

# When World Sound Equals Police Shooting Black Men

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## A Big Question

There is a teaching in the Kwan Um School of Zen in which I am a dharma teacher: We practice so that our minds become clear. Without our thoughts and judgments to muddy our minds, we can see clearly where the world needs our help and how to help it. Once your mind becomes clear, you become one with your situation and react with spontaneous compassion. So we say: When a hungry man comes, you can just give him food. When a thirsty woman comes, you can just give her something to drink.

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This is a very simple and wonderful teaching, one that I like because it reminds me that my spiritual practice is not just for me but also for everyone else. But still, I have some very big questions about my relationship with the world. Even if I understand about feeding hungry people when they appear, what do I do when other, more complicated world problems appear?

For example, what do I do when I see so many videos on the news of black person after black person being shot and beaten by white police officers? What do I do when I am reminded further that people of color are getting the shortest end of the stick, not just when it comes to police violence but in every area from education to employment to home ownership? What do I do when I see that the more layers I peel back, the more complex the issues of racism are? What on Earth, as a white practitioner of Zen, am I supposed to do, then, when it is nowhere near as simple as giving food to a nearby hungry man or water to a nearby thirsty woman? What do I do when the problem seems so big and totally beyond my control?

### ***Kwan Se Um Means “Perceive World Sound”***

Kwan Um, the name of our school, means “perceive sound.” Zen Master Seung Sahn, our founder, said that “perceiving world sound means perceiving that many, many people are suffering.” The Zen master insisted that the bone of our school’s teaching is not just attaining Buddha’s truth but attaining the correct function of that truth. Or to put it another way, not

just knowing what Buddha knew but doing what he did—helping people. After all, when you live in the world, what is the actual point of enlightenment besides helping others?

Zen Master Seung Sahn said, “Only attaining truth is ‘monk Buddhism.’ Keep your hair cut and go to the mountains, practice your whole life. Correct function is not necessary because you have no wife, no children and no connection to society.” He also said: “Lay practice [practicing in the world] is not like a monk’s job—it is how to help other people. First your family, then your friends, then your country and all beings: helping them is your obligation.”

For my part, if I am honest, then I must admit that sometimes, when I am practicing meditation, helping the world is not my first idea. Sometimes I want peace—“nirvana.” I want something for myself. Thinking appears that tells me “maybe my practice will help me feel less upset about the world.” Or “maybe I will learn to accept things I have no control over.” Sometimes, I even want escape from the confusion that comes with not knowing what to do in the face of big world problems like systemic racism. But these thoughts are part of the Zen sickness we sometimes call attachment to emptiness or attachment to peace. Attachment to peace is still a kind of clinging that prevents me from functioning correctly in the world—how can I help?

The great news is that *How can I help?*—our bodhisattva vow—is not something that we impose on ourselves. It is not a promise that we make on the outside of ourselves about how we will be on the inside. Because the vow is already at the core of ourselves. Our practice is just to liberate the vow. Clinging to peace is what is on the outside. Attachment to stillness is the actual imposition—because it is the desire for something that does not exist. The bodhisattva vow—to function in relation to things as they actually are—is our true nature. It is the sunlight that is revealed when the clouds of I-my-me desires for peace and heaven finally part.

It is this light that helps me understand that my confusion in the face of big societal problems is itself truth. My confusion and despair do not need to be pushed away. In fact, they cannot be pushed away. A better practice is to embrace truth. Embrace things as they are. Embrace confusion. Then the question becomes: What is my relationship to that truth? What can I do with my confusion?

### Helping Is Both Possible and Necessary

Zen Master Seung Sahn wrote, “If you can hear the sound of suffering then helping is both possible and necessary.” This teaching is very helpful to me. It gives me faith in my confusion. It tells me that the fact that I feel confused about what I can do about the systemic racism I witness means that somehow I can help with it. Not knowing what to do is itself the seed that will eventually grow—if I nourish it—into knowing what to do.

Once, in relation to another problem, I asked one of our school’s very senior teachers, “What do I do about being confused?”

He said, “Get unconfused.”

So in my confusion about the racism I have been witnessing, one of my first steps is to get unconfused. I have begun by asking questions, having conversations. Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, “When a primary cause meets a condition, you get a result. If you want to change the result, you must change the primary cause.”

So what is the primary cause that results in people of color getting shot by police, put in jail far too often and not having the same access to opportunities that white people like me are more likely to have? I have heard many people say that the problem, when it comes to police violence against people of color, is individual racist police officers. Certain bad eggs in our society. But instead of using such a simple idea to help me escape from confusion, what happens if I keep not knowing? Keep asking why?

Eventually, what I have begun to learn from people who know much more than I do is that the problems—from police violence to unequal access to opportunity—are caused not just by bad people but by a bad “system.” The problems are not caused just by prejudiced people but by a “system” that is itself racist. There are many reasons for the racism of our “system” of federal, state and local governments, religious organizations, corporations and other institutions. Part of it is the inheritance of history. Part of it is because societal “systems” tend to automatically favor the largest groups. Part of it is because many prejudiced people have power in the systems.

So how can I assist in changing these primary causes? Where in this complicated system, metaphorically speaking, is the hungry man or the thirsty woman that appears before me whom I can help? I have learned that I have some influence in the “mainstream,” through my membership in the institutions that add together to make up the system. Each of us can reduce some of the primary causes of systemic racism to work toward a different result by using what influence we have.

Here are some examples. They are not the only methods but they are some that I have used:

- **We can join anti-racist organizations where we can help and learn:** I have found that the fastest way to get involved with issues I care about is to join in with others who are already working on them. That way I can learn and channel my efforts effectively.
- **We can each lovingly explain to people how systemic racism works and how we need to work to change the system.** In my case, right now I am using my small amount of influence by writing this article.
- **We can each learn to tolerate and promote the tolerance of difference.** For example, I recently read about a company where black workers tended to sit around and chat before getting to work. White workers got straight to the task and thought the black workers were lazy. Black workers thought the white workers were cold. But it turned out that the black socializing reduced worktime conflict and therefore increased productivity. Blacks and whites got the same amount of work done.
- **We can support institutions run by people of color.** Rather than just making white organizations more inclusive, each of us can support non-white owned and run organizations with our money and memberships.
- **We can remember to hire and encourage our employers to hire outside our personal networks.** When we only hire friends and social connections, we end up denying employment opportunities to people who are not like us, as well as losing the opportunity to acquire their new skills and talents.

Is this everything we can do? Will this fix everything? Will it even fix anything? Maybe yes. Maybe no. Who knows? Be willing to stay confused. If you make a mistake or you are not as effective as you would like to be in your first attempt, then you can fix it in your next. Our practice is not to constantly check the potential results of our actions—that can paralyze us—but to keep strongly to

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