

# 'It Should Be Disturbing'

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Excerpted from a workshop at the Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference

**Zen Master Soeng Hyang:** It's great that so many people came for the kong-an discussion. For me, kong-ans are the root of our practice. Kong-ans are like receiving a gift. There's the package: it's beautifully wrapped, there's a ribbon, wrapping paper, a beautiful box, and when you open the box there's tissue paper. But what you really want is the gift inside, which is our true self. The very heart of the gift is to ask "What is this? What am I?" until it's totally unfiltered, totally present and intimate. Zen Master Seung Sahn has done an excellent job of making it palatable—making it possible for us to learn how to practice with the kong-an.

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The first time I had an interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn, I was very frightened. I had read all these books about Zen, mostly from the Japanese tradition. In 1972 that was all that was available, mostly translations from Japanese or Chinese. The masters were very severe. They were hitting people with staffs and shouting, "KATZ!" I was very afraid he was going to do that, too. But what he did was teach about hit [*hits floor*]. He just kept saying, "What is Buddha?" [*hits floor*] Boom. "What is dharma?" [*hits floor*] Boom. After drilling that into my head for about five minutes he asked me, "What is Buddha?" I tried a timid little tap on the floor [*hits floor softly*]. I was so afraid, but he said, "Wonderful!" If I were to look at it from the outside I'd say, Oh God, he's just trying to prop her up and make her feel good—but it worked. I felt as if I got something. I felt a little bit of that hit. Something was communicated with that hit. That was important.

**Zen Master Bon Yeon:** One of the things that I always appreciate about kong-an practice is the great relief it is to at last meet somebody in your life who asks you, "Who are you?" You're stuck and you don't know, but you're happy. I think other people feel this relief too.

I recall one funny example of seeing this relief in a video clip of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching in Europe. In the film he's giving a first or possibly second interview to several people at once, all from different countries. With his Zen stick in hand he pokes them each in the belly, asking them one by one, "When you

die, where do you go?" Of course nobody could answer. There's a tension in the room which is visible on the faces of these Zen students. After none of them can answer, he says to the group, "OK. You ask me." They look puzzled, like, "You're gonna *tell* us?" Then they all look at him and ask together, "When you die, where do you go?" With those bright eyes of his, he says, "To the cemetery!" You can hear the laughter and see this relief come over their faces as if to say, "Oh my God! Is that all?" In that moment they realized they don't have to try and figure it out, and they could just be with "don't know." If you keep it really simple and in this moment then the questions we have about life and death are quite approachable. You allow yourself to just see, or hear, or smell. Then it's very wonderful and for that moment the question and the



answer dissolve in the act of you just doing something 100 percent. When you give up the feeling that you have to be right or you have to have the answer, then it's fun and great to have the "gift of the question itself," as Zen Master Soeng Hyang just called it. That's the thing—it's not about finding the answer to some question such as "When you die, where do you go?" or "Who are you?" It's the question itself that is the gift.

**Student:** I've had the experience of having the answer appear; that is very satisfying.

I understand the idea of keeping in your mind the question without thinking, but it still makes me angry and frustrated that I have this question that I'm working on.

**ZMSH:** When I was working on the kong-an about hanging from a branch by your teeth, I was working in a nursing home. I was in charge of a unit housed in an area that had really long hallways. I had to walk for a minute and a half just to bring medication to a patient. I was walking down this corridor one morning after I had had an interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn. It was the same thing you express: part of my mind was wrestling with the kong-an. Suddenly, I was just stuck with the kong-an and it really was a great experience, because I thought, "That's don't-know!" I was just right there with not having the answer. Then I woke up to the hallway. I was just walking down the hallway. I thought of the patient's name, what he needed and what I was going to do. And that was the kong-an. This is now. Asking that kong-an opened me up to now: How are you? What do you need? How may I help you? And whatever I had to do in the room. The kong-an brings us to that question.

**ZMBY:** One of the things about kong-ans is how you take that hit that Zen Master Soeng Hyang was talking about as the substance of your original question—"What is this?"—and then find out how it works with each situation and relationship. How does it function? A dog has its specific situation, relationship and function that is quite different from a cat's. Interviews allow us to take our experience and try out how our spontaneous true self functions in certain situations. What if I was in that monastery with Nam Cheon on that day? What would my true self do? Could I save the cat? For me, this is the great breadth of Zen Master Seung Sahn's particular style of doing kong-ans, exposing us to all these different scenarios. Like Zen Master Soeng Hyang said, maybe this one is easy for me, but that one I don't know what to do with. Just as in life, that's how we learn: through all these different stories, through trial and error, how to use this point [*hits floor*] in our everyday life.

**ZMSH:** To me, interview-room training is very valuable because you are vulnerable. The teacher has the stick and the bell and the title and the experience behind them and then you walk in and you usually have less experience. It's a setup. But you can rise to the occasion. You

just face it. And you just might face it with [*hits floor*] don't-know and that's totally valid and totally perfect just to do that. Keep the eye contact. Keep your chest open. "I haven't answered that one; don't-know; it's just not clear to me yet." Don't know. I love it when students do that.

I'm talking about courage to stay open. In order to have courage, you have to have faith. You have to have faith that it's not a bunch of teachers trying to look good and carry their title around and get their honorarium and then go back to the plane and go home. If you feel with a teacher that there isn't some authentic vow to teach clearly, then you should hit the teacher with that. You have to try to find that courage to say, "I don't trust you," if that's how you feel. If the teacher is worth their weight as a teacher, they will be able to meet you in that place with honesty and integrity, and not overpower you, because that's not what it's about.

**Student:** There are two types of mind sets: there's one that is rational-centered and there's one that is intuitive. I'm not into solving things intuitively.

**ZMSH:** All I can say to you is just try to be kind. That's the biggest kong-an. How can I be kind in this moment? That's correct relationship, function and situation. That's what all these kong-ans are trying to point to. All of them.

**Student:** I'm screwed again because I'm not a very kind, compassionate person. It's really difficult because I

**ZMSH:** Don't make I, only do I.

**Student:** I would love to be able to solve some of these . . .

**ZMSH:** So, just do. Don't be you—just exist—don't make you. "I am not": that's what we call checking. "I am not this. I am not that." Don't check! When you get up, put on your underpants and brush your teeth—only that—don't check.

**Student:** I struggle a lot with kong-an practice too. It disturbs me.

**ZMSH:** I know. It should be disturbing. I was in Korea once with my three-year-old daughter, my only child. We were at Hwa Gye Sa Temple, the main temple. At that time, if a bus or a car pulled up, they would pass between the outhouse and the main temple gate. We had been at the outhouse and were going to cross over to the main gate. So I crossed ahead of her. All of a sudden this bus is barreling up this driveway at about thirty miles an hour. I just wasn't expecting it. She hesitated, right in front of the bus. She looked at me and she looked at the bus. I said, "Come on!" but she hesitated.

I had already answered Nam Cheon's cat, this great-compassion, great-love kong-an. I had already answered it, but for a second I too hesitated, instead of running in front of the bus and grabbing her. I completely owned it. But I thought, "You shit! You did not pass that kong-an. It's your own kid and you're not going to even try to get her out of danger, let alone get a cat out of danger." I did get her, but I checked for a second. That was a beauti-

ful experience for me because I felt like such a hypocrite. Especially between a mother and a child, I'm supposed to be the epitome of compassion. That wasn't good or bad—it just made me think: you didn't pass that kong-an yet, honey. But don't check; just wake up to the fact that this is deeper than you thought it was—a lot deeper.

**ZMBY:** We don't come up with hitting the floor ourselves. Somebody tells you to hit the floor, so you do it. Then they say, "Wonderful!" Then you think, "Oh good, that's done." But you could spend your entire life on just this point alone! Zen Master Guji used just one finger his whole life and never exhausted it. The kong-ans are opportunities, one after another, to pass something on, to realize it, to communicate it, or to perceive one thing over and over from different points of view. For example, "The sky is blue." That's a famous Zen sentence. You could spend twenty, thirty, forty years, ten thousand years practicing with that and it would always be fresh and new. Over time, it becomes more and more your own. When you see the moon in the sky, its light reflects exactly the same way in a million rivers all over the universe. It doesn't change, and nobody owns it. We're like those rivers: the clearer we become, then that reflection is going to look the same in you as it does in me as it does in the next person, because that's the way the truth is. So I think of it like an opportunity to keep learning or experiencing that kong-an in my life, over and over.

As women, it's important to remember the strong lineage of women who practiced before us. Unfortunately, we just don't hear about them. For thousands of years we've been there beside the men practicing. Because history didn't record it, we don't have a lot of female role models. There might be a couple of teahouse owners on the side of the road somewhere, but we don't even know their names. Young women who want to practice see that all the major spiritual role models are male. The Pope is a man, God is a man, two of the three parts of the Trinity are men. Buddha is a man. Most traditions are like that. One of the things that I appreciate about the "combat" side of dharma combat is the way it teaches us to trust our experience. A great example of that is to go in for an interview with someone who, in our case, is very male and very strong, like Zen Master Seung Sahn. He asks you a simple thing like, "What's your name?" But he has such a strength and clarity that you're stunned—you can't even answer! Then he teaches you, "Your name is Jane." Ha Ha! Oh Jane, yeah, good. The next day you come in and he says "What's your name?" and you proudly say "Jane!" and he says "No good!" Then what happens? You fall down. You think, "Oh, something's changed, today

is different. I must be off the track again." Then he pokes you and says, "You were right! I'm just seeing how much you believe in yourself!" Can you imagine—Buddha gets up from six years under the bodhi tree and somebody asks him a question and he says, "The sky is blue," and they say "No good!" Will Buddha stumble and say, "Oh, was that not a good answer?" No! Why? Because he believes his eyes, he can trust his experience. Both women and men in today's complex world have been so beaten down by all the thinking and all the different choices we have that we fall down very easily. Zen Master Soeng Hyang, who is a woman, was one of the first teachers to teach me that I, too, can be strong. I, too, can believe in myself. I can see that blue sky. I know my name, it's Jane. Twenty years later I can really say that. If somebody says to me, "No, it isn't," I'm not going to fall down. Very basic stuff, not about winning or



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losing, and not about fighting—it's about trusting in yourself. As women, this kind of teaching has been lacking in our society. If you want to be a great bodhisattva you have to have a big toolbox. You can't just always use a feather duster, and you can't always use a hammer; sometimes you need a screwdriver. You need different types of things for different situations. As women, why lock ourselves out of the ability to be strong?

**ZMSH:** Kong-an practice gives you the ability to see what you don't have in your toolbox in a positive way. It's good to get stuck! Because you can become complacent. "Oh, we're cool." If you've got somebody to pull the rug out from underneath you once in a while, that's good.

**ZMBY:** To utilize skillful means, you need to be able to be anything. A dragon, a demon, an angel, a bodhisattva, whatever. You learn, slowly, clumsily, through trial and error, all those skills, for others. It's not about ourselves. ♦