

# No Problem

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Just before Zen Master Seung Sahn died, his last words were, “Everything no problem.” What does this mean?

In English the expression *no problem* is of fairly recent origin. We associate it with an attitude of relaxation, open-mindedness, and what we might call the spirit of the Sixties: “live and let live.” Or, a more recent variation: “It’s all good.” Of course, in daily speech we use it for all kinds of situations with no deep implications (or so we think): if, say, a deliveryman calls me and says, “Can I bring the table to your place at five instead of three?” I might say, “No problem.” Or, if someone bumps into me on the subway and apologizes, I might say, “No problem,” or, “Don’t worry about it,” or, “It’s OK.”

In English, there’s a certain kind of power associated with saying “no problem.” My mother once received a plaque in connection with her work from the Optimists Club, which had their credo stamped on it, and the first sentence was, “Let us be strong enough that no mundane worries can trouble us.” Of course, the Optimists Club in that town was mostly made up of wealthy businessmen who, relatively speaking, had little to worry about, so that was easy for them to say. I can afford to have good car insurance, so if someone bangs into my car in a parking lot and accidentally damages the bumper, I can say, “no problem,” knowing that my insurance will pay for it. The spirit of “no problem” is sometimes—perhaps often—something we have to *work* for, at least in an American context.

One of the problems in translating one language to another is that every language has idioms whose meaning is not inherent in the words themselves. *No problem* is definitely one of those. When I lived in Hong Kong after graduating from college, I developed a bad habit of using a literal Cantonese translation of “no problem,” *mou mantaih*, instead of the more appropriate Chinese expression, *m’ganyiu*. The Chinese idiom literally means “no connection” (in Mandarin, *mei guanxi*) or “no relationship,” in the sense of, “It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t relate to anything more important.” Even that doesn’t really convey its meaning, but it will have to do. Another, even more untranslatable Chinese equivalent is *mou souwaih* (*wu suowei*), meaning, roughly, “It has nothing to do with it.”

I may be overstating things, but my feeling has always been that these Chinese expressions are slightly more humble and more conciliatory than “no problem.” They are also, perhaps, slightly less optimistic.

I have no way of saying what expression Zen Master Seung Sahn was mentally translating when he used the words “no problem,” or whether he, in fact, used the English expression without thinking of any equivalent. But of course the Buddhist interpretation of the world indicates a different meaning for these words than the normative English one. In Zen, any use of words is a problem: “Open mouth already a mistake!” Words lead to conceptual thinking and discrimination, to disagreement and confusion. Of course, on the other hand, we have no choice but to use words. Words are part of the big mistake of human life, from the moment we are born to the moment we die. In the largest way of thinking, “problem” and “no problem” are neither different nor not-different; they are interdependent categories. To say “no problem” is not to exclude or militate against “problems,” but to welcome them in.

In the world of samsara we live in, there are real problems everywhere. Yesterday, in the newspaper, I read about a woman in Darfur, in Sudan, who spent three months gathering firewood to take to market to sell for the equivalent of \$40. On her way home she was attacked by militiamen who stole her money and raped her. How must it feel to be that woman? How is it possible for such cruelty to exist among human beings? To read such a story and then say of the world, “everything no problem,” would be an outrage.

Yet Zen Master Seung Sahn was not wrong. In the clarity of the Buddha Way, we forget about problems and no problems and simply go straight to what needs to be done. We pick up the phone and call our representatives in Washington, or send an email to our friends, or donate some money, or perhaps even change our life direction to be of more service to this suffering world. We use every means to relieve pain and give hope. This includes using words when they serve some real purpose. At the moment Zen Master Seung Sahn was speaking, he was surrounded by his students, who were, perhaps, consumed with fear over what was happening. It was necessary to reassure them. Thus: “Everything no problem.”

In the right hands, in the right situation, the expression does more than simply shrug off or dismiss an unpleasant situation: it creates a space of harmony and calm in the midst of worry or anxiety or anger. It’s a way of saying, “yes, there is a problem, but even a problem like this is no problem.” Or, as Zen Master Seung Sahn often said, a bad situation is a good situation.

A story from my own life illustrates this point. When I was twelve years old, my family moved from the East Coast to Phoenix, Arizona, in August, the hottest month of the year. We were driving around in the blazing midday sun looking for a house to rent, and we stopped at a Circle-K store to get something to drink. I bought an enormous soda full of ice, carried it to the counter, and promptly dropped it and spilled it everywhere. There was sticky Cherry Coke and ice all over the floor, the counter, my clothes—a colossal mess. My father turned to me and said something terrible—so much so that my mind has blotted it out. And the next person in line, a middle-aged man, said to me, “It’s OK, it could have happened to anyone. Everybody makes mistakes.”

I burst out crying at that moment. In my shame and humiliation, it was exactly what I needed to hear. For that second, that man was transformed into Kwan Seum bodhisattva, “she who hears the cries of the universe.” I’ve often wondered who he was. Which is another way of saying that I wonder whether *I*, on that same hot day, with cold soda spilled all over my shoes, would be capable of turning to the clumsy, pimply, greasy-haired kid in front of me, and saying—fully meaning it!—“It’s OK. It’s no problem.”