

Zen and psychotherapy

Zen Master Dae Bong
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Sunims, professors, doctors, and guests, thank you very much for inviting me here today. I have been asked to speak on the experience of teaching Zen.

Zen actually has no teaching. The student determines the teaching. The Great Chinese Zen Master Im Je said, “Our school has no doctrine. I simply produce medicine for the disease which appears.”

The Great Chinese Zen Master Tae Hye said, “In Zen there is nothing to cultivate. Just rid yourself of all your opinions.” People do not have faith in the clarity and wisdom of their own original mind, so myriad problems and sufferings appear.

Practicing Zen is realizing suffering, the cause of suffering, and the end of suffering. Realizing this, naturally you want to help others.

Since all names and forms are impermanent, including religious forms, teachings, and ideas, a Zen practitioner uses whatever is at hand to help others. Yesterday I met a Korean man below our temple. He said he wanted to become a monk. I asked, “Why?” He said, “I want to get enlightenment.” I asked him, “What will you do after you get enlightenment?” “I don’t know.” That is a problem. I asked him if he was married. He said “yes, with two children.” I told him he must ask his wife’s permission. He said she would say no. She is Christian and gets very angry when he talks about wanting to be a monk. I said, “Then why become a monk? Buddhism means only help others. This world is originally empty, so you are also empty, so only help others. When you are with your wife, 100% keep husband’s mind. When you are with your children, 100% keep parent’s mind. When you are with your friends, 100% keep friend’s mind. When you are working, 100% working mind. When you are driving, 100% driver’s mind. That is practicing Buddhism. You can practice Buddhism in your everyday life just as it is. That is Zen.”

This man said that he is very nervous. “Who is nervous?” “I am.” “Who are you?” After some time he said, “I don’t know.” “Only keep this don’t know mind—in your lower belly.” Then I taught him tanjeon ho-heup, a breathing exercise.

“If you keep energy in your head, then you will have much thinking, much desire, and much suffering. If you keep energy in your chest, you will have too much emotion. Then I like this. I don’t like that. This person is good. That person is bad. This kind of thinking will appear. If you slowly breathe in and slowly breathe out, and return your attention and energy to your tanjeon, then your thinking and emotions will calm down. Slowly your mind will become clear and bright. You can then perceive this world and perceive your job moment-to-moment and do it. Try that every day.”

When I first met my teacher, Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn, in 1977, he was giving a dharma talk at Yale University in the United States. That night, a psychology professor asked him, “What is crazy and what is not crazy?” Zen Master Seung Sahn said, “If you are very attached to something, you are very crazy. If you are a little attached to something, you are a little crazy. If you are not attached to anything, that is not crazy.” I thought, “This answer is better than my ten years of studying and working in psychology.” Then Zen Master Seung Sahn continued, “So, in this world everyone is crazy, because everyone is attached to ‘I’. But this ‘I’ does not really exist. It is only made by our thinking. If you want to find your true self and not attach to your thinking ‘I,’ you must practice Zen.”

I thought, “This is my teacher.”

Human suffering comes from attachment to our thinking, to “I, my, me.” Practicing Zen means looking deeply into “I.” What am I? If you ask this question consistently and sincerely, finally you don’t know. This don’t know is very important. Keeping don’t know mind is practicing Zen. Giving others don’t know mind is teaching Zen.

Zen Master Seung Sahn said, “Don’t teach your understanding. Only teach don’t know.”

When I was a university student, I worked as an aide in a mental hospital at night. One night I came on duty at 11 pm. I could not find any of the staff, so I walked around the unit. Finally, I found the doctor and nurses in one patient’s room trying to get her to take her sleep medication. This woman was refusing to take her medicine and kept saying she needed to take a bus. Rita, the night nurse, came on duty and also could not find us. Finally she found us in the woman’s room. Rita watched the scene for a few moments and walked over to the bed (the only furniture in the room.) She pulled the mattress off of the bed, and as she rolled the bed frame out of the room, she pointed to the mattress and said to the woman, “There’s your bus. Get on it and take a ride.” The woman was shocked and stopped arguing. We all went out of the room, locked the door, and she slept the rest of the night.

When this happened, I thought to myself, “I want to get that kind of mind. I do not think I can get that from academic study.”

In Zen we say, any religion is like a finger pointing to the moon. If you attach to the finger, you will not get the moon. So in America we have Christian-Buddhist retreats, led by a Catholic priest or Protestant minister and a Buddhist monk. Christians and Buddhists practice Zen meditation together. I have a Catholic priest friend named Father Hunt who likes to say, “When you are doing sitting meditation and your leg has pain, is that Christian pain or Buddhist pain?” That is a very important point.

Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, “If you practice Zen, then if you are Christian, you can be 100% correct Christian. If you are Muslim, you can be 100% correct Muslim. If you are Buddhist, you can be 100% correct Buddhist.”

Zen meditation means when you are doing something, just do it! When you are sitting meditation, just sit. When you are chanting, just chant. When you are bowing, just bow. When you are driving, just drive. When you are washing dishes, just wash dishes. When you are with your family, 100% family. When you are doing something, just do it! At that time, there is no “I, my, me.” Where is “I, my, me” then ?

That sounds easy. It is not, and it is. If you try, try, try, slowly your body, mind, and situation moment-to-moment become one. Your complicated mind becomes simple. Then your simple mind can become empty and clear. One day you will realize your true nature, universal substance, is before-thinking, empty, void, pure, clear, and miraculously functioning. You will realize what the Sixth Patriarch called “the essence of mind.”

If you correctly attain that, your mind will be clear like space, clear like a mirror. Everything will reflect in your mind. Red comes, red. White comes, white. You see clearly, hear clearly, smell, taste, touch, and think clearly. The sky is blue. The tree is green. The dog barks, “Woof! Woof!” Sugar is sweet. Everything just the way it is is truth. You attain truth.

Then one more step is necessary. How does truth correctly function and make a correct human life? You must keep the correct situation, correct function, and correct relationship moment-to-moment. When you are hungry, eat. When you are tired, sleep. When someone is hungry, give them food. When someone is thirsty, give them a drink. When someone is suffering, help them. The name for that is Great Love, Great Compassion, and the Great Bodhisattva Way. But it is not special. It is simply correct human life. It is Zen.

Zen practice means substance, truth, and function become clear moment-to-moment. Teaching means that your mind and the student’s mind become one and give direction. You can perceive where the person is stuck and show them correct direction.

Practicing and teaching Zen are not two separate activities. If your practice is clear, your teaching will be clear. If your practice is not clear, your teaching will be not clear. Teaching, for me, is an experience of moment-to-moment learning—about you, about me, about this world. I always felt my teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, was a great teacher because he had a great vow and was a great learner. He knew how to learn from every moment. Every moment was fresh and new.

Zen Master Seung Sahn once said to me, “Before, students learned from teachers. Now, teachers learn from students.” This has helped me tremendously. I never felt I had anything to teach. Now I realize that teaching is not teaching. It is learning: Who is in front of me? Where are we stuck? How can I help?

A few years ago, a Korean woman approached me in the subway in Seoul. She pulled my robe and said, “I hate these clothes.” I said, “These are Korean clothes. Why don’t you like Korean things?” Pulling the robe again, she said, “I hate these clothes.” I said, “OK. You and I are about the same height. How about you give me your clothes and I give you mine.” Then she looked at me, smiled a little, and said, “You are a strange man. What is your name?” I said, “My name is Dae Bong.” “No. Tell me your real name.” “My name is Dae Bong.” “No. I want your real name.” “I forgot. You better ask my mother.”

“No. No. I want your real name.” “Why do you want my name?” “I want to pray for you.” “That is OK. You can pray for me without my name. God knows who I am.”

“No. I want your name.” I said, “OK. You get a paper and pen and I will tell you my name.” So she got out a paper and pen. Then I slowly said, “My name is I...love...you.”

She laughed, slapped me on the arm, and said, “You are a funny man,” and walked away.

Korean people eat with chopsticks and spoon. Japanese people eat with chopsticks. Western people eat with a knife and fork. Indian people eat with just their hands. The techniques are all different, but the direction is the same: food into my stomach. The direction is more important than the technique.

The most important thing in teaching Zen is helping the student find the correct direction of practice and of human life. Only go straight—don’t know. Why? To help all beings. When a person finds the correct direction, everything moment-to-moment becomes a useful technique. You can use every circumstance to teach a person. You can show a person how to use every circumstance to move forward, to help themselves and others.

When I asked Korean young people ten years ago what they thought about Buddhism, they said, “Buddhism is a grandmother’s religion.” The Korean young people I met did not see it as relevant to their life. Similarly, Zen practice essentially disappeared in China in the 1500s and 1600s because it had become a practice of the intellectual elite. It no longer connected with people’s everyday life.

But society is changing, and now I think that more and more people find Buddhism, and especially Zen, interesting. Especially in the West, Buddhist practice is rapidly growing. It is growing in the West because correct Buddhism is not based on belief but on practice. It is a practice of becoming clear, of seeing one’s essential nature, that one’s true self is identical to the entire universe, of seeing the self-cause of suffering, and the way to overcome or end suffering. The ideal in Mahayana Buddhism is to help all beings, not only oneself, and not only human beings, not later but now, this moment. This resonates strongly with the concerns of many people in the world today.

Nowadays, all societies have lost their direction. People only want money and comfort in this life and the next. People kill others and themselves to get their dream. Everyone holds their opinion, and their opinions are different, so they fight. This is true between religions, countries, political parties, husband and wife, parents and children. Even inside us, our mouth and our stomach fight. My mouth says “I want more food and drink,” but my stomach says “No! No!” So we cannot make harmony within ourselves, with each other, with animals, with the air, water, and earth. If we continue this way, then soon much, much suffering will appear and many, many people will die—from war, disease, starvation, too little water, too much water, bad air, and natural disasters. We human beings are making the world like this! It is not coming from outside. Cause and effect are clear.

If we want to change this, then we must wake up! We must find our true nature, return to correct human beings’ mind, help each other, help nature, and help all beings. This is our human beings’ original job.

If you want to do that, then I ask you: What are you? If your answer is clear, then your life is clear. If you don’t know, then I hope you only go straight, don’t know, which is clear like space, try, try, try, for ten thousand years, non-stop, attain your true self, truth, and correct function, and save all beings from suffering. ☸