

# How Can We Make Our Practice Relevant in Society?

## Panel from the Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference, October 2014, South Korea

**Moderator:** *Zen Master Bon Soeng*

**Speakers:** *Gary Sprague, Susi Childress, Professor Seung Hwan Park, Zen Master Wu Kwang*

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**Zen Master Bon Soeng:** Good morning everyone. Thank you for coming. The topic for our session is “How can we make our practice relevant to society?” When I was told that this was our topic, I laughed and I said, “How could our practice *not* be relevant to society?” Our teaching is very clear: understand our true self and help this world. Every moment, every choice we make creates the world we live in. So we’re always interacting with society, in our work, in our art, in our politics, in our conservation and ecology, always, everywhere.

So, to my left is Zen Master Wu Kwang. He is the guiding teacher at Chogye International Zen Center in New York. He’s been practicing meditation since 1967, he met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1975, and he received transmission in 1992. To my right is Seung Hwan Park. He has been practicing Buddhism for 30 years and is a member of the lay Buddhist group called Seeking the Path Association. The aim of this association is to seek the path of the bodhisattva. He is a principal research scientist in biotechnology. To the far left is Susi Childress. She is a bodhisattva teacher and her Buddhist name is Do Shim. She’s been a student in the Kwan Um School of Zen for 18 and a half years. She’s been married for 41 years, has a daughter and son and three grandchildren. She is now a retired special education teacher, having taught every grade but mostly in the high school. Finally, to my far right is Gary Sprague. Gary is a dharma teacher whose name is Poep Kwang and he lives in Oakland, California, and I’m fortunate that he practices at Empty Gate Zen Center in Berkeley, where I teach. He began practicing at the Brown Zen

Group and lived at the Cambridge Zen Center. For his work, he is a small-business consultant, focusing on business with a social or environmental mission.

Each of our panelists will speak for maybe five or six minutes, and hopefully we’ll have about half the time for questions. First, we’ll begin with Zen Master Wu Kwang.

**Zen Master Wu Kwang:** Good morning everyone. I work as a psychotherapist in New York City. And I have a client who likes to pay attention to the news. In fact, he likes to pay *a lot* of attention to the news. So besides reading the newspaper every day, he makes many searches on the computer during the day, because he is obsessed with the news. Herein lies his problem. Because, in paying that much attention to the current news, he finds himself quite hopeless, especially because he was a young person during the 1960s in the United States, when everything



*Photo: Jerry Botha*

seemed extremely hopeful. One day he told me how hopeless he was about everything, that the rich were getting richer, that the middle class was getting poorer, that global warming was happening, and so on and on, and that he was not hopeful at all. This man also has some experience with Buddhism and has practiced meditation at times, although not steadily. He had also heard Dae Soen Sa Nim speak a few times in New York. In response to his hopelessness, I shared this interchange that I had with Dae Soen Sa Nim quite a few years ago.

At that time, we had a Zen center located in Lexington, Kentucky. The guiding teacher there, Dae Gak, had bought some land about two hours from Lexington. The land was way up in the mountains in a poor, rural area where very simple people lived. Initially his plan had been to have a small retreat hut on this property, but when Zen Master Seung Sahn came to visit, they took him out to see this land. When Dae Soen Sa Nim saw the positioning of the mountains around where this particular property was, he said that the geomancy there was excellent and that Dae Gak should give him this land. He didn't mean that literally he should sign the deed of the property over to him, but that we should build a larger retreat center there where many people could come, because it was a power point spot.

At first they built one small building, which was called the tea house. It did not have an Asian appearance at all and did not look like a Buddhist temple. Then they started a second building, which supposedly was right in the center of where the power point was. This building did look like a traditional Asian temple building with a blue tile roof and the whole deal.

Around the same time that they were building this second building, up in Massachusetts there was a Japanese Nichiren temple where they only chanted the name of the Lotus Sutra for world peace. One night, some Vietnam vets, maybe suffering from some post-traumatic stress disorder or something, got quite drunk and went and burned that temple down. This made the newspapers in the northeast, so I saw it in New York. Shortly after that, I was up at Providence Zen Center and Dae Soen Sa Nim was there. I went to have a private meeting with him, because I had a concern about this place down in Kentucky.

I said, "Dae Soen Sa Nim, in that area of Kentucky, those people are very simple fundamentalist Christians. Maybe they will burn this building down." He looked at me and said, "Oh, burn down? No problem." He could see I was puzzled by his response, so he said, "They've been burning temples down in Korea for hundreds of years now. The Chinese came through; the Mongols came through; the Japanese came through several times. They burned down everything!" He said, "That's no problem; we just build them up again." When I finished telling this client of mine this story, he said, "I feel much better."

I've thought about that story many times over the years, and first of all, one teaching embedded in that is that we have to take a very broad view, a very big view. When he said to me, "They've been burning them down for hundreds of years; we just build them up again," I knew he understood something that I had no idea about. But embedded in that very broad, wide view is our teaching about patience and acceptance and activism.

#### Professor Seung Hwan

**Park:** I'm very happy to see you all here. I would like to thank all of you who come from far away to make this one flower possible. It is a pleasure to sit here as part of the single flower. I heard that I would be given 15 minutes yesterday so I wrote it down all night long. But the moderator just told me I only have five or six minutes, so I have to put it away.

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Photo: Jan Sendzimir

I received much guidance and help from Zen Master Dae Bong and Zen Master Dae Jin and other venerables in Mu Sang Sa Temple. But I cannot claim that I am a teacher; I am just one of the lay Buddhists. I felt very shy about accepting the invitation, but I decided to come so I can repay just a little bit of all I got from these Zen masters. I would like to share how I was introduced to Buddhism and how I was able to come all the way here.

My grandma always took me to the temple when she visited one of them; however, I actually studied and practiced Buddhism in earnest only after I started my graduate program. I got into the master's of science program at KRIBB (Korea Research Institute of Bioscience & Biotechnology). It is similar to MIT in the United States, and it's very difficult to get into. But I was not such a good student throughout college, so I had to work twice as hard as my friends to get into the master's program there. Be-

cause of that, I truly understand how students feel when they are under much pressure to perform well but can't really produce. So I have the know-how to actually produce results when under enormous pressure. So when I got into KRIBB, a lot of people offered me congratulations. Yesterday one of the panelists, one of our dharma friends working at Harvard University, said that once they got into Harvard they went through lots of inner conflict and questions. When I heard that, I felt like, "Well this is really my story."

So although others were offering congratulations, I started getting worried, wondering, "Am I confining myself to this narrow path of science and thus condemning myself to be a narrower person?" So I searched for the answer, and that's how I found this lay Buddhist group called Seeking the Path of Bodhisattva. That was in 1980, so that's over 30 years ago. I was indescribably joyful when I was first exposed to Buddhism, and I still continue with this lay group to this day. I cannot go into all the details about what we do, so let me change my direction a little bit and let me tell you a little bit about my area of study, bio-engineering.

As we all know, science established a complete genome map in 2003. It revealed lots of information about human beings. One thing we learned is that a human cell contains about 3 billion base pairs, the basic genetic information of humans. These contain about 3,000 genes. Would you raise your right hand please? You can put it down now. After studying what's going on in the human body, in the human cell, I realized this simple movement is actually a miracle. All of you just performed a miracle. So in each cell at every moment, these genes manifest themselves and do their function. And the 6 billion components of these base pairs have to function meticulously for you to be able to raise your hand—just that simple action. I cannot tell you all the story, all the drama, going on within our body and cells; however, your body itself is just comprised of numerous miracles. I would like to share this with as many people as possible, especially young people. Once you understand that having this body is a miracle, that this body is itself a miracle, you will never think light of yourself, and you will never think light of others.

While I'm studying my specific field, bioengineering, I

realized that Buddha was telling the truth. The Buddhist truth, that we all have Buddha nature. I would like to share that with the young people of Korea, if I'm given the opportunity.

**Susi Childress:** When I was asked to talk today, I was intimidated. I related to Zen Master Soeng Hyang's story: "Oh no, don't speak in front of the group." But oh, yes, great bodhisattva vow, so just do it.

When I taught in high school, I worked with special education students. These were students who were not good students, and I typically had a small group. I found that practicing Zen was invaluable when I was in a classroom and working with these students. I would like to tell you a story that is an example of this.

In particular, this story is about how to live your life sincerely, keeping precepts and using that to help others. We all know that teenagers will see right through any attempt to fool them into believing that you are sincere when you're not. I had this group of boys, about five or six boys, and I'd had them for five years, attempting to help improve their reading ability and to improve their English language.

We knew each other very well after four years. One student, Nick, had a relationship with me where we liked to tease each other. But I was about to take ten precepts and one of those precepts is, "I vow to abstain from putting others down and building myself up." I think, "I'm going to have a big problem with Nick." So, on the Friday before I went to the retreat, I told the kids, I'm going to take these precepts. I explained what it was, and as soon as I told them about the abstaining from putting others down precept, they immediately laughed. Nick was very happy. He thought that now he could keep teasing me, but I can't do anything back.

So I go to the retreat and I asked my guiding teacher, Zen Master Dae Kwang, what happens if I break my precept. You know Zen Master Seung Sahn always said, "Know when to keep them and when to break them." Maybe I should break it with Nick! Zen Master Dae Kwang, with very clear teaching said, "If you break your precept, how can you use it to help?"

I went back to school on Monday, and Nick says, "Did



Photo: Jan Sendzimir



you do it?” I said, “Yes, I did.” So, then it begins. He kept trying to get me to engage with him. Monday went OK, and Tuesday went OK. Then on Wednesday the students were all misbehaving, and Nick kept pushing my buttons and pushing my buttons. Pretty soon, I broke my precept, and I let him have it. There was dead silence in the room. “Oh! She broke her precept!” My response was, “Sorry, Nick.” I wasn’t really sorry.

I went home that night and sat in meditation and felt terrible. “I’m a terrible Zen student, I can’t even keep a precept for more than three days.” But then I remember what Dae Kwang Sunim said: “If you break it, how can you use it to help?” And then it became clear what I needed to do. I went back to school the next day and I said to the students, “I want to talk about what happened yesterday. When I broke my precept and then I said, ‘Sorry Nick,’ I didn’t really mean it. What I should have said to you, Nick, was, ‘Thank you for your teaching.’ Because you are very important in helping me learn to keep this precept, that means you are my teacher. In our Buddhist practice, we show respect to our teachers by bowing to them.” I dropped and gave him a full prostration bow and thanked him. Nick said, “I never thought I’d have a teacher bow to me before. I never thought I would be a teacher’s teacher.”

So if you break your precepts—and I guarantee most of you will break your precepts—I hope you will always remember Dae Kwang Sunim’s clear teaching: “How can you use it to help?”

**Gary Sprague:** Good morning everyone. It’s wonderful to be here with you. When I thought about the topic of this panel, two things came to mind. As laypeople, we generally spend most of our lives in two places: When we’re young, we spend most of our time in school. And

when we’re older, we spend most of our time working. So I think those are the two places where we can start making practice more relevant to society, and I thought I would just share a couple stories about how that’s happened to me in my life.

When I started university, I actually delayed starting for a year because I didn’t know why I was going and what I would do there. And even when I arrived a year later, I still didn’t know what I would do or really why I was there. But I had become interested in Buddhism and Zen, and I was reading lots of books about Zen. But all of these books said the same thing: “Just reading this book, just understanding this speech, won’t help your life.” They said, “You have to do it!” So I thought, “Where can I practice this? Where can I practice Zen? Where can I practice meditation?” And luckily for me, I went to Brown University. So I started going to the Brown Zen Group, and that’s how I began practicing. I really feel that if I didn’t have that practice through college, I wouldn’t have finished. And I made some very good friends through that group, some of my good friends started coming to that group, and all of us, to this day, still practice.

Another story I thought I would share about meditation and school is not my own experience, but it’s from a school in San Francisco, where I now live. In one of the worst schools in San Francisco, they started something called “quiet time.” At the beginning of the day, every single day, all of the students go to the auditorium and sit quietly for five minutes or ten minutes. This practice isn’t called Zen or even meditation. It’s just called, “Sit quietly, be with yourself, breathe in, breathe out, be aware.” After four years of this program, the school completely transformed. Suspensions—that is, when kids do something bad and they get sent home—fell by 98 percent. And 20 percent of the students are now getting into the best high school in San Francisco, where previously none went to the best high school. Maybe most important, this school reports the highest satisfaction of any school. That’s only five minutes in the morning, with really no teaching, and it completely changed the lives of these students. That’s the school part.

Then, for the working part, we all have to make money to support ourselves to live. As a practitioner, I know that my livelihood is not just about me. It affects the people around me, the world around me, my environment. I really enjoy busi-

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Photo: Jerry Botha

ness, the problem solving, the creativity, the organization of building a business. But if this business is just about making money, then I know that its direction is not clear. So I try to make an effort in my life to find businesses and entrepreneurs to work with who have clear, strong, social or environmental values to what they're doing. This is a whole movement that's growing in the world, which has many different names, but in the United States we often call it social enterprise. I think this kind of approach to work, and specifically business, is important because we all know that we have more and more people on the planet, fewer resources, climate change, public health—all very big problems we have to solve. So I try to find a way to bring together my personal passion, my personal interest, with helping this world and helping to solve some of these problems. Thank you very much for listening.

**Zen Master Bon Soeng:** Gary, you gave us a good jumping-off point. Our teaching says that suffering in the world comes from greed, anger and ignorance. All of us know the inequality, the violence, the consumerism and all of the larger social problems in the world, and I wondered if you on the panel could talk about how your practice helps you deal with those things. Zen Master Wu Kwang talked about hopelessness, and I think many of us meet this world's problems with hopelessness, so I wonder if any of you have some thoughts on how practice helps you deal with these larger social forces in the world.

**Gary:** What comes to mind for me is also something that Zen Master Wu Kwang said, which was that when we practice, we gain a wider view, and we try to keep as wide a view as possible. Things may seem hopeless now in this moment, but I try to return to that place of not knowing what will come, recognize how vast our world is in time and space and realize that I'm occupying this small part of it. So it can seem hopeless from my little vantage point, but I can also remember there is a much wider world and universe out there.

**Susi:** I have two things, both from Zen Master Dae Kwang, because there have been times when I felt hopeless. One time I asked him this very question and his response to me was, "I don't know how being depressed helps anyone." I know this isn't an answer for everyone, but for me it was helpful. It helped me to remember my bodhisattva vow. The other thing is, I was at a talk in Chicago where Dae Kwang Sunim was speaking with a Ko-

rean community. One of the ladies in the audience said that when she sees someone like Mother Teresa doing such wonderful things in India, she feels sad about herself because she doesn't go out and do such great works. Dae Kwang Sunim said to her, "Maybe what the world needs is more good mothers, and not so many Mother Teresas. It already has a Mother Teresa." So it helps me to remember to focus on taking care of what's right in front of me: Just now, what can I do?

**ZMWK:** I was once with Dae Soen Sa Nim, and I said to him, "I've been practicing for many years now, and have had some wonderful experiences through practice, but there still remains a deep sorrow and sadness in me." He said, "Sadness is OK. Sadness becomes great compassion. Happiness or joy becomes great love. These two are the bodhisattva way, *dae ja, dae bi*." Then he said one more thing to me: "But your sadness is not just your sadness. Your sadness is part of universal sorrow." I think when we see it in that perspective, then we get a wider view.

**Question:** I am working with Professor Park, and I am also practicing with him. In terms of Buddhist contributions to society in the 21st century, I would like to talk about the importance of the environment, the environmental bodhisattva. We are using too much energy just for our convenience. Also we are eating too much meat just out of greed. That is what is causing environmental problems these days. I think the answer is Buddhism, and the answer will be realized when we practice it. I study plants. Professor Park mentioned that a human has about 23,000 genes but plants such as rice have more than 38,000 genes. That means we have a lot to learn from nature. So nature and I are not two. That's Buddha's teaching, and it has the wisdom we need to solve 21st-century problems. So the UN for the past 20 years has had three



Photo: Jerry Botha



environmental conventions, which solve environmental problems such as biodiversity, climate change and desertification. But it's just words, words, words. Twenty years hasn't seen much progress. That means, as someone who has a solution, if the world gets worse, it's our responsibility, it's our fault. So we all need to be reborn as environmental bodhisattvas. I would like to hear your opinion about my suggestion. Thank you.

**Professor Park:** So, Dr. Kwak, we work at the same research center, and as colleagues, we talk a lot together. I'll just tell you the one thing that he's practicing. There are about a thousand researchers and staff working in our center. They all eat lunch at the same huge cafeteria, and anyone who has any leftovers will get scolded by Dr. Kwak. I am his really good friend, but he will not make any exceptions for me for the scolding, so now it has become my habit not to leave any food behind. I tell you this to emphasize the importance of doing it, practicing it. A lot of people, when they serve themselves food on their plate, they know it is more than they can consume. Still, they do it, and they produce a lot of leftovers. But it just doesn't stop at food. If we look at our 24-hour-life day, there are so many things we do that way. We call ourselves Buddhists, and this is one of the things, as Buddhists, we have to be aware of and practice. I would like to ask you to work together to apply Buddha's teaching to the saving of this planet. Thank you.

**Question:** Gary, you brought up an interesting example of quiet time, which is something that Transcendental Meditation does. They've taken their meditation practice and made it very accessible, so that it can be used in any type of school. I'm wondering with our practice, given this topic, how do we make it relevant for society. Is there insight into how can we make our practice work in the

schools or in the workplace or in the culture in a way that's more accessible? Jon Kabat-Zinn was a student of Dae Soen Sa Nim, and he left the school to go make this practice more accessible. A lot of people really love that, and then some people say, "It gets so watered down that the bone isn't there." So my question is how to take this teaching and this practice and bring it into the schools in a way that is accessible? Thank you.

**Susi:** At our high school, I started two meditation groups that met after school. I had one for students and one for teachers. I didn't think there was a need for two groups, but the teachers did. They said they couldn't relax with the students there. Because I was in a public school in the United States, I couldn't make it a Buddhist practice, so I just called it meditation. But I taught them all of our forms. No chanting, just meditation. But it was interesting because they would have questions, and as questions came up, it gave me an opportunity to give them some teachings without calling them Buddhist teachings. It was interesting to me which students would choose to show up for the practice. I got a lot of the high achieving students, the ones we've all talked about at this conference who're stressed out about going on to college. Then I got a lot of the low achieving students who had hyperactivity, attention disorders. It was a very interesting group. But what I saw was, each person was able to get from the practice what they needed. Including the teachers.

My classroom was across the hall from a girls' locker room, and after school it could be quite noisy in the hallway. My favorite story about the teachers' group is about one teacher who got up from meditation, opened the door and went out and yelled at the students to be quiet, "because we're trying to meditate!" Then she suggested we find a quieter place to meditate. I told her, "No, this is exactly where you need to be able to find a strong center." It's easy to feel calm in the mountains and in a beautiful place like this, but can you do that in a high school? That's my experience.

**ZMWK:** Coming back to your point one more time, I don't think it's important whether something gets watered down or not. If some kind of awareness or mindfulness or "be present" practice is helpful to people, then we should be able to do that. But some of us have the temperament to go out and be able to do that with larger groups, and some of us do not necessarily have that temperament or skill. So if that's your interest, I look forward to hearing what you're going to do.



Photo: Lubor Kosut

I wanted to say one thing connected to Dr. Kwak, the scientist. You said something like, “We’ve been having these conferences and talking for something like 20 years or more but nothing is really changing.” My experience as a psychotherapist is that, many times, after working with someone for a long period of time, they suddenly wake up to some point, something about themselves. But from the therapist’s point of view, I had been bringing that person toward that point many, many hundreds of times over many months or even years, before suddenly they said, “Oh I never thought of it that way. I never felt that before.” So I think social activism is also like that in many ways. Although I’ve never been a social activist at all, many of my heroes remain some of the great social activists: Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and others. If you study what they were able to do, certainly they had to keep coming back to the same thing over and over again for a long time, and they also trained people that were working with them, as Gandhi did, in being able to not flare up and lose themselves in anger prematurely but instead to learn how to keep their center and then use that energy of anger and indignation in skillful and constructive ways. So I think we need to all practice repeatedly to master, to whatever degree we can, that kind of pacing and centeredness.

I just want to say one more thing: I was born during World War II, and as a child I remember seeing on television—which was a new invention in my childhood—scenes of the Korean War. And then there was the Vietnam War, and then there was fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in between those, probably many other places. So in my lifetime I’ve never seen anything called world peace. And yet, aspiring to world peace is not a useless thing. Probably, it is the most useful thing.

**Question:** I’m from Mu Sang Sa Temple. I would like to ask a question related to Dr. Kwak’s comments, and also it’s related to Zen Master Wu Kwang. Professor Park mentioned that our body is made of miracles, but we use only a small fraction of our brain before we die. Historically, Korea is known as the country of morning calm. However, in modern times, we are overexposed to the so-called world news. They tell us a lot of stories where people who think their bodies are too important, so they don’t give a second thought to harming other people’s bodies. I was lucky enough to be exposed even to just a small amount of Buddhist teaching, and as I look at the



Photo: Barry Briggs

teachings of other religions, especially religions with God, I can see how important Buddhism is in modern society. It’s important to deliver this message to young people. So to make Buddhism more relevant to society, one of the most important things we can do is to make this teaching available to young people, and I wonder what we can do as a school to achieve that goal.

**Professor Park:** Thank you for your great question. I think if we have all the time we need, that really this deserves a very long discussion. So let me just offer you my opinion, briefly. I think one of the best things we can do for young people is to give them hope. I just told you that our bodies perform miracles, and I said that I want to share this with young people, because I believe it’s one of the ways that we can give hope to young people. One of the reasons I found Buddhism attractive is because

its goal is to lead everyone, with no exception, to be the winner. If they understand this, they are less likely to fall victim to disappointment, or they may feel less stressed because of the competition. There may be more specific, detailed proposals, but let me mention just one. The sad thing is that people don’t come to us to learn this wonderful teaching. So maybe we can lure them by giving them what they want first. For instance, if we say we’ll teach you how to be the top of the class, then they will come. I think it’s important for

them to come to us, and once we have their foot in the door, then we step up our teaching and teach them what’s really important. I think we are almost out of time here, but I hope that we can meet together after this, one on one, and continue this discussion.

**ZMBS:** So it’s time now that we must finish. First I’d like to thank the panel very much for your wonderful contributions. I’d like to thank you, the audience, for your participation. And I’d like to tell a very short story from Zen Master Seung Sahn.

One day at a ceremony at the Providence Zen Center, he came out and he told us this story. One of his students said to him, “Zen Master, when you die, I will follow you.” And Dae Soen Sa Nim replied, “Oh, no. You don’t want to follow me. Because when I die, I dive straight into hell. Because that’s where they need a Zen center the most.” So everything we talked about today is to that point. Thank you all very much. ♦