

# Why We Chant

ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

One Sunday evening, after a dharma talk at the International Zen Center of New York, a student asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, “Why do you chant? Isn’t sitting Zen enough?”

He replied, “This is a very important matter. We bow together, chant together, eat together, sit together, and do many other things together here at the Zen Center. Why do we practice together?”

“Everybody has different karma. So all people have different situations, different conditions, and different opinions. One person is a monk, another is a student, another works in a factory; one person always keeps a clear mind, another is often troubled or dissatisfied; one person likes the women’s movement, another doesn’t. But everybody thinks, ‘My opinion is correct!’ Even Zen masters are like this. Ten Zen masters will have ten different ways of teaching, and each Zen Master will think that his way is the best. Americans have an American opinion; Asians have an Asian opinion. Different opinions result in different actions, which make different karma. So when you hold on to your own opinions, it is very difficult to control your karma, and your life will remain difficult. Your wrong opinions continue, so your bad karma continues. But at our Zen centers, we live together and practice together, and all of us abide by the temple rules. People come to us with many strong likes and dislikes, and gradually cut them all off. Everybody bows together 108 times at five-thirty in the morning, everybody sits together, everybody eats together, everybody works together. Sometimes you don’t feel like bowing; but this is a temple rule so you bow. Sometimes you don’t want to chant, but you chant. Sometimes you are tired and want to sleep but you know that if you don’t come to sitting, people will wonder why; so you sit.

“When we eat, we eat in ritual style, with four bowls; and after we finish eating, we wash out the bowls with tea, using our index finger to clean them. The first few times we ate this way, nobody liked it. One person from the Cambridge Zen Center came to me very upset. ‘I can’t stand this way of eating! The tea gets full of garbage! I can’t drink it!’ I said to him, ‘Do you know the Heart Sutra?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Doesn’t it say that things are neither tainted nor pure?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Then why can’t you drink the tea?’ ‘Because it’s filthy!’ [Laughter from the audience.] “Why is it filthy? These crumbs are from the food that you already ate. If you think the tea is dirty, it is dirty. If you think it is clean, it is clean.’ He said, ‘You’re right. I will drink the tea.’ [Laughter.]

“So we live together and act together. Acting together



*Vowing openly with all world beings,  
Entering together Amita’s ocean of great vows,  
Continuing forever to save sentient beings,  
You and I simultaneously attain the way of Buddha.  
Become one: infinite time, infinite space Buddha.*

—from the *Morning Bell Chant Translation*,  
the *Kwan Um School of Zen Chanting Book*

means cutting off my opinions, cutting off my condition, cutting off my situation. Then we become empty mind. We return to white paper. Then our true opinion, our true condition, our true situation will appear. When we bow together and chant together and eat together, our minds become one mind. It is like on the sea. When the wind comes, there are many waves. When the wind dies down, the waves become smaller. When the wind stops, the water becomes a mirror, in which everything is reflected—mountains, trees, clouds. Our mind is the same. When we have many desires and many opinions, there are many big waves. But after we sit Zen and act together for some time, our opinions and desires disappear. The waves become smaller and smaller. Then our mind is like a clear mirror, and everything we see or hear or smell or taste or touch or think is the truth. Then it is very easy to understand other people’s minds. Their minds are reflected in my mind.

“So chanting is very important. At first you won’t understand. But after you chant regularly, you will understand. ‘Ah, chanting—very good feeling!’ It is the same with bowing 108 times. At first people don’t like this. Why do we bow? We are not bowing to Buddha; we are bowing to ourselves. Small I is bowing to Big I. Then Small I disappears and becomes Big I. This is true bowing. So come practice with us. You will soon understand.”

The student bowed and said, “Thank you very much.”