



From a Letter to the Polish Sangha

November in Warsaw
Fifty people together in one room.
Sitting Zen for three days.

Try mind. Bread
And potatoes and onions.
Fifty people eating together.
Get energy. Find the true way.

What is the true way?
Don't know? Primary point?
Before thinking?
Someone appears. Hits the floor.
WHACK!
But *is that* the true way?

November in Warsaw.
The sky is dark.
Fifty faces are shining.

from *Bone of Space* by
Zen Master Seung Sahn

Paul Lynch, Ocean Eyes Zen Center

An interview at Dharma Zen Center

Paul Lynch: Why do you, as a Zen Master, bother to compose poems?

Zen Master Seung Sahn: For you. *[laughter]*

PL: When you compose your poems, do you actually write using "beautiful language"?

ZMSS: No. This moment appears, then compose a poem. Not checking situations, and not making anything.

PL: In your teaching, you say that people suffer from word sickness, so word medicine is necessary. Would you describe how you use language in your poetry?

ZMSS: Simple! Only whatever situation comes up or appears! Any style of writing is OK. You know, Korean, Japanese, English, any kind of writing, but most importantly, only what appears.

PL: This seems too simple. I love reading your poetry because it allows me to connect to this moment, so what if I was to say to you, "I love your poems; they are so beautiful," what would you say to me in response?

ZMSS: I don't care! *[much laughter]*

PL: Of course. In your teaching you often talk about candy, something that gives us a good feeling. So a Zen Master's words can sometimes be candy and sometimes hooks. Is there candy in your poems? Are there hooks?

ZMSS: Yes, sometimes candy and sometimes hooks appear in my poems, but realize that I don't create candy or hooks in these poems. They are written, with no intention, only for all of my students.

PL: What happens in your mind when you read or hear other peoples' poetry?

ZMSS: I don't check other peoples' poetry. The mind with which I read other's poetry is only a practicing mind, so the meaning appears. Then I only comment.

PL: So, what is the best way to read *your* poems so that I may learn your teaching?

ZMSS: Put it all down, everything! Then my mind and your mind can connect.

PL: That's not so easy. Is poetry Zen? Does true poetry manifest Zen mind?

ZMSS: Zen mind, poetry mind, writing mind, practicing mind, all are not different.

PL: So would you say it is better to write poems or to talk about poems?

ZMSS: If you see clearly, hear clearly, and smell clearly, then everything is clear. So, right now... what appears? People talk about how one poem is this and another poem is something else. This is making something.

PL: So, only read the poem, then [*claps hands*] cut off all thinking, and then only what appears in this moment is all that is necessary?

ZMSS: Yes. It's very simple. For example, in my poetry book *Bone of Space*, when I traveled around Europe, for each city I visited I wrote a poem. If you read these poems you will understand the situation, condition and relationships that existed during that trip—how I connected to each country, each city, and how I understood these cities. Something would appear, and I would make a poem. This is not special; in writing poetry, I only see clearly, hear clearly, smell clearly, and think clearly. My thinking is clear, not checking anything. Just think clearly, then make your poem.

PL: In the west there is a rhyming poetry style, or in Japan there is Haiku, which is limited to 17 syllables. These are poetic structures, but it appears to me that Zen poetry has no structure. Is this correct?

ZMSS: Yes, that is correct.

PL: So, whatever appears we write it down?

ZMSS: Haiku poets only follow Japanese style. This style is very tight and many people are attached to its form. Zen means, don't attach to name and form. Perceive everything. Don't attach to the particular country, people, forms, situations, or conditions—only become one. Then some idea will appear; that's the poem. That's it, OK? My poetry does not make anything. It's the result of seeing clearly, hearing clearly, and thinking clearly.

A long time ago in Japan, there was a well-known region called Matsushima. Matsushima is a place by the ocean, with mountains, rivers, trees, and flowers. Matsushima inspired many beautiful poems. At one time the famous Zen Master and poet named Basho decided to visit. When Basho saw the beauty of this place he wrote this poem:

Matsushima—
ah, Matsushima!
Matsushima!

Three clear lines! This is a very famous poem. Only Matsushima is Matsushima—it is very simple. That is the most important point. This is great Zen poetry.

Paris

Many heroes, many kings,
Where did they go?
Old shadow's tight chill.
The hero broke how many skulls?
The king drank how much blood, tears?
High buildings, wide rooms, only for one man.
Samsara is clear:
Sun comes, dew disappears.
Place de la Concorde stained red.

Many original masters
Coming, going—freedom.
Eiffel Tower, l'Arc de Triomphe, Louvre, Versailles,
Stone tiger, ancient obelisk, Winged Victory
Singing a chorus of mirages.
Palace mind deeply, deeply sleeping—
Good times, good times, never wake up.
Shining, shining eastern sky.
Seine River flowing into the ocean.

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