



# authenticity

Zen Master Bon Soeng

This talk is inspired by the life of Zen Master Seung Sahn. Through his teachings and his action, he was a consistent example of authenticity. Being with him would shake the foundations of my “I, my, me” mind. Things would feel surreal; my usual evaluation and control would loosen. In its place would appear spontaneity and humor. He showed me how one can be committed to a vow of service to the world, while at the same time completely enjoying the moment. His teaching expressed spontaneity, a moment-centered life lived with the purpose of attaining true self and helping this world.

He did not push us to understand the sutras, or be experts (as he was) in the Buddha’s teaching. Rather, he pushed us to attain the Buddha’s mind, which means to understand our true selves and manifest it in a way that helps others. About three years before I received inka—authorization to teach—a group of us were out to lunch with Zen Master Seung Sahn. My brother asked him, “When will Jeff become a teacher?” He replied: “When he learns how to eat noodles.”

This poem, to me, expresses the heart of his teaching.

ORIGINAL FACE—Zen Master Seung Sahn

*Your true self is always shining and free  
Human beings make something and enter the ocean of suffering  
Only without thinking can you return to your true self  
The high mountain is always blue, white clouds coming and going*

When Shakyamuni Buddha had his big awakening, he was gazing at the morning star. In that moment, he completely realized that he and the universe were one thing. Even to say “one thing” takes away from the completeness of the experience. His experience was complete, no trace of “I.” He realized that not only were he and the universe one, but that it was true for all beings, all of us. Zen Master Man Gong’s famous calligraphy states: “The whole world is a single flower.” Just as a flower is made up of stem and petals, pistil and roots, so is the complete universe made up of parts which are themselves complete.

**Your true self is always shining and free** You are already complete. Hui Neng, the sixth Patriarch, said, “You should know that so far as Buddha-nature is concerned, there is no difference between an enlightened man and an ignorant one. What makes the difference is that one realizes it, while the other is ignorant of it.” The Buddha’s teaching says that without cultivation you are already complete. Our authentic, real self needs no cultivation. True self is always shining and free whether we are aware of it or not. Our task, our practice, is to become aware and to actualize our true self, to be it in this very moment.

Zen is not about self improvement. We don’t strive to become something, or to overcome our deficiencies. We practice to allow the natural, authentic unfolding of Buddha-nature to manifest. Our effort is about clearing away delusion and ignorance. This means getting out of our own way, allowing this magnificence, this authentic true self to manifest. In this way healing and world peace are not an impossible, distant dream, but exist right now, right here in this very moment.

**Human beings make something and enter the ocean of suffering** Our true self may indeed always be shining and free, but most of the time we experience painful difficulties in our lives. We are constantly dissatisfied with the ways things are. The Buddha said that we suffer because either we don’t have what we want, or we are afraid of losing what we do have. Moment to moment we struggle to control and force the world to fit into the mold of our desires. That is what Zen Master Seung Sahn is pointing to when he says that human beings make something.

Listen to this sound [*hit.*] Each of us hears this sound. Before thinking we can recognize it for what it is. Just [*hit.*] But some of us don’t like that sound: “Why did he hit the table so hard?” Or some of us really liked it, “That is so great. I really could get the deep meaning of that sound.” Either way, we are making something. The sound itself is just as it is. How I feel about it is making something. This making something creates likes and dislikes. Then, as the Buddha said, if I don’t get what I want, I suffer. If I do get what I want, then I am afraid I might lose it. Or, I might like this sound, but the next sound might hurt my ears and I won’t like it. We are perpetually at odds with, and trying to control, our reality.

In Buddhism we talk about the three poisons: greed, aversion, and delusion. These three poisons point to the way we make something and enter the ocean of suffering. Can you recognize them in your own life? Can you see how your desire for things, or rejection of things, colors your perceptions and actions in the world? Can you admit to the inauthenticity of your actions driven by these three poisons?

The first poison is greed or desire. I want, I need, give it to me, please, please, please. I really want it. I need to get it and I need to figure out a way to get it. Maybe I can just take it. I know it is YOURS, but I need it more than you. And anyway, my needs are more important than yours. I’m even willing to fabricate a story in order to get what I want. And I will repeat this story over and over until I finally believe it—mostly.

Greed interrupts the natural flow of things. Adding my desire into the equation of life, trying to change or alter the way things are to bring me satisfaction, ultimately leads to suffering.

Aversion or hatred is the second poison. Aversion is essentially rejection. Get that thing away from me. Hatred and aversion arise in response to something we don’t like or want to happen to us. It often leads us to push away, at worst culminating in violence. Hatred and anger can overwhelm us, causing us to act in inauthentic ways in order to get relief from these feelings. The natural, authentic flow of life is rejected, and more suffering is the result.

The third poison is ignorance or delusion. This poison follows directly from the other two. Our greed and anger force us to act inauthentically and lose contact with the original, natural flow of things. This inevitably leads to a sense of separation. To live with that separation, I make up a story or narrative to explain who I am and why my greed and anger are justified. More and more, true self is lost, and I live in the dream of my narrative. This is fundamental delusion. The more contrived our delusion is, the more we suffer. The more rigid we become trying to justify and bolster our story, the more we suffer, and the more we cause suffering for those around us. This “making” of likes and dislikes, good and bad, right and wrong, leads us farther and farther away from an authentic, natural unfolding of our lives.

**Only without thinking can we return to our true self** Without thinking means before thinking, or not attaching to thinking. Seeing things as they are, not how we would like them to be. Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” A Zen student asks, “If I don’t think, then what?”

Before-thinking is easy to talk about, but difficult to practice. Our desire, anger, and ignorance are so powerful, so encompassing and solid, that we don’t even recognize their impact. Many people who first hear about before-thinking find it absurd. Others feel that it is impossible to not attach to their thinking.

This leads us to the realm of Zen practice. Though our delusion seems enormous, and our suffering feels so daunting and profound, Zen practice offers us a way to deconstruct our delusion. We can live a more centered and grounded life, in order to work with our desire and anger, so that we can reconnect with that authentic natural self which is always shining and free.

Quiet the mind. Breathe gently and deeply in and out. Observe what is happening just now. Find your balance point where desire and anger don’t control you. Allow your actions in life to come from this place, and mindfully pay attention to the results. This is true Zen practice.

From the Chinese and Korean Zen traditions we learn that it takes three things to practice Zen—great question, great courage, and great faith. These three greats form the foundation of practice. Together they show us a path, a way to live which will bring us into more alignment with what is natural, authentic, and true. In this way we can find our true self and help this world.

Great question is the first of the three greats. Great question means asking the question, “What am I?” and “What is this?” Asking these great questions brings our meditation and mindfulness alive. As we sit in meditation, these questions bring energy and focus to our silent work. Mindfully asking these questions as we go about our everyday lives offers a way

to bring our meditation out of the dharma hall. What is actually happening right now? What do I feel and think about it all? How are my thoughts and feelings colouring my view of what is happening right now?

Moment to moment we are called upon to respond to all sorts of situations and conditions. How clearly can we really see what is going on? As was said in the discussion about making something, usually our view of the moment is coloured by the three poisons. Using great question as a focus of our Zen practice, we can begin to observe the moment more honestly, more free of the biases of our desire, anger, and delusion. As we let go of our biases, we can experience our lives more directly and honestly. We use these questions to clarify our life.

Great courage is the second great. Great courage means to make a great effort, whether the moment is difficult or easy. This effort is critical to Zen practice because our delusion is so strong. Life is very uncertain, and we are very vulnerable. We cling strongly to our own delusion to protect us from these risks and uncertainties. In our Zen practice, we need to push beyond what is comfortable. This is one of the important lessons we learn in a meditation retreat. Much of the time during retreat we are unhappy and want it to end. Just making it through helps us build a stronger center. We need to become better able to observe our desire and anger without losing ourselves in them. I may want something, but by applying great effort, I may not need to satisfy my desire. I may be angry but I may not need to strike out. I can watch it, observe it, and not act on it. We need great courage to honestly face our feelings and thoughts as they are, so as not to be lead astray by them.

Great faith leads us back to the true self, which is always shining and free. We believe in our true self, in the authentic unfolding of life. This is not about believing in something outside ourselves. We are the universe, the universe is us! As we begin to see the falseness of our own delusion, we can

begin to experience directly the completeness and authenticity of this moment. We can have faith in our own experience. When standing in the rain, we get wet. It is possible to believe our own senses, untainted by the three poisons. Listen to the wind. Hear it and appreciate it for what it is. Feel it on your face and you experience truth.

These three greats, practiced moment to moment, grounded in meditation and mindfulness, offer us all an active and dynamic way to practice Zen. They help us actually relax the tight grip of our feelings and thinking and return us to our true self.

**The high mountain is always blue, white clouds coming and going** Here we return to the realm of the natural unfolding of the universe. The mountain itself is always blue, whether we realize it or not, whether we like it or not. The clouds coming and going do not bother the mountain. In fact, they coexist peacefully. The mountain helps the clouds form and the clouds give moisture to the mountain. In the same way, our struggles and triumphs nourish our awakening.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, enlightenment is depicted as a two-headed dragon of wisdom and compassion. In a moment of centered authenticity, wisdom and compassion appear. We have the clarity to see things as they are and the courage to open our heart. We naturally treat the world and the things in it with love and compassion and are concerned about others, not only about ourselves.

Authenticity is the path to peace and healing. Don't try to be someone other than yourself. Allow our Zen practice to help you listen deeply to your true self—your deepest and most authentic expression of the Buddha's mind. There are 86,400 seconds in one day. Imagine how many experiences we live in all these seconds. How will we live them? Will we remain lost in the dream-created by the three poisons, or will we wake up to this moment's magnificent unfolding of Buddha-nature? ☸

