

How Can You Answer?

Zen Master Su Bong

Editor's note: The following article is edited together from transcriptions of two talks by Zen Master Su Bong. He visited Bosnia during the combat in the early 1990s, and these talks are about his experiences during that time. He gave one talk at what was then the Hong Kong Zen Centre—and is now Su Bong Zen Monastery—on November 8, 1993. The other talk was given at the Cambridge Zen Center on March 1, 1994.

In Europe, I always ended my dharma talks with one line: “Great love and great compassion is not a thing to do in order to do a good thing. Great love, great compassion, reciting Amitabul, or asking ‘What am I?’—that is human beings’ original job.” So do you have any questions?

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Zen Master Su Bong

Zen Master Su Bong was born in Hawaii on January 7, 1943. His mother was Korean and his father was Hakka Chinese. He studied industrial design in the United States and was also an artist.

In 1974, he met Zen Master Seung Sahn and soon became one of his most dedicated and keen students. Between 1975 and 1981, he assisted Zen Master Seung Sahn in establishing Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles, and he also helped to build many monasteries and pagodas in North America. In 1980, he received inka from Zen Master Seung Sahn to become an authorized Ji Do Poep Sa teacher. He started teaching kong-an practice and also served as abbot of Dharma Zen Center. In 1983, he was ordained a monk and named Mu Deung Sunim. Between 1983 and 1994, he led thirteen 90-day Kyol Che retreats in the United States and at Shin Won Sa, Hwa Gye Sa and Su Duk Sa temples in Korea. He also traveled frequently to give teachings throughout Europe, especially Poland and Russia.

In October 1992 at the Providence Zen Center, he received dharma transmission from Zen Master Seung Sahn and became Zen Master Su Bong. His enlightenment name means “Extraordinary Peak.” Zen Master Su Bong was the guiding teacher of Zen Centers in Hong Kong, South Africa, Australia and the Seoul International sangha. Between 1990 and 1994, he also accompanied Zen Master Seung Sahn on teaching trips to China, Singapore and Malaysia.

Zen Master Su Bong entered nirvana on July 17, 1994, while giving an interview to a 14-year-old student.

Question: This world is full of suffering, so how should we help people who are suffering and who are in danger?

Zen Master Su Bong: That’s your job. You must find that. The sutras cannot tell you. Buddha cannot tell you. Zen Masters cannot tell you.

We all have some idea on how to help the suffering in this world, but it is all only an idea. If someone were to ask, “How would you help this world?” then maybe if you are a Zen student, you would answer, “May I help you?” That’s a very wonderful heart and a very wonderful mind, because the direction of “May I help you?” is great love and great compassion, and save this world from suffering.

I went to Bosnia-Herzegovina because I was teaching in Bratislava, and Bratislava is very close to Bosnia. We have a student in Zagreb, which is quite far from the fighting area, who asked if I could come. When I got to Zagreb, they said that a soldier, Ivoca, who liked Zen meditation, wanted to meet me.

The fighting is done by young soldiers—all young men. At 17 years old they are told to go to war. Ivoca was 27 years old, and he was unusual because he was vegetarian. For four years he’d been a total vegetarian. I said, “You don’t like meat but you are killing people. Why?”

Ivo said, “At this time, that’s my job, but when this is over I want to come to Korea and practice Zen with you. I want to become a monk. I really want to do that and will never go out from the temple until I know what a human being is. But now, I must kill people.”

I said, “I will wait for you and hope that you will come soon. But how is it possible that you don’t eat meat? All the soldiers love meat and alcohol and those things.”

He explained, “That is no problem because I am a very good fighting soldier. I am a killer. So, they understand that, and the mess hall understands; they give me extra bread, fruit and vegetables.”



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

Because Ivoca is a leader for the special forces, I was able to go to many places few people could go. So I spent three days with him and his killers. He said, when he introduced me to his soldiers, “These are my killers. They are my family.”

So I told my friend that I wanted to go to this town of Mostar. That’s where the heaviest ethnic fighting was. Then he said, “OK. I can take you anywhere.” Then he said, “Just a moment please.” And he entered his room



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

and put on a special uniform. Outside the house, there were other soldiers, but their uniform was a little different. The color was the same, the camouflage was the same, but the fashion and the cut were different. So I asked him: “Why is it that your uniform is different from theirs?”

And he said, “My uniform is brown and green.”

That’s like a Zen answer. The other soldiers’ uniforms were also brown and green. But at that moment I understood he couldn’t tell me why. Later I learned that it was because he was a special kind of killer. So we went to the top of a hill overlooking Mostar.

It was a very difficult situation because there was so much gunfire and bullets. It wasn’t just one or two shots, but continuous gunfire and small bombs exploding everywhere in the air. Everything was very loud. They shot off grenades, and on the other side of the mountain, a large number of people were fighting in the town. We were on a hill watching the fighting when other soldiers came to us and said, “No, no. Don’t stay here because the snipers are very good. They have guns that can shoot more than 4,000 yards. So if you stand up, they’ll shoot you. They don’t care who they shoot. Even the fact that you have no hair and funny clothes does not matter. They don’t care, they’ll shoot you.” So I said, “OK, OK.”

So my friend said, “OK, you want to go to the front line?” Somehow the front line was safer than on top of the hill. So we went down the hill.

On the street behind some broken buildings were a few small shops. These shops sold coffee and Coca Cola, ice cream and potato chips and of course cigarettes. Because the soldiers walked across this boundary line, fought each other, and then they came back and drank coffee and smoked cigarettes. It’s a little funny, because it’s like they were sitting in an outdoor café in France. Of course it’s not like France, but my friend said, “Let’s eat ice cream and have some soft drinks.”

Next to us were two soldiers with all their weapons on the ground next to them. One of the soldiers asked me through a translator, “Where are you from?”

I said, “I am an American. I live in Korea.”

Then he looked at me and he asked, “How can you help us?”



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Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives

If you had been there, how could you have answered the soldier? What would you say? Would you say, “May I help you?” Or would you say, “Amitabul, Amitabul . . .” If you are a Zen student, then what? Would you say, “The sky is blue; the tree is green?” Not possible.

Already, I am a Zen student. I already answered many kong-ans. But this question by a soldier in a real life-and-death situation—“How can you help us?”—hit my mind and hit my soul. Of course being a good monk, I gave him a correct answer. I gave him some answer. But that answer, you yourself must find alone.

If you find that answer, then you will discover correct function and correct human being’s life. If you cannot find that, then our whole life is lived in a dream. A Zen dream, a “Don’t-know” dream, a Buddha dream, a Pure Land dream, a Nirvana dream, a Samadhi dream. Ten million, million Buddha lands: ten million, million dreams. If you want to help this soldier who asked “How can you help us?” then we human beings must wake up.

If you don’t understand, I hope you only go straight, don’t know; or recite “Amitabul, Amitabul, Amitabul . . . Amitabul. What am I?” Then attain your true self, get enlightenment, become one of ten thousand Buddhas, which means become this universe and save all beings from suffering.

Thank you very much for coming here this evening.

You are very kind. If five and a half billion people have your mind and your heart, even if we didn’t attain anything, this world will be at peace. Thank you very much.

Again, great love and great compassion is not something to do for the sake of doing good. Great love and great compassion is not a thing to do for the sake of doing a good deed. Great love and compassion is our original job. So I hope all of the people in this world can find their correct and original job, get enlightenment and save all people from suffering.

Epilogue: Six weeks after this talk was given, Zen Master Su Bong was teaching in South Africa. Every day he read the newspaper to find out about the world situation and how the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was progressing. When the war is over, he thought, Ivo would soon join him in Korea. One day Zen Master Su Bong picked up the paper. The headlines read “Severe Street Fighting in Mostar.” He thought, “I must call Ivo.” Two hours later he received a fax at the Dharma Centre in Cape Town—Ivo had been killed in street fighting a few hours before.

Transmission Ceremony Excerpts

October 1992

*Do Mun Sunim JDPS:*¹ Richard Shrobe JDPSN² gave the opening dharma talk about three kinds of transmission, and today we have three transmissions. So I would like to ask you, are you the tail, the family shame or the blind donkey?

Zen Master Su Bong: You have head, body and feet. What is it doing now?

DMSN: Standing in front of you.

ZMSB: Isn’t that enough?

DMSN: No!

ZMSB: Arrow has already passed downtown.

DMSN: Thank you for your teaching.

Mu Ryang Sunim: Zen Master Seung Sahn is a very great Zen master. Do you feel any awe in stepping into his shoes?

Zen Master Su Bong: Zen Master Seung Sahn is a very great Zen master. Many people in Korea wear white rubber shoes, so no problem. What kind of shoes do you wear? [*Laughter.*]

Notes

1. Do Mun Sunim JDPS is now Zen Master Dae Bong.

2. Richard Shrobe JDPSN is now Zen Master Wu Kwang.