

Something Is Going to Get You!

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Hello everybody. Greetings from Singapore! It's evening here, but we have people from all over the world, so it's just "Hello." Usually we aren't quite this high-tech in our oral presentations at the Zen center. But we've been forced by circumstances and the Singapore government to shut down the Zen center. So, since people can't come anymore, we're going online to do teaching. Just as people are experiencing this coronavirus all around the world, we're also experiencing it in Singapore. One of the effects of this is that people everywhere are experiencing illness and even death, all the way from China to Alaska. I was looking at a map today of the United States, and all the different states that have it and how many people have died. Unlike many catastrophes, this one affects us moment to moment in our daily life, almost everywhere. And everyone throughout the world is doing things to ameliorate the effects of this new virus on us. How can we protect ourselves?

That's natural. When something bad happens, you want to get away. Maybe you run or hide. Or, maybe you try to attack

to preserve yourself, your family, your business, or your country. One time a monk came to Zen Master Un Mun and said, "When pain and suffering come, how can we avoid them?" That's a natural question that any human being might have.

When you feel the pain and suffering that comes from daily life experiences, you naturally want to know how you can get away. So the monk asked Un Mun, how can we avoid them? And Un Mun answers, "Welcome."

Un Mun is famous for his one-word answers, but this was kind of shocking. Welcome? Hello, I'm trying to get away!

This *welcome* is very interesting. Usually we don't *welcome* pain and suffering. Certainly the Buddha didn't when he got his manservant to sneak him out of the palace to go look around and see what the world was

really like. He didn't go out with the idea of welcome. The Buddha's father had created a nice situation for him in the palace. In fact, you might think of his situation as kind of like our situation, before we encountered this new coronavirus. Then he left the palace and had a direct experience of three things that I'm sure he knew about, had read about, but had never directly experienced: He had a direct encounter with an old person, a sick person, and a dead corpse lying beside the road. These direct experiences profoundly affected him. He asked his manservant, "Will this happen to me?" The servant says, "Of course! Everybody gets sick or gets



old. For sure you're going to die." That answer from the manservant brings up a big question for the Buddha.

The question isn't "How do I avoid old age, sickness and death?" The question is instead "What are we?" "Why do we suffer?" So this circumstance of directly experiencing old age, sickness, and death was actually a teacher for the Buddha, because these three things point directly to what we, in Buddhism, call the great question of life and death: What is a human being? Why are we here? Why are we born? Of course, this is a kind of teaching that you will not be able to avoid. I can avoid studying math in college by dropping out of the course, but in the end I can't drop out of this one. So, the coronavirus is one of many experiences we have, moment to moment in our life, which are teaching us something, pointing to something, if we pay attention.

Our founding teacher here at Kwan Yin Chan Lin, Zen Master Seung Sahn, was always saying "A good situ-

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ation is a bad situation, and a bad situation is a good situation.” That’s shocking, because it’s just exactly the opposite of what you think is going on. This bad situation is actually teaching you something about the way life really is. When the monk says “When pain and suffering come, how can we avoid them?” and Un Mun says “Welcome,” the behind-meaning of this *welcome* is: Yeah, this is a bad situation that’s going to teach you something.

After this encounter, the Buddha left his good situation and went to find the answer to the great question. He didn’t know the answer! They say the fourth thing that he saw was a seeker after truth, a *sadhu*. So, the Buddha also became a seeker after truth. Why do we suffer so much? What’s the truth behind our existence? So, you can study about this coronavirus; there are many coronaviruses running around. The common cold is a coronavirus. You can practice social distancing; you can wear a mask; you can do all kinds of things, but what the Buddha saw in the world, and what we can see too if we look closely, is that even if you avoid this particular coronavirus, something is going to get you in the end!

The bad situation that every human being will be presented with is not based on one’s religious, philosophical, or cultural beliefs. Everybody faces it. It’s actually pointing toward something. It’s pushing us toward searching for the great answer of life and death. What are we, really? If you look at what we usually use to describe what we are, those things are all taken away by old age, sickness, and death. So what’s back behind those? The Buddha did a very simple thing. He didn’t go to a library, and he definitely didn’t go online to Wikipedia. He went and started looking inside. He looked inside himself to find the answer. Then one morning, he looked up and saw the morning star—Venus—and boom! He had a direct experience of the answer to the question. Nobody was telling him the answer; he wasn’t reading the answer in a book. He had the answer through a direct experience. It’s very interesting, what he said. “Wow this is amazing! Everybody already has it. Everybody already has the answer, which is your own Buddha nature. But human beings don’t know that, and because they don’t know, they suffer.”

That means the suffering we experience as human beings is created by a misunderstanding. We think we’re one thing, and we’re actually another. That’s what we call in Zen your original Buddha nature or your original nature or your true nature. There are many words for it. So when Zen Master Seung Sahn said a bad situation is a good situation and a good situation is a bad situation, this bad situation pushes you until you seek the answer to this question. The reason a good situation is not so good is—and almost all human beings are the same in this regard—a good situation will make you lazy. When Un Mun says *welcome*, the

behind-meaning is “Wow! You’re lucky, because this is going to push you toward finding out what you really are,” which is the true solution of the great question of life and death.

I was thinking today, “Wow, what about big catastrophes?” The last one we had was the 2008 economic collapse that was all over the world. That was pretty dramatic. When I was a young person, my country was involved in a war with Vietnam. That didn’t turn out so well. I had friends dying. But in the end, whether it’s big things like the coronavirus or the economic collapse of 2008 or a war somewhere, or small little things just in your daily life, all of these things are pointing toward what you truly are. Somebody will die. You’ll get sick. For sure, you’ll get old, if you don’t die first. And while you wouldn’t wish any of these things on anybody—you don’t want anybody to get this coronavirus, and if they do get it you want them to get well—in the end, in the big picture, no human being is going to be able to avoid those things. So the big meaning behind all of those bad experiences you don’t want anybody to have is this big question: what are we?

Just before the Buddha died, he said a very interesting thing: “Life is short. Investigate it closely.” This phrase “Life is short” is very interesting to me. Because to me, it almost seems meaningless. You can say it, but you don’t really know how short life is. I’m old enough to know that I’m probably past middle age. But nobody knows how short their life actually is. [Breathes in and out.] That may have been the last one. I don’t know. So this “Life is short; investigate it closely” means wake up now! Because right here, right now is where you’re going to find your true self.

Zen Master Seung Sahn’s take on this phrase in the *Diamond Sutra* points directly to this experience: “Past mind can’t get enlightenment, future mind can’t get enlightenment, and even present mind also can’t get enlightenment because it just went by.” The only place you’re going to connect with your true self is right here, right now. This is it. There’s no place else to go. This is the way things are. There’s no running away. Except you can run away in your mind, and we do it all the time. The Buddha taught that the way to find your true self is to let go of your thinking, and just this moment let go. Then it’s possible to wake up just now and use this just-now mind to help the world. There’s suffering going on all the time, and the coronavirus is just pointing toward that. While it seems kind of special that we would have a worldwide pandemic like this pointing at something, actually our daily life is pointing toward the same thing all the time: Find your true self, wake up, and help the world, because there is plenty of suffering. Most important is doing some practicing, so you too can find your true self and use that to help the world. Kwan Seum Bosal! ♦