

Desert Paramita

Zen Master Wu Kwang

This dharma talk was given at the opening ceremony for Zen Center of Las Vegas on May 5, 2012.

[Raises the Zen stick over his head.]

Do you see this?

[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]

Do you hear this?

If you see and hear this, then your mind and senses are clear and open. But if you attach to the idea of “open,” then closed has already appeared.

During the golden age of Zen in China, Zen Master Hyeon Sa had a teaching about three kinds of sick people. Addressing the assembly, he would say, “The adepts of old all speak of relating to things for all people.” (This means manifesting a selfless attitude in guiding and aiding people.) “Suppose they would unexpectedly encounter three kinds of sick people. With a blind person, if they raised the Zen stick, he or she wouldn’t be able to see it. A deaf person wouldn’t be able to hear the samadhi of words. And with a mute person, if you asked them to speak, they couldn’t speak. So how could they guide these people? If they couldn’t, then the buddhadharma has no miraculous effect.”

Now it’s very important that the buddhadharma have miraculous effect. Otherwise how could this Zen center appear in Las Vegas? I can’t tell you how many times over the years people have said to me with incredulity, “You people have a Zen center in Las Vegas?” It’s as if a flower had bloomed in the desert. When Hyeon Sa calls blindness, deafness and muteness “three sicknesses,” that’s somewhat surprising because we wouldn’t ordinarily think of these as sicknesses. Disabilities, perhaps, but not sicknesses. So what is he getting at? And of course, you don’t have to be deaf to be unable to listen, and you don’t have to be mute to be unable to communicate.

A monk, having heard this teaching of the three sicknesses, went to Zen Master Un Mun and asked for clarification. Un Mun said, “Bow.” As the monk was coming up from the prostration, Un Mun poked at him with his Zen stick. The monk, seeing the stick approaching, drew back. Un Mun said, “You’re not blind.” Then Un Mun said, “Come closer.” Hearing this, the monk approached. Un Mun said, “You’re not deaf.” Then Un Mun asked, “Do you understand?” The monk said, “No, I don’t understand.” (We might say,



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now he’s getting somewhere. He’s touched the mind of don’t know, don’t understand!) As the monk said, “No I don’t,” Un Mun retorted, “You’re not mute!” At this the monk attained. If you perceive this monk’s attainment, then you understand “Open.”

Two:

[Hits the table with the stick.]

No open, no closed! Like a black lacquer bowl—completely dark and empty. At this point, everything is equal—everything was “it.” But what is “it”?

Zen Master Seung Sahn would sometimes say, “Within emptiness, ‘mystic.’” Fleshing out his English we might say, “Here within emptiness resides the mystic potential for many good things,” but I like his “within emptiness, ‘mystic’” better.

Zen Master Seung Sahn’s great grand teacher Kyong Ho Sunim once attended a commencement ceremony at a sutra temple for young monks. This kind of temple emphasized study of Buddhist scriptures and philosophy rather than meditation. The abbot addressed the young monks: “You all must study hard, learn Buddhism and become like big trees from which temples are built and like big bowls able to hold many good things. A sutra says: water becomes round or square according to the container it is put in. Likewise people become good or bad according to the friends they keep. So always keep the Buddha in mind and keep good company. Then you will become like great trees and contain-

ers of dharma.”

Next Kyong Ho Sunim was invited to speak. Kyong Ho said, “You are all monks and monks should be free from petty desires. Wanting to become a great tree or big bowl will hinder you from becoming a true teacher. Big trees have big uses; small trees have small uses. Good and bad bowls can each be used in their own way. Keep both good and bad friends. Nothing is to be discarded. This is true Buddhism. My only wish is that you don’t cling to conceptual thinking.”

Three:

[Hits the table with the stick.]

Open is just open. Closed is just closed. Sun shines, the world is bright and open.

Cloudy time, not bright and open. If your preferences don’t cloud your mind, then just now, how is it? “KATZ!”

Today is the grand opening ceremony of the new Las Vegas Zen Center. Enjoy yourself a lot!

Thank you all for coming today and also thanks to the Zen center for asking me to give this talk. The first time I came to the Las Vegas Zen Center was probably more than ten years ago. At that time the Zen center was in a storefront in one of your many strip malls and was not very large. It reminded me of our Zen center in New York, which is also not very large. There were no bedrooms, so during the retreat everyone slept on the floor and I was housed in a “very modest” motel next door. The Zen center had a kitchen and toilet but no shower, so some people came next door to my room to use the shower during free time.

Zen Master Seung Sahn had a maxim that he would often teach with: “A bad situation is a good situation, and a good situation is a bad situation.”

Now this wonderful practice place has appeared through the hard work and generosity of many, and its appeal should be used to help many people come to the practice of the Zen way. But we always need to keep in mind what is the true practice place.

A monk asked Zen Master Joju, “What is the practice hall?” Joju said, “From the practice hall you have come. To the practice hall you will go. Everything everywhere is the practice hall. *There is no other place.*” When the monk asks, “What is the practice hall,” he is referencing something from one of the sutras, and Joju’s answer encapsulates the teaching from the sutra. The sutra is the Vimalakirti Sutra, which was prized by the Zen sect in China. The main character in the sutra is not the Buddha, but a layman named Vimalakirti, who was a wealthy merchant, and also a great practitioner and bodhisattva, considered to be almost on the level of the Buddha himself. The sutra contains dialogues between Vimalakirti and many of the Buddha’s disciples and many of the bodhisattvas. In these dialogues Vimalakirti usually



Photo: Chiemi McGhie

spots where someone is attached to some idea or concept or is clinging to orthodoxy, and he challenges their perspective. The particular dialogue being referenced by the monk and Joju is between Vimalakirti and a young bodhisattva named Shining Adornment. They meet at the gate of the city and Shining Adornment asks, “Layman, where are you coming from?”

“I’m coming from the place of practice [the practice place].”

“The place of practice—where is that? [What sort of place is the practice hall?]”

Vimalakirti said, “Mind itself is the practice hall.”

An upright mind is the place of practice. A deeply searching mind is the place of practice. The mind that aspires to clarity and wisdom is the place of practice.

Generosity of giving is the place of practice, because it hopes for no reward. Observance of the precepts is the place of practice. Patience or forbearance is the place of practice, for it enables the mind to be free of obstruction. Zeal and energy are the place of practice because they forestall laziness.

Meditation is the place of practice, because it makes the mind tame and gentle. Wisdom is the place of practice, because it sees all things as they are.

“Loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity are the place of practice.” Usually in these dialogues Vimalakirti starts with a familiar perspective, but gradually becomes more radical. So he continues, “Earthly desires are the place of practice, for through *them* we know the nature of suchness. Living beings are the place of practice, for through them we know that there is no ego. All phenomena are the place of practice, for through them we know the emptiness of all phenomena. If bodhisattvas apply themselves, then everything they do, every lifting of a foot, every placing of a foot becomes coming from the place of practice.”

When Lin Chi lived in Zen Master Huang Po’s monastery, he frequently would plant pine trees around the temple. One day Huang Po asked him, “What is the reason for planting so many pine trees on this remote mountain?” Lin Chi said, “I do so first to improve the view from this mountain, and second, to provide beacons for future generations.” Now certainly this wonderful Zen center has improved the Las Vegas view—better than the grand hotels and casinos—and hopefully it will be a beacon for future generations of practitioners to come and continue the tradition.

I have one last practice place story. Someone once asked Trungpa Rinpoche, “What is the difference between Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.” Trungpa said, “Zen is black and white; Tibetan Buddhism is like Technicolor.” I took this to mean that Zen emphasizes the “ordinary” while Tantra has many colorful practices such as visualization of unusual-looking deities, recitation of mystic formulas and specific practices for after death experiences. But there are always exceptions. So here is an unusual Zen story, a Technicolor story.

The monk Wu Cho was making a pilgrimage to the holy site of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, on Mount Wutai. As he climbed the mountain, he came to a rough area and began to think that he might have lost the way. It was late afternoon. Suddenly he came upon a small temple, and the abbot invited him to spend the night. As they sat and talked, the abbot asked, “Where are you coming from?”

“From the south,” said Wu Cho.

“How is practice going on in the south?” the abbot asked.

Wu Cho said, “In this age of decline, not many monks keep the precepts.”

“How many in the assemblies?” asked the abbot.

“Some three hundred, some five hundred.”

Now from the Zen standpoint, Wu Cho has completely missed the point of the abbot’s questions. “How is the buddhadharma practiced in the south?” means how is your practice? Show me the veracity of your practice here and now. “How many in the assemblies” means your own unified being. The one is the many; the many the one. But Wu Cho only engages in shoptalk.

Then Wu Cho asked the abbot, “How is the practice of buddhadharma hereabouts?” The abbot said, “Ordinary people and sages stay together. Dragons and snakes intermingle.”

Wu Cho looked perplexed, but he persisted. “How many in the assemblies?” The abbot said, “In front three by three; behind three by three.”

Now Wu Cho was even more confused. Then they had tea. As they were drinking, the abbot suddenly held up a crystal bowl and asked, “Do they also have this in the south?”

Wu Cho didn’t know how to answer so he said, “No!”

“Then what do you drink tea with?” Now *crystal bowl* means pure and clear mind. If you are going to really taste the tea, your mind needs to be pure and clear.

Then they retired for the night. In the morning the abbot’s attendant escorted Wu Cho to the temple gate. Wu Cho asked, “Last night he said ‘in front three three, behind three three.’ How many is that?”

Suddenly the attendant yelled out “Oh Monk!”

“Yes.”

“How many is that?”

Now Wu Cho was really bewildered. He asked, “What is this temple?” The attendant pointed behind the statue of Vajrasattva. Wu Cho turned his head to look, but when he turned his head back, the attendant and the temple had both disappeared and there was only an open clearing. Then Wu Cho realized that the abbot had been Manjushri himself and that all this was illusory. Later Wu Cho served as rice cook at the temple on Mount Wutai. Sometimes Manjushri would appear above the rice pot. Wu Cho would immediately take the big wooden spoon and hit him and he would disappear.

So, if your mind begins to become too attached to the beautiful form of this practice place, you must hit it with a wooden spoon. Then we will be able to use the beauty and serenity of this place to help many people.

[Hits the table three times with the Zen stick.]

The dharma speech is now closed, but the Las Vegas Zen Center is completely open. Thank you for listening. ♦



Photo: Paul Dickman