

Nothing That Is Not There and the Nothing That Is

John Holland

In *The Compass of Zen* our founding teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, admonished us:

You make your world. You make your time and your space. You also make the cause and effect that controls your life. All these things come from our minds. First, what is time? Past, present, and future do not exist. Where is the past? Where is the future? You cannot find them anywhere. Everybody knows this, and contents themselves with the belief that at least the present exists and is real. Yet if you even say that the present exists, it is just as great a delusion. Where is the present? Saying “present,” it’s already past. The moment you say that word—“Present!”—it has already become “past.” Your thinking makes past, present, and future, so you have time . . .

Our thinking also makes space because originally space, too, simply does not exist. America is here, and Korea is over there. America has north, south, east, and west; Korea also has north, south, east, and west. But America’s north, south, east, and west are different from Korea’s north, south, east, and west. “I am here. I have north, south, east, and west. When I disappear, where is my north, south, east, and west?”

And yet we may recall Zen Master Seung Sahn’s presence in the kinetic memorial to him designed by the artist Mark Mendel facing North America’s nor’-nor’-west. The 8-foot-by-9-foot slab of granite, now set vertically upon a Virginia slate plinth, was once a well cover that for two hundred years kept the feet of families dry when they came to the well. Through the circular hole where once water was drawn we see an 8-foot stele:

*In emptiness the two are the same,
And each holds the ten thousand things.*

The hole itself resembles *taeguk*, the symbol used in the South Korean flag that contains a balanced *ying* and *yang*. For some it may appear as an *enso* or the Zen Circle.

Mark Mendel has embellished the rugged well-stone by limning it with a golden glass aura that dramatically catches sunlight or moonlight. It reminds us of the fiery aspect of our Founding Zen Master. On the opposite side



Photo: Barry Briggs JDPSN

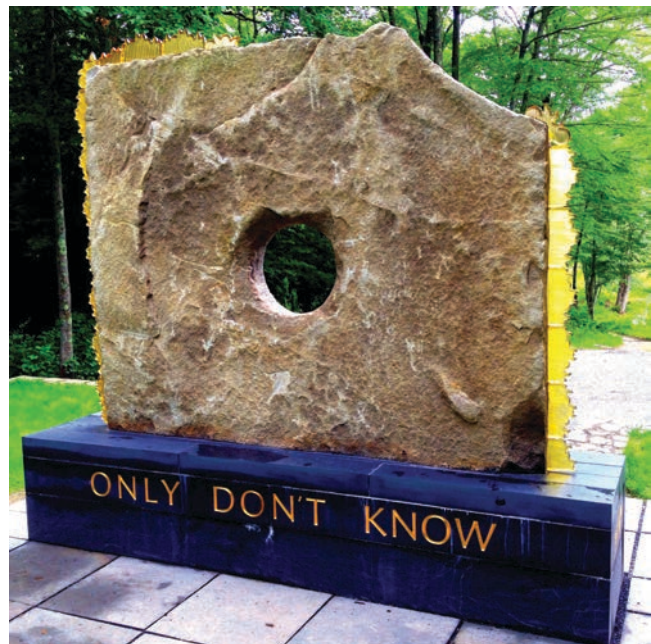


Photo: Barry Briggs JDPSN



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of the stone, Mark invited Karin Sprague Stone Carvers to hand letter and gold leaf “ONLY DON’T KNOW.” The handsome letters, as on the front of the monument, are each 5 inches high in the style of Palatino Nova Sans. This typeface was released in 2005 by the esteemed typographers Hermann Zapf and Akira Kobayashi. Karin Sprague says that she chose this typeface because of its clarity—“Clear mind, clear mind—Don’t know.”

At the unveiling of the monument on August 2, 2014, at the Providence Zen Center, Mark Mendel said that he had seen the spectacular well cover in Maine fifteen years ago. He purchased it for his stoneyard, where he also had the stone that would become the stele. He liked the two stones so much that he put a high price on them, thus managing to hold on to them until their purpose became



Photo: Barry Briggs JDPSN

clear. This happened soon after Zen Master Soeng Hyang gave a dharma talk at the Zen South County Center in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a year ago. When she met Mark there, he told her that he had read many books by Zen Master Seung Sahn and that he was a stonemason. She asked to visit his yard and saw the two stones.

Mark has linked the stones with a narrow fieldstone pathway that resembles a mandala. Behind the stele, which reminds one of a pagoda, a more traditional Asian monument, are meditative trees. He believes that this monument is the most important artwork he has yet created. At the unveiling Mark quoted Shunryu Suzuki Roshi as describing some stones as alive, some as dead. These stones, Mark vouchsafes, are alive.

Zen Master Seung Sahn selected the site for the nearby monastery because of the pond, hills and ridges surrounding it. The flat space on which the memorial sits was recently created. The whole site is considered to have Kwan Seum Bosal energy, that is to say, soft energy.

In front of the memorial the fieldstones embrace the steps that are like a brook of a dry garden that eventually plunges with telluric energy into the pond below Diamond Hill Monastery and to the Providence Zen Center. It is purported that *ki* rides the wind and scatters, but is retained when encountering water. The steps lead up to the stupa. Ultimately, however, the steps are just steps.

Thank you, Zen Master Soeng Hyang, for your perspicacity in obtaining the talent of Mark Mendel for this memorial to Dae Soen Sa Nim.

Note: The title of this piece comes from “The Snow Man” by Wallace Stevens. For Zen Master Seung Sahn’s admonishment to us, see *The Compass of Zen*, pages 89–91. The two-line quotation is from *Trust in Mind: The Hsin Shin Ming of Tseng Ts’an, Third Patriarch of Zen*, translated by Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stanley Lombardo). David Chadwick recounts the comment about alive and dead stones on page 344 in *Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki* (1999). Reference to *ki* (*qi*) is from *The Zangshu*; or, *Book of Burial* by Guo Pu (276–324), translated by Stephen L. Field (2009; fengshuigate.com/zangshu.html).



John Holland is a long-time member of the Chogye International Center of New York. After training in the New Haven Zen Center, he became a dharma teacher in 1995. In 2008 he took the vows of a bodhisattva teacher. John has taught meditation at Union Theological Seminary of New York, Columbia University, and for extended periods at the Institute of Omega for Holistic Studies, as well as at New York Chogyesa. For many years he was an active member of the Buddhist Council of New York. John was the coeditor of *Don’t-Know Mind: The Spirit of Korean Zen* and *Elegant Failure: A Guide to Zen Koans*, by Zen Master Wu Kwang. In addition to Zen, John also practices tai chi and bird-watching.