

Put It All Down

Zen Master Dae Kwang

Every enlightenment story is about putting it all down and waking up to our original nature. Here in Singapore it's cloudy this afternoon, but I know if it clears up the sun will be shining brightly. That's my experience, and that's your experience too. Very simple! When the clouds lift the sun shines. It's the same for the mind.

One day a Brahmin came to the Buddha to make an offering of flowers. He had a flower in each hand. The Buddha said, "Put it down." The man placed the flower in his left hand in front of the Buddha.

The Buddha said, "Put it down." The man then laid the flower in his right hand down.

Again the Buddha said, "Put it down."

"I've put down the flowers, what else is there to put down?"

The Buddha said, "I'm not referring to your flowers. You should put down the six roots, the six dusts and the six consciousnesses, then you will be free from life and death."

"Put it all down" means to let go of your opinion, your condition and your situation. If you don't attach to any idea about yourself or the world then you are free. Your mind becomes like space. Then you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think clearly. The sky is blue; the trees are green.



Photo: Myong Hae Sunim JDPS

In the Zen school this teaching comes down to us through the Diamond Sutra. The founder of the modern Zen style of teaching was Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch. He died in 713 CE. He's famous for getting enlightenment after hearing just one sentence from the Diamond Sutra: "When thinking arises in your mind, don't attach to it." This is the easiest way to understand "put it all down" and nonattachment. It means letting go of your thinking.

Here's a famous story from Tang Dynasty China. Tan Shan and a novice monk were traveling around together when one day they encountered a beautiful woman in very fine clothes standing beside a swollen and muddy creek. She was stuck! Han Shan offered to carry her across, for which she was grateful. He set her down on the other side of the creek and the monks continued on their way. Later in the evening Han Shan and the monk stopped at an inn to rest. But the young monk was very agitated. Finally, he blurted out, "We are monks! How could you pick up a woman like that?"

Han Shan replied, "I already put the woman down, but you are still carrying her."

Our founding teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, wrote many letters over the years responding to student's questions about Zen. He would always end his letters by saying, "I hope you only go straight, 'don't know,' which is clear like space, soon get enlightenment and save all beings from suffering." This teaching style has three parts: The first part is "put it all down." "Don't know" is another term for our original mind, the mind that is not attached to anything. It is clear like space. The second part means that when you put it all down, you naturally wake up from your attachment dream. We call that enlightenment. And the last part refers to Buddha's getting up from under the Bodhi Tree and helping all beings get out of suffering. That is the original job of someone who has put it all down. Love and compassion is the job of our original nature.

Here is a kong-an for you:

A monk asked Joju, "I'm not carrying anything, how should I practice?"

Joju said, "Put it all down."

The monk said, "But I'm not carrying anything. What is there to put down?"

Joju replied, "Then carry it along!"

So, what did Joju mean when he said, "Then carry it along"? ♦

[11