

# Ninth Gate: Nam Cheon Kills a Cat

*An excerpt from the expanded and revised edition of Zen Master Seung Sah's classic Ten Gates, published by Shambhala.*

*One day Nam Cheon Zen Master was in his room when he heard a big commotion outside. The 250 monks of the Western Hall and the 250 monks of the Eastern Hall were fighting over a cat. Nam Cheon became very angry, picked up this cat and said, "You! Give me one word and I will save this cat! If you cannot, I will kill it!"*

Here Nam Cheon is checking the students' minds to see if they truly love the cat or if they are only attached to the cat. If they are only attached to the cat, they cannot answer. If they are not attached to the cat—if they love the cat—then saving the cat's life is possible. But none of the monks said anything. There was only silence. So finally Nam Cheon Zen Master killed the cat.

*In the evening, JoJu, Nam Cheon's top student, returned to the temple. Nam Cheon told JoJu everything that had happened. When he was done speaking JoJu took off his shoes, put them on top of his head, and walked away. Nam Cheon Zen Master then said, "If only you had been there, I could have saved the cat."*

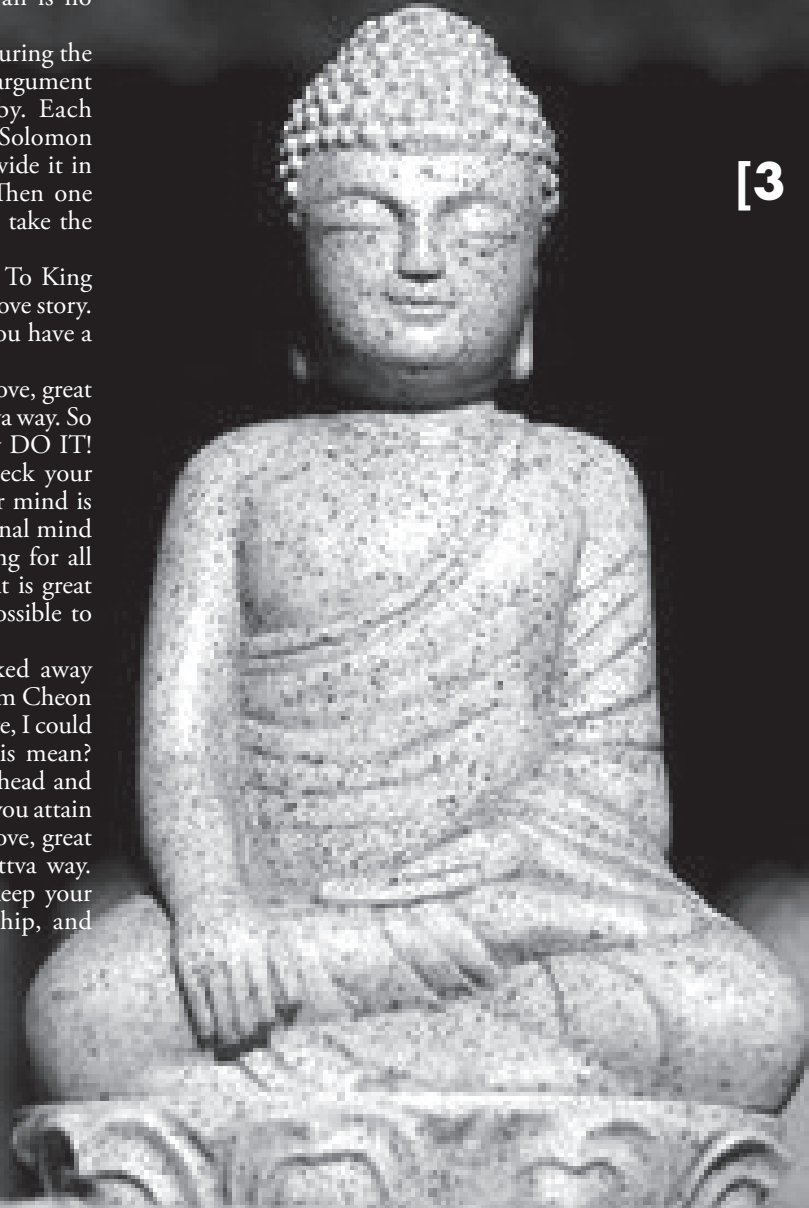
The first question: When Nam Cheon Zen Master holds up the cat and says, "Give me one word and I will save the cat. If you cannot, I will kill it!"—what can you do? This is a love kong-an. If you have great love and great compassion, then this kong-an is no problem.

Here is a hint: A long time ago, during the time of King Solomon, there was an argument between two women about a baby. Each claimed it was her baby. So King Solomon said, "Bring this baby, and I will divide it in two. Each of you can take half." Then one woman said to the other, "Oh, you take the baby. It is yours."

Then who was the true mother? To King Solomon, it was very clear. This is a love story. If you have great love inside, then you have a Zen mind.

Unconditional love means great love, great compassion, and the great bodhisattva way. So unconditionally sit; unconditionally DO IT! Unconditionally practice. Don't check your condition. This is great love. If your mind is unconditional, then this unconditional mind has no I, my, or me. I do everything for all beings—for husband, for wife—that is great love. If you have this mind, it is possible to save the cat.

The second question: JoJu walked away with his shoes on his head. Then Nam Cheon Zen Master said, "If you had been here, I could have saved the cat." What does this mean? Why did JoJu put his shoes on his head and walk away? What does this mean? If you attain this kong-an, then you attain great love, great compassion, and the great bodhisattva way. This means moment to moment, keep your correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function.



Dear Soen Sa Nim,

How are you? Today I will take the precepts at Providence. I am writing you, though, because soon you will travel to Korea, and I will return to school. So for a long time, I won't see you. I had planned to sit during the Labor Day retreat at Providence Zen Center, but that weekend my father is getting married, so I must be with him.

Maybe you will check my homework anyway, "Nam Cheon Kills a Cat." To master Nam Cheon, I would say, "It's theirs!"

Thank you very much for giving the New Haven Zen Center so much of your time this summer. Since you came those two weeks in a row, we've had many new people come to practice, including many of my classmates. Perhaps when school starts again the Zen Center will be very busy.

See you in December.

Yours truly,  
Erik

Dear Erik,

Thank you for your letter. How are you? Congratulations on taking the five precepts.

You wanted to come to the retreat but you cannot—that's OK. What is most important, moment to moment, is keeping your correct situation and relationship. Your father is getting married, so you will stay with him. That is the correct situation and correct relationship. That is Zen, not special.

To Nam Cheon's kong-an you say, "It's theirs." If only you and someone else (two people) are present, that answer is possible. But at the time there were 500 people together, 250 from the eastern hall and 250 from the western hall. The other students don't like your speech; they say, "NO!!!" Then what? You cannot act.

One more step is necessary, then you will correctly understand great love and great compassion and attain them. This answer is not your idea—you are a thief because you took this answer from the story of King Solomon.

Again I ask you: Zen Master Nam Cheon, holding up the cat, says, "You! Give me one word, and I will save this cat. If you cannot, I will kill it!" What can you do? Tell me, tell me! If you don't understand, only go straight, don't know, OK?

I think that in the future the New Haven Zen Center will become stronger and a wonderful Zen Center, because you are strong, very clear and have many friends.

I hope you only go straight, don't know, which is clear like space, soon finish Nam Cheon's kong-an, get enlightenment, and save all people from suffering.

Yours in the dharma,  
S.S.

Busy Beloved Soen Sa Nim,

Not knowing where you are, hopefully this reaches you before your world trip. Thank you for your helping answer letter.

Now Nam Cheon's cat was saved from the beginning, but to save the cat and all cats, my one word is *meow*.

—MEOW  
Yours truly,  
Patricia

Dear Patricia,

Thank you for your letter. How are you and your family?

Your answer is not good, not bad. We say 90 percent. There is 10 percent missing because our kong-an has two kinds of answers: "subject just like this" and "object just like this." For example, when you are hungry, then what? You must eat. This is subject just like this. When someone else is hungry, then what? This is object just like this. That is called the correct situation. When you are hungry, what is your correct situation? When someone else is hungry, then what is your correct situation?

So Nam Cheon's kong-an is not subject just like this. If it were, your answer would be 100 percent. But it is an object just like this kong-an, so your answer is not enough. Somebody is hungry and you say, "I am hungry too." You are not keeping your correct situation. You must have great love, great compassion, and the great bodhisattva way. Then this kong-an is no problem.

If you don't understand, you must see a cowboy movie. You can find two kinds of cowboy stories: money and love. Money stories are not interesting. You must check a love story. Then you will see that this love is without conditions. That is true love. If you find that, then this kong-an is no problem.

Only understanding cannot help you. You must be without conditions and find true love, that's great love, great compassion and the great bodhisattva way. That is also everyday mind and Zen mind.

I hope you only go straight, keep a clear mind, attain Nam Cheon's kong-an, and save all people from suffering.

Yours in the dharma,  
S.S. 