

When you find Zen, what do you do?

Zen Master Soeng Hyang

Well, we've just heard such good news from some of our regions, but I don't have such good news from the United States. At a lot of our Zen groups, we have maybe 15 to 25 people, and then we have 15 and then we have 20. It's a little bit like that.

Recently I was listening to public radio and they were doing an experiment with college students, studying people's ability to do meditation. They were asked to sit in a quiet room with no stimulation, or they had another choice: they could be hit by a small electric shock every five seconds. About 75 percent preferred the electric shock. This is how difficult silence is for many Americans: they'd rather get an electric shock!

Sometimes I go to a movie and they have the previews first. BOOM BA-BOOM BA-BOOM—tremendously exaggerated noise and activity. So yesterday when I was listening to the talk about how we can help children with meditation, I personally didn't feel much hope. So many people are used to being so stimulated. There is a high attrition rate for those who do come to practice. I think we've all experienced having someone leave the practice, even after they have been practicing for many years. I used to ask Zen Master Seung Sahn, "What did we do wrong? Why did they leave?" He'd always say, "More suffering is necessary." I think it's difficult to believe in yourself, to trust the process of Zen practice. When you first start practicing, often you feel worse. You start watching your brain and watching all your thoughts, and you think you're getting worse, not better. So coming to this practice and staying requires great faith, great courage, and a great question. You have to develop the ability to see your thinking, and it can be painful at times. It's not an easy path.

I was thinking about a story that I heard Zen Master Seung Sahn tell. It's about a sparrow. She lived in a large forest. This bird was very evolved: she never checked, held or made anything! She was always paying attention, and was so gregarious that she knew all the animals in the forest. She not only knew the animals, she also respected and

loved them. One day a very rapid, horrible fire started. It was a dry, windy day. The sparrow was of course paying attention, and she flew straight up. She used her intuition, saw a pond, filled her beak, flew over the fire and dropped the water. Over and over and over, this action of dropping one drop of water onto the forest fire. And then, finally, totally exhausted, she fell into the fire.

I love that story. So . . . who died? Did her efforts even help? If we think that way—life, death, the fire was put out, it wasn't put out—that's a big mistake. We all know this fire. We need to know the fire, the suffering, the pain. It's impossible not to see it. But, again, we're very smart, so we find all these ways to avoid looking at it. We have movies; we have books; we have all kinds of things to distract ourselves. Human beings are very smart, but intelligence will not show us the way. Only a strong vow and strong direction will bring us to knowing how to put out the fire.

Dae Kwan Sunim was saying how much she likes Zen. Part of the attraction was the kong-an practice. When I met Zen Master Seung Sahn, I didn't know much about Zen, but I'd read about kong-ans. So that was the first thing I asked him, I asked, "Do you teach kong-an practice?" "Yes, yes, I teach kong-an practice!" Then I said the worst thing: "Are you Japanese?" "No, I'm not Japanese!" I was so stupid, so I said, "I didn't know they had Buddhism in Korea!" Then he got even more upset! But he still was so nice to me. "I am giving a dharma talk this Sunday. Please come!" So, most important, if we want to help this world, we have to love what we do. So I went to that dharma talk. He loved what he did. He loved Zen. And he taught it really well. You see, when he was talking, he was spitting, spitting out everything [*makes spitting sound*] because he was so enthusiastic, so excited. If I see someone that excited about what they're doing, then I stay with them. We have to be excited—spit it out! Whatever we do, just find that we really trust it; we really love it; we want to share it. Then this world will be healing rather than burning. Thank you.



Photo: Allan Matthews