

INKA CEREMONY FOR

Terence Cronin

April 6, 2014, at Providence Zen Center

DHARMA COMBAT

Q: You nervous?

Cronin PSN: You know it.

[Laughter.]

Q: You should be.

[Laughter.]

Q: So, where I come from, anytime there's a celebration or some great event, the Southern people have this tradition of a rebel yell. Would you like me to demonstrate?

Cronin PSN: Sure.

Q: YEEEEEEHAWWWW! What does that mean?

[Laughter.]

Cronin PSN: You already understand.

Q: One more step is necessary.

Cronin PSN: YEEEEEEHAWWWW!

[Applause.]

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Hedgpeth PSN: It's so good to see you in this seat. So you're a hospice chaplain, yeah, this is your work? So you counsel people, and their families, who are dying.

Cronin PSN: That's right.

Hedgpeth PSN: How will you be able to counsel yourself when you die?

Cronin PSN: You already understand.

Hedgpeth PSN: I don't understand.

Cronin PSN: *[Falls over dead.]*

[Laughter and applause.]

Q: We sat together the last week of Kyol Che. It was very wonderful. I did the morning bell chant, and you did the evening bell chant. It's a lovely bell. It's sometimes tricky to get the right tone. If you hit it the wrong way, it clangs, and I had trouble with that. For two weeks, I had the privilege of hitting that bell. How do you hit it just right?

Cronin PSN: You already understand.

Q: I'm not so sure of that!

Cronin PSN: What color is the floor?

Q: The color is brown.

Cronin PSN: Do you like that tone?

Q: It's a wonderful tone, thank you.



Photo: Brenton Sheehan

DHARMA SPEECH

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

A good answer is a bad answer; a bad answer is a good answer. That's a mistake.

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

No good answer; no bad answer. That's a mistake.

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

A good answer is a good answer; a bad answer is a bad answer. Another mistake.

So, how can you not make a mistake?

KATZ!

Today is Sunday, April 6, 2014. The candles on the altar burn brightly.

Thank you for being here today. It dawned on me recently that, with just a few exceptions, most of you here didn't know who the inka candidate was going to be. I think that is great, because it emphasizes not the individual, but the role of teacher. Or perhaps even more, the teaching itself, this timeless dharma taught by the Buddha, down through the generations to Zen Master Seung Sahn and the Kwan Um School of Zen. Moment by moment, we are all responsible

to continue that teaching just as we are all responsible to be lifelong students. Identifying some as formal teachers is just one skillful way to help us all do that.

I am eternally grateful for this life-giving teaching, as I am for Zen Master Seung Sahn, Zen Master Soeng Hyang, my guiding teacher who nominated me for this role, the teachers on my inka committee, and for all our school's teachers and sangha members, whose wisdom has guided me over all these years.

I'd like to share four Zen stories that have been life-giving for me and inspire me still.

The first is a saying I heard when I first started practicing over thirty-four years ago: Goats are just goats; people are goats trying to be goats.

Human beings can't just be ourselves. We are so self-conscious, which is what we sometimes call checking mind. We're goats trying to be goats. We don't believe in ourselves. We're always wondering, "Am I . . . enough." Am I tall enough, pretty enough, smart enough, talented enough, wealthy enough, clever enough? Did I get the right answer often enough? Other times, we're busy checking other people: Why is she like that? That's not right! Why can't he do it the correct way? On and on and on. Goats are just goats; people are goats trying to be goats. Buddha taught that everything is perfect, just as it is; but none of us believe that. And so, we suffer and we create all kinds of suffering for everyone and everything around us.

I've been doing a lot of checking in the past few days: "What are they thinking, making me a Ji Do Poep Sa? They must be crazy; they're making a big mistake! I'm way too introverted, much too anxious, certainly not charismatic enough . . ." On and on. Truth be told, thirty-four years ago when I first started practicing Zen, I really, really wanted to believe that if I could just get enlightened, of course then I'd be calm in the face of any adversity. I'd be confident and decisive in all my decisions. I certainly wouldn't be standing here today feeling anxious. Well, guess what? It doesn't work that way. And that's OK; it doesn't have to. Anxious goats are just anxious goats—perfect, just as they are.

Our good fortune is to have our practice: Who am I? Don't know! Who is anxious? Don't know. And through that don't know, to awaken to the truth that, as one Zen master put it: it's all perfect just as it is, and you could stand a bit of improvement. We can see both sides of the coin, and use our karma to help bring compassion to this moment.

My next story is from my first contact with the Kwan Um School, which was a retreat I attended here at Providence Zen Center led by Mu Deung Sunim JDPS, who later became Zen Master Su Bong. This was probably in 1986 or so. During a talk he gave, he referenced the kong-an Hyang Eom's Up a Tree. For those of you who may not be familiar with it, it goes like this:



Photo: Brenton Sheehan

It is like a person high up in a tree, clenching a branch between their teeth. Their arms and legs are bound; they can't grasp a branch or touch the tree. On the ground, someone approaches and asks, "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" If the person answers, they fall to their death; if they don't answer, they fail in their duty as a bodhisattva and will be killed. If you were up in the tree, how could you stay alive?

What Mu Deung Sunim then said touched me to the core: "In our school, most everyone passes this kong-an. But, do any of us every truly attain this kong-an? Fully realize it?" And I thought, "This is a Zen school I can find my home in." As it was, I had already "passed" that kong-an, but I knew I had not come close to passing it in the only way that even mattered: being able to embody it in each and every moment. I still haven't. To be part of a school that doesn't make passing kong-ans anything special, but emphasizes "Try, try, try, for ten thousand years nonstop"—that was just the teaching I needed to hear.

This next story has been important to me because it connects my Zen practice with the religion I was raised in, Catholic Christianity. Though by choice I haven't practiced that religion for many, many years, the fact is that the Christian contemplative tradition became the doorway through which I found Zen. There's actually a short story within the story here: after finishing at Yale Divinity School in 1981, I thought I might have a vocation as a Trappist monk, so lived at Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey in Lafayette, Oregon, for a time. There, two of the most important teachers in my life, the abbot, Bernard, and the novice director, Peter, were diligently trying to reclaim and deepen the Western contemplative spiritual tradition being practiced by their

monks. Recognizing the importance of a skilled teacher, they were open-minded enough to have forged a relationship first with Robert Aitken and then with Willigis Jäger, both teachers in the Sanbo Kyodan Zen tradition. My first Zen retreats were sesshin led by these teachers and, when I left the abbey to return to Maine for good, they said, “You should check out Zen Master Seung Sahn at the Providence Zen Center. We hear good things about him.” I did (the retreat with Mu Deung Sunim that I just referenced) and I’ve been coming here ever since.

Anyway, I digress. The story is of a fellow called Zen Master Bird’s Nest, from the T’ang dynasty in China. He gets his name because he did his meditation high up in a tree. One day, the governor of that province, who was himself one of China’s great poets known for his expressions of Zen Buddhism, came to consult Bird’s Nest. Calling up to him, probably expecting some profound or esoteric teaching, he asked, “Tell me, what is it that all the Buddhas taught?” But in reply, Bird’s Nest, quoting from the Dhammapada, simply said, “Always do good; never do evil; keep your mind pure—thus all the Buddhas taught.” The governor, who perhaps had travelled some distance and made significant effort to reach Bird’s Nest, was not happy, and replied with anger and impatience, “Always do good, never do evil, keep your mind pure: I knew that when I was three years old.” To which Bird’s Nest responded, “Yes, any three-year-old child may know it, but even an 80-year-old cannot put it into practice.”

When I first heard that story, I immediately thought of this passage from the Christian scriptures: “And someone came to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?” And Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you will live.”

If we’re not attached to any idea about God, or person, or salvation, these two stories are the same story. It really is so simple: love each other, love everything! In each and every moment, ask “What is this, right now?” And then, “How can I help this situation?” “What does compassion look like at this very moment?” In our teaching words, how do I keep correct situation, correct relationship and correct function, right now?

Bird’s Nest’s insight—even an 80-year-old cannot put it into practice—certainly rings true for me. My beloved wife and son, Linda and Sam, as well as my brothers and close friends here today, can attest to that. Unfortunately, it’s usually those closest to us who see us at our worst—hopefully they see us at our best as well—but, either way, these stories remind us that unless enlightenment means enlightened behavior, it’s not worth very much.

And finally, perhaps my favorite teaching phrase of all

because it really brings all these others together in such a practical way, is Zen Master Seung Sahn’s teaching, “Make mistake—just make correct.” I can’t tell you how important that teaching has been for me. I don’t know about you but, for me, so many of the Zen stories seem to end with, “Then the person got enlightenment, all the kong-ans were clear, and they finished this great work of life and death.” Or, some version of that. Well, that certainly hasn’t been my story to date. So many kong-ans—both in the interview room and, much more important, those real-life kong-ans in our marriages, our families, our sanghas, our communities and workplaces—they don’t resolve themselves quickly and easily. We do our best to see the moment clearly, we respond with what seems correct function . . . and the next moment reveals that whatever we did didn’t seem to work. Perhaps the person is still angry or the suffering hasn’t been eased or the problem is still there. Are we willing to stick with it, “to stand in the fire and not shrink back,” to return to the situation, over and over again, for as long as it takes, until it feels like “it’s correct.” That has been one of the great values of kong-an study for me: teaching me to stay with the situation, mistake after mistake after mistake, until it becomes clear—and then to just put it down, because the next moment, a new situation is right there. Equally important, am I able to put down my preconceived notions of what “correct” and “incorrect” might even be?

Then:

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

Do you see this?

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

Do you hear this?

This stick, this sound, and your mind, are they the same or different? If you say they are the same, that’s a mistake, and the stick will hit you; if you say they are different, that’s also a mistake, and the stick will hit you; if you say they are both the same and different, that’s an even worse mistake and the stick will hit you even harder.

So what can you say? How can you not make a mistake?

KATZ!

Outside, bright sun; in this room, many bright faces. When I make a mistake, please help me make it correct. That’s sangha. ♦

Terry Cronin JDPSN started practicing Zen and Christian contemplation in 1980 while a student at Yale Divinity School. Since 1986, he has trained in the Kwan Um School of Zen. He is head dharma teacher at the Northern Light Zen Center in Topsham, Maine, and received inka from Zen Master Soeng Hyang in April 2014. For the past 21 years he has worked in a variety of roles for hospice programs, currently serving as a hospice chaplain. He and his wife live in Maine and have one adult son.