

# Imagine That You've Fallen into Hell Already

Sol Sandperl

A young Dutch man, upon ending some years of training in a Zen monastery in Japan, came to the master to bid him farewell. The master gave him an ornamental Zen sword with the following words: "You have been forged here, just like this sword. The entire planet is a school where the sleeping are awakened. You have been woken up here, enough so that you will never fall asleep again."

And that is what happened at the Providence Zen Center. We were forged so that we can never fall asleep again, and our training continues unbroken in other training centers of life. Zen Master Seung Sahn's words and teaching continue to resonate in our minds and heart, and his work is not lost.

I had first met our founding teacher in New York City. We had perfunctory conversations about various topics. I had no idea what was coming a few years later and how intense his teaching would become when I needed it most.

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It was in the Providence Zen Center in early June of 1980. I had just arrived from Montreal with a small suitcase and a lot of mental baggage. In fact, the mental part had become so severe that I found myself in dire straits, battling for my sanity. Dae Soen Sa Nim was traveling and was away for the first month of my stay. I tried following the schedule, but it was not relieving my sickness. I was in bad shape, I can tell you. Finally, when Zen Master Seung Sahn arrived, I went to see him with the teachers. They said, "This man [me] is social—let him continue working with the schedule and he will come around." Dae Soen Sa Nim looked at me with a penetrating glance and said, "This man needs to go to war with his demons full time. His weapons should be bowing and mantra all day." I agreed immediately. I welcomed a chance to fight.

I began the very next morning, giving myself to the practice full force and did upward of 1,500 bows per day. In between bows, I walked around the dharma room doing 10,000 repetitions or more every day of the mantra I was given (The actual mantra did not matter so much, he would later tell me. It was the concentration on it that counted. You could repeat "Coca-Cola" with total concentration and it would be effective). The closer I got to focusing on the mantra, the more panic-stricken I got. I went to Zen Master Seung Sahn and asked, "Soen Sa Nim, can I do away with the mantra and just do bowing?" He answered with a smile "No, you have to do the mantra also. It is absolutely necessary. Your back-seat driver [your ego] does not want

to give up control. Keep a try-mind and you will soon have success!" With that, he gave me a pat on the back, and I was back at it with renewed vigor.

And it happened that after a few weeks of bowing and repeating the mantra all day—until my jaw was sore—that finally I "landed on square one." The nightmare I was in dropped for one instant, and I realized that all those thoughts weren't me. There was a way out, and the mantra was it. I was still filled with anxiety and still afraid, but I also had an increased desire to go on. I found a path, a technique that would save me, and I was hooked on it. My addictive, obsessive personality worked in my favor when it was being directed in a positive and clear direction—the one that Dae Soen Sa Nim had laid out clearly.

But my demons were very strong and agitated as I was practicing. Now I became afraid of what would happen if I "lost the mantra." Would I fall into hell? I had fallen very far already. So I went to Zen Master Seung Sahn again. I spoke with him often at that time. Whether it was catching him in the hallway or during formal meetings, he always stopped to listen. No matter what. When I told him about my fear of falling into hell because I couldn't keep my mantra, he smiled. Then he said, "Sol, don't worry about that. Imagine that you've fallen into hell already and a demon is beating you. Then just try the mantra 'Kwan Seum Bosal.' Don't worry about getting it, just try it." The advice was a panacea for me. That fear practically disappeared. I knew of course that I could always try Kwan Seum Bosal, and that nothing could prevent me from doing that. The lesson was liberating and helped me along. Dae Soen Sa Nim wanted us to go right into the heart of our imagined fears. It reminds me of the Roman and Greek stoics such as Seneca, who taught that allowing oneself to feel, in sober detail, the worst-case scenario sapped the future of its anxiety-producing power. Zen Master Seung Sahn would tell us to see what our fears are and to go into them. They had no self-nature and were entirely mental creations occurring to an imaginary "I."

A month or so later Dae Soen Sa Nim was giving a talk in the dharma room. He said that fear of death was a necessary prerequisite for those bodhisattvas that had embarked on the journey to enlightenment, and that a bodhisattva's fear of death was intense and immediate and very real. He then said, "Sol experienced this and was very afraid. Now he's strong—no problem." I was grateful to hear him say that. I knew that by *strong* he

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meant strong enough to stay on the path and not get swallowed up by mental demons.

In my time spent in close proximity with Zen Master Seung Sahn, there were a number of times that great teaching came from him directly to me. One example: A number of us were sitting outside having a picnic lunch with Dae Soen Sa Nim on the Zen center grounds on a hot summer afternoon. I was recovering but still felt unsteady. He looked across at me and said, "Your consciousness jumping around." He then imitated a little bag of consciousness, like a little bird, swooshing around above my head. I laughed. That was exactly what was happening. It was such a relief to see that and understand it. While it did not immediately cure that problem, it took the mythology and intimidation out of it. I began to tell the difference between the state of presence in which consciousness was grounded, and I felt strong and down to earth, versus the states of unsteadiness in which thinking was so intense that I felt I left my body and was outside of it. That's probably the origin of idioms like "He was beside himself with rage."

I continued living at Providence Zen Center for another four and a half years, gaining strength and equanimity in the process, which eventually allowed me to move to Boston and enter the business world. Eventually I got married to my soulmate and teacher. We had a son, and I am continuing

my practice, always with my wife, who is also on the path of liberation from the ego. I am grateful to my great Zen Master Seung Sahn, who pulled me out of the fire and set me on the right way. Thank you, Dae Soen Sa Nim.

One afterword: One of the prerequisites for successfully practicing transforming out of despair into balance is having a strong community behind you. I could not have asked for a more supportive group than my teachers and fellow Zen students at the Providence Zen Center from 1980 to 1984.

I fondly and gratefully remember the insightful teaching and solid support that came from George Bowman (Zen Master Bo Mun), who took me under his wing and lifted me up. And Bobby Rhodes (Zen Master Soeng Hyang) and Linc Rhodes JDPSN, who provided great wisdom and solid realism. And I fondly remember Louise Sichel, the head dharma teacher, who kindly put up with the sweat-stained bowing mats. And Shana and Davy Klinger, and Fred Rosen and Sam Rose, Jim Pallett, Domi Stauber, Tony Sager, and a host of others! ♦

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One day, I asked her if there was anything she wanted to discuss. Her eyes snapped open. "Yes," she said. "I want you to tell me how to die."

We talked a little and then she said, "You seem like you have it all together."

She cried a bit. I said, "Are you crying because you wish you had it all together?" She said yes. She was falling from an infinite height to an infinite depth and she didn't know how to live or how to die.

She cried some more. She said, "Do you? Do you have it all together?"

I said, "I don't think that quite reflects my experience. I often wake with anxiety and worry about money. I feel lonely because I have no partner . . ." (I do now, though.) I said, "But I do have a certain peace with my humanity. I don't fight the fact that I don't have it all together. I think I am largely OK with not having it all together."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

I said, "I don't think any of us completely 'have it all together.' We are all struggling with being human. If no one has it all together, in a certain way, that means all of us do have it all together. Not having it all together, if you are human, is in fact having it all together."

She fell asleep then. Something I'd said had relaxed her. I think I gave her permission not to know how live, not to know how to die. I think telling her that that was the human condition made her feel she no longer had to fight.

We fight it, but it's OK not to know. In fact, not know-

ing is our original condition. Stop fighting. Let go. There is nothing to fight. Everything is just like this. We can relax. We have arrived because we never left.

But merely understanding these words cannot help us. We must each attain something for ourselves.

*[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]*

Zen Master Bon Haeng (Mark Houghton) once said to me, "Our practice is about becoming comfortable with not knowing." Is that knowing how to live?

*[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]*

Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Bobby Rhodes) once said to me, "Let me give you the best advice you'll ever get. At the moment of your death, ask, 'How can I help?'" Is that knowing how to die?

*[Raises the Zen stick over his head, then hits the table with the stick.]*

Not knowing, is that life or is that death?

KATZ!

Thank you for listening to me. I hope I didn't go on too long. With any luck, those of us at Providence Zen Center will soon be eating cake! I hope cake appears for those of you on Zoom, too! ♦