

Carlos Montero

March 28, 2015, at the Providence Zen Center

DHARMA COMBAT

Question: I have a question. Let's say you get inka. We have a good time, we chant, we eat more cake, I get less sick, a whole bunch of cool stuff goes on. I go back home. A month later, I hook up with the wrong people and I decide, "You know what, to hell with this! To hell with the teachers! To hell with all the dharma, everything! And I decide to become a terrorist. Before I go, I think to myself, "You know what, I gotta tell my friend Carlos what I'm going to do." So I tell you, "You know what Carlos? To hell with everything, everyone's an infidel, I want everybody to die." What do you tell me?

Montero PSN: Are you sure?

Q: Yes, I'm very sure.

Montero PSN: Have a good trip.

16]

Question: So Carlos, although I'm up in Maine right now, I lived probably the majority of my life in Florida. I still have family and friends there, so I'm very concerned about how the sangha in Florida is going to go. I know you've kept your direction there for fifteen years now, but there are a lot of distractions in Florida. There are neon lights and all sorts of tempting pleasures and so on: fast cars and beautiful women. So how are you going to keep your direction clear?

Montero PSN: You already understand.

Q: No, I don't. I'm easily distracted.

Montero PSN: First, meditation. Then, party at South Beach! *[Mimes dancing.]*

Question: When I was younger, I didn't think much about death. But now that I'm older, I think about death every day. So my question is, How can I practice with that?

Montero PSN: You already understand.

Q: Please teach me.

Montero PSN: When you die, where do you go?

Q: *[Hits the floor.]*

Montero PSN: Keep that mind.

DHARMA SPEECH

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

White light becomes a rainbow. A rainbow returns to white light.

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

Originally no white light and no rainbow.

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

White light is just white light. And a rainbow is just a rainbow. When you open your eyes, which one is clear?

KATZ!

Smiling faces of many colors, revealing their white teeth.

First, I want to thank everybody, because this whole thing could not happen without each one of you. So, thank you. Thank you to my teachers, all of you who have helped for so many years. And a great thank you to my sangha, who have really been there, and without them this could not have happened. And that doesn't just mean everybody in Florida; that means everybody here as well.

So when I was young I was a very curious child. I really wanted to know things. So I naturally gravitated toward science. On top of that, people always praised me for my curiosity and intelligence, so it felt good to know things. "Oh, he's smart, that's good, I like that." So, oh boy, I wanted to know everything. I was fascinated by knowing things. For example, light comes from the sun. It's bright, then it goes through tiny little droplets of water and becomes this beautiful rainbow. That's amazing.

Then, one time I was in the fourth grade and the teacher had us make a wheel and we split the wheel into seven equal slices, like a pie, and we colored each one a color



Photo: Paul Brymer

Summer Retreat Program 2015

Europe. June 22 - September 13



Kwan Um School of Zen
Europe

Seon Mun Sa, Vrážné, Moravia, Czech Republic

Zen Master Dae Kwang : June 22 to 28
Jo Potter JDPSN : June 29 - July 5
Barry Briggs JDPSN : July 6 to 12

Wu Bong Sa, Warsaw, Poland

Jo Potter JDPSN : August 2 to 8
Zen Master Bon Shim : August 9 to 15
Muchak JDPSN : August 16 to 22
Andrzej Piotrowski JDPSN : August 23 to 29

Sufi Kanka, Vepriai, Ukmerge district, Lithuania

Zen Master Ji Kwang : July 11 to 17
Andrzej Piotrowski JDPSN : July 19 to 25

Ku Bong Sa, The Peak, England

Igor Piniński JDPSN : September 1 to 5

Surya Centrum, Mor. Lieskové, Slovakia

Oleg Šuk JDPSN : July 26 - August 1

Bori Sa, Garrotxa, Catalunya, Spain

Zen Master Soeng Hyang : September 5 to 13



More information
www.kwanumeurope.org

Zen Center of Las Vegas

Zen Master Ji Haeng
Abbot & Guiding Teacher

2461 E. Harmon Avenue Las Vegas, NV 89121
Phone: 702 293-4222 zencenteroflv@gmail.com

Daily Practice | Residential Training | Weekend Retreats
www.zencenteroflasvegas.com

of the rainbow. And we spun the wheel really fast and guess what? It was white! Wow, amazing! So there were all these explanations for this: “Well, light goes through the droplets with different wavelengths, they split, there’s diffraction, and so on.” OK, but why? So, at the point of deep questioning, science fell short. There was only “Don’t know, but we’ll keep trying, OK?”

For me, religion was like this too. I grew up a Catholic boy in South America, in Venezuela. My parents loved me very much and they were devout Catholics, so I grew up in that environment. Given my science mind, I was always asking questions, “OK, but wait a minute—we’re talking about God this and God that, but how does that *really* happen?” The answer always was, “Well, it’s a *great* mystery.”

What’s happening there is that both science and religion consistently gave me—gave all of us—this wonderful invitation to just wonder. To just stay there, to just—“Oh! If God made everything, what made God?” But that’s uncomfortable, so most of the time we decline that invitation and we stick to what we know. We stick to what makes sense to us, what we can regurgitate it. And we stick to what we can impress other people with. So growing up I used my intellect as a badge of look-how-cool-I-am. But being smart and good at school got a little boring, and I started playing sports. Actually, it was not swimming or basketball; it was golf that I really devoted myself to for a long time. Now, talk about a good teacher! The interesting thing about golf is that you can’t think and analyze while you’re hitting the ball, or else really bad things happen. So at one point, my golf teacher said, “You understand golf 100 percent, but you can’t do it!” He was very wonderful; I also thank him from the bottom of my heart because he said, “You should try Zen meditation.” And he gave me five books, some which I’m sure you have read. None of them are from our school, but they’re classic Zen books. At that time, I was 20 years old and I really devoured these books. This was like, “Ahh!” It was like this questioning and my current situation, everything was kind of becoming one, opening up. But everything was still only thinking: “Oh I get this, this makes sense, I get it, I understand it!”

So I was lucky enough to be spending the summer here in Rhode Island, and at that time, I searched the Internet for “Zen” and what came up was the Providence Zen Center. I said, “That’s kind of fortuitous. I’ll check this place out.” So I came, and I’m still here. And I’ll tell you two stories about why.

The first one is about my first kong-an interview. By the time I had my first interview, I had read a lot of books, including those written by Zen Master Seung Sahn, so I had

a lot of ideas about what my first kong-an encounter would be like, and about how well I would do. Zen Master Seung Sahn got enlightenment when he was 22. I’m like, “Well, I’m 20. OK, 2 years off . . . What do I do, what do I bring?”

This first interview was actually with Zen Master Wu Bong (Jacob Perl). It was the only interview I ever had with him. He was just visiting, and he happened to be the guest teacher. So I entered the room, I did my prostration, and I didn’t know who this man was. I had only seen him in pictures. So it was completely normal when he asked me, “Oh, what’s your name?” So I said, “I’m Carlos.” And he goes, “That’s your body’s name. What’s your true name?” “Uhh oh huh?” [*I was*] completely stuck. Completely stuck. Couldn’t answer. But I kind of brushed that off. Instead of just becoming one with that moment of 100 percent complete doubt, I returned to the more familiar world of thinking. “So I have a question.” I wanted to bring something up, so I started explaining how much I understood and talking and talking and he’s listening, he’s listening, then without my even noticing he grabs the stick and—BOOM—hits me, quite firmly! And I stopped, and asked “What?”

“Too much thinking!” For the second time I was completely stuck. So that was very powerful because it was not just reading about don’t know, it was in my face: “Get it? Get it? There it is! Not because I said so. *You* experienced it.”

Some time passed and the second story has to do with my first Kyol Che. I spent that summer of my first interview in Rhode Island, went back to school in the fall, and I was determined to do Kyol Che in the winter. This retreat just happened to be during my senior year in college. So I had a week off for spring break. Now, all my friends were saying, “We’re going to Miami, and we’re going to enjoy our very last semester in college. Yo, party! What are you doing?” “Well, I’m going to sit a retreat.” “What?”

The truth was, even though I had already read a lot about Zen, and I had read a lot about how when you don’t know, all your likes and dislikes disappear, and it’s OK, you can be free and enter nirvana and then help this world—you can read all of that—but at that time I was suffering greatly. Great suffering. Even if I understood Zen logically, it wasn’t helping, because it’s not just about understanding it, or even getting a small taste of it when the teacher hits you. That’s a little sample of it but how do you cultivate that? So I said, “I’m going to try this practice. It sounds really hard and it’s crazy, but I’m going to do it.”

The reason I was suffering so greatly, apart from not understanding myself, is because I wanted something. At that time I was madly in love. I had one of those mind-

blowing crushes that just shakes you up, and of course I wasn't getting what I wanted. On top of not getting that, there was cultural insult added to injury. It was perfectly OK for a Latin Catholic boy like me to be madly in love with a woman, as long as she was a woman. But that was not the case for me. So that was very hard, because of my own ideas about how I would disappoint my parents if they found out. How would I fit in society, after growing up believing that this was wrong? I thought there was a problem, that I had a problem. So I kept it quiet, all inside. So, love, confusion, potential failure, all these ideas just weighed heavily on my heart. I was carrying a very, very heavy burden. And I had never told a soul about it.

So I went to Kyol Che and it was Zen Master Dae Kwang, whom I wish were here today so I could thank him, because during the first interview, I finally felt comfortable enough to tell somebody about my situation. "Hey, this guy's supposed to have enlightenment, which means that he doesn't judge, meaning that he's somebody that probably I could just tell him what's going on." It was not easy, but I did. So during the interview he was trying to get it out of me, because it really wasn't flowing. I was like, "Well, I'm in love, but it's the wrong person, and . . ." He goes, "Well, what's so wrong? What's wrong with her? Is she your cousin?" I was able to say, "It's not really a *she*." And then he turned red and he was like, "I'm so sorry!" First he apologized to me. I just told him this awful thing—I thought it was awful—and he was apologizing to me. He goes, "I'm very sorry for thinking that." "No problem!" "No problem? You sure, no problem?" "Yeah, no problem." And he goes, "Do you know what barnacles are?" Zen style, right? I grew up in South America, right near the beach, so it took a little explanation for me to understand that he was talking about those pesky crustaceans that stick to the bottom of the boat if you leave it in the water too long. You have to keep cleaning them off. So finally I agreed, "Yes, I know what barnacles are." He said, "Human beings are like barnacles. We don't choose what boat we stick to." [*Loud laughter from the audience.*] That may be funny to you, but to me, it was like somebody took a ten-thousand pound weight off my shoulders and put it to the side. I remember walking out of that interview smiling. I just couldn't help but smile. It's like, "Ah! It's not my fault! I am not this karma. I am not gay or straight or a man or a woman or Latin or anything. It's just—ahh!—that's not who we are."

But one more important thing became clear: How did the teacher know to say that? Just at that moment, just when I really needed to hear something like that, so unexpected and spontaneous. I don't think he had turned to the "Zen Master's Guide to Answering Questions," question number 25. No, he just perceived something and—boom! I said to

myself, if practice is able to do that, if practice unlocks this innate wisdom to just say something when someone needs to hear it, and help them put that burden down—wow! That is something that I need to invest time into.

Those two stories really cemented and forged a commitment to practice. And I'm sure that everybody here has had some type of personal story, and that's why you keep coming. Sometimes we make excuses. "I'm too busy. I have a job. I have to take care of my kids." All of that is fine, but how do you do something about it? How do you first attain that we are not our thinking, that we're not our karma, that we're not the things that come and go, and cultivate that realization so that by itself some great love, compassion and wisdom can appear? Then perhaps if we encounter somebody in need we can give ourselves to them and help them to be free. Then they in turn can pursue their own path and attain themselves.

So, if you're here, what do you do from now on? How do you use all of your colors, all of your uniqueness to first pursue and attain your mind and then help this world? We have a great opportunity in this lifetime, so let's do it.

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

All colors are one color. One color is all colors.

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

Originally, no colors. Also, no eyes to see them, or mouths to speak of them.

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

Actually, all colors are just colors. The snow outside is white. The Buddha behind me is gold. But which one is your true color?

KATZ!

How may I help you? ♦

Carlos Montero JDPSN is the abbot of the South Florida Zen Group, which he founded in 2000. He has been a student of the Kwan Um School of Zen since 1997. Carlos left his native country of Venezuela to study chemical engineering at Penn State University. After earning his bachelor's degree, he pursued a six-year career as a professional golfer. He is currently a high school chemistry teacher focused on modern methods of instruction and chemical education research. Montero PSN holds a first-degree black belt in the martial art of Nihon Goshin Aikido and is an avid masters swimmer.