



IN THIS ISSUE

Dialogue with Songbon Sunim
Zen Master Seung Sahn 3

**2002 WHOLE WORLD IS A SINGLE FLOWER
CONFERENCE AND TOUR IN KOREA**

Good Teaching *Zen Master Dae Kwang* 8
Travelogue 10

Buddha's Tears
Zen Master Wu Kwang 18

Like the Blink of an Eye
Grazyna Perl JDPSN 19

Hell in the Middle of Paradise
Grazyna Perl JDPSN 20

108 Bows 22

Book Reviews
Judy Roitman JDPSN 23
Algernon D'Amassa 24

Books in Our Tradition 16, 17
Membership in the Kwan Um School of Zen 29
Kwan Um School of Zen Centers 29, 30, 31



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Dialogue

between Zen Master Seung Sahn and Songbon Sunim

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With the development of science and technology it seems as though humanity is gradually suffocating itself. There seems to be more distrust in the world than ever before and people are gradually becoming more and more isolated and alienated from each other. Human beings are even described by some as mechanical robots living under the yoke of modern society. Dissatisfaction appears to be growing and people are losing what inherent self-awareness they possess. What has made the human being, who ought to be the master of his/her destiny, become like this? What can be done in order to address the problems facing modern society? What role can Zen play in curing the disease of this age? This dialogue on the theme of Modern Civilization and Zen took place between Zen Master Seung Sahn of Hwagye-sa and Songbon Sunim, a professor of Dongguk Buddhist University, in an effort to identify the problems faced by modern society and offer possible solutions to them.

Songbon Sunim: Modern civilization seems to be confronted by five critical problems: war, shortage of food, overpopulation, destruction of the environment and the loss of humanity. Each issue is interrelated, but particularly the loss of humanity appears to be the cause of escalating social problems. It is believed that Buddhism directly addresses these issues. Would you begin with your thoughts about war?



Zen Master Seung Sahn at the Whole World is a Single Flower conference, October 2003

Seung Sahn Sunim: Wars are caused by changes in the balance of power in the world. There are different realms of power which all interact in this world: the power wielded by humans, the power associated with the animal kingdom and the power of nature itself. Of these, the power wielded by mankind has become the most dangerous. It must be evident to all, that mankind is currently responsible for most of the damage being inflicted on the earth.

Within the human realm, it can be seen that the egoism of personal desire is starting to control most of society. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, ideology played an important role in controlling society. However, since the early 1990s, with the advent of the age of free market capitalism, it is evident that this is no longer the case. Humans are now the slaves of economics. Human beings are starting to resemble dogs, cattle and horses in that their only concern is survival. So human beings are becoming even worse than animals. Animals at least attack other animals out of necessity when hungry, but humans behave much worse than that, even though they are already satiated. War is brought about by this kind of human being.

4] *Collective egoism in society seems to be growing irrespective of nationality, religion or political persuasion. Perhaps collective egoism can be viewed as another kind of war at the national level. And as the fire of this egoism rages we see the human being change into an economic animal. How can this issue be addressed by Buddhism?*



Humans have two kinds of power, the inherent and invisible power within the mind and the externally directed power to act in the world. When humans focus solely on the material world without, then the outer world becomes collectivized and organized. Grouping together and fighting for food results in war. It is from this that, I think, the destruction of human nature originated. Forming groups for self-protection and fighting each other is the way of animals. This problem can be cured when the true nature of mankind is uncovered. The world was not created for humans only. So in order to live in harmony in this world, the mind of great compassion needs to be generated. In the absence of this quality of mind it is not possible for all human beings to co-exist in peace. For example, animals that are butchered to satisfy people's greed will only be reborn again carrying with them the seeds of war and revenge. The only way to overcome this is to work towards the collective self-realization of mankind.

The world religions of today can be divided generally into two kinds in terms of geographical environments and climates. The religions and philosophies which originated from India and China are categorized as the "religions of the forest," whilst the monotheistic which originated from the Middle East such as Judaism and Islam are categorized as the "religions of the desert". The East seems to emphasize the harmony of both humans and nature while the West tends to emphasize their division and separation. Humans and nature are believed to be inseparable in the "religions of forest." Accordingly there is the conception of "all things are one." So humans tried to live their life in the knowledge that they were an integral part of nature. In the "religions of the desert" on the other hand, a God as absolute maker of the world was created. So people came to believe in and follow this only God, creator of all things, not accepting the existence of other gods and beings. As I see it, the problems of modern society stem from this religious tradition with the dualistic thought structure.

Yes, I believe that you are right. There is no past in the religions of the West. They are heading merely from the present to the future. This blocks people from seeing mankind as a part of nature. On the other hand, Buddhism admits the past, the present, and the future. The present is the result of the past, and the future is the result of the present. When we view things in this way, the balance of the world and nature will be preserved in the correct manner.

This dualistic foundation of western religion, which has the tendency to analyze and divide, seems also to be carried through into western science. Western science, in which the dissecting and analysis of things is regarded as its purpose, tries to break down things which simply cannot be broken down. For example, living things once broken down into their



composite parts will obviously no longer be living things. I think that this is the biggest weakness of modern science. Also I think that the analytic, dualistic way of thinking is the cause of much of the confusion in the world today.

Actually, it is a fact that Buddhism also divides and analyzes. But the difference is that Buddhism proposes a way to return to the origin. This point is illustrated by the hwadu: "Ten thousand things all return to the one; to where does the one return?" As you know well, this hwadu comes from a dialogue between Zen Master Joju and another monk. This hwadu clearly expresses the east Asian idea that the root of everything is one.

Furthermore, this hwadu provides a direct insight into the very essence of Zen and east Asian thought. That is to say, the idea that by emptying oneself and completely immersing oneself in nature, one can find oneness with the universe. Also it raises a profound question about the origin of existence. "The ten thousand things" symbolize the positive attributes of affirmation, existence, differentiation and the real aspect of phenomena. On the other hand, "the One" represents the idea of negation, emptiness, non-differentiation and equality. So you can appreciate that Buddhist philosophy also involves an element of analysis and division. However, underneath all this, the underlying intent is always the return to the origin.

On the contrary, in Western philosophy one finds the roots of modern society with its obsession with specialization and fragmentation, which is leading to the systematic mechanization of mankind. So human beings are losing their essential humanness or humanity. Although this is taking place, the damage is not necessarily irreversible. A way back is possible but not through any paradigm offered by western philosophy. Only Buddhism and Zen can offer real solutions.

The difference between eastern and western philosophy is also reflected in the different approaches taken by eastern and western medicine. Eastern medicine is essentially preventative in nature, seeking to protect and strengthen the weaker organs of the body, while Western medicine is reparatory in nature focusing on the surgical removal of the weak and sick parts. A parallel can be drawn in the different concepts of freedom and peace. In the east, punishment consists of exile from society to create a kind of mental freedom. However, in the west punishment consists of confinement, which focuses on the limitation of spatial freedom. So one can see that in the east there's the pursuit of mental and inner freedom and peace while in the west there is the pursuit of material and outer freedom and peace. Many scholars believe that if society is to evolve in the future, mankind must focus on the Eastern concept of inner mental freedom.

Yes, absolutely. I agree. This is not a passing trend. Many western scholars are feeling the limitation of their own studies, and are exploring the eastern approach through Zen practice. This shows the limitation of the western philosophic approach. Why do you think scholars with Ph.D.'s are becoming involved in Zen? It's because they are blocked. They are not finding the breakthroughs and solutions that they expected through the western paradigm. Just as Zen monks do Zen practice to cut through the discriminating mind, they are taking up Zen practice in order to find a way to break through their doubts.

Many scholars are convinced that the principles of Buddhism will be an important instrument in future philosophical studies as well as in bringing about world peace. What do you think about the principles of Buddhism as they relate to world peace?

Well, the first thing is that you should realize yourself. How can peace be found without knowing yourself? In self-realization one finds the state of perfect equanimity. At this stage, you realize the origin of the phenomenal world and the intrinsic meaning of life. You also come to possess the wisdom to discriminate correctly so that ultimately your mind is not disturbed by events taking place around you. In other words, one is able to live one's life comfortably and composedly without worries or anxiety. So when human beings come to know themselves as they really are, meaningless disputes will cease, and there will be peace.

Yes, you are correct. I think this is basically Wonhyo's principle of mutual interpenetration and all-inclusiveness. The power of returning to the origin rather than dividing and analyzing; this is what Buddhism is really about. I agree with your idea that world peace will be attained when the idea

that all people possess the Buddha nature, which is the seed of realization, is established. So in this regard, I completely agree with you.

There is no investigation of the person who is doing the dividing and analyzing in the western philosophical and scientific tradition. In other words, there is no question of who the "I," the person doing the analyzing, is. On the other hand, as I indicated before, Buddhism, being concerned with returning to the origin, investigates the "I." This is the salient feature of Buddhism. Nevertheless we now belong to the scientific and technical age. So we need to consider carefully how to effectively communicate the ideas of Buddhism in order to make Buddhism relevant to the modern world.

I feel that Buddhism in Korea won't become relevant to modern society merely through the reorganization of its institutions. The spreading of the Buddhist message to the rest of the world will only take place when the prevailing thinking changes. So when the education of the Buddhist monks improves in quality, then we'll see the proliferation of the Buddhist ideal.

Humans are not born out of choice, but it is possible to control one's destiny to a degree. This can be achieved by controlling one's mind. This is the most important teaching of the Buddha. If I can control my mind, then my destiny can be changed. Through Zen practice and Yombul (mantra repetition), karma is dissolved and so one's destiny will naturally be altered. Just as a film director can edit the film he works with, destiny can be controlled when one realizes the self. Isn't the essence of Wonhyo's teachings of "Harmonization" and the practice of "No Obstacle" all about controlling one's own action and not discriminating against others?



Zen Master Seung Sahn
with Ji Do Poep Sa Nims
Judy Roitman and
Dennis Duermeier
at Mu Sang Sa

As human beings we need desperately to eliminate our selfishness and consider the welfare of all living beings, including the planet itself, if we are to survive as a species. The planet is being crippled by our own uncontrolled pollution. As an example of this, every day we face the issue of how to dispose of our garbage. So what is the Buddhist approach to dealing with these kinds of mundane issues?

You have a very good point. I think we need to adopt the Zen Buddhist idea of not wasting even a single grain of rice. If we live with this ethic then naturally we'll be able to find a sustainable solution to the issues of food and the elimination of waste matter. In the absence of such an approach it is unlikely that we'll be able to reverse the crippling damage that we are inflicting on our own planet. At the same time we need to train our own minds. Purity and restraint within our own selves will lead naturally to the solution of the mundane problems we face in the material world.

It seems that those with genuine spiritual understanding will have to assume many roles and do many things in this age. Only if Buddhists assume the mantle of responsibility in this way, can we avert the inevitable disaster being brought on by the modern life. Technological civilization with its mechanized industrial structures has gradually been consuming the humanity of the individual. I think for those brought up in the theistic social and religious traditions of the west, the spirit and culture of Zen Buddhism will bring a fresh impetus.

Of course what you say is correct. We need to perfect ourselves first, and at the same time we should endeavor to transmit the Buddhist teachings to our neighbors. This is the way to benefit not only our own country but also society at large, and the whole world. No matter how much science develops, it will never be able to fathom the secrets of consciousness itself. So ultimately, through empirical scientific investigation, the understanding of the human being is impossible. The human being is a composite entity of both body and mind. Consequently the intrinsic desire for the improvement of life can only be fulfilled through the spiritual life. One of the main tenets of Zen Buddhism is that the individual must experience and affirm the truth for himself or herself.

It might just be that the significance of Zen to the modern age will be to enable the individual to find the wisdom to live his/her life resourcefully and confidently. The spiritual world cannot be seen or affirmed through the physical eyes. It can only be comprehended through the mental eye of realization. Buddhism is useful in that it can help people internalize the problems of this modern age through their individual experience. We must come to realize that civilization will not be saved by God or Buddha, but by ourselves. With the help of the wisdom of Zen Buddhism we can recover our humanity and lead meaningful lives in harmony with each other and the world we inhabit. So we must all become bodhisattvas in order to save the world. ☸

Un Mun Sa (top and bottom); Zen Master Seung Sabn's hermitage (middle)

