

The Mirror of Zen Study Guide

Jess Row

Note: This excerpt is from a guide prepared for Chogye International Zen Center's study group. The full document can be found at this link: <https://kwanumzen.org/resources-collection/mirror-of-zen-study-guide> —Ed.

The *Mirror of Zen* (*Songagwigam*) is a uniquely important text for Kwan Um School of Zen students. It's one of the fundamental texts of the Korean Zen tradition, and the source of some of Zen Master Seung Sahn's most famous teaching phrases and concepts. Korean Zen, much more so than Japanese or Chinese Zen, is a syncretic tradition that embraces scriptural study, chanting (including Pure Land chanting), the use of mantras, and other practices. Korean Zen also has a distinctive approach to the use of kong-ans. The *Mirror of Zen* condenses many centuries of debate and doctrinal dispute into a kind of "mission statement" for Korean Zen that is respected and embraced by many different traditions.

The author, Hyujeong Sunim, also known as Sosan Daesa (alternate spellings include Seosan Daesa and So Sahn Taesa), lived from 1520 to 1604 in the Choson Dynasty, a time of state repression of Buddhism under a conservative Confucian government. He's credited for restoring the legitimacy of Buddhism in Korea by organizing an army of monks to defend the country from a Japanese invasion, and he is considered a folk hero in Korea.

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The *Mirror of Zen*, like most premodern Korean Buddhist texts, was written in classical or literary Chinese, which was the prestige language of the time, in the same way that Latin was the prestige language used by scholars and clerics in Europe until the eighteenth century. In Chinese, its language and structure echo foundational Zen texts from the Song Dynasty, such as the *Gateless Gate*. Hyon Gak Sunim translated a version in modern Korean by the great monk Boep Jong Sunim. This translation, while excellent, did not have access to the original Chinese characters. Since I've based my translation on these, I've translated to clarify the meaning in accordance with the meaning in Chinese as I see it.

One: Fundamental Principles of the Way

1.

There is only one thing. From the beginning until now, it remains vivid and luminous, unborn and without end. It has no form and no name.

2.

The Buddha and the founders of Zen appeared in this world like waves on a windless ocean.

3.

The dharma has many shades of meaning, and people have varying abilities [to understand it]. This does not obstruct or alter the importance of using whatever provisional systems are useful for teaching it [including sutras, commentaries, kong-ans, and so on].

4.

[Many of us have a tendency to] get strongly attached to names and terms like "mind," "Buddha," "all sentient beings." Don't depend on these names as a way of deepening your understanding. The essence is just like this. If your mind moves, that's already a mistake.

7.

I have one thing to say:

Cut off your thoughts and all your objects of mind,

Sit still and do nothing.

Spring comes, grass grows by itself.



Photo: Sven Mahr

35.

All beings exist in the unborn, yet they think of themselves as existing [in the realm of] “birth,” “death,” and “Nirvana.” It’s as if they see flowers appearing in the empty sky.

36.

Bodhisattvas save sentient beings by leading them to Nirvana. Yet in reality there are no sentient beings and no Nirvana to lead them to.

42.

Pure and unobstructed wisdom, with no hindrance, comes from meditation practice.

43.

During meditation, your mind is able to see how all things arise and disappear in the phenomenal world.

44.

If you let no thoughts appear in response to objects of your perception, this is called the unborn. The unborn can also be thought of as “without thinking” or “without attachments.”

45.

It’s a mistake to think that our way of practicing is intended to help us extinguish our attachments and karma (that is, to attain Nirvana). Our dharma teaches that the mind is originally clear and still, free of all such attachments. This is why we say, “all dharmas are already marked by extinction.”

49.

Keep your original true mind—that is the most important practice.

58.

The Buddha said, “Everything in this impermanent world is burning, and every sentient being in the four directions is engulfed in flames of suffering and bitterness. Eventually the afflictions we suffer as human beings will rob us of our lives.” People of the Way: pay close attention! Practice as if your own head is on fire!

Three: Mantras, Chanting, and Studying Scriptures

50.

On mantras: your practice may help you address your present karma, but your past karma is harder to remove. It requires the spiritual power [of using mantras].

52.

There’s a difference between reciting with your lips and chanting with your whole mind and heart. Merely reciting the Buddha’s name does nothing to help you along the Way.

[*Note:* Be sure to read the entire commentary to section 52—this is the core of Sosan’s teaching on the unity of Zen practice and Amitabul or Pure Land practice.]

54.

If you study the scriptures without keeping up rigorous practice, you could read the entire canon and still not achieve any benefit for yourself or others.

Four: Buddhist Ethics and Right Conduct

38.

Misusing sexual feelings while practicing Zen is like steaming sand to make rice. Being involved in murderous behavior or violence while practicing Zen is like plugging your ears and shouting at the same time. Practicing Zen while tolerating theft and greed is like expecting a leaky cup to fill to the brim. Deceiving yourself and others while practicing Zen is like carving a dried turd to look like incense. Remember: even the wisest person can fall into Mara’s realm.

[*Note:* This list, based on the five precepts, uses single characters to refer to killing, theft, lying, and sexual misconduct, without elaborating on what Sosan has in mind. This is a case where a translator could simply follow the pattern of the original sentences, in which case the first sentence would read, “Embracing perversion while practicing Zen is like . . .” and so on. This brings up a fundamental, and complex, question about how Buddhist ethics—as defined in premodern India, Song-Dynasty China, or seventeenth-century Korea—should be rephrased for contemporary practitioners.]

46.

When a poor person appears before you, give them as much as you can according to your abilities. Reflect that you and the person in front of you share the same fundamental nature, and manifest compassion for them. This is the true meaning of dana.

47.

When someone has done you harm, focus on your quality of mind at that moment. If you allow rage and thoughts of revenge to overtake your mind, you will create enormous obstacles for yourself.

59.

If you constantly crave fame and attention, praise, credit, personal profit—the transitory and insubstantial benefits of “making a name for yourself” in this world—your negative karma will only increase.

69.

When you have hurt someone or made a mistake, apologize immediately. Be mindful of the fact that you have caused negative karma to arise, and take full responsibility for your actions; that is the best use of your energy. Promise that you will correct your behavior and follow through; that way you will cause this negative karma to dissipate. ♦

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