

Seeing the Person in Front of You

An interview with Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

Ian White Maher: I sent you an email asking if you could send me some articles that talked about your teaching and you sent me back this great email that said “Hi Ian. I’m a little puzzled by ‘express your teaching,’ because I don’t think of myself as having any particular teaching.” But yet people go to you as their teacher, so how does that all fit together?

Zen Master Bon Hae: First of all, I don’t think of people as being my students. One of the wonderful things about the Kwan Um School of Zen is you have the guiding teacher of your Zen center and you might have other teachers affiliated with your Zen center, but you’re encouraged to sit with other teachers. It’s not this sense of a one-on-one relationship; it’s more like you’re in graduate school and you have your thesis adviser, but you also work with other people. That’s sort of how I think of it. So there isn’t this sense of “my students” or “my teacher.” It’s broader. Obviously there’s a closer relationship with the people that you see all the time, but there’s also this broader vision. So my teacher—now that I’ve said that we don’t have students and teachers—my teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, would say “I don’t teach Buddhism. I only teach don’t know.”

So if I were to say “My teaching is that all things are one” or that “Everything is emptiness,” or anything like that—anything that you can capture in a phrase, anything that you can capture in a sentence or a paragraph or a book—that’s automatically not don’t know. You’ve pinned

something down; you’ve made something. So how could I have a particular teaching? Also if you say “This is my teaching,” then what happens is you’ve closed off everything else. Then the other things can’t be your teaching.

There’s a Chinese teacher who died in 1985, Hsuan Hua. He set up the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, California, in the center of pot country. It’s this huge, ornate, Chinese-style place. Although he had a reputation for being autocratic, he described himself as “a good, knowing adviser.” I don’t think he was giving advice, but there you are—you’re people’s companion. You’re there to respond to the needs of the people in front of you. It’s like Buddha. He said different things to different people depending on who he was talking to.

“What is Buddha?” “Mind is Buddha.” “What is Buddha?” “No mind.” (That’s Zen Master Ma Jo in the eighth century). The same question gets different answers depending on who you’re talking to. So you’re responding to the person in front of you. And so that’s why the notion of “This is my teaching” just doesn’t resonate with me. It narrows things. It closes things off.

IWM: What was so helpful to me, listening to a talk of yours, was this: At first, I sort of rolled my eyes and wondered, “Why won’t she just tell me?” But then there was this point of “Oh!” It was as if you were saying that there’s a teaching coming through me, or I’m here as just a companion. But then there are all of these people who are coming to see you and depend on you. How do you, as



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you guide them, help them separate you from the teaching?

ZMBH: The best thing a teacher can give a student is for the student to believe in themselves. So, people would come and listen to Zen Master Seung Sahn, and what you would get from him is to not be attached to his words. And what you would get from him is this incredible energy and this incredible centeredness, and this incredible clarity, and the realization that you could also have that, and in fact you already had it. That's the best thing the teacher can give the student

It is not for the student to believe in the teacher as this exterior authority, but for the student to realize that what this teacher has, you already have it. It's yours. You don't have to go somewhere else to get it. So to me, the job of the teacher is to encourage people to practice, encourage them to find that for themselves, encourage them to really believe in themselves. That's what my job is.

And to believe in their true self. Not in the sense of "Oh I'm the greatest this" or "I'm the best that." Not that kind of belief in yourself. Belief in this true self that doesn't belong to you. It's much bigger than you are. Believe in that, and then everything you do comes from that. Which of course never completely always happens, not even with Zen Master Seung Sahn, not even with Buddha. But as much as possible everything we do comes from this center, comes from this true self, which we don't own. It's not ours. And it's completely ours.

IWM: I imagine because you're a mathematician that people are always trying to get you to talk about math and Buddhism and how that relates. In your article about kong-ans in *Buddhadharma*, September 2018, you say something like, "Being clever is not going to help you." Which really struck me in a funny place because I realized you must operate in these two worlds where, around the faculty table, being clever must be highly prized. And then you go home, or you go to the Zen center to work with students and you're like "by the way, don't be clever." I'm wondering how you navigate those two spaces, or perhaps I'm misunderstanding how the faculty table works.

ZMBH: Yeah, well at the faculty table people generally weren't very clever. "Being clever isn't going to help you." So you got it right. First of all, there's a misunderstanding there about mathematics. When you do mathematics it's actually very similar to working on kong-ans. If you try to control the situation too much, you're not going to get anywhere.

What happens when you work on mathematics, it's sort of like holding up a jewel to the light, and you just turn it around and you look at it. Your mind has to be very open. You just keep turning it around and looking at it, and you turn it another way and suddenly you see a way in. So it's very much like working on kong-ans. It's not about cleverness. It's about being observant in this pe-

culiarly abstract world. It's about being observant in a way that's not about your senses, but it's a very similar thing where you're just looking at something and you're turning it around—you're trying to find the little crack that will let you in. Like Leonard Cohen said, "Let the light in." It's more like that. So it's actually not at all a contradiction. There's definitely a kind of cleverness that people in academia tend to have. But that's not really relevant to the real work; it's just kind of this patina that you can have or you don't have to have. Not everyone is clever around the faculty table. And, you know, it's useful in a certain way but it's also useless in a way. It's not the point.

IWM: Do you think that your encounter with math guided your Zen study, or was that just two parallel tracks?

ZMBH: I don't even know if they're parallel. It's just, you live your life and you do all these things. Nobody ever says "Does your cooking affect your driving?" No one ever asks that. You just do all these things in your life. Why do you have to have this unified life where everything leads to something else? You know you are not a unified being, right? That's one of the great observations that you make as you sit on the cushion. You begin to realize that you're not this little marble. Stuff arises and it goes away, and it dissolves and it appears, and you're a thousand things at once, and none of them have any real existence, and what the hell is going on here? So this whole idea that you have to be this unified being: Why? You're not.

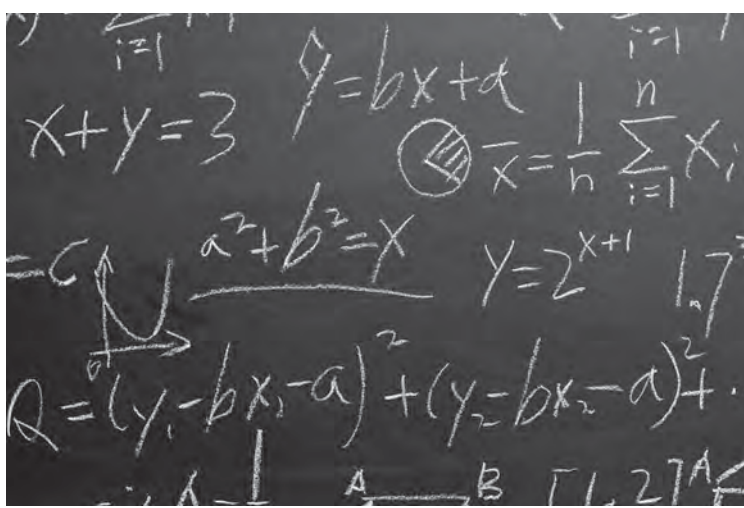
IWM: Still, I think of them as both kind of mystical pursuits in a way. When I think about math at the level that you are working on, like you said, quite abstract.

ZMBH: The set theory I worked on was about empty sets and models of the universe. I worked on consistency results. That means statements that you can't prove and you can't disprove. So you find a model where the statement is true and another model where the negation is true, and these are models of the whole universe! The whole mathematical universe! How mystical can you get? So yeah, I guess you could say that, but it's just what I did. It's not special.

IWM: But then you also wrote about Nagarjuna and the Tetralemma.

ZMBH: That didn't originate with him. This is ancient Indian philosophy. There are many forms to describe the tetralemma. One form is this: (Fill in any noun for X—you can tell I'm a mathematician.) (1) X is. (2) X is not. (3) Not X and not not X. (4) X and not X. There are other forms of the tetralemma. The idea is you have these statements, and the whole point of the tetralemma is that none of them are true. So "The sky is blue" is not true. And "The sky is not blue" is not true. And "The sky is not blue and the sky is not not-blue"—that's also not true. And "The sky is both blue and not blue"—that's also not true. So what that's really pointing to is don't know. It's saying whatever we think we know, we actually don't know.

That's all it is. It sounds very fancy. There's this won-



derful book by Nagarjuna—*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*—translated as *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. The translation by Jay Garfield is a fantastic book. Its commentary is amazing; I highly recommend it. But again it's just pointing to don't know. It's saying that our thinking mind is going to get us into trouble all the time, because the minute things enter as thought, and as language, then that means that we've lost something. We're missing something when we do that.

IWM: What is it that we're missing?

ZMBH: You can't say it. If you could say it, you'd be missing it. It's like when a newborn baby opens his eyes. It's that mind.

IWM: In this same article in the September issue of *Buddhadharma*, you're talking about what kong-ans are and what they're not. You give the example of Nam Cheon's cat. You said, "He really is killing a cat, and this really is your life." I think sometimes people come into the interview to do kong-an practice, and it's a little about being clever. Or it can feel that way. What do you mean when you say, "This is your life. The answer to this kong-an really is your life"?

ZMBH: Well obviously I can't give away the answer. But, I'm really glad you got to that, because things were getting abstract there, and I was getting uncomfortable. What about compassion? And what about suffering? And, you know, how did Buddhism start? It started when Buddha looked around and said "Whoa! Everybody's suffering. What's this suffering about, how can I end this suffering?" When we usually think of ending suffering, it's "I want to end my suffering." People start practicing, because they want to end their suffering. At least that's how I started. I didn't start with Zen; I started with relaxation response, because I was so miserable. I mean I was suicidal; I was delusional; I was all kinds of things. I eventually had this great shrink who was able to help me. But I started meditating because of that, because I just needed a way to calm down. People come to the Zen center like that. They need a way to calm down. But then after a while you realize you can't end your suffering until you end all beings' suffering. Because we're all connected. We're just so completely connected. And it's not even like all these discrete beings are connected. It's like if you look at the fingers of your hand, and then you cover up so you can't see the palm, and you

look and it's like four little puppets on a stage. You know it's like four little puppets on a stage and you think "oh those are different puppets." But then you uncover your palm and you say, "Whoa, wait a minute. They're deeply, deeply, connected." It's like that. What Buddha realized is—and this is the whole Mahayana—your own suffering is just part of this ocean of suffering, and we all have to work together.

That's what a lot of the chants in the Kwan Um School of Zen say. They say things like, "Together we vow to achieve enlightenment," in the same moment at once. Simultaneously. So there's this great cosmic vow that all beings take. We're so inexorably entwined. That's what Thich Nhat Hanh means when he talks about interbeing—this intrinsic connection that we have, and not just with human beings, but with all creatures. Even bacteria. We're all part of the same thing; and we're not even part of the same thing. We're all the same. You can't really say it, right? But this deep sense of connection. And this deep sense of recognizing suffering, not trying to escape from suffering, but really acknowledging it and working together to help each other in this ocean of suffering. Of course, this is not saying that we don't have wonderful things too, because those exist, but I want to focus here on the suffering part.

Nam Cheon's holding up this cat. I always imagine he's holding it by the tail, and that the cat is doing all this screeching and whatever a cat would do in this situation. And then he takes out his knife, and then there are five hundred young monks, all in their teens and early twenties. Right—they're kids! And they're fighting over this cat because each group, the western hall and the eastern hall, they all want this cat for themselves. And he grabs it and picks it up, and he's got this knife. He says, "Give me one word or I will kill this cat!" And they are all stuck: "What am I going to do?" So then he kills the cat. That's the situation. And what in that moment are you going to do?

And that's our lives. That's actually what our lives are like right now. I was walking down the main street in our little town with some friends—this is true—and there was a guy who looked homeless, lying down on the sidewalk and moaning. He looked really sick. Just really really sick. Like something was terribly wrong. He was obviously in a lot of physical pain. We stopped. And we said to him, "Are you OK?" And he sort of pulled himself up to a sitting position and said, "Yeah I'm OK. Yeah I'll be fine." Like he just didn't want us to call an ambulance or something. I don't know why, but he was sending out this vibe: "I don't want to be taken to the hospital. I don't want the police to be called." You know just a "leave me alone" kind of thing. And so we said "Oh, OK," and we walked on. As I was walking away I was thinking "Maybe I should just sit here with him for a minute. Maybe I should just sit with him quietly and make sure he's OK and maybe talk to him for a little bit." But I had someplace to go. I was supposed to be someplace in five minutes. You know?

I could have taken out my phone and said, “I can’t meet you in five minutes, because I’m hanging out with this guy here, and I think he needs a little bit of help. And maybe you can come over here and join me and see if we can help this guy.” But instead I just said “OK” and I walked on. So I flunked. I flunked that kong-an.

That’s what I mean by “it’s our life.” We’re just constantly hit with these things. How do we respond to them? What do we do? Again, the Mahayana vision is really useful here, because there’s this tendency to think “I alone have to fix everything,” and then we feel hopeless, and we give up. But no, it’s more like we’re all working together. So where is my part? What is my job? Where is the situation that I can step in? That I can do something? What’s appropriate in the moment?

Zen Master Seung Sahn always used to talk about correct situation, correct relationship (which means relationship to the situation), and correct function. So what actually is the situation that we’re looking at? That’s the first question. What is the situation? Not what do we think it is, but what is it actually. And then what is our relationship to the situation. The example I always use is this: You’re walking along and you see someone drowning. If you know how to swim, you jump in. If you don’t know how to swim, you holler for help. What is your relationship to the situation? And then third of all, what is your function in the situation? That’s very important. And that’s Nam Cheon killing the cat. That’s what that’s about.

There’s a story we tell a lot in precepts ceremonies. About knowing when to break precepts. A farmer’s in the field and a rabbit comes hopping along and then disappears to the left. And then the hunter comes and asks, “Where’s the rabbit?” The farmer points to the right, so they just lied; they’ve broken a precept. But they just saved the rabbit’s life. Know when to hold the precepts; know when to break the precepts. But then there’s this twist, because the hunter comes, and what if it’s a guy with a starving family, and they haven’t had any food in days, and the farmer knows this. And so the hunter comes along and the farmer points to the left, so that the hunter will kill the rabbit and feed his family.

My husband was telling this story in Arkansas, and a woman in the sangha in the back raises her hand and says, “Well if I were that farmer I would just invite the family in for soup.”

IWM: Right. It’s a good answer.

ZMBH: Yeah!

IWM: Kong-ans really are just appearing every moment, I guess is what you’re saying. There are times in my practice when I feel very connected to my direction, to my question, and then there are times when I feel that the desires are so strong; they’re so attractive. And for me particularly it’s like anger and self-righteousness. God I love them.

ZMBH: Yeah, they’re really seductive.

IWM: They’re like my parents, I love them so much.

ZMBH: Yeah, people love them. You know you exist because you’re angry. Yeah, you’re angry and then you know you exist. It’s really wonderful.

IWM: Yeah, I feel power.

ZMBH: Exactly.

IWM: Which leads me to believe, afterward, I’m sort of dealing with the hangover of it: “Why do I feel so powerless that I need this fantasy of power?” And I’m wondering what advice you give to students who are wrestling with these, the attractiveness, the seductiveness of these fantasies.

ZMBH: Everybody wrestles with those. I’m sure the Buddha wrestled with those, and not just before he woke up. I’m sure he wrestled with them his whole life; everyone does. So, what is their substance? You investigate that. What is the substance of this anger? And if you look really really closely; it dissolves.

And the second thing is, actually it should have been the first thing I said, whether or not it dissolves: You stay on that cushion until the time is up. You don’t let it run your life, even to the extent that you get up from the cushion early.

The most important thing about these strong emotions—and I should add that joy is another emotion that can prevent us from seeing what’s happening—they cloud our vision. No matter what the strong emotion is, the strong feelings, the strong ideas, don’t act on them. That’s the most important thing. If they’re pleasant, you can appreciate them, but you don’t act on them. Once I was in college, and there was some kind of crisis in my life. I called a friend of mine and started talking like a person in crisis, and he said, “Don’t cry. The sky is blue.”

That’s not helpful. That’s an example of a so-called positive feeling getting in the way. So don’t know is so important. Not to act on your anger, and your desire, and your ignorance; not to act on any of that. But just keep with the practice, keep with the schedule, keep with what it is you’re supposed to do. Just do that. That’s extremely important. And then that stuff doesn’t control you anymore. And that’s the point. To have this mind that is, like Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, “clear like space.” And have a mind that is clear like space, and to function in the moment exactly as you need to function. ♦

This and the next article are adapted from interviews by Ian White Maher for the Kwan Um Zen podcast, “Sit, Breathe, Bow.” For more, please visit kwanumzenonline.org/podcast.

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