issues of sickness and healing.

Two stories from the Buddhist tradition highlight this view of sickness — that all suffering is created in one form or another by mind, and that it is through the healing of mind that suffering is eradicated.

The first story is one of the most famous in the Buddhist tradition. A young woman, Kisa Gotami, lived in India during the Buddha’s time. Her infant child had died and Gotami had gone mad with grief, not even allowing the corpse to be cremated. She had taken the corpse from healer to healer, asking if they could revive her child. While everyone took pity on her, they always informed her that the child was completely dead and could not be brought back. Then, upon hearing of the Buddha and his reputation as a great healer, she brought him the corpse. The Buddha said he could revive the child, if only Gotami would fulfill one condition: to go to the nearest village and collect five grains of mustard from a house in which no one had ever died. With great willingness, Gotami went from house to house, asking if someone had ever died there. Invariably, someone always had. By the time Gotami had gone through the whole village, she realized that death is an inevitable fact of life. She woke up from her grief and allowed the corpse of her child to be cremated. Then she became a nun and one of the most illustrious disciples of the Buddha.

The second story is about a junior mandarin (bureaucrat) in China. Once he was invited to dine at the home of a very high official. When he was served his tea, he saw a little snake in his cup. Because he was a junior bureaucrat and didn’t want to offend his host, he drank the

tea with the snake in it! After he went home, he found he had stomach cramps, and after a few days felt very sick. He consulted every doctor he could find but could not find a cure. He thought he was about to die.

In the meantime, the senior bureaucrat who had been his host heard about his condition, and invited him back for one more dinner. Again he was served tea, and again he saw a little snake at the bottom of his cup. This time, he thought, “Well, I’m going to die, so I can offend my host.” So, he said to the host “There’s a snake in my cup.” The host said, “Oh,” and pointed up to the ceiling. When he looked up, the junior mandarin saw a bow hanging from the ceiling. It was a very fancy bow and in the middle of it, in the handle, there were some life-like carvings of little snakes. What the junior mandarin was seeing was the reflection of a carved snake in his cup! As soon as he realized this, his stomach cramps disappeared and he was completely cured.

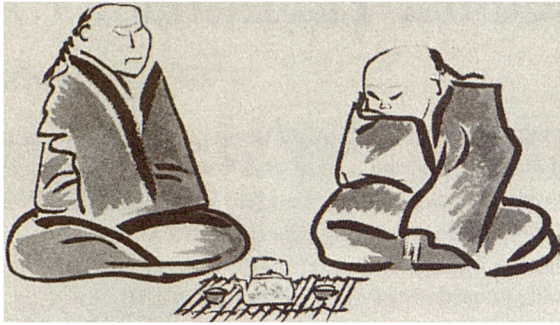
These stories ask us: Where does sickness come from? What gets healed? These tales point to our (thinking) mind, the mind that covets, or is fearful, as the cause of “sickness.” That sickness is then manifested physically. They also reiterate that ultimately it is the mind again which heals.

Today, we are learning the same lessons from professionals who work with

terminally ill and dying patients: a sense of physical recovery or well-being as a result of treatment is really a by-product of the patient’s acceptance of his or her situation deep within the heart. It is this acceptance, rather than fighting one’s condition, that brings a measure of peace. This is the place where the spirit is healed, and this healing goes beyond mere “recovery.” From a Buddhist point of view, “enlightenment” is to accept things just as they are, to experience sickness, aging, and death as a natural process, with equanimity. To reject the working of this natural process is to be yoked forever to the wheel of samsara.

Thus, in order to be truly healed, we have to move beyond mere recovery to a striving for enlightenment. In his “Compass of Zen,” Zen Master Seung Sahn says that





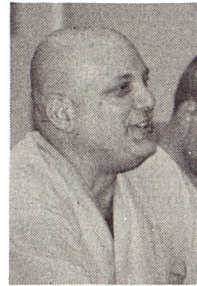
A Bad Situation is a Good Situation

Traveling in Eastern Europe with Zen Master Seung Sahn

Mu Sang Sunim

the purposes of Buddhism are first to attain enlightenment and then to help others. Our direction as human beings is not merely to understand the sources of sickness but to move beyond and act towards others with compassion. Obviously, if we are going to heal others, we must make the utmost effort to heal ourselves as well.

Mu Soeng Sunim is abbot of Diamond Hill Zen Monastery at Providence Zen Center. □



Traveling with Zen Master Seung Sahn in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union last spring, I was repeatedly struck by his teaching: “a good situation is a bad situation; a bad situation is a good situation.” The whole region is in upheaval. For ordinary people, getting even the simplest things can be an arduous task.

And yet over and over I found people who, far from concentrating on their possessions, had a strong desire to practice and find the true way. In many ways I was reminded of America in the sixties: young people struggling to find the truth in a world that made no sense.

Scenes from a journey:

One woman and five men take novice monk/nun precepts at the Warsaw Zen Center in Poland. They are all in their early twenties. Not wasting any time, with complete faith in his students’ potential, Zen Master Seung Sahn tells them, “Each Bodhisattva has a special job. So you must each pick out some kind of practicing, only go straight, then completely understand your mind, become Ji Do Poep Sa Nims, then become Zen Masters.”

Again at the Warsaw Zen Center, a group of young students come up and ask me to teach them Soen Yu, Zen Master Seung Sahn’s breathing-energy exercises. I haven’t taught Soen Yu for years — I haven’t practiced it for years (I’ve been in a funk). But what can I do? They asked, so I teach. Slowly I remember the exercises. They feel just right. The students love them. By the end of the class we’re all very happy. People are asking me all kinds of questions — their sincerity, openness, and lack of checking amaze me, give me energy. “Now you are again Soen Yu Master,” says Zen Master Seung Sahn, half serious, half joking as usual. I’ve been practicing Soen Yu regularly ever since.

Zen Master Seung Sahn is giving a Dharma talk in a Tibetan center in Leningrad. The center is just a musty room in an abandoned building maintained by squatters, with a few Tibetan-style pictures on the wall. The room is full, about 50 people. The students are all young, with

*Just as through oneself one may contemplate oneself,
So through the household one may contemplate the
household,
Through the village one may contemplate the village,
And through the empire one may contemplate the
empire.*

Lao-tzu

*It is through earth that we perceive earth,
water through water,
through aether bright aether,
consuming fire through fire,
love through love,
and hate through grim hate.*

Empedocles