

Wisdom Is Not Something You Carry Around in Your Head

Zen Master Dae Bong

Editor's Note: The following article is taken from a longer talk given by Zen Master Dae Bong on what it means to be a dharma teacher. Zen Master Seung Sahn had a very direct, live and spontaneous quality to his talks and his teaching. Underpinning this was an organized foundation of the essentials of Zen practice and tradition. Dae Bong Sunim's talk gives a particularly cogent and clear exposition of these elements.

Here are some important points of Dae Soen Sa Nim and our Kwan Um School of Zen's teaching. First, what is a dharma teacher? Dharma means truth, attaining truth. Truth is before speech and words. In our practice, first we must attain this point before speech and words. Then, we can attain truth and correct human being's life. That's one meaning of dharma. Teacher means someone who helps others. Human beings are unusual because we have teachers. Some animals teach each other a little bit, but most animals—most things in the world—have their program already set inside. But we human beings have learned from each other, so teachers are very important. So a dharma teacher is someone who teaches truth. Anything we do in our life is a kind of teaching. So if we try to live by truth, then we are teaching truth to others.

For a dharma teacher, sincere practicing is very important. This sincere mind is already a great teaching. Next, it's important to see my karma, and try to fix that. In the Bible, Jesus asks, "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" That means it's very easy to see other people's karma, but difficult to see our own karma. So the Sixth Ancestor said: "What I see are my own faults. What I do not see is the good and bad of others." Most important is to see my karma,



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control my karma, make my karma disappear, attain my karma, then use my karma correctly.

In Buddhism, they say there are four ways to help others, that is, four kinds of bodhisattva action. Buddha talked about this. The first kind is giving people things they need or want. Maybe somebody needs food, somebody needs clothing, somebody needs medicine, or somebody really wants something very badly. If we give those things to this person, then their mind relaxes.

The second kind of giving is giving encouraging speech. This means speech that helps people believe in themselves. For example, maybe a three-year-old child makes a drawing. It just looks like a scribble to us, but we ask the child what this is, and they say, "Oh, that's an elephant." Then, if you say to them, "Oh, that's not an elephant, that's terrible, that just looks like a scribble," maybe they would get a bad feeling and they won't try anymore. But if you say to them, "Ah, that's wonderful! Wow, that's a big elephant! Draw another one, please," then they get this mind of encouragement. They believe in themselves and they want to try. So, this kind of good speech, encouraging speech, really helps people.

The third kind of bodhisattva action means teaching truth, talking about the nature of this world: "If you do good things, you get good results. If you do bad things, you get bad results;

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you get suffering. So, what do you like?” This kind of talking—teaching dharma, teaching truth to others—this helps people very much.

But sometimes, people cannot hear these three things. They are still suffering and holding their desire and anger and ignorance. Then there’s a fourth kind of bodhisattva action, which we call together action. Buddha sometimes called that identity action. That means only acting together with them. If they like dancing, then dance together. If they like eating, then eat together. If they like stealing, then steal together.

Buddha also said that in life, there are three kinds of giving. Giving is a great virtue; it’s the first of the six paramitas, generosity. First is giving things: giving things that people need, material things, money, things like that. That’s wonderful and brings a very good result. Also, it helps others.

Next, a higher giving is giving your life. That’s like soldiers or firefighters or police, sometimes doctors—anybody in a situation who acts without regard for their own life, only to help somebody else. That’s a very high form of giving.

The third kind, the most high, is giving dharma. This means if we learn to practice correctly and really attain our true substance and truth and correct function, then we can give dharma to others. That’s the highest form of giving.

20] Zen Master Seung Sahn always talks about four kinds of mind problems: wanting something, attaching to something, checking something, holding something. These four things are a kind of mind disease. These things make suffering for ourselves and for others. So we always say: don’t want, don’t attach, don’t check, don’t hold. If you want something, don’t attach. Then, no problem. If you attach to something, don’t check, then no problem. If you check something, don’t hold, then no problem. If you hold, then you have a big problem. So very important is to perceive our wanting, attaching, checking, holding mind and take away these things.

Being a dharma teacher means wanting to understand our true nature and save all beings from suffering. That’s our life’s direction; that’s the dharma teacher’s job. If that’s clear, then any kind of dharma teaching situation doesn’t matter. The direction is the same. Being a layperson, monk or nun doesn’t matter. If we just try to understand our true self and want to save all beings from suffering, then that’s being a true dharma teacher.

The second point is, what is meditation? In this world, there are many kinds of meditation: Christian meditation, divine light meditation, yoga meditation, relax-your-body meditation, fly-in-the-sky meditation, get-some-psychic-power meditation. Even in Buddhism, there are many kinds of meditation: Tibetan styles, Theravadan styles—even different Zen styles.

In Zen we say meditation means when you’re doing some-

thing, just do it. When you’re driving in the car, just drive. That’s driving meditation. When you play tennis, just play tennis; don’t think “How do I look?” When you eat, just eat. When you talk, just talk. When you wash dishes, just wash dishes. When you’re doing something, 100-percent just do it. Then your mind, your body and the situation all become one. The name for that is meditation. That’s a not-moving mind. Your mind and the situation completely become one. That’s meditation.

This is very important. In Zen, our meditation is not special, not separate from everyday life. When you’re doing something, just do it. That’s very hard for people to do, so we have simple forms of formal meditation: sitting, bowing, chanting. We use these simple forms to take away our karma. Finally, when we’re doing something, we can just do it. At that point, our meditation and our everyday life aren’t separate. Then our whole life becomes a spiritual practice. In this world, many people understand the word meditation, but they think it’s something special, and they don’t understand true and correct meditation. Zen teaching is very wonderful, very clear.

The third point concerns formal meditation: bowing, sitting, chanting, walking. Bowing practice means very quickly your body and your mind become one. It’s also a good way to take away lazy mind, desire mind and angry mind. When you’re sleeping, your body’s lying in your bed, but your mind flies around and goes someplace. Maybe you go to Las Vegas or you go to the ocean or you go to New York, or some monster is chasing you. Even though your body’s in bed, your consciousness already went someplace. Often, when we wake up, our consciousness and our body don’t quickly connect. So you wander around your house, drink coffee, bump into things. Slowly, slowly, your consciousness and your body come together again. That’s why, first thing in the morning, we do 108 bows. Through these 108 bows, our body and our consciousness quickly become one. Then, being clear and functioning clearly is possible.

We always bow 108 times. One hundred and eight is a number from Hinduism and Buddhism. There are 108 defilements, or compartments, in the mind. Then each bow takes away one defilement; it cleans one compartment in your mind. Bowing practice is like a repentance ceremony every morning. In the daytime, in our sleep, our consciousness flies around. Also we make many things in our consciousness. Then, we repent! When we do 108 bows, that’s already repenting of our foolish thinking, taking away our foolish thinking.

There are some people who cannot sit. Maybe they have a little crazy mind or too much thinking. If they sit, they cannot control their consciousness. For them, bowing is very

good. Using your body some way is very important. Further, having a clear direction about bowing is also important. I want to put down my small I, see my true nature and help all beings. Exercise can help your body and mind become one, but with just any exercise, the direction is often not clear. Sometimes it's for my health, sometimes it's for my good looks, sometimes it's to win a competition; but in Buddhism, everything's direction is the same point—how to perceive my true nature and save all beings from suffering. Bowing means to take our karma mind—our thinking mind—and return to this moment very clearly. I want to find my true nature and save all beings from suffering. So bowing practice is very important. If somebody has much anger, or much desire, or lazy mind, and they want to address this, then if they do 300 bows, or 500 bows, or 1,000 bows, every day, their center will become strong, they can control their karma, take away their karma, and become clear. So bowing practice is particularly good for this.

Next, sitting practice. Sitting practice simply means three things: body, breath and mind.

The next point is how to keep your mind. Buddha had one big question: What is life? What is death? What is a human being? What am I? He searched, and finally, he only didn't know. So he went straight, don't know for six years. Correct mind practice means this big question, "What am I? Don't know." But holding this kind of question in our minds is can be very difficult. Deep inside our minds we must have this question, but holding the words is not necessary. Although we have many kinds of mind practice techniques, correct mind practice means only go straight, don't know: Have this big question, wanting to understand my true self and save all beings.

Next is chanting. Chanting is very important and is also a wonderful practice. If you keep your energy in your head, then there is much thinking and desire and suffering. If you keep your energy in your chest, then there is too much emotion, then incorrect thinking appears. "I like this, I don't like that, this is good, this is bad." This thinking dominates your life and your actions. If you return your energy to your lower belly, then it is easy to become clear and for wisdom to appear. If people have too much emotion, or don't like emotion, then chanting practice is very good for them.

We talk about three kinds of mind: lost mind, one mind and clear mind. When you do chanting practice, it's easy to

experience clearly this lost mind, one mind and clear mind. Lost mind means that you're doing one thing but you're thinking something else. For example, in chanting, your mouth is chanting, but your mind is thinking about the many things you have to do that day, or some conversation that happened, or something that you want. When you're chanting, put all your energy into the sound. If there is any kind of thinking, any kind of feeling, or any kind of thing going on, take that energy and put it into the sound. Then finally your mind will become one mind, only the sound—ma-ha ban-ya ba-ra mil-ta—only sound. That's what we call one mind. Then there's no thinking at all, only the sound. It's also called samadhi. That's a very good feeling. So it's important not to attach to this samadhi mind. One more step is necessary: hear your voice, hear other people's voices. That's what we call clear mind.

Chanting actually is more than 50 percent listening. You also have to open your ears. First, put all your energy into the sound, then hear your sound, and hear all people's sound. That's correct chanting practice, clear-mind practicing. If someone has too much emotion, too much thinking, too much bad karma, then chanting practice really helps this lost mind become one; then one mind becomes clear. That's the importance of chanting practice.

We don't talk so much about walking meditation. Walking meditation is often seen as just a break from sitting practice. It's more. It's very important, when you're walking, to return your energy to your *danjoen*, your lower belly, and feel your feet touching the floor. In our walking style, the hands are interlaced. In some styles the left hand is inside the right

hand; in other styles, the right hand is inside the left hand. Dae Soen Sa Nim said one time, "Yeah, that's OK, but then maybe this right hand or this left hand has a bad feeling." So we interlace our hands. Then both hands are equal; both hands are happy. We hold our hands over this *danjoen* area and walk at kind of a normal pace: not too slow, not too fast. In that way, our walking meditation is also kind of an everyday life practice—not special.

That is bowing, sitting, chanting, walking. That's our formal meditation style. Then we try that every day, every day, every day, and then this center appears. This before-thinking center appears. Then we can experience what is meditation mind, and in our everyday life turn our everyday-life action into correct meditation. Then our spiritual practice and wis-



Photo: Kateřina Grofová

dom will really grow.

The fourth point: substance, truth and function. A central point of our teaching is making substance, truth and function very clear. This is one of the activities of our correct kong-an practicing. Substance means our before-thinking nature. Sometimes we call it primary point. This cannot be expressed in words or speech because it's before thinking. Guji always raised one finger. Lin Chi always shouted "KATZI!" Zen Master Duk Sahn always hit people. Our school's style is to hit the floor. First, return to your before-thinking nature, then if you correctly attain your original substance, you can see clearly, hear clearly, smell clearly, taste clearly, feel clearly. Everything is clear. The sky is blue; the tree is green. The dog goes "woof woof"; sugar is sweet. Everything is just reflected in your mind. We say, if you keep this hit-point, then your mind is clear like space. Clear like space means clear like a mirror. The mirror just reflects. Red comes: red. White comes: white. So when you see the sky, just blue. When you see a tree, just green. When you hear a dog barking, just "woof woof." That name for that is truth. So everything in this universe is truth, just the way it is, not dependent on our thinking or our opinions.

Attain truth. Then, one more step is necessary. How does truth correctly function to make correct life? We say, "helping others." That means, when you're hungry, eat. When you're tired, sleep. When somebody is hungry, give them food. When somebody is thirsty, give them a drink. When somebody is suffering, help them. The name for that is correct situation, correct function, correct relationship. Buddhism also calls that great love, great compassion, the great bodhisattva way. That's our practice. That's correct life. That's Zen. So, substance, truth and function all become very clear.

Number five: Sometimes I heard Dae Soen Sa Nim say that in practicing, two things are very important: correct direction and try mind. Correct direction means wanting to find our true nature and save all beings from suffering. Try mind means try. Do it, just try. One day he said to us, "If you have try mind and correct direction, then you have correct practicing. Then one day you realize that try mind and correct direction is enlightenment." Correct direction we can get from our dharma teachers. It can be pointed out to us by our dharma teachers, by our Zen master. But try mind, only we can provide. So it's important for everybody to try.

Sixth is kong-an practice. This is distinctive to Zen practice. Kong-an practice has two main functions. First, to help us always return to our correct practicing direction. Some people practice to feel better. Some people practice to take away problems. There are many kinds of reasons, and all those reasons can be very good, but our practicing's original direction is very important: Don't know—only go straight,

don't know. So when you can't answer a kong-an, already your mind returns to don't know. This helps us keep our practicing direction. Some people just want quiet for meditation. That's OK, but that cannot really help your life. So kong-an practice helps you keep this correct practicing direction of don't know.

A second point is that kong-an practice helps us to find correct function. As we go through kong-an practice, we begin to see clearly substance, truth and function, and then we can find the correct function in our life. There are basically two kinds of kong-ans. One kind checks our meditation mind—how much our mind is unmoving. It's like sword fighting; the teacher attacks, you go back, then the teacher, then you, then the teacher, then you. Then you can see how long you can keep not-moving mind. The second type of kong-an checks our wisdom. That means our functioning. It is very important that our kong-an practice connects with everyday life. So the three main aims of kong-an practice are to help us keep our correct practicing direction, which is don't know; to find correct function; and finally, to attain no hindrance.

Number seven: If meditation, cognition (or correct view), and everyday life connect in our practice, then our spiritual life is complete. With some people, their religious life and their everyday life don't connect; then this can never be satisfying or complete. Meditation means not-moving mind: when you're doing something just do it. Correct view comes from kong-an practice and correct study. How do I connect my practice with everyday life? If we understand correct meditation, then that will already help us connect with our everyday life. We can make our everyday life meditation. Then wisdom appears, and we are actually able to help our life from our practice. Also, our life will teach us how to practice better.

Number eight is about form. First, the purpose. The purpose of form is to help us put down our opinion and attain original mind. Anything we do in life has some form. By making a simple form and simply doing it together, it gives us a chance to see our opinion moment to moment, put it down, and then suddenly attain our original mind, which is open, wide and free. Most people who like freedom, especially in America, are attached to freedom, and they're not really free. When they're in a structured situation, their like and dislike mind appears and they can't follow the situation. But if you're really free, that means that you're also free of your likes and dislikes. Even if you have likes and dislikes, you're not controlled by them. So it's possible to follow any kind of form to help others. So the first purpose of form is to help us put down my opinion and attain original mind.

The next purpose is to help us function together harmoniously. Dae Soen Sa Nim often said, “Follow the situation, then get happiness.” So in each situation, our teaching is always to follow the situation. If you go to a Tibetan temple, practice Tibetan style. If you visit a Japanese temple, follow the Japanese style. If come to a Kwan Um School of Zen temple, then follow the Kwan Um School of Zen style. If you learn this way and can live this way, then in any situation you can make harmony, put down your opinion, attain original mind, get wisdom and be of great help to people. This means keeping our great direction.

Learn to use your eyes, ears, hands, your whole body. If you go to another Zen center and you watch what they do, soon you’re able to follow them. Then often they’re surprised, because most of the time we have to tell people over and over what a particular form is. Most people are not able to really use their eyes, ears and hands clearly. If we Zen students learn to use our eyes, ears and hands correctly, then we’re able to connect with others and other situations much more quickly.

Finally, we always talk about together action. Together action makes harmony. By doing together action, I put down my opinion and am able to follow others. Then, others will follow you. So Dae Soen Sa Nim sometimes said, “If you want to help somebody, then you must follow them, follow them, follow them. Then, turn around and go the correct way; then they will often follow you.”

The ninth point is practicing. One day at the Cambridge Zen Center, a student asked Dae Soen Sa Nim during a formal dharma talk, “I have been practicing for three days. Can you give me some advice that will help my practice?” Dae Soen Sa Nim said, “How many days have you been practicing?” The student said, “Only three days.” Then Dae Soen Sa Nim said, “Too long!” Then he said, “Three days, twenty years—doesn’t matter. Very important is this moment. What are you doing right now? If this moment is clear, your whole life is clear. If this moment is not clear, your whole life is not clear. So don’t check, ‘I’ve been practicing three days, one year, ten years, twenty years.’ Only, what am I doing right now? That’s very important.” This kind of approach really helps students because it’s true and very clear.

Another thing about practicing is that often, after about three years, and sometimes between seven and ten years, people who are practicing have some problem in their practice. When you first begin practicing, often you get some kind of rapid result. You get some relief from a problem in your life, or some ability to see yourself better. Then you often start to feel like, “Well, I’m doing more thinking than before.” But all that’s happening, really, is that you’re beginning to see your thinking. But sometimes after about three years people begin to feel that they’re not making any progress and they don’t

understand why their practice isn’t helping them anymore.

I always say that our karma is like a ball of ice. When you first light a fire under it, right away some spot begins to melt and you get the satisfaction of actually making some progress. But after a few years, you’ve melted the outside surface, but the insides are very hard, and the same fire will not melt more, so you begin to doubt your practice and doubt yourself. At that point, it is important to simply practice harder and persevere. Simply continue. Don’t check yourself. Don’t check your practicing. Don’t check the results. Then, you’ll pass that point and again realize some change and some progress. Also, often between seven and ten years a similar situation or problem will appear. So again, it’s important simply to continue to try. Then you will always get the result.

Another topic that Dae Soen Sa Nim would talk about occasionally, in relation to practicing or karma, is what he calls lingering karma. Lingering karma means something deep in your consciousness. Even if your practice is going well and you feel very clear, sometimes some situation will appear, and boom! Your karma appears—some desire, some opinion—and suddenly you can’t control yourself. This is called lingering karma, and it usually catches you by surprise. Well, the medicine for this is simple: strong practice. If you’ve been practicing strongly, then your practice energy will carry you through this karma and suddenly your mind again will become clear and you’ll be able to break free. If your practice hasn’t been strong, and this lingering karma appears, it’s important to practice strongly. Then you can pass through this without creating problems and obstacles for yourself and others.

One further point: Dae Soen Sa Nim’s teaching about meditation and wisdom. Meditation means a not-moving mind. When you’re doing something, just do it. If one practices that way, one is able to get a strong center. But sometimes people have some deep experience in practice, then they take this experience, turn it into some kind of understanding, then it’s very difficult to teach them and they don’t really get wisdom because they’re just holding their understanding.

We say wisdom comes from correct kong-an practice and together action, and especially important is correct kong-an practice. If you have a big question, not holding on to your understanding, but having a big question, returning constantly to don’t-know mind and having the direction of saving all beings, then wisdom will appear. In our teaching, these points are explicit and clear: substance, truth, function, and also, meditation and wisdom. Wisdom is not something you carry around in your head. It’s the ability to respond in a situation automatically that saves all beings from suffering. ♦