

True God, True Buddha

Zen Master Seung Sahn

Adapted from a talk during a retreat at Providence Zen Center in December, 1990.

Question: I'm a Christian, and I would like to know, is there anything you would like us to understand that we tend not to understand?

ZMSS: Christianity says God made everything—good and bad, heaven and earth, human beings and animals and so on. He worked for six days, then rested.

But in Buddhism, there is no original cause or creator; there is no coming, no going, no existence, no non-existence; all of these are opposites thinking. Sun and moon, light and dark, day and night—all these are names; the world of names is opposites thinking. "God" is also a name; it's also opposite thinking. True God has no name, no form. In no name/no form, there is no coming, no going—no opposite thinking. That which is beyond all names and forms is always bright. That is True God.

The purpose of Buddhism is to find primary point. What is the primary point of this universe? The Bible says, "God made everything." But what is the primary point of God? Where does God come from?

These days, not many young people are becoming monks or nuns. I was in Paris—a big Catholic university had closed its doors. No more students! Any society that has a "good situation" doesn't have young monks, only old monks. This is a different age, a different mind. Old-style religion was to just believe in God. Now people check—what kind of religion will help me, help society? Monk or not monk is not important. They like new idea, new-style religion, perhaps some meditation.

This is a time of great change and religions need to adapt; a change in teaching style is necessary. A simple belief in God is no longer enough for many people. They want to understand: What is God? What is my true self? In the Bible, it says, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." What is this "I"? Is this "I" God? Is this God separate from me? If this God is not separate from me, are God and I two or one? Through meditation practice these questions can be resolved on a deep level. Then one can truly understand religion, understand this world. In meditation all opposites become one point: mind, God,

dharma, truth. You can call it many things, but this point is before all names and forms.

If you only talk about a belief in God, then there are many questions: Where is God? Inside the body or outside? Someone says God is in heaven; nowadays spaceships roam about in vast outer space, but don't find any God because all is curved space. Here is God? Here is God? True God has no inside and outside, no name and form.

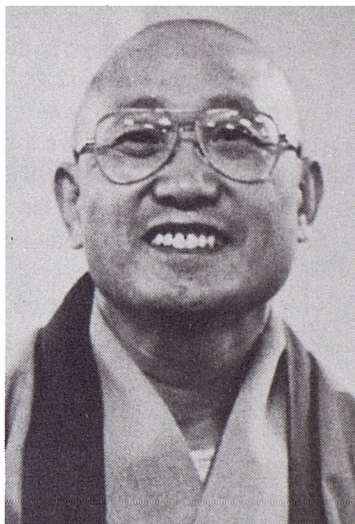
Nowadays many Christians like Thomas Merton's books. He didn't only analyze Biblical words. He understood and practiced Zen meditation, so he was able to connect with his true self, and wrote about this connection. That's why his books are so popular.

Any kind of religion, any kind of style doesn't matter. *Why do this?* Making this direction clear is very important; if this direction is clear, then your life is clear. If you only hold your religion, your idea, then you have a problem. If you are not holding "my religion," not holding "my practice," have a clear direction, and only try, try, try, then you attain something. Clear direction and try mind are most important.

Zen mind means put down any idea, any form. If your direction is clear and you completely put down everything, then you will attain something. When you attain something, you connect with everything else.

All religions are like different paths to the mountaintop. The top of the mountain is very clear; it's the primary point. But there are many paths leading to this point; there is the eastern road, western road, southern road, and northern road. When people begin climbing the mountain, they are always fighting: "My way is correct, your way is not correct." But from the bottom of the mountain, they cannot see the top, so they are very strongly attached to "my way." Having clear direction and try mind means just going up, going up, one step after another. So you don't spend energy in fighting other people or their ideas; you just practice. Then you can reach the mountaintop.

The different paths to the mountaintop are made by our mind. But what is mind? If you try to understand it intellectually, you will not find it. Our mind is very big,



Zen Master Seung Sahn

but it's also small. A very sharp needle cannot touch this mind, because this mind is smaller than the tip of the needle. But our mind is also bigger than the whole universe. Sometimes our mind is very bright, sometimes very dark. If you make "my path," you also make "my mind." But if you let go of "my mind," you become a Buddha. Then any path will lead you to the mountaintop.

If you control your mind, you control everything. But if you say, "I control my mind," then what is this that controls the mind? Is it some other mind that controls the mind or is it no mind? Also, how do you control your mind? Where is your mind? Are you and your mind two things or one? Same or different? Big problem! That's all thinking. POW! Put it all down, OK? Don't think!

The Diamond Sutra says "All things are impermanent. A pure view is to see all appearances as non-appearances. When all appearances and non-appearances disappear, that's complete stillness. Then you can see Buddha-nature." But if everything is impermanent, I am also impermanent; Buddha is also impermanent. Then how can I see Buddha? How can impermanence see impermanence?

If you check the words in the Bible or in the Diamond Sutra, then it's all checking, all opposites thinking. But truth means there are no opposites. No opposites means the absolute. If you are checking, then everything is not correct. If you are not checking, everything is correct. That is Zen. The Diamond Sutra teaches that silence is better than holiness. And the Bible says "Be still and know that I am God." This silent mind is very important. How do we transmit this silent mind from me to you? Buddha picked up a flower, and only Mahakashyapa smiled. Then Buddha said, "My true dharma, I transmit to you." But that was a big mistake on Buddha's part. If I was Mahakashyapa at that time, I would have said, "No, thank you, Buddha, I already have dharma." Then Buddha would have a problem!!

So, already everybody has dharma, already everybody has truth, already everybody has the correct way and correct life. Already everybody has, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." So why does anyone need transmission from someone else? Open your mouth and it's already a mistake. But our job is to help all beings. So, we only use this mouth to teach the dharma and help all beings. That, we say, is "tongue formula."

If you only keep a try mind, a don't-know mind, then your center becomes stronger, stronger, stronger. Then everything you hear, smell, see, taste, touch is better than the Buddha's speech, better than the Bible's speech. That's enlightenment. Then you can save all beings from suffering.

Zen Master Seung Sahn is founding teacher of the international Kwan Um School of Zen. □

Centering prayer Or, Teachings From the Hotel California

Father Robert Morin, OMI

Adapted from a talk at a Christian-Buddhist workshop at Providence Zen Center in January, 1991.

I'd like to address the practice of centering prayer as a form of contemplative prayer. I'll begin with something that Zen Master Seung Sahn said, that the basis of all religion is the phrase contained in Psalm 46: "Be still, and know that I am God." Sounds very simple; actually, it's a lifetime project.

When we hear the phrase "centering prayer," people naturally think, "find your center." But *where* is your center?

It's not something you can find, so to speak. It's more intuitive than that. I know, afterwards, when I've been acting in a centered way, when I've been behaving out of that center. Other times I know very well I'm acting like a perfect airhead, when the internal chatter is covering over all of reality. In the West we tend to practice religion from the ears up: very cerebral, sort of like the rock group Talking Heads. We have a lot of words about God and relatively little experience of God. In the words of one old priest, who used to smoke regular cigarettes and was offered a filtered cigarette, "Bah! That's like kissing a girl through a plate glass window. You get the idea, but not the effect." Ideas-about and experience-of are two entirely different realms.

When we live from up here, the rest of the body dangles from that center of consciousness and gets ignored. We don't have that much of a body consciousness until you sit down to practice and your legs say, "Guess who's here?" A certain wisdom comes right back up from the body. The Orthodox Christians locate the spirit in the top third of the heart. While practicing the Jesus prayer they stare down at the heart, the top third, the part we fill in with cholesterol. That's where they'd say your soul is. In Oriental tradition, the center is the nerve-knot about two inches below your navel; literally, your physical center. If you were to stand me up, measure me, and find the halfway point, you'd see that's just about where it is. But if I were to say, "My center is right here in my head," you'd say, "You don't know how to measure too well." I wouldn't know how to live too well, either!

Finding one's center in centering prayer is done in God. It's not just a project we do. Otherwise, it's simply narcissism, navel-gazing. I'm reminded of the parakeet