

The Whole World is a Single Flower

Zen Master Dae Bong

TRUTH CANNOT DISAPPEAR



I would like to thank Gye Mun Sunim JDPS and all the people of the Kwan Yin Chan Lin Zen Center here in Singapore and everyone else who has made this Whole World is a Single Flower Conference possible. Whether you came from just down the street, or from the other side of the world, I thank you for coming to share yourselves with each other. Lastly, I would like to thank all the teachers, monks, and nuns who have contributed to this conference.

At the end of World War II, Zen Master Man Gong wrote the famous calligraphy, “The Whole Word Is a Single Flower.” Why? The end of the war marked the end of thirty-five years of oppressive occupation of Korea by the Japanese. This period was very difficult and painful for the Korean people. Zen Master Man Gong’s role during the occupation was very interesting. He wasn’t a monk who just stayed in the mountains, got enlightenment, and enjoyed a good reputation through teaching people.

After the 1910 annexation of Korea, the Japanese tried to crush Korean culture, language, and religion. Part of that strategy was to control Korean Buddhism, which was seen as

a force of resistance. There were about three or four thousand temples in Korea at that time. They were all governed by twenty-five head temples. The Japanese governor general who was in charge of ruling Korea called the twenty-five abbots of the head temples to Seoul for a meeting. Man Gong Sunim was the head of one of those temples, so he also was called to this meeting. At this meeting, the governor general said, “All Korean Buddhists follow you twenty-five great monks. My predecessor, the former governor general, only wanted to help Korean Buddhism. I also want to help Korean Buddhism. So for Korean Buddhism to become strong, Korean Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism must become one school.” What that meant, of course, is that they would follow the rules of Japanese Buddhism. That meant small things—like wearing black robes—but, it also meant following forms which would weaken Korean Buddhism. These included allowing monks to marry, eat meat, and drink alcohol, which was the rule in Japan. The Japanese authorities wanted all the major temples headed by married monks. The penalty for not following the rules set forth by the Japanese government could mean imprisonment or execution.

After the governor general finished speaking, Man Gong Sunim walked to the front of the room, pointed at the governor general and demanded, “Do you know where the mountains, the rivers, and the great earth come from?” The governor general was silent. Suddenly Man Gong Sunim shouted, “Katz!” He pointed to the governor general’s mouth and said, “Then that mouth is the gate to hell. Your predecessor didn’t want to help Korean Buddhism, he wanted to destroy it. If you want to help Korean Buddhism, don’t touch it.” Then he left and went back to Dok Sahn Mountain. Six hundred meditation monks and nuns refused to follow the Japanese style and the Japanese didn’t touch them. The rest of the monks and nuns went over to the Japanese style, which is why there is still a married monks order in Korea. The occupation continued until World War II ended and the Japanese were forced to leave. I’m sure everybody was joyous, just like they were in Malaysia, and here in Singapore. Maybe some of you were alive at that time and remember—certainly your parents or grandparents were.

At that time, Man Gong Sunim took a petal from a flower of the national flower, dipped it in some ink, and wrote, “The Whole World Is a Single Flower.” I always wondered why this calligraphy is not really beautiful writing; it was written with a flower petal, not a brush. But there is no bitterness in this calligraphy. There is no anger. There is no exclusion. Everybody, everything is part of this single flower. Man Gong Sunim’s mind at that time is already the end of all differences.

Long ago, Buddha picked up one flower. Only Mahakashyapa understood. In that flower are the 84,000 sutras. All the truth of the universe is in Buddha’s flower. And in Man Gong Sunim’s calligraphy is the end of all differences, the end of desire, anger and ignorance. Whether he had attained enlightenment or not, the moment he wrote “The Whole World is a Single Flower,” that was the end of all differences. You don’t have to wait until your practice is ripe. One moment of truly open, wide, accepting, compassionate, inclusive mind is it. That is Buddha.

We are very lucky in this hall. If we were all from the same backgrounds, all from the same lineages and teaching... of course, it would be easy to get along. But if you have different ideas, then how do you get along? Simple... don’t hold on to them. Appreciate the other person’s idea. Who cares who is right or who is wrong? For example, this is a glass of water. English people say “water,” Chinese people say “sui,” Korean people say “mul,” and Malaysians say “ai.” So I ask everybody here, is this water, sui, mul or ai? *[clapping]* Clap? Why are you clapping, we’re not done here... I ask Achan B—Is this water, sui, mul or ai?

Achan B: “As long as it’s not gin, I don’t mind.”

ZMDB: “Sorry?”

AB: “As long as it’s not gin—gin, a type of alcohol, maybe the closest is sake... because sometimes you can’t tell the difference.”

ZMDB: “That’s too complicated an answer for me.”

AB: “That’s all you’re getting.”

ZMDB: “My mind’s complicated. So another way to answer will be...” *[he drinks the water and hands it to Achan B to drink, which he refuses.]*

AB: “I have faith.”

ZMDB: “He has faith. He trusts me. That is a mistake!”

I will say something about trust. There are three kinds of thieves in the world. The first kind of thief steals your car, your credit card, your TV. I’m sure you all worry about that. Actually, this first kind of thief cannot hurt you. The second kind of thief steals your nation. The name for that kind of thief is “hero.” That is somebody like Napoleon. The second thief is more dangerous. But the most dangerous thief is the third kind—they steal your mind. The name for that is “holy person.” So watch out, you’ve got two holy people up here stealing your minds right now! *[clapping]* You applaud? Be careful.

One of the last things Buddha said was, “Be a lamp unto yourself.” We are Buddhists, right? If you believe there is something perfect outside of you, then that is the same as other religions, not Buddhism. Why do other religions fight all the time? Buddha said, “I am a doctor with many kinds of medicine.” He didn’t try to give the same medicine to everybody. So if you like one kind of medicine, take it. Don’t worry about the kind of medicine other people are taking, or force them to take your medicine. That is true Buddhism.

I have a Buddhist story about that. It’s a story about dog racing, which took place in America about twenty-five years ago. Dogs are put into a cage. There’s a rail on the inside of the track. And there is a mechanical rabbit on the rail. The mechanical rabbit goes around the track. When the dogs see the rabbit, they chase it. They think they can catch the rabbit, but they can’t because someone is controlling its speed. But they chase it around until they pass the finish line. Then human beings win or lose money on their bets. One day, there was a dog named Clear Mary in a race. That’s interesting—Clear Mary—because we say Zen means a clear mind. Nothing special. Just that your mind is clear. Clear Mary was very fast and had won many races, so many people bet on her. On this particular day, all the dogs went into the gate, as usual, the gates opened, the dogs saw the rabbit, and started to chase the rabbit. Everybody was cheering, hoping to win

money. However, halfway around the track, one dog stopped. The other dogs kept chasing the rabbit, but this one dog just stood there watching. All of the people on the stands were looking at this one dog, Clear Mary. Naturally, the people who bet on her were really upset. They started yelling, “You stupid dog! Run! Run!” But Clear Mary just stood there watching the other dogs chase the rabbit. Then she turned around and looked the other way, back from where she came. Then suddenly she jumped over the rail, shot across the center of the track, and as the rabbit came around, she leaped at the rail and grabbed the rabbit.

When our teacher Zen Master Seung Sahn heard this story he said, “This dog has Zen mind.” That is very interesting. Our life is much like this dog race. We are always chasing something outside. We want a car, we want a good relationship, we want a good body, we want enlightenment, we want nirvana, we want to find our true self. We always want something. [laughter] But this one dog just stopped. Then she turned around and looked the other way. Then, suddenly, everything became clear. The situation no longer controlled her. Then “Boom!” She jumped over the rail and caught the rabbit.

In our lives, it is the same. If we don't stop and look at ourselves, then “my” situation, “my” condition and “my” opinion always controls me. If we don't hold on to words, and thinking, onto “I, my, me,”—then we can find what is controlling us. Do you think that truth did not exist until the Buddha appeared? It must have existed before Buddha appeared. That means that even if Buddhism disappears, which the Buddha predicted, we are OK, because truth cannot disappear. So it doesn't matter what anybody else is doing. It doesn't matter what the monks do, it doesn't matter what your teachers do, it only matters what you do. Our teaching is to find your true self and help this world. Then the whole world is a single flower. Thank you. ☸

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