

This Kind of Vow

A dharma talk given in answer to questions on December 4, 2004, at the Paris Zen Center, less than a week after the death of Zen Master Seung Sahn.

I want to welcome everybody, and also at this point I welcome any questions you have . . . No questions?

Student: You feel sad about the passing away of your master. Can you speak about how you feel about it?

Zen Master Wu Bong: In the past couple of years, every time I saw my teacher, it was very sad after each visit. Of course I was happy to see him and talk to him, though talking was one-sided because he just kept silence. Sometimes he did respond, which was unusual because normally he couldn't respond to anybody. So as happy as I was to see him, every time I left I was very sad, because he used to be a very energetic, very active person.

I'm not so sad for Zen Master Seung Sahn. I'm sad for us, because even though he was pretty much retired and didn't really participate so much in our school for the last few years, still, if there was something that needed to be asked then at least we had the illusion that well, maybe he can help us. But now no such illusion.

So our great teacher is gone, but as I said today at our retreat closing talk, his dharma is not gone. I've known him since 1972, but what really struck me during all these years is this great vow that he followed of helping others. I believe that this vow of his will continue to function. His death doesn't stop this kind of vow. So again he will practice with us in the future and again one day will teach us. And I only can wish him a better rental car than he had this time.

Any other question?

Student: Once I asked Zen Master Su Bong, before he had a heart attack in 1994, about how he thinks about his relationship to his body and keeping his body healthy. He talked like this: the body is just a rented car.

ZMWB: Yes, so you take care of your body. If you lose your body then you cannot practice, cannot get enlightenment, and cannot help others. But if you attach to your body, also you cannot get enlightenment, cannot help anybody. So take care of the body: no problem. Attach to the body: that's a problem.

Student: The great masters have this vow to help others. The bodhisattva vow I like is, "I will be the last one who enters nirvana." So is it true that masters have extra responsibility to keep their body alive? To help, should you be the

last one?

ZMWB: Actually, a teacher's responsibility is not to be the last to die. A teacher's responsibility is to give correct teaching. So, living-teaching is correct, dying-teaching is also correct.

In China long ago, Zen Master Ma Jo was sick. At that time the housemaster came to visit him and asked, "How is your venerable health lately?" Then Ma Jo replied "Sunface Buddha, Moonface Buddha."

Now this housemaster's question is not a casual question. This housemaster had some idea: this is a great Zen master, Master Ma Jo, very famous, very big master. *Great Zen Master* means great energy, so this person is supposed to have all this great energy, great enlightenment. So why is he just lying

helpless, sick? Maybe the housemaster's question was a little similar to your question: maybe the Zen master should be the last to get sick, in order to be helping everybody.

Ma Jo said, "Sunface Buddha, Moonface Buddha." If you attain this Sunface Buddha, Moonface Buddha, then also you understand Zen Master Seung Sahn's death, his death teaching.

Now I know many people were expecting his death to be something special. Not long ago, for example,

there was a monk in Korea who announced his death. He was healthy, then he told everybody, "One week later I will die." Then one week later he sat down for meditation and he died just exactly how he predicted. There were reports in all the newspapers saying, "Wow, wow . . ."

So maybe people were expecting Zen Master Seung Sahn also to make some special show. He will maybe tell everybody, then when the day comes he will sit down and maybe recite a poem and then die. But he died in a very ordinary way; that's his teaching style. Always, his whole life, that was his teaching way. Is special? No good.

We were visiting a monk in hospital in New York, a monk who had had a stroke and was very sick. Half his body was paralyzed, so only half was working. When we were in his hospital room, Zen Master Seung Sahn was talking Korean to him, but I could understand he was asking, "How are you?" And then this monk was answering very strongly, "Yeah! Great! Fine!" But of course he was saying this "great" with half his body. When we left the room, Zen Master



Seung Sahn said, “Oh, stupid man . . . if you are sick, then hundred per cent just sick. Why say ‘I’m great, I’m fine?’”

So these last years, every time I telephoned him from Paris and got him on the phone, I would ask, “How are you, sir?” He never said “I’m fine.” He would just say, “Not dead yet.”
[Laughs.]

OK, any other questions?

Student 1: I think you touched on a difficult subject for people who grow up in a Western, Christian environment, and that’s the point of reincarnation. So I would be interested if you could say some words about that.

ZMWB: OK, I will explain reincarnation for you.
[Laughs.] It’s not so mystical, it’s not complicated, and if you think about it you can see how correct it is. For example, your body is changing moment by moment. If only one cell falls off, then already that’s a different body, right? Correct!

So, moment by moment, a different body. Not only your body, but also your thinking is changing. Your feelings are also all the time changing, changing, changing. So, moment by moment that is a different you. You think “I,” but this I in this moment—that’s not the same I as a moment ago.

That’s reincarnation. OK? So, you already experienced this.
[Laughs.]

[Long silence.]

Student 2: Wait a minute! [Laughs.] What about actually changing from one body into another body?

ZMWB: I already explained! That’s changing, one body

Student 2: No, but . . .

Student 1: Can I add a comment to that? I understand what you are saying, but even though the cells are being regenerated, it’s the same thing looked at perhaps from different sides.

ZMWB: No, what I’m saying is it’s not the same. You say same but it is not the same! I cut a piece off this stick. Is it the same stick?

Student 1: Hmmm. Yes and no.

ZMWB: Yes and no. OK, I will wait. If you say yes, I’ll hit you thirty times, but if you say no I’ll also hit you thirty times.
[Laughs.] If you say both, yes and no, that’s sixty times!
[Laughs.]

Student 1: Same answer.

ZMWB: But if you really understand that point I just made with the stick, then you can understand this idea of reincarnation. You think “I,” but look deeply: what is this I? I ask you, what are you?

Student 1: Based on your answer I’m a moment in time—

ZMWB: That’s only understanding. I’m not asking about your understanding. What are you?

Student 1: Then I don’t know.

ZMWB: Don’t know. Correct! That’s good idea. Keep this don’t know, then one day, from this don’t know this answer can come. Then all these things can become clear for you. Not just somebody’s idea, OK? So, for Zen students this idea of reincarnation is not important. It is just some idea.

There are these four kinds of teaching from Zen Master Seung Sahn, the four don’ts. He said don’t make, don’t attach, don’t check and don’t want. If you follow these four teachings very well, your practice can grow up, because our usual habit is to always make something, then we attach to what we make, then we keep on checking that and then of course desire appears, so we want, then because of this desire we continue to make and attach and check and make more desire. That’s the usual human habit.

So our practicing is to get rid of this kind of habit. If everybody has this great question, “What am I?” very sincerely, soon this don’t know appears. This don’t know cuts off all thinking. “Cuts off all thinking” means before thinking. If you keep your mind before thinking then you don’t make, then also there’s nothing to attach to, nothing to check, then of course this desire will not arise, so nothing to want. So actually four teachings are not necessary; you find them all in this great question, “What am I?”

The last time I heard a dharma talk from Zen Master Seung Sahn was a year ago. I went to Korea to sit one month of Kyol Che, the last month of the winter Kyol Che. When Kyol Che is finished all the students come to Hwa Gye Sa Temple, and the tradition was that Zen Master Seung Sahn would meet everybody, everybody can bow to him, and then he always gave a talk.

So we were all brought to a big room. Once we were all seated, people brought him—they had to carry him—into the room. Then we bowed to him and he gave just a short talk and he asked for questions. It was very interesting because the way he taught was really the way he was teaching in America when he first came: almost every question that somebody raised he would say: “Who is asking?” His whole teaching was basically “What are you?” It didn’t matter what kind of question—“What are you?” Actually, it was a great talk.

So, keep this “What am I?” and then all of his teachings will be with you. They are all inside.

It seems that because of the death of Zen Master Seung Sahn, for us and our students this is a big thing. It is basically the end of an era. Actually not only for our school; because of his relationships and the openness of his teaching, he has had a very profound effect on the Zen world in general.

But now we are on our own. It’s our responsibility, so to speak, to carry the torch. In spite of all his effort, the world still has much suffering. As much as he tried, he did not finish that job, and it is up to us to complete it.

The core of his teaching was helping others. He never talked about technique. He always talked about direction, about the practice. So, direction always means for others, for others, for others.

I hope everybody will practice hard, attain your true self, and then you can really be of service to this world.

Thank you for your attention tonight, and I hope we meet sometime, and not just to talk about dharma but to practice together. Have a good night, everybody. ♦