




GREAT QUESTION OF LIFE AND DEATH



Zen Master Dae Kwang

At the heart of Buddhism and Zen lies the great question of life and death: What am I? What is a human being? Why do we suffer so much? Why are we here on the planet earth? Are we here to make money? Are we here for sex, food, or fame? These are the questions which became the focus of the Buddha's practice and the reason why he left home. He left home to find the answer to the great question for all beings. He didn't leave home to find a better palace to live in or kingdom to rule; he didn't leave home to find a better job or a better wife. His intent was clear: why do we suffer so much and how can we get out of suffering? He faced this question not just for himself, but to help all beings get out of suffering.

Buddhist tradition teaches that suffering is the mother of Buddha. Without suffering there would be no Buddha. Suffering is the source of the Buddha's search. It's the same for us—we suffer. Now the H1N1 flu virus is with us; there's famine and war everywhere. We experience old age, sickness and death just like the Buddha. We experience pain when we have to be with people we dislike and we feel sorrow when we are separated from those we love. Everyone wants to escape these things, but few can find the way out. Fortunately, we have encountered the Buddha's teaching.

All of the Buddha's teaching is concerned with suffering and how to relieve suffering. In Zen we say that every human being's job is the same—find your true self and help the world. When the Buddha left home he didn't go to a library to try and find the answer to his great question. Instead, he started looking inside himself to find the answer. We are the same. Just like the Buddha, no outside source, even Zen teaching, can give us the answer. We must look inside—that's the meaning of practice and meditation—looking inside to find the answer to the great question of life and death by returning to our original substance, your true self.

One time, the famous monk Xuan Jue visited the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Buddhism, Hui Neng. After entering the great hall at Nan Hwa Ssu, he circled the Patriarch three times, hit the floor with his staff, and just stood there without bowing. The Patriarch admonished him for violating the rules of etiquette and asked him why he was so arrogant. Xuan Jue replied, "The great question of life and death is a momentous one. Death may come at any moment, I have no time to waste on ceremony." As Zen Master Seung Sahn says in the temple rules, in the great work of life and death, time will not wait for you.

The Patriarch said, "Why don't you attain the substance of 'no birth', then the problem of death and its coming will not concern you anymore."

Xuan Jue replied, "Since substance has no birth, the basic problem of death and when it comes is solved."

From a Zen point of view, it's the illusions of mind that keep us from realizing our true nature. These illusions are based on our likes and dislikes and we tend to be very attached to them. Desire, anger and ignorance are continually at work, through attachment, to cloud our minds. The great hope of Buddhism is that we can cut through these clouds and let the sunlight of our original nature shine through. How do we do that? How do we practice correctly to attain our substance, so we don't waste our time?

The Buddha always taught us not to attach to anything. Letting go of our attachments is the way out and the goal of all practice. The Sixth Patriarch got enlightenment when he heard one line from the Diamond Sutra, "When thinking arises in your mind, do not attach to it." This is the basic technique. In Zen, we call this style "I don't want anything" practicing. After all, if you want anything, even from meditation, you only create more suffering.

All the meditation techniques common to Buddhism have this as their basic ingredient. So, whether you are using a mantra, a hwa t'ou, or just following your breath, it's all the same. They are just techniques to allow you to let go of your thinking and return to your true self, your substance. This is why we look inside, because this is where the answer is. This is also why the great question and its answer lie before thinking, before attachment to like and dislike. OK... but why didn't I "get" something?

Interestingly, the only thing that separates those who get something from practice from those who don't is: who does it? The "doing" of meditation is based on a clear intention to help our world and a "just do it" mind. It doesn't require any special ability or special technique, just do it! All the different techniques point to your true self, you just have to look and have a clear intention. As the Sixth Patriarch pointed out, the original mind, which is pure and clear, can only be attained through the habit of practice. He further noted that a sage and a demon were the same, but the sage understands his true nature while the demon doesn't. So, as our founding teacher Zen Master Seung Sahn would always say, "I hope you only go straight don't know, which is clear like space, soon get enlightenment and save all beings from suffering." 