

Ko Bong's Try Mind

Zen Master Seung Sahn



Portrait of Ko Bong Sunim: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

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Zen Master Ko Bong (1890–1962) was one of the greatest teachers of his time. He was renowned for refusing to teach monks, considering them too lazy and arrogant to be Zen students. He was also very well known for his unconventional behavior.

Ko Bong Sunim didn't like chanting. He only did sitting meditation, no matter what. That was his practice. One time, as a young monk, he was staying in a small mountain temple. The abbot was away for a few days, so Ko Bong Sunim was the only one around. One morning an old woman climbed the steep road to the temple carrying fruit and a bag of rice on her back. When she reached the main Buddha Hall, she found Ko Bong Sunim seated alone in meditation.

"Oh, Sunim, I am sorry to bother you," she said. "I have just climbed this mountain to offer these things to the Buddha. My family is having a lot of problems, and I want someone to chant to the Buddha for them. Can you please help me?"

Ko Bong Sunim looked up. Her face was very sad and very sincere. "Of course," he said. "I'd be happy to chant for you. No problem." Then he took the bag of rice off her back and they went to the kitchen to prepare the food offering. As they started to wash the fruit he said to her, "I don't know how to cook rice. You cook the rice, and I'll go start chanting."

"Yes, Sunim. Thank you very much."

Ko Bong Sunim returned to his room to put on his formal robes. But, because he never chanted, he didn't know any Buddhist chants. So, he dug out an old Taoist sutra from among his things and brought it back to the Buddha Hall. Then he picked up the moktak and started hitting it while reading out of the Taoist book. Usually it's appropriate to do certain chants for different occasions, like the *Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra*, but Ko Bong Sunim didn't know about this. He only banged the moktak and chanted the Taoist sutra out loud, right from the book. After an hour or so of this, he finished.

The old woman was very, very happy. "Oh, thank you, Sunim. You are very kind. I feel much better now!" She left the temple. As she was walking down the mountain road, she passed the abbot, who was returning to the temple. "Hello, Mrs. Lee, are you coming from the temple?"

"Yes," she said. "There are many problems in my family right now, so I went up to pray to the Buddha. Ko Bong Sunim helped me."

"Oh, that's too bad," the abbot said.

"Oh, why?"

"Because Ko Bong Sunim doesn't know how to do any chanting. Maybe someone else could . . ."

"No, no," she said. "He did *very* well. He helped me very much!"

The abbot looked at her. "How do you know how well he did? These are very special chants! Ko Bong Sunim doesn't know how to do them—he doesn't know chanting."

"Yes, I understand." This woman used to be a nun, so

she was quite familiar with all the various chants. She knew that Ko Bong Sunim was only chanting a Taoist sutra. “What is correct chanting? He did it very well. He only chanted one hundred percent. Words are not important. The only important thing is how you keep your mind. He had only try mind—only do it.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” the abbot said. “I suppose mind is very important.” They said good-bye and went their separate ways. When the abbot reached the temple, he found Ko Bong Sunim, seated in meditation. “Did you just chant for Mrs. Lee?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t know anything about chanting.”

“That’s right,” Ko Bong Sunim said. “I don’t know anything about chanting. So I just chanted.”

“Then what kind of chants did you do?” the abbot asked.

“I used an old Taoist book.”

The abbot walked away, scratching his head.



This is a very interesting try-mind story. It means, from moment to moment, only “do it.” Only keep a try mind, only one mind: do-it mind. When chanting, sitting or bowing, only do it. Practicing will not help if you are attached to your thinking, if your mind is moving. Taoist chanting, Confucian chanting, Christian chanting, Buddhist chanting: it doesn’t matter. Even chanting, “Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola . . .” can be just as good if you keep a clear mind. But, if you don’t keep a clear mind, even Buddha cannot help you. The most important thing is, only *do* it. When you only do something one hundred percent, then there is no subject, no object. There’s no inside or outside. Inside and outside are already one. That means you and the whole universe are one and never separate.

The Bible says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” When you are still, then you don’t make anything, and you are always connected to God. Being still means keeping a still mind, even if your body is moving or you are doing some activity. Then there’s no subject, no object—a mind of complete stillness. That’s the Buddha’s complete stillness mind. When sitting, be still. When chanting, be still. When bowing, eating, talking, walking, reading or driving, only be still. This is keeping a not-moving mind, which is only do-it mind. We call that try mind.

Editor’s note: We asked Zen Master Bon Shim to choose an article by Zen Master Seung Sahn and to comment on what led her to choose this article. Here is her response:

“Try, try for 10,000 years”—I find this teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn most essential and compassionate, as every being wants to be happy and get out of suffering, and the only way to achieve this is to try, never giving up.

I use this teaching very often—people have difficult times and, having no patience, they become discouraged and sad very quickly, but the only way for things to get better is to keep trying. If we don’t put enough effort, we cannot expect results.

People are often not satisfied with themselves, so the only way to develop is to keep trying. It also happens frequently that we come back from retreats with a mind clear like space, but soon there are lots of clouds, so again try, try.

Some other time, we decide to make this kind of mistake never again, or we become aware of a bad habit and we really want to get rid of it, but just one moment of not paying attention and we have it back, so only keep trying, patiently.

This is incredible teaching, simple and so helpful—just keep trying and be mindful until your last breath.

The true meaning of this is to never stop. Even if we think “I have already got something,” then try even harder. Practicing this way, our everyday life is to continue, never being deceived by anything—and keep trying, never losing our original job.

Trying mind is also a true spirit of a bodhisattva’s great vow, to never enter nirvana until all sentient beings are liberated. It is not an easy task to just go back to zero or to don’t-know over and over; the only way to do that is to keep trying.

Trying mind is already enlightened mind. If we try then we learn how to stay on this path of only going straight, don’t know. ◆