

Are There Any Dangerous Animals on This Mountain?

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Twelve years ago we held a memorial ceremony for Zen Master Seung Sahn at Mu Sang Sa Temple. I did the head monk's job and had to give orientation for a short retreat we had right before the day of the ceremony. I walked into the dharma room and, lo and behold, sitting front and center were Zen Master Dae Kwan and Zen Master Soeng Hyang. I got a bit of a shock, thinking, "What do they

When I heard myself saying this, I thought, "What are you saying? Shut up! Stop talking!" But my mouth didn't stop, as if something smart would come out if it kept talking. I felt awkward, caught in a surreal moment of my own making, and I thought, "Oh god, what am I going to do?"

I looked at the two Zen masters, thinking, "They must think I'm an absolute idiot." But their faces were totally inscrutable. Then, I think I saw one of them nod and smile almost imperceptibly and I thought, "I'll take that as an OK."

I had completely forgotten about that incident until I was given this talk topic by Jan, "True Human Being." I thought, "What am I going to say? Can't he give me something easier to talk about?"

Perhaps my mouth had inadvertently uttered a truth that I had not acknowledged at that time. I recently read about the lion fish, which is now prevalent in the waters off Florida. It's a nonnative species, very beautiful, with

lots of horns and scales, but incredibly voracious. I don't know how it got there, but it has no natural predators and it eats all in its path. Very little survives in its wake. I thought, "Wow! That's pretty invasive."

However, compared to human beings, it comes in at a very poor second. We all originated from Africa. Not content to stay there, we spread out and colonized the whole planet. I don't think there is an inch of this earth that we haven't set foot on. In the process, we've decimated quite a few species. We have a pretty poor track record as being stewards of this planet.

I remember Zen Master Seung Sahn once said, "New building appear, then nature broken somewhere." In my hometown, we have beautiful small limestone hills and call the area *Siu Gwai Lum* in Cantonese, meaning they resem-

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Photo: Allan Matthews

need a meditation orientation for?" I felt a sense of rising panic and quietly told myself to breathe.

At that time, I was still a young monk, but nowadays I'd probably say, "Zen Masters, how wonderful of you to join us. Would you like to give the meditation instruction?" But I was quite unnerved by their presence and tried my best to get through the orientation. I said what I had to say and asked if there were any questions.

Out of the blue, a question came which really threw me. Someone asked, "Are there any dangerous animals on this mountain?" I thought and thought, "Dangerous animals?" While I was still thinking, my mouth decided to disassociate itself from my brain and it came out with, "Human beings!" And the tone of the answer sounded to me like, "Isn't it obvious?"

ble a small version of the Guilin landscape in China. That limestone is an important ingredient in high-grade Portland cement, which is much in demand. Nowadays when I visit, I see orange scars where the cement companies have blasted the hills. In the space of three years, one hill was gone. Fairly soon, there won't be any hills left to admire.

Our demand for economic growth is insatiable: more buildings, bigger cities and greater consumption. David Attenborough once said, "Anyone who believes in infinite growth on a finite planet is either a madman or an economist." My apologies to economists! And I don't think that we're all mad, but I feel that most of us are unaware of the implications of our actions for life on earth.

One question always comes back to me, "Why do we, such an intelligent, capable species with self-awareness, seem so unwilling or unable to save ourselves when we still have the time and the opportunity?" I just can't figure it out. There are minds greater than mine who may have an answer for this but I just come up with a complete don't-know. Why is it that we cannot take responsibility for the consequences of our own actions? Why can't we own our own shit? Don't know.

When I first started Zen practice in Hong Kong about 25 years ago, I remember one student asked Zen Master Su Bong a question. The student felt sad because there had recently been an earthquake and many people died. He asked, "Why did so many people have to die?" As a Zen newbie I was expecting Zen Master Su Bong to come up with a really compassionate answer but he replied, "It was correct, that there was an earthquake and the people died."

"What?" I felt winded when I heard it. He continued, "Cause and effect are very clear. When people hurt the earth, one day the result of their actions will appear." After I got over initial shock, I realized that it's true. We human beings tend to consider only ourselves, and assume that the earth with everything on it is here to serve us and us only. We slap Mother Nature around quite a lot. And we're surprised when Mother Nature slaps us back and says, "Hey! It's not personal, it's only business." When that happens, we think, "What's going on? Where did we go wrong?"

It's not that we don't try; we do, but maybe we just don't have enough information or we're not aware that we're headed in the wrong direction with Mother Nature. We usually intend that we'll leave this world a better place than when we first come into it, so that our children may have a better life than ours. But over these last five, six years or so, it seems pretty clear that if we continue without any changes and carry on with business as usual, it won't be like that.

I'd like to try a little experiment with all of you. You can close your eyes if you want. I'd like you to imagine a really bleak dystopian future. Not even a "Blade Runner" landscape's going to cut it. Just imagine how bleak it can be.

If we hit all our climate-change tipping points and get full-blown climate change, it's going to be worse than that, I think. I prefer not to be around to find out. It won't be anything that we have ever experienced. We will end up making the kind of planet for our children and our grandchildren where just trying to survive is the norm.

We're all in the same boat, like the Titanic. The developed countries are in the first class above deck, and we Malaysians, we're below deck. But when the ship goes down, the first class will go down just as fast as the lower classes. I guess that my only consolation is this: if we succeed in wiping ourselves out as a species, I'll be in pretty good company with all of you.

I'm sorry if it sounds pretty bleak. But before we all sink into the depths of despair, I think there's a beacon of light, of hope, from our young people. In Penang we have a growing number who are starting their own organic farms, who are very ecologically aware. They sell their produce in farmers markets twice a month. I know twice a month doesn't sound like a lot around here, but in Penang it's a pretty big deal. An increasing number of new young farmers are trying this way. They're not just chasing the money, and I think that's great.

Every time I go to the farmers market, I feel a little bit of pride, even though I'm not originally from Penang. I sometimes work with a couple who run home-farming workshops out of their own house to teach city folk how to grow their own vegetables on the balconies or on the porch. When I visit I usually give a short talk about climate change, conservation and saving water.

In Penang, we use the most water per household of all the states in Malaysia. Water is cheap—far too much so. Our Zen center's monthly water bill is five Malaysian ringgits, or one U.S. dollar. In my country the awareness of climate change is pretty low. Most people expect the government to take care of it, so that we don't have to make a personal effort. But I think these institutions can't be very effective. We have to get ourselves out of this mess. No one else will.

In Malaysia, HSBC Bank found that more than 50 percent of parents are willing to go into debt to fund their children's education. In addition, more than 80 percent are already using their current income to pay for their children's education. Not only are they using their current income, but they also want to borrow money to educate their children. Imagine what could be achieved if we could just redirect this energy.

Rather than act solely for their children's education, what if parents put their energies into ensuring a better, sustainable future for their children? Who could inspire them to do this? Politicians? Government bureaucrats? What do you think? How many people would be willing to travel hundreds of miles to listen to a prominent politician or civil servant? Usually they have to come to us, press our flesh every four years to get reelected. So, I think

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they are not the people who will inspire us to act.

However, quite a lot of us here were willing to travel thousands of miles to listen to Zen Master Seung Sahn and to study with him. It's the same with the Dalai Lama or the Pope. When I was young, I thought nothing of getting my friends together and finding somebody who had a car so that we could drive a few hours to go to a concert and hear our favorite band—U2 or Springsteen.

I believe it's the spiritual leaders, the musicians, the artists, the poets, the filmmakers who can and will inspire us. Why is that? They speak to our hearts, not to our minds. I've seen Al Gore's first documentary. It was OK and informative. But I don't think it inspired or moved me as much as listening to Zen Master Seung Sahn, or other spiritual teachers or some music that I really connected with.

I think that all of you here are spiritual leaders. Some of you are also musicians, artists, poets, writers and filmmakers. If you step up to inspire others, I think we could do a lot to help our world situation. I don't have a nice neat answer to what it is to be true human beings, but I think it's up to us to reclaim our true human heritage by practicing the spiritual path.

You're probably not going to like what I am going to say next. One way we can start doing something simple now is to make changes with the meat that we eat. In 2006, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization published a report called "Livestock's Long Shadow." Following this,

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families with kids, and all of a sudden, a kid looks at you funny, tugging at her parent's sleeve and pointing a finger at me with a questioning face: "Who is that? What is this?" The kids already have don't know. And at the same time, other people will also have this question, "What is it?" Even if it's just for a short moment, they return to don't know. Or sometimes they might ask, "These clothes—are you a monk or what?" I get all these questions. So even today, coming from the hotel on the shuttle bus, the driver was just looking at me and at the Providence Zen Center address, and he said, "I've seen this place before. What are you doing here? What is meditation?" And you can see that he's thinking, "I have difficulties. Can it help me?" Maybe you will have a new person coming on Sunday. So because of the monastic uniform, these people would come to ask about their lives and in a way have a chance to meet the dharma.

I didn't go to churches and didn't face the challenges that Bo Haeng Sunim went through, but having this kind of experience of how people relate to me differently is not necessarily a feeling of not belonging. I hadn't been in Lithuania for a long time, so the situation there has changed a lot. I may not understand many things or know how to fit in. Even though I've been in Asia for a long time, I'm not really Asian, and I still do not completely understand Asian culture either. It's like I don't belong anywhere. I'm not Asian, but I'm in Asia. When I

Goodland and Anhang of the World Bank published a similar report in 2009. Both found that livestock farming is a huge contributor to global warming and greenhouse gases because ruminant animals like cattle fart and belch a lot.

What comes out of them is methane. It is about 80 times worse than CO2 for warming the climate. But methane doesn't last as long as CO2. It has a much shorter life span. So, if we could cut our meat and dairy consumption, it would make a pretty immediate impact. But it's something that we have to be willing to do.

A University of Cambridge study in 2014 found that the average efficiency of converting plant feed to meat is only 3 percent. If any of you ran a business at 3 percent efficiency, you wouldn't be in business very long. But we still insist on doing this.

If China and the rest of Asia and India start to eat like the West, I don't know what's going to happen. Many of us like our bacon, our cheese and our yogurt. However, if we can't adopt a plant-based diet 100 percent, why not try 80 percent? Try eating meat and dairy one day a week. And the rest of the time eat plant-based foods. We could try it this coming week—we've got great chefs serving up a great menu of vegetarian and vegan food. I don't think anybody's going to die from not having animal protein for a week.

So, finally, for our children and our children's children—all of those who will come after us—please let's just try to just do it. Thank you. ♦

go back to Lithuania, they'll call me a foreigner, because I have an accent now when I speak Lithuanian. I have an accent in every language I speak! I But what is my true self? What am I really? I am not Chinese; I am not Lithuanian; I am not any of these things. And at the same time I feel that actually I belong to everyone, to this whole world. It's starting to break boundaries. So in some ways you break the boundaries of "that's my country" or "that's my path" or "that's the group of people I belong to."

I am used to this monastic life, and practice is a little bit like a challenge. It challenges my own boundaries as well. As Bo Haeng Sunim said, he was told, "You have to stay in the monastery; don't go out." Well, after you practice, the monastery that you have to have is inside. But breaking the boundaries of what we are making, of what you are, boundaries of I-my-me. Having a strong inner monastery of don't know helps. Also everything is constantly changing. So you have to be with this don't know all the time. That's my challenge. ♦

Myong Hae Sunim JDPS is the first Buddhist nun from Lithuania, where she heard of Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching for the first time in 1991. She moved to Hong Kong after becoming a nun in 1997 to train under Zen Master Dae Kwan. Myong Hae Sunim has served as head nun and vice abbot of Su Bong Zen Monastery in Hong Kong, where she now serves as the monastery's second guiding teacher.