

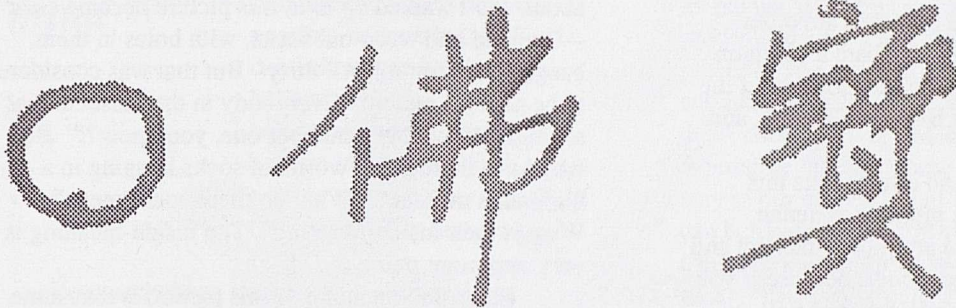
Buddha, Dharma, Sangha:

The Three-Treasure Structure of Buddhism

Excerpt from *The Compass of Zen Teaching*, with Commentary by Zen Master Seung Sahn
(to be published in 1995.)

The Precious One which is the Buddha:

The object of faith and emotion, departing from pain and attaining pleasure. Having to do with *samadhi*, beauty and faith.



The Precious One which is the Dharma:

Philosophical, intellectual, going from ignorance to enlightenment. Having to do with *prajna*, truth, and understanding.



The Precious One which is the Sangha:

Ethical, mental, putting an end to evil and practicing good. Having to do with *sila*, goodness, practice.



The
Three
Treasures
lead to
holiness
and
moksha
[liberation].

Commentary

The Three-Treasure Structure of Buddhism

by Zen Master Seung Sahn

Modern Buddhism is comprised of three main branches: Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Zen. Although these three branches are often thought of as quite distinct, they do share a common basic structure. This common structure consists of the three treasures, or “jewels,” of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Time and space, cause and effect make this world. All of this comes from thinking. Human beings’ minds are composed of emotions, intellect and will. These are called the three clouds, because if you cannot control your emotions, intellect, and will, or they do not function harmoniously, they will cloud over your true self. Then you lose your way in this world, causing more suffering for yourself and others. Because of these three clouds, Buddhism has the three corresponding treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Then what is Buddha? Buddha means waking up and attaining your true self. If you attain your true self, you become Buddha. But in Zen teaching, Buddha is not special. Buddha means if you attain your true self, you attain your own mind. An eminent teacher once said, “Mind is Buddha; Buddha is mind.” So how can you attain your true self? At first, when

you begin practicing, you only believe in Shakyamuni Buddha and in his teaching. As you practice this teaching, you see that you can better control your thinking and emotions. And if you control your thinking and emotions, then you can take away suffering and get happiness. As a result, your mind is not moving as outside conditions constantly change. Then you can see clearly, you can hear clearly, you can smell clearly—everything is beauty, just as it is. Then you can believe that the sky is blue, the tree is green, a dog is barking,

Buddha
is your
pure
mind

‘Woof, woof!’ You can believe in everything. Somebody once asked Un Mun Zen Master, “What is Buddha?” He replied, “Dry shit on a stick.” Perceiving that is the same point. This is moment-to-moment life. We call this the treasure of Buddha.

Beauty does not come from the outside appearance of things. In the treasure of Buddha, “beauty” means that when your mind is not moving, everything is beautiful. I was teaching in Paris several years ago, and saw an exhibition of paintings. An important picture was hanging alone on a large wall. From across the room, you could not tell what this painting was about. As I walked up to it, this picture became clear — two old and worn-out socks, with holes in them, hanging in a frame! All dirty! But that was considered to be the best picture. Everybody in the museum was saying, “Wow, that’s number one, you know?!” But why have these dirty, worn out socks hanging in a high-class museum? What do these socks mean? What is their inside-meaning? The inside-meaning is a very important point.

The inside-meaning of this picture is that some human being did a lot of walking in these socks, putting a great deal of energy into them. With time passing, the socks became worn and full of holes—they showed a lot of suffering. So this picture of old socks is making a very important point: this picture teaches us something about a human being’s life. So although the socks are very dirty, the meaning is very beautiful. Where does this beauty come from?

True beauty comes from our not-moving mind. In Sanskrit, it’s called *samadhi*, which means deep meditation, unmoving. When your mind is not moving, everything is beautiful, just as it is. If your mind is moving, however, then even if a beautiful picture, a beautiful landscape, or beautiful things appear in front of you, this view quickly changes in your mind, and does not seem so beautiful. For example, when you are angry, or sad, or depressed, then even the birds chirping right outside your window sound irritating or depressing. Because you attach to feelings or outside conditions, whenever these feelings or outside conditions change, then your mind is constantly changing, changing, changing. You lose your center. Then even a beautiful landscape may seem ugly or revolting. So the most important thing is to keep a not-moving mind, moment to moment. Then you can perceive true beauty, and you can digest your understanding so that it can become wisdom.

A not-moving mind gives rise to faith. When your mind is not moving, you can believe in this world. The word for that is faith. Believing in Buddha as an “object of faith” means believing in your true

*Dharma
is your
clear
mind*

self. Faith means simply that you can believe in your true self, your original nature. Then you can believe your hands, your eyes, your ears, your nose, the trees, the sky, God, Buddha—everything! Someone once asked me, “Soen Sa Nim, do you believe in God?” I said, “Of course I believe in God!” The person was shocked: “But you are a Zen teacher! How can you possibly believe in God?” “I can believe my hands. I can believe my nose. I can believe my eyes. Why not believe in everything? I believe this tree, this dog, this cat—why not believe in God?”

You can believe in everything; believing in everything means realizing that you and everything are never separate. [Hits the table.] OK? You and everything are never separate. Let’s say a husband and wife both believe in their true self. Then even though the husband’s and wife’s bodies are separate, this mind always becomes one and they are never separate. If you believe in your true self, then you can believe in everything; you and everything already become one. The name for that is “faith.” “Mind is Buddha; Buddha is mind.” You are Buddha; Buddha is you! When you see, when you hear, when you smell, when you taste, when you touch—everything is beauty, just as it is. With a not-moving mind, even shit is very beautiful! When this becomes clear, your true way appears clearly right in front of you. So the treasure of Buddha means keeping a not-moving mind.

However if you only understand this, that’s merely intellectual. If you haven’t attained your true self, you don’t truly understand what is life, what is death. So it is very important that you take away ignorance and get enlightenment. How do we do this? First, you must digest your understanding. When you truly digest your understanding, then “The sky is blue” becomes yours. That means your understanding is becoming true wisdom. Your ignorance is changing as your mind opens. When you completely digest your understanding, our name for that is “getting enlightenment.” Wisdom appears by natural process as you continue practicing, digesting your understanding. That is Dharma—the treasure of Dharma.

What is the meaning of Sangha, the treasure of

Sangha? Sangha is the ethical side of our life, which means having “correct life.” Correct life comes from your will, from your center. This means taking away bad habits, and following a good way which helps all beings. If your center is not moving, then having correct life is possible. We also refer to that as “correct direction.” That’s the Buddha’s basic teaching—keeping a correct direction. “Why do I want to do this or that? Only for me, or for all beings?” In order to keep our correct direction, however, we need some basic rules or guidelines for our life. These rules, or precepts, always point us toward saving all beings. Precepts are not rules to limit our actions; precepts mean correct direction. If you follow these precepts, you attain goodness. Then only correct action appears by itself: you don’t check inside, you don’t check outside. Moment to moment just doing it is possible, because these precepts already point the way to our correct job of helping all beings. Then you can believe in your true self one hundred percent. One name for that is “freedom”; another name is “holiness.” This is also called “become Buddha.”

Buddhism has a very clear teaching structure: the treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The

Zen Master Seung Sahn



Chinese characters for this reads *sam bo*, three treasures. There are three dimensions to sam bo. They are original sam bo, form sam bo, and true sam bo. The original three treasures are the historical figure Shakyamuni Buddha; the actual teachings of Dharma which he gave 2,500 years ago in India, before any sutras appeared; and the assemblies of monks and laypeople who followed his teachings while he lived—the original Sangha. So that's the original Buddha, the Buddha's original Dharma speeches, and the original Sangha of people who heard and followed his teaching. In Sino-Korean, we call that *jin che sam bo*, the original three jewels.

More than 2,500 years have passed since the original three jewels appeared in this world. Now we have *sun jun sam bo*, or *form* of the three jewels. Since the original Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha have disappeared, what is the form of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha that we see today? Every temple has a Buddha statue. In Buddhist temples and in our Zen centers in the West, the Buddha statue is gold. This gold Buddha is the *form* Buddha—it represents the original Buddha. Today we have many sutras, as many as 48,000 sutras. These are the written records of the Buddha's teaching. We also have books with teaching and events from the lives of eminent teachers in the history of Buddhism. That's the *form* of the Dharma. And originally, while Sangha meant only those people alive at the time of the Buddha who heard his teachings and put them into practice, today there are many Buddhist communities throughout the world. This is the Buddhist Sangha, the *form* of the Sangha. All together, that's sun jun sam bo, the form of the three jewels.

Then what is the true Sangha? What is true Dharma? What is true Buddha? In Korean and Chinese characters, we call this *il che sam bo*, which means "become-one three treasures." Your pure and clear mind is Buddha. When your mind-light shines, that is Dharma. When your mind acts with no hindrance, that is Sangha. Buddha is your pure mind, Dharma is clear mind, and Sangha is your "no-hindrance mind."

Sangha
is your
no-
hindrance
mind

But what is a pure mind? What is clear mind? What is a no-hindrance mind? A long

time ago, somebody asked Joju Zen Master, "What is Buddha?" He said, "Go drink tea." Another time, someone asked Joju, "What is Dharma?" "Go drink tea." "What is Sangha?" "Go drink tea." In Sino-Korean, we call that *shil yong sam bo*, which means real three treasures. If you drink tea with a clear mind, then in that moment, you become actual Buddha, actual Dharma, actual Sangha. Joju Zen Master answered many kinds of questions with "Go drink tea!" If you don't understand this you must go drink some tea, right now! Then you will attain the actual Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, OK?

In *the Compass of Zen*, it says that the treasure of Buddha means beauty, the treasure of Dharma means truth, and the treasure of Sangha means morality or goodness. In Sino-Korean, we call this *jin song mi* — "truth, goodness, beauty." How are these connected? What is the relationship between truth, goodness and beauty? Everyone has seen a beauty contest on television. Many women come together and are judged on beauty. That means the judges look for each woman's beauty, or *mi*. But they only look at the woman's body and face. If her face and body are beautiful, and if her actions are graceful, then this woman wins the contest. But real jin, truth, is not only how our face and body appear: real truth and beauty are found in our mind. What does our mind look like? Usually our mind is filled with many kinds of ignorant thoughts, and that makes the mind seem ugly. If you practice hard and gradually take away ignorance, you get enlightenment. Then wisdom appears: that's true beauty and truth.

Everybody has goodness, or *song*, already in their mind. One way to easily see this is by going to a movie where a good character is battling a villain. The good person is being beaten badly; maybe he or she is about to die. It looks like the villain is going to win! That's no good! So everybody in the movie theater is thinking, "No good! No good! Get up! Get the bad person!" If the good character and the others suffer a lot at the hands of the scoundrel, then everybody watching the movie feels upset. Nobody wants the good person to die. The anxiety we feel is the innate goodness we already have in us. "Get up! Get up! Get the bad person!" This mind appears. So that's goodness. This goodness comes from where? It comes from our nature, our true nature. Myself and all beings are not different, and are never separate. That's why goodness is realized in Sangha. So, true goodness means correct direction—precepts. ☉

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