

# The Way of Enlightenment

Zen Master Seung Sahn

## Preface

Great nature, with its singing birds, flowing streams, and temple bells deep in the mountains, leads us from our worldly passions into nirvana, transcending life and death. Dark mountains and clear water, fresh spring leaves and deep oceans—all these, by themselves, are the path, the truth, and Zen. Every dust particle we touch and feel are just wonders, and all things we come across are nothing but our original face. But the reason we do not recognize this while constantly sensing it is because we do not understand our true self.

A human cannot be a human only just because they are a human. Knowing the path, perceiving the truth, living in Zen will distinguish you from the animals. Attaining the path, the truth, and Zen will be possible only after you understand your true self. If you find your original face, the before-thinking face—that is, if you cut off all thinking in your mind—then there is no Buddha and common mortals, no good and evil, no life and death, and no right and wrong. When all thinking is cut off, there cannot be any distinction by language or words; what you have is the absolute world that transcends the duality of name and form—you are the universe and the universe is you.

Therefore, if we recover our before-thinking faces, then the sound of birds and the sound of streams will become our lives all at once, and the high mountains and the deep water as it is will become our truth. Our life will become that of things as they are, like a large round mirror reflecting black into black and white into white.

We must give up the idea of “I,” which tends to inquire into right and wrong or good and evil between me and you. The world in which you and I become one, in which I live with nature, is the path, the truth, and Zen.

In the hope of introducing, from old days, the bright lives of the righteous with the great freedom over life and death to this dark world of suffering, I picked up a hundred cases out of the traditional seventeen hundred Zen kong-ans, and I wrote a Zen storybook that, I hope, will become a guide in our troubled lives.

If this book can lead its readers to an understanding of the path, the truth, and Zen, then I am doing my part, however little, to repay the Buddha’s grace.

Finally, grateful acknowledgment is made to monk Kyeh-Hyun Lee and laymen Yoo Chan and Chul We for their help in editing the manuscript, and to layman Yun Taik for his assuming the publishing costs.

S.S.

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## Case 1: No Question-and-Answer for Primary Meaning

Zen is commonly understood as something like a bamboo stick grafted onto a chestnut tree, communicating through eccentric words and actions far away from common sense. But Zen is not that kind of thing.

As indicated by the old masters’ teachings:

*Not relying on words,  
A transmission outside the sutras.*

or

*Investigation of words cannot attain it;  
Thought cannot reach it.*

It would be a great mistake to try to describe the essence of Zen with words and letters or specific actions. It does not allow any possible description, as it always has been such.

This is because Zen does not rely upon words, letters, consciousness or ideas. However, it does not mean that words, letters, consciousness and ideas should be discarded—it means simply that Zen is not restrained by them.

Like the old proverb, “The art can be taught, but not the genius,” it is possible to teach Zen in a common-sense way. It can only be learned through its perception and its spontaneous practice. It cannot be learned through words or letters.

If it is describable, the description is only something secondary, and cannot be the ultimate primary meaning. Because it is indescribable, the old masters said:

*Word’s road is cut off,  
Mind’s arena is destroyed.*

and

*True form is beyond words.*

When two persons reach the same stage of mind through identical consciousness and ideas, then words and letters will not be necessary for a 100 percent effective communication. At such a stage, there is indeed no need for an explanation or question-and-answer.

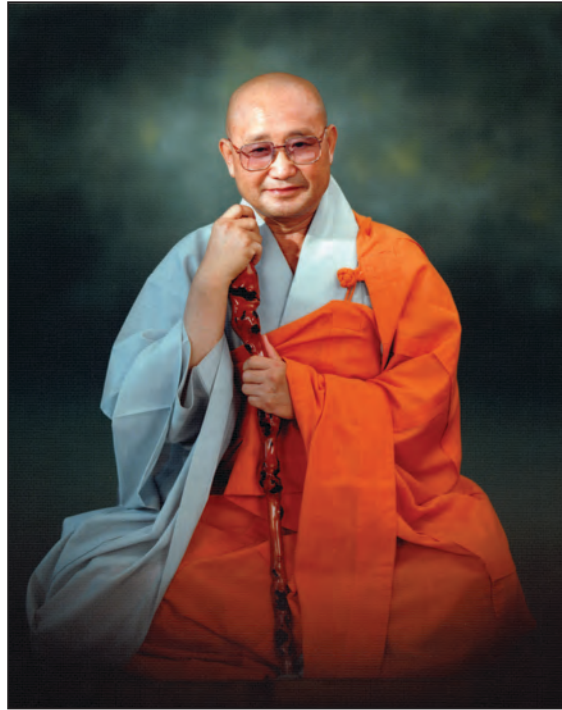
One should drink water to taste its coldness or hotness. Likewise, it is foolish to attempt a description or instruction of such a state of mind through words and letters. On the other hand, simply keeping Zen to oneself after attaining it, and not trying to share it with neighbors, goes against the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. A Zen person should not only try to attain Zen, but also try to help others attain it.

Therefore, teaching Zen through all possible chan-

nels usually takes the form of questions and answers. But its intent is very much different from that of questions and answers in the ordinary learning process. This is because Zen attempts to point directly to primary meaning. In order to show the true picture of life and death, various ingenious methods are employed, sometimes using strange words, shouting a belly sound, [That is, “KATZ!” –Ed.] or sometimes brandishing a stick.

This type of question and answer can be quite energetic and stylized, full of wit, nerve and surprises. But regarding only this as Zen is a mistake. At the same time, all these questions and answers by themselves should be considered as the skillful application of Zen, because our every action, whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, is nothing but Zen. Therefore, it is important that we take up the following cases and devote ourselves to studying them.

“Zen is Practice, so don’t preach Zen!” This remark characterizes one aspect of Zen.



*Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archives*

**Editor’s Note:** The Way of Enlightenment was published in Korean in 1965, thanks to the generous donation of a Korean bosalnim. This kind of offering is part of Asian Buddhist culture and is one way that a lay family will support the dharma. The text went through a preliminary translation without attribution in the 1980s, and while we do not currently know the identity of the translator, we are grateful for the work. The book is a collection of traditional kong-ans with commentary by Zen Master Seung Sahn. In the preface and first chapter, though, Dae Soen Sa Nim speaks directly to the reader. Those of us familiar with his teaching will clearly recognize his voice here, although his style in 1965 was a little different than in his later years. Much of this issue of Primary Point is devoted to the “Whole World

Is a Single Flower” conference, one of the fruits of Zen Master Seung Sahn’s worldwide teaching. Primary Point is pleased to offer this example of his earlier teaching as a preface. Our thanks to Barry Briggs JDPSN for his efforts in producing a digital version of the original manuscript. I have made some modifications to this version, to accommodate standard English usage. ♦

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**The Tenth Triennial Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference & Zen Master Seung Sahn’s Tenth Memorial Ceremony  
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