

Standing Up!

Zen Master Soeng Hyang

Standing up to accept the title of School Zen Master, there was a warm applause. As I stood there, waiting for the clapping to stop, an old familiar warning went off in my head. Approval and affection are nice, but are not what is needed most. The real, indispensable gifts are regular doses of feedback and clear criticism. Zen Master Seung Sahn often said, "People who give you good speech are not your friends. It's the people who give you bad speech that really help you."

In the realm of Zen practice, your ultimate teachers are the people who can honestly be a mirror for you and help you to see what you are not yet able to see. How can we develop and mature our practice to the point where we are able to graciously and gratefully receive our sangha's teaching? Our sangha will never flourish if we have a line of successors who are not practicing with humility and curiosity. In our School, this curiosity is called many things: "Don't Know", "What is this?", "What am I doing just now?", "How is it just now?"

As I write this, I am on a plane, returning from The Whole World is a Single Flower Conference and Tour. This was quite an interesting event. We started out in Warsaw, and somehow (it wasn't easy) managed to visit Prague and Budapest... all in about nine days. At times the sangha felt like a river of love, mixing and meandering. We enjoyed the food, the talks, and the jokes. We enjoyed meeting and seeing each other. But of course, there came the inevitable moments of dissatisfaction. Sometimes everything wasn't just right. Some people tired of the potato salad, cheese, and eggs. There was no kimchee, no Chinese food, and no pizza! Some complained about this person or that person. Everyone complained about the long bus rides. But again, all and all, I think most of us were glad we came. It was a very worthwhile effort. I think if we had just had a dharma room in each hotel, it would have been perfect.

I met someone on the trip who gave me the "bad speech" that I so value. He is a strong practitioner who has a history of doing several Kyol Che's and numberless retreats. What I appreciated so much about our time together is that all that was said was said honestly and directly. There was no accusing or blaming, no hurtful finger pointing. There was just a rich bringing forth of opinions, observations, and frustrations. What he said, and whether or not I agreed with all that was said, doesn't matter. What does matter is that he made himself available in such a generous way.

I would like to respectfully share some of his criticisms.

One: The Kwan Um School of Zen teachers don't penetrate their student's minds.

Two: The teachers often only use Zen slogans, without noticing what the student really needs.

Three: The teachers' samadhi is either non-existent or certainly does not go deep.

More was said, but that was what I most valued. Again, to me it is not so much what was said, but that it was said directly. It was those long bus rides (another slogan: a bad situation is a good situation) that gave us that chance to listen to each other. As the trip went on, I felt some trust and appreciation developing between us. That trust and appreciation is everything that I could want from our relationship. That is the Single Flower. Our struggles, fears, and confusion are the flower's sun, soil, and water.

So I thank this dharma brother and I trust that his vow, direction, and patience will allow him to continue to keep showing up at our retreats and gatherings. There can be no "penetration" of minds without both teacher and student being totally astute and aware of each other's presence. The teacher can't penetrate a student's mind any more than the student can penetrate the teacher's mind. True penetration only occurs the moment the idea of teacher and student disappears and there is only clear perception.

There can be no complete understanding of the magnificent teachings of our lineage without both the teacher and the student digesting their true meaning. The slogan that I find the most obnoxious when it comes out of the mouth of someone who has no understanding of what it really means is, "Put it all down." We might get some slight idea of what putting it all down means, and then we start running around telling other people to do it. I suggest that the only time we ever say put it all down is to ourselves each time we notice that we might be holding, checking, or making something. Putting it all down is not a command, it is a skill. Here's another slogan that's sometimes tossed around a little too much: "How may I help you?" If we really want to help, perhaps we can stop asking how, and just "Do it" (oops, another slogan.)

Lastly, what is samadhi? How can we possibly know about its depth? Again, it is up to each one of us to learn about meditation. It up to each one of us to practice letting go of all that tethers us to our false concept of "I". We can't judge our teacher's samadhi, but we can expect our teacher to be kind and perceptive. We can expect them to inspire us and we can vow to inspire them. All the Buddha had to do to inspire Mahakashyapa was hold up a flower. All Mahakashyapa had to do to inspire Buddha was to smile. Was deep samadhi on their minds at that time?

A true sangha must unconditionally, with consistent patience and wisdom, learn what it means to help each other. We all must own and take full responsibility for our own effort and endurance. We must have the courage and insight to look into our own misperceptions and break out of them, using all the magnificent tools Zen has to offer.

What it means to me to have the honor of being the present "School Zen Master" has everything to do with trying to be vigilant about my vow and direction. This world is full of greed and confusion. So many human beings are lost. The Kwan Um School of Zen sangha has a chance to honor Zen Master Seung Sahn's memory by trying to whole-heartedly digest all that we have not yet digested. We can do this by showing up and encouraging each other. The great and deep samadhi is all about attentiveness. This can't be measured, can't be weighed... WAKE UP! Pass the potato salad, don't miss the bus. ☸