

Where Is Its Master Now?

Excerpt from a Baekjung (Ulambhara) Kido Ceremony at Musangsa Temple, August 2015*
Zen Master Dae Bong

Most of you know the famous story of the seven sisters from India. They were seven sisters who practiced very seriously. One day, they all went to a funeral. On the way home after the funeral, they passed by a cemetery. In Korea, when someone dies, we bury the body in the ground or we burn the body. They also do that in India. Sometimes they even throw the body into the river for fish to devour, but sometimes they just leave the body on the ground in the cemetery. That time, the seven sisters passed by a cemetery and saw a skeleton on the ground. One of the sisters pointed to the skeleton and said, "Where is its master now?" The youngest sister tapped on the skeleton and said, "What is it? What is it?" In English we also say, "Just this. Just this." The sisters heard that, and all seven simultaneously got enlightened. At that time, a great light appeared and up in heaven, the Heavenly King saw this great light coming up from the earth. He was very curious, "Where is this light coming from? What's causing this light?" He went down to earth and found the light was coming from the seven sisters' minds as they simultaneously attained enlightenment. The Heavenly King bowed

to the sisters three times and said, "I'm the chief god in heaven and I have great powers, and in honor of your enlightenment I would like to offer you anything you want. I have the power of granting anything you want. What do you want?" One of the sisters said, "We want three things: We want the valley without echo. We want the tree that has no roots. And we want the ground with neither dark nor light." The god of heaven was completely stumped. He had no idea where they were. So the sisters said, "Only go straight don't know."

Can you find the valley without echo, the tree that has no roots, and the ground that has no dark nor light? A great master taught us that if we find these three things, we realize there is no life and death, and it's just our attachment to things that makes us think there is coming and going. Speech is not enough. Even understanding this point cannot save us from suffering. If we go to a restaurant and read the menu and leave, we are still hungry. In the same way, even if we understand the truth of no life and no death from Buddha's teaching, it still won't take away our suffering mind. It means if you're hungry, you have to eat. Then your stomach is comfortable and full. If you have concerns about life and death, then you must do some kind of practice. Then your mind will be free and full, and not frightened by suffering from this changing body or the coming and going that we see in the world. Practicing is not only sitting meditation. We always say, "Only keep don't know, don't make I." When you're doing something, just do it. If we keep this mind in every situation, then when we're chanting for our family members and they hear the sound of our chanting, they will go to nirvana.

It was the summer of 2001, and very, very hot in Korea. There was a drought that summer. The whole village below us lost their water supply. I remember the army brought in water for the rice fields. The pond in front of Musangsa went dry. At that time, we didn't have this lovely road coming up to the temple. We just had one broken dirt road. Some places had some concrete, some places only dirt. One day, I was walking down the road after lunch. It was so hot that most people didn't go out, but I enjoyed the heat and took a walk. That time, the

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Photo: Sven Mahr

road was very dry, very hot, even the pavement, even the dirt. When I got quite far down the road near the railroad tracks, I saw one dead frog on the road. It was a big frog, and it looked like a few cars had run over it so it was very flat, and from the sun it was baked, toasted like a slice of bread from the toaster. Then, like in this story of seven sisters, I looked at it and thought to myself, “Where is its master now?” Suddenly I felt myself, my body and this whole universe filled with so much energy. “Just that, Just that!” Nothing came or went; nothing went away at all. Its master didn’t go anywhere. Just toasted flat frog. I felt so happy, beyond the usual. Just happy, completely happy.

I hope one day when we look at our sick body, “Oh! Just that, just that! That’s all!” Isn’t that important? Isn’t that worth spending some time considering? Maybe our loved ones who passed away have already attained that. Maybe when we are chanting and they hear the sound of our voices, they’ll come and help us. Or maybe they are suffering and lost too, and when they hear the sound of our voices, we will be helping them. Never separate!

A poem says,

The blue mountain of many ridges is the Buddha’s home
The vast ocean of many waves is the palace of stillness
Be with all things, always without hindrance
Few can see the crane’s red head atop the pine tree
Vowing openly with all beings, together entering
Amita Buddha’s ocean of great vows
Continuing forever to save all sentient beings, you
and I simultaneously attain the way of Buddha
Namu Amitabul
Namu Amitabul
Namu Amitabul

*The *Baekjung* (or *Ulamhara* in Sanskrit) kido ceremony is a traditional 49-day Jijang Bosal kido for the dead offered in Korean temples every year during the summer Kyol Che period. Many Buddhists offer this kido for ancestors and loved ones and is considered one of the most important chanting offerings in Korea.

Sitting Zen: Questions and Answers with Zen Master Dae Kwan

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Learn to Relax

A group of social psychology professors from different universities in China visited Zen Master Dae Kwan. They asked many questions about practice.

Professor: I joined a retreat in China, and they taught me to meditate by counting my breath from 1 to 10. I followed the instruction and put all my strength into counting each breath from 1 to 10 without any thinking for half an hour. At the end of the retreat, I got a headache and a hemorrhoid. Now I am afraid to sit again. What shall I do?

Sifu: Have you ever sat down to watch a movie and half an hour later you get a headache and a hemorrhoid?

Professor: Never, Zen Master.

Sifu: Same as that. If you watch your breath like watching a movie, then you will solve your problem.

Upon hearing that everyone started laughing.

Commentary: One of the most important parts of practice is to relax and be natural. It is like playing a stringed instrument: too tight, the string will break; too loose, the string cannot make the correct sound. Counting our breaths is a means to regulate our mind so that it can return to its original not-moving, relaxed and natural state, which means clear and centered. Most important is that we breathe naturally. If the breath is clear, our mind is clear. Applying this clear mind moment to moment to help ourselves and others is the true meditation.

Just Open Your Eyes

After the introductory class on sitting meditation, everyone tried to apply what they had just learned to the sitting session. Many students were experiencing the same problem.

Student: Zen Master, you taught us to sit with eyes half closed, looking down at a 45 degree angle. After a few deep breaths, my eyelids just closed very naturally in a split second. How do I stop myself from closing my eyes? I don’t want to close my eyes during meditation.

Sifu: [*pointing to the blinds in the dharma room*] Please go open the blinds halfway.

Student: Do I really have to do it?

Sifu: Yes.

The student couldn’t stop laughing while pulling up the blinds halfway.

Sifu: From now on, every time that your eyes close, please remember how to roll up the blinds halfway. This will surely help you. You don’t have to stop yourself from closing your eyes; just roll up the blinds halfway.

Commentary: The Platform Sutra says, “Inside our mind we have delusive, ignorant and suffering beings. We use right views to save them.” It further says: “Let the fallacious be delivered by correctness, the deluded by enlightenment, the ignorant by wisdom and the malevolent by benevolence.” So if we close our eyes and fall asleep, we just open our eyes again—that is already training us to wake up! Very simple. ♦