

My Son's Ashes

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In 1957, when Zen Master Ko Bong became seriously ill, Zen Master Seung Sahn was appointed as the abbot of Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Seoul. In the course of his duties as abbot, Zen Master Seung Sahn heard of a Japanese temple in Seoul that contained the bones of 500 dead Japanese. The temple was troubled with finances and fell under the control of laypeople. The laypeople were not interested in Japanese bones; at that time there was still considerable bad feeling toward the Japanese, their former oppressors for 35 years. When Zen Master Seung Sahn heard that that the bones were going to be thrown out, he went to the temple. He told the officials, "Whether these bones were once Korean or Japanese, dead people's bones are all the same. Dead bones are dead bones!" He arranged

to have the bones removed to Hwa Gye Sa. For 100 days, he chanted *Namu Amita Bul* over the bones; the chanting was for the dead spirits. A few years later, Korea and Japan resumed diplomatic relations. Before long, some Japanese came to Korea to Hwa Gye Sa to claim the bones of their dead ancestors and carry them back to their homeland. Because of their appreciation and deep respect for the Zen master's action, the Japanese invited him to go to Japan. This invitation led him to move to Tokyo and eventually to the United States.

It has been said by some Koreans, "We lost a great master to Japan and to America because of some dead bones."

A few days ago I had my own experience with bones, or rather their ashes. They were the ashes of my son. But let me back up a bit. After my son was born, I asked the priest at an Episcopalian church on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, of which I was at that time a member, to christen him. But because the godparents I had chosen were Jews, the church turned down my request. I then went to the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village with the same request. The clergyman there agreed, and offered to write a special service to include Benjamin's Jewish godparents.

Ten years after the death of my son, my daughter converted to Judaism. Subsequently she wanted to have her brother's ashes interred in a Jewish cemetery in New Jersey so she could visit. The problem was that Benjamin was not a Jew and he had died by his own hand. It took a year to find a resting place for him, and this was only accomplished by a problem-solving, bodhisattva rabbi.

On the 49th day after Benjamin's passing I chanted *Ji Jang Bosal* in Calabria with family members before casting some of his ashes into the Tyrrhenian Sea, in which Benjamin used to enjoy bathing with his Italian cousins. On the 100th day we chanted *Namu Amita Bul* in the Chogye International Zen Center of New York.

We also recited the great verse composed by Korean Zen Master Na Ong in the 1700s (to which I am told Zen Master Seung Sahn added the question at the end):

Coming empty-handed, going empty-handed,
that is human.

When you were born, where did you come from?
When you die, where do you go?

Life is like a floating cloud which appears; death
is like a floating cloud that disappears.

The floating cloud itself does not originally exist.
Life and death, coming and going are like that.

But there is one thing that remains clear—
not depending on life and death.



Photo: Albert Lee

Then what is that pure and clear thing?

Almost overcome as I was with grief, I had read a letter from Zen Master Ta Hui, the author of *Swampland Flowers*, about feelings and affliction that said in part:

You had thought that in this realm the feelings between a father and his son, [or a mother and her daughter] the flow of affection over a thousand lives and a hundred ages, would be impossible. In the world of the five corruptions [The translator here explains these corruptions as being the corruption of the age, the corruptions of the prevalent false views and afflictions, and the consequent corruptions of sentient beings and the shortening of the human life span.] all is empty and false: there's not one that's genuinely real. I ask you to contemplate this constantly, whether you're walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Then gradually over time (your feelings) will be worn away. Nevertheless, it is precisely when afflicted that you should carefully investigate and inquire where the affliction arises from. If you cannot get to the bottom of its origination, then where does the one who is afflicted right now come from? Right when you're afflicted, is it existent or nonexistent, empty or real? Keep investigating until your mind has nowhere to go. If you want to think, then think; if you want to cry, then cry. Just keep on crying and thinking. When you arouse yourself to the point where habit energy of love and affection within the Storehouse Consciousness is exhausted, then naturally it's like water being returned to water, giving you back your original being, without affliction, without thoughts, without sorrow or joy. . . .

Father and son are one by nature: is there such a thing as a father who is not troubled when his son dies and who doesn't think about him, or a son who isn't troubled when his father dies and doesn't think about him? If you try to suppress (such sentiments) forcibly, not daring to cry or think about it, then this is deliberately going against the natural pattern, denying your inherent nature; (it's like) raising a sound to stop an echo, or poring on oil to put out a fire.¹

What more was there to say? This search for meaning reminded me of the story about the Second Patriarch, Huike, who persistently asked for Bodhidharma's instruction while standing in waist-high snow outside a cave in Shao-lin where Bodhidharma was meditating. Legend has it that in order to demonstrate his sincerity in seeking the dharma, Huike cut off his left arm and presented it to

Bodhidharma. When Bodhidharma finally deigned to acknowledge Huike's bloody presence, Bodhidharma asked the monk, "What is it that you want?"

Huike answered, "My mind is not at peace. Please pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma replied, "Take your mind and bring it here, and I will pacify it for you."

Huike said, "When I look for my mind I can't find it."

Bodhidharma said, "Then I already pacified your mind."

What more was there to say? And yet last Thursday, when I was standing next to the rabbi in front of the niche into which my son's ashes were to be interred, I was expected to say something. I turned to the teaching of Korean Zen Master T'aego. T'aego deserves credit for unifying the disparate Nine Mountain schools of Zen into a single school, the Chogye school, in 1356. I read a poem written by Zen Master T'aego:

White clouds—inside the clouds, layers of
green mountains

Green mountains—in the mountains, many
white clouds

The sun is the constant companion of the
cloudy mountains

When the body is at peace, there's no place
that's not home.²

What does this mean?

The first two lines: "White clouds—inside the clouds, layers of green mountains / Green mountains—in the mountains, many white clouds," are a poetic restating of the Heart Sutra's teaching, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form."³

Then, "The sun is the constant companion of the cloudy mountains": The sun is always shining brightly in the sky. Clouds come, clouds go. But there is always one thing that is not moving, not dependent on coming and going.

Then T'aego concludes, "When the body is at peace, there's no place that's not home." The last line is far from being sanctimonious; rather, it is a statement of freedom from dualism. For me to cling to my sorrow would be to resist the fundamental openness of emptiness as well as to exclude my vow for *all* sentient beings. ♦

Notes

1. Christopher Cleary, trans., *Swampland Flowers: Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui* (New York: Grove Press, 1977).

2. J. C. Cleary, trans., *A Buddha from Korea: The Teachings of T'aego* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988).

3. Richard Shrobe, *Don't Know Mind: The Spirit of Korean Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004).