

bowl? Like this bowl, the one who lies without feeling ashamed is just spiritually empty, without any moral ground.”

Then Buddha flipped the bowl upside down and said to Rahula, “Do you see this bowl now? In the same manner the one who lies flips his spiritual achievement upside down cannot grow.”

It is said that in training toward enlightenment one can break any vow except that of telling the truth.

The vow of correct speech (telling the truth) is simply about relying on what is real, not delusional, about relying on the truth gained by wisdom and not about fantasies that emerge from desires.

### ***Refraining from harmful talk***

Harmful talk is one of the most serious moral misbehaviors and it creates damaging karma, so it is extremely important to refrain from unkind, rude and sarcastic talk.

The opposite of harmful talk is speech that comes from a caring and compassionate mind. It elevates the spirit of connection and oneness. We ought to pay attention to how we speak and communicate with more patience for the weaknesses of others, keeping in mind our own imperfections and respecting different opinions and views.

### ***Refraining from gossip***

Gossip has the power to destroy relationships. It has the power to tear a community apart. Speaking idly may not cause harm. However, the habit of being thoughtless about speech can lead to indulging in gossip.

There is a story from Buddha’s time about this. It is in one of the oldest sutras, the Hemavata Sutra. In it, the deceitful minister Vassakara goes to the Vajji kingdom at the direction of King Ajatasattu, who wanted to overthrow the kingdom. There, Vassakara befriends the ruling Licchavi princes, whose strength was their harmony. After gaining their trust, he slowly broke their bonds of friendship. He did this by whispering harmless phrases into their ears, for example, “Have you taken your meal? What curry did you eat?”

When other princes saw this, they would ask what Vassakara whispered. Each prince told the truth about what Vassakara said. However, none of the other princes would believe it because it had no real meaning. Why would Vassakara whisper that? Each thought the others were lying. Eventually, they began to speak ill of each other and then to mistrust each other. When the harmony was broken, Ajatasattu was able to conquer the kingdom.

Our practice leads us to speak what is appropriate and beneficial. This natural harmony arises from sincere practice. Then it’s possible to perceive our own mind and then see others’ minds. Strong practice supports clear vision and guides clear speech.



## **Right Action**

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### ***Can you take a day off from correct action?***

Ultimately, a Zen practitioner cannot take a day off, a minute off or even a second off from right action, but practically, if she were to take a day off, then her job would be to perceive this and return to the correct moment, which means being present 100 percent and facing in the right direction.

What is correct action? Correct action is about being in the moment correctly. It’s about keeping a correct situation, a correct relationship and a correct function. It is not an easy task to do this 24/7. Usually, the human mind goes somewhere. We are often not aware of this, and by starting meditation we become able to see our mind and how it works. It is hard and intensive work to bring the mind to the present moment again and again.

### ***Inside work and outside work***

Zen Master Seung Sahn used to talk about inside work and outside work. Inside work or action means keeping a clear mind and being present; outside work means helping others. That was his style. By connecting inside and outside a human can become one. Zen Master Seung



*Photo: Nick Gershberg*

Sahn usually expressed that as a big “Boom!” or “Aha!”

Correct action is relatively easy in the Zen center during a retreat. We know the schedule and we learn the routine quickly. At 5 a.m. we do bowing, then chanting, then meditation, then breakfast, work and so on until late evening. Then we go to sleep, and every day is the same. It is so easy that the only work is to follow the schedule, no matter what. The Zen practitioner has the support of people—Zen center staff and the other retreatants—who help her to follow the schedule and the rules correctly.

Can we do the same in our daily life? I am sure we can. Does that mean that we can organize our whole life the same way as we do during YMJJ? I think, again—yes, we can make a “YMJJ life.” It comes slowly but is followed by an increase in discipline, and we can be clear from moment to moment in all our relationships and situations.

### *Don't make anything*

Making something and following that kind of idea only causes trouble for us. We have an example in the Sixth Patriarch, who was almost killed by a monk-general who wanted power and who desired to be a Zen patriarch. In response to the threat to his life, the Sixth Patriarch said to the jealous general who was following him, “Don't make good and bad.” His teaching helped this man to wake up. The Sixth Patriarch also used a kind of magic just before his main teaching, so the man could let go of his feelings of envy, one of the strongest human hindrances. It was very special. Sometimes doing special things is necessary not only to preserve our lives but also to help people let go of troubling and extremely strong feelings and desires so that they can become clear, open, nonjudgmental and free as a human being.

What was the Sixth Patriarch's special magic? When the monk-general had almost caught up to him, the Sixth Patriarch put the robe and bowl (symbols of transmission) on a rock and hid behind a tree. Then he said, “This robe is nothing but a symbol. What is the use of taking it by force?” When the monk-general tried to pick up the bowl, he could not move it and broke out in a sweat, then finally humbly asked for the teaching.

Where was the magic? In his words? In the bowl? In the rock? In the monk-general's mind? How did it work?

How did the Sixth Patriarch know what to do and what to say? Correct action means not making anything, just doing, or *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*. What does that actually mean? It means being in the moment completely, 100 percent, and recognizing our correct job, our correct relationship to the situation. Sometimes it means taking quick action, sometimes words, sometimes silence. Some people call it being completely one within, and others call it enlightenment.

### *Appears by itself*

This is actually a very natural way of being and it appears by itself. This is sometimes vividly present in extreme or

traumatic situations. The person is not thinking but is just doing. Someone is about to fall under a train. You instinctively reach out to catch him. Afterward, though you may be surprised by how it happened, you may say to yourself, “It was just what I had to do—nothing special.” When the question of fear or strength appears, the helper says, “I am really not sure how that happened; it was just obvious; it just came out.” This is what all humans have had from the beginning of time. It comes from the core of our humanity, from deep compassion and a strong will to help without even caring about life in that very moment. But in our daily lives, we don't have to wait for a train. Just helping someone when they fall is already the functioning of our original mind.

### *It's just natural, so why is it difficult?*

So why, if this is so natural, do humans struggle to access that part, that bit of the self that knows what and where and how to do it? Some humans struggle more, some less, but the point is that someone is deeply satisfied and happy if he or she can act from this compassionate and wise part. It makes humans deeply satisfied because it gives a sense of being, a sense of life and a sense of death. A human is able to just do it.

A deep and sincere willingness to access this is the first step to doing so. People want to be fully human, and whatever they say or do, they all have this human question: What am I doing here in this world?

Correct action can be many different things, because circumstances are different. It is often obscured by different internal limitations and hindrances, desires or habits, or what is referred to in psychology as the external locus of evaluation, such as family, tradition, culture, religion or political groups. These can prevent us from seeing our circumstances clearly. People become confused if they are not able to develop an internal locus of evaluation, which sometimes means leaving tradition, family, country and religion and leaving very old patterns of life, letting go of desires and overcoming karma. After that, correct action based on great courage appears, even if the person sometimes risks his or her reputation, promotion, relationships, money, position or even life. It is stronger and more powerful than worldly things and values.

Sometimes, correct action means not being understood or being rejected or even killed. This is extreme, but we have many Zen stories confirming how the teacher's internal self was leading their action, even if it shocked society and was not understood. Their reasons became clear only in light of further events, and then everyone could understand why they acted as they did.

There is the example of a greedy monk, who charged large amounts of money for ceremonies but then saved the money and used it to buy medicine during a plague. Another monk took care of a young child after he was falsely accused of being in an illegal intimate relationship

with a young woman, who actually had the child with another man, out of wedlock. When accused, he merely said, “Is that so?” and took the baby. People scorned him. Later, when she finally admitted what had happened, he returned the child to her, saying only, “Is that so?” Then people praised him. But he was attached to neither praise nor scorn and only did what was right for the child.

This is not saying anything new, but when we look at it, it is amazing how it works. The kong-ans we work with come from such a way of being correctly in the moment and from not checking or judging either oneself or others. This is powerful and infinite and always accessible if someone knows how to operate this energy once he or she starts practicing.

### ***Right precepts path***

In the *Compass of Zen*, in the chapter on the Eightfold Path, Zen Master Seung Sahn says, “The Buddha had very clear teachings for how we could help this world with right action. This is sometimes called path of precepts.” He then goes on to say that whenever one is thinking, one makes karma—cause and effect—and we create a mental habit for that action: “Right action means always being aware of how our actions affect other beings, because that also affects our mind. This is why Right Action is sometimes translated as ‘right karma.’”

Sometimes, people manipulate precepts for their own purposes, telling others that they should use them but

not following them themselves. This is particularly true if someone has strong ambitions or desire for power or money, or is full of jealousy. This is especially dangerous in those who claim to be spiritual leaders. Because of their charisma, their followers may not experience this as abuse of power. Both leader and follower become blind. Even if there is a nagging internal sense that something is not right, they lose the ability to listen to it. When the truth eventually emerges, much damage has already been done. An extreme example is the Manson family. Another is the Jonestown community, where the spiritual teacher led many of his students to commit suicide the 1970s.

This kind of pride and self-deception operate in our own lives also, and we too become blind. Mouthing the precepts is easy. Following the precepts demands more.

### ***Difficult and simple***

Right action sometimes means undertaking a path that appears risky and difficult in order to follow the guidance of our own true nature. Surprisingly, this can create the shortest and simplest way. Zen Master Seung Sahn liked to tell a story about a clever dog called Clear Mary. She was a greyhound who ran in competitions to catch an electric rabbit going around a track. She suddenly understood that going around in circles chasing after a fake rabbit as the other dogs were doing was not the way to win. She stopped, looked around and then ran across the center of the track to catch the rabbit. She made her own brilliant shortcut and won.

Right action flows from not being attached to thinking and not being attached to habitual action. It means just perceive this moment, then only do it. That is possible for all, just as it was possible for Clear Mary.

### ***Correct action and kong-ans: learning to trust the true self***

Correct action means being in touch with our true self, acting from the true self. We refer to it as acting from primary point or before thinking.

Studying and practicing with kong-ans, I have found, is one of the most amazing techniques to learn how to act from our true self. We can discover correct action again and again and build trust in our true self. Doing this work, we find that we can bring a case into daily life to digest, and then finally to connect it with our own life. Life itself becomes our kong-an space, and we realize kong-ans aren't just puzzles or things we do merely routinely. One slowly develops an internal leader, a teacher in every moment of one's life.

As the true self becomes familiar with its own qualities, it finds the ability to pilot one's life. The true self then remains in a leading role by discovering how to keep don't-know—that is, a before-thinking mind. The individual becomes ready to respond to situations with open eyes and ears, from the very simple to the very complex, to complicated and challenging circumstances. As our life becomes our teacher, right action emerges by itself.



*Photo: Nick Gershberg*