

Central Park Fall

John Holland

Master Seong Am Eon used to call himself every day, “Master!” and would answer, “Yes?”
“You must keep clear!” “Yes!”
“Never be confused by others, any day, any time!” “Yes! Yes!”

We are fortunate to live under the Atlantic flyway, along which birds migrate twice a year. In May I was out early in Central Park in search of those remarkable, beautiful colored birds called warblers, in which birders take such delight, when in a moment of inattention to my footing I tripped on a rock and fell hard. Even though I didn’t hit my head, I was badly stunned and lost consciousness. As I lay on the ground I drifted in and out of consciousness. In moments of lucidity I watched my mind thinking, “I am a practitioner of Zen. Why am I not calm?”

During one moment of wakefulness, I was conscious of a dog licking my face. I heard his companion say, “He needs more than the love you can give him.” Later I learned that these were visitors from Nova Scotia. Shortly thereafter some of my fellow birders came upon me and called 911. Then another bodhisattva appeared in the form of a runner from France. He was a trained alpine rescuer. I heard him say, “Talk to him! Talk to him!” as my companions waited for an ambulance. Two bodhisattva birders accompanied me to the emergency room.

Zen Master To Sol asked his monks, “Monks, you leave no stone unturned to explore the depths, simply to see into your True Nature. Now I want to ask you, just in this moment: Where is your True Nature?”

I could have wished that in my lucid moments I might have heard To Sol ask his monks this question—and realize that my ordinary mind was intent on pointing itself at the sun instead of recognizing my true nature.

“Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all” is one of the four great vows we make each day—I should know because our founding Zen master gave me the Buddhist name of Dae Won (Great Vow) a name that I obviously have some difficulty in living up to.

The psychoanalyst Harry Stack Sullivan once remarked that in the end “all of us are more human than otherwise.” It sounds obvious, but somehow most of us end up preoccupied with “being otherwise.”¹

In our practice we strive to dissolve the dualism of subject and object. We attempt to trust our own resiliency in the face of our life as it is. Zen offers us a

counterbalancing insight into our essential wholeness, a wholeness to which nothing need be added or subtracted. “We are like water which can’t—and doesn’t need to—get any wetter.”²

To Sol challenged his monks with two more questions:

“If you realize True Nature, you are free from life and death. Tell me, when your eyesight deserts you in the last moment, how can you be free from life and death?”

And: “When you set yourself free from life and death, you should know your ultimate destination. So when the four elements separate, where will you go?”

The four elements, of course, are fire, wind, water, earth—and are represented on the altar. They are what comprise existence. On the lower level of the altar, there are two candles which, when lit, represent fire. Between the two candles is an incense burner. Incense, when lit, represents air. On the second level there is a bowl containing water. The altar itself represents earth.

[23



When the four elements separate, where will you go?

Hsin Shin Ming, the Third Patriarch of Zen warns us:

Outside, don't get tangled in things,

Inside, don't get lost in emptiness.

Be still, and become One,

And confusion stops by itself.

“Inside, don't get lost in emptiness” is an important injunction. The function of what we call the Three Treasures—the Buddha, the Dharma (that is, the teaching), and the Sangha (that is, you)—is to lead one to a direct attainment of emptiness. Then you can help all beings. This is true liberation.

“But when the four elements separate,” Tou Shuai asked, “Where will you go?” Zen Master Seung Sahn says speech and words cannot describe this point. Only demonstration can express it. If you can attain that point, it is always possible to keep this mind. So, he says, you must practice every day, for at least ten minutes a day: What am I? Don't know . . . Where is my true nature? Don't know . . . How will I be reborn? Don't know . . . When the four elements disperse, where will I go? Don't know . . .

The Diamond Sutra says “All things that appear in the world are transient”—just like us. Just as cyclones are. I'd like to pause here for a moment to commiserate with all sentient beings—that includes animals—who have suffered or died in the terrible devastation wrought by the recent hurricanes and earthquakes.

I'd like us also to remember the fleeing and the murdered Rohingyas.

The truth is we do not know what happens to us when we die. The Buddha taught that originally there is no life and death—our true self is infinite in time and space. Don't-know mind doesn't have a beginning or an ending. Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching is to wake up this moment and attain our true nature. When we keep a don't-know mind we are addressing the big question of life and death moment to moment.

We don't actually have a thing called a “life.” When we talk about our lives we are usually referring to what happened in the past or speculating about what will happen in the future. But that is only *thinking* about what has already happened, already gone, or what may never happen. In Zen we say, “The past is already dead,



Photo: Barrie Raik

and the future is just a dream.” So, my lying in shock in Central Park is already dead.

In the midst of all that talking and thinking about our so-called lives we overlook something: this moment. This moment is the only place where anything that we might call “our life” is actually happening.

Be still, and become One,

And confusion stops by itself.

Is this enlightenment?—Be careful, wanting enlightenment, as Zen Master Seung Sahn said, is a big mistake.

A man lies on the rocks in Central Park.

A dog licks his face.

Wake up! ♦

Notes

1. See Barry Magid, *Ending the Pursuit of Happiness: A Zen Guide* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), xiii.
2. *Ibid.*, 64.

John Holland is a long-time member of the Chogye International Center of New York. After training in the New Haven Zen Center, he became a dharma teacher in 1995. In 2008 he took the vows of a bodhisattva teacher. John has taught meditation at Union Theological Seminary of New York, Columbia University, and for extended periods at the Institute of Omega for Holistic Studies, as well as at New York Chogyesa. For many years he was an active member of the Buddhist Council of New York. John was the coeditor of *Don't-Know Mind: The Spirit of Korean Zen* and *Eligant Failure: A Guide to Zen Koans*, both by Zen Master Wu Kwang. In addition to Zen, John also practices tai chi and bird-watching.