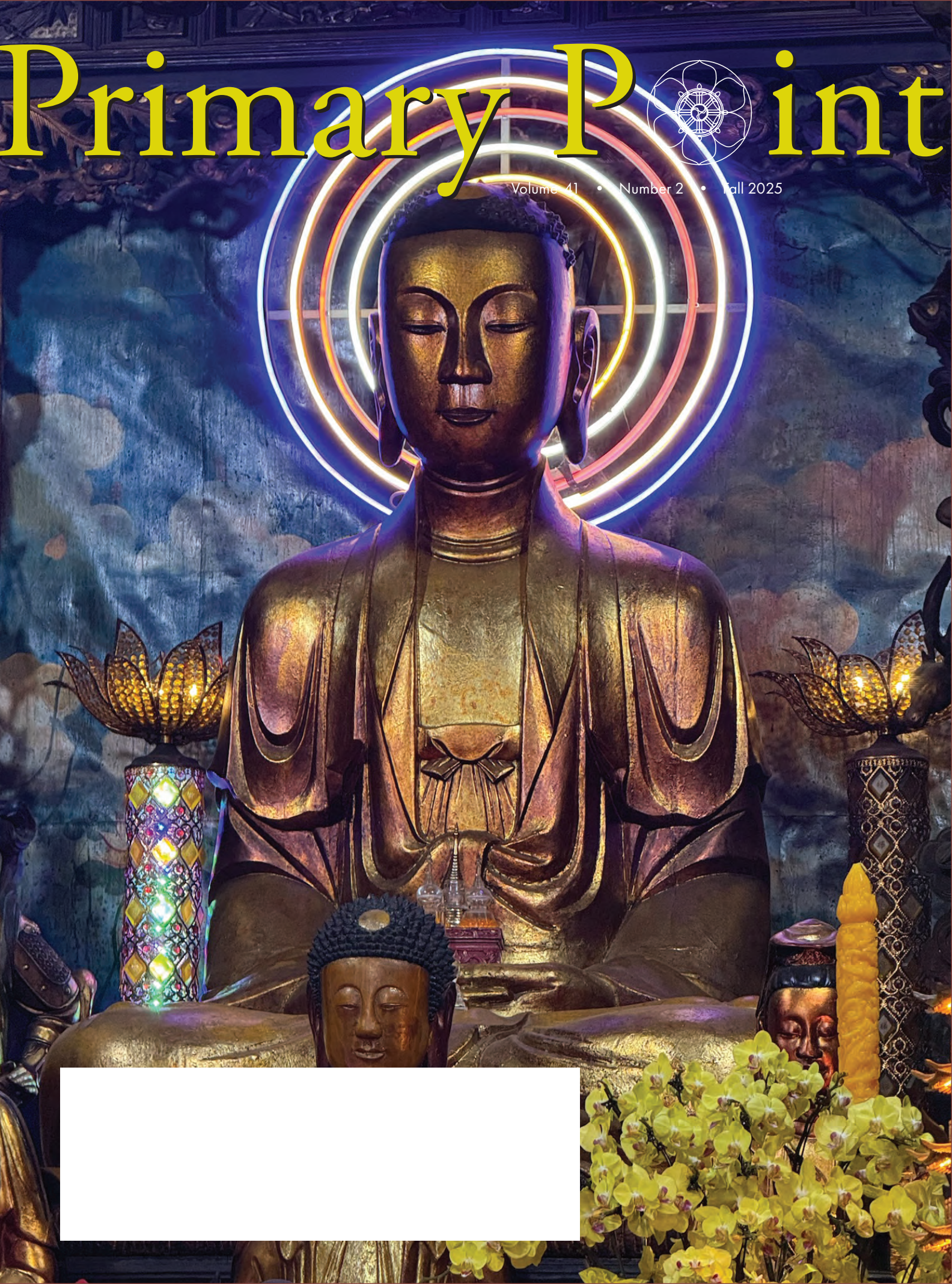


Primary Point



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The Kwan Um School of Zen supports the worldwide teaching schedule of the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sas, assists the member Zen centers and groups in their growth, issues publications on contemporary Zen practice, and supports dialogue among religions. If you would like to become a member of the School and receive *Primary Point*, see page 31. The circulation is 1,400 copies.

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Cover: Statue at Vinh Tràn Pagoda, Tien Giang, Vietnam.
Photo by Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN.

Buddha's Teaching and the Bodhisattva's Teaching

From a talk by Zen Master Seung Sahn, London, April 30, 1978

The letter we just read from *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* was from a professor, and was very complicated: "I am a professor, I have this position, my position, etc." Sometimes having a good position is important, but if it is only for you, this position cannot help you. Also, it cannot help other people. If this good position is not only for me, but only for helping other people, then this position is a great position.

It's like Kwanseum Bosal. Kwanseum Bosal doesn't want earrings, necklaces, beautiful clothes. These are not necessary. If you see pictures of the bodhisattva, they are beautiful, but this is not necessary. But everyone likes beautiful earrings, beautiful necklaces, beautiful clothes. They see the pictures and think, "Oh, wonderful, I believe in this bodhisattva." This mind appears. But Buddha's picture, you know, is nothing at all. Only simple clothes, simple face, no necklace, no earrings. So Buddha's teaching and the bodhisattva's teaching are different.

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Buddha's teaching is only truth. But many people don't like Buddha's teaching. Why? Everyone has desire mind. So when someone is hungry, how does Buddha teach him? "You are hungry, but if you keep hungry mind, no good! Put it all down." This teaching is not possible! First you must give the person food, then he will have enough-mind. Then you can say, "Where does this hungry mind come from? You eat a lot, this is no good. Not good for your body. If you eat too much when you're hungry, you will hurt your stomach, so only eat a little." First give the person food, then give correct teaching. This is necessary. If you say, "You are hungry. This is no good. Put it all down. Then you won't be hungry. Only drink water. For three days, five days, one month, this is possible. Why do you let desire mind appear?" This is not bad teaching, but he will not listen. Nobody will listen.

So Buddha's teaching is the original, true teaching. But the bodhisattva understands all humans' desire minds. Then he first satisfies these desires. Then next, cut: "Desire is no good!" So Buddha's teaching is only straight, only straight. The bodhisattva's teaching is always together teaching, together with human beings. So Buddha's teaching is only intellectual. The bodhisattva's teaching is first emotional, then intellectual. This is different. So when you are teaching someone, try this bodhisattva way. ♦



Photo: Jiri George Hazlbauer JDPSN

TRANSMISSION CEREMONY FOR

Zen Master Dae An

On June 15, 2024, Bogumila Malinowska received transmission from Zen Master Ji Kwang at Brickworks Community Centre in London, U.K., and became Zen Master Dae An.

DHARMA COMBAT

Zen Master Gu Ja: Yes. I am so happy to see you there. You must have got enlightenment. Yes. So I'm curious. This kind of question is not very new, but I'm very curious. And whether you have an enlightenment poem?

Zen Master Dae An: You already understand.

ZMGJ: No, I don't.

ZMDA: Love your golden robe. The flower is yellow and the bus is going fast.

ZMGJ: So enlightenment nonstop. Thank you very much.



Question: It's so wonderful to see you. Congratulations. I have a question. So you're a therapist? My question is, when you're seeing clients, are you also a Zen teacher?

Zen Master Dae An: You already understand.

Q: So I ask you.

ZMDA: Welcome to the session.

Q: Thank you for your teaching. I'll see you in Providence.



Question: So, a question: a spider has eight legs. If I had eight legs, would I move faster?

Zen Master Dae An: You already understand.

Q: OK, but what about you?

ZMDA: Don't check your legs.

DHARMA SPEECH

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

Silence, action, words.

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

No silence. No words. No action.

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

Silence is silence. Words are words, and action is action. How can we make sense of that?

KATZ!

Very important: How we choose. What is needed from us in this moment?

I want to share today a little bit of my history about when I started to think about practicing Zen. Around 1980, I was in my second-year at academy. I had different subjects to study, including literature, grammar and an ancient language.

At that time, I had a teacher whose name was Kazimierz. He was a nineteenth-century literature teacher, and

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Photo: Andrew Wadsworth

he was teaching us about the theoretical side of literature. That might not have been so exciting, but there was something interesting when he was in the room, and when he was teaching. I recognize him as my first Zen teacher.

I sensed something. I couldn't even say to myself, "What was that?" After maybe six months, I asked him, "How do you teach? What techniques do you use?"

He was surprised. "What do you mean?" he asked. "I talk to you. I talk to all of you about the theoretical side of the literature, about poetry."

I asked again, "Can you let me know? How do you teach?" It was difficult for me to ask clearly. I even didn't know what my question meant.

He said, "Leave me alone." He didn't want to talk about it. It was all very interesting. It was also an interesting time in Poland. At that time, we were not entirely allowed to talk about religion. One day, I knocked at his office door and I asked him once more, "Can you tell me, how do you teach?" And then he told me, and he gave me an unusual book: *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Philip Kap-leau. I found out later on, when he had talked a little bit with me, that my teacher was actually one of the first Zen students in Poland, practicing Japanese Zen with a Zen master, Philip Kap-leau.

We had a little bit of discussion, but he didn't want to mix his job as a teacher with teaching me Zen. I was also very busy at that time, so I decided to focus on doing my master's degree.

I asked one of my friends if she knew something about Zen in Poland, and she led me to a place that was not owned by our school but was just rented. I just felt this collective excitement. Everybody was so excited. It was 1981. I had this strong sense of "I want to come back, when I finish university." Then I decided, OK, maybe I should try to find it. But there was no internet back then to help. Yet I did find it. Now it's called the Warsaw Zen Centre.

At the time I visited, Zen Master Seung Sahn was visiting Poland. He was busy, because many people came to see him. I wanted to ask him a question, but he was too busy for there to be time. I got back home a bit disappointed, because there was no space to do that. Maybe I was late, as he was about to depart for the United States.

In 1983, I finished university and then I was looking for a job as a teacher. I was able to find a job right away. It was actually in the same town where I had been a student, at the same high school. At that time in Poland, there was a long Fall break. I thought to myself, for all of my short life—many years, primary school, secondary school, high school, then university—all those years, I was working and studying hard. And finally, I had these two months in which the job was already on the table. I thought, "I have to do something during this break," and I went to Warsaw to sit a one-week retreat.

And that time in 1983, there were not actually teachers

in Europe, but there was also already a small sangha, and they said, "Yeah, OK, you just come, and we will have a retreat. It would be like maybe ten of us, and then we'll see how it will go." I traveled about seven hours by train to get there. It was a difficult time for my body, difficult to maintain stability and silence, and being on the cushion was very physically—and emotionally—demanding.

After the retreat, I wasn't sure what had just happened. But there was something; I didn't know what it was. But it was clear that I could relax by just experiencing silence and this unique human connection. It was the first time in my life there was connection without words. And it really got me very deeply. It was what I needed. The pain wasn't important.

I remember that was an important moment when I experienced this situation. And when I can sit with people and experience silence, my practice is just to say "silence, silence." When we have a retreat, we keep silence unless it's necessary to exchange some information about the retreat.

Behind the words of my teacher Kazimierz, I finally understood the power of silence. That's what we call "Before words, before speech." There was not much actual explanation. I could clearly sense that something was behind his teaching. And sometimes I don't know if he even noticed it himself.

This is amazing. It was so interesting, when he finally told me that he was practicing meditation. From this little bit, there sprouted something about silence, about connection, and reading something behind the words.

I want to bring up a story from the seventeenth century. You might be familiar with haiku. Haiku is a type of poetry that is very short, usually three lines. In Japanese, it's five syllables, seven syllables, and five syllables. So, there was a famous young person who was well educated in seventeenth-century Japan. His name was Basho. If you look for haiku, Basho's name always comes up. He was quite amazing, and his memory was impressive. He read a lot, studied a lot, and was interested in Buddhism. One day, he decided to go to a Zen master, and there was that first moment of meeting. We are all familiar with the feeling, when we meet with the teacher the first time. As I had been a student for a long time, I understood how he felt.

He asked some questions, and it was important for him to say, "You know, I read this; I read that; I study and I know. I know this from history; I know that from art." He went on and on, and he couldn't stop talking about how much he knew.

Finally, the Zen master said to him, "Now give me one sentence that is yours. Don't look to your books. Don't look to your memory. Don't look to your past experience."

Basho was surprised and stuck. And he just couldn't find anything. The teacher kept saying, "Give me! Give me!" He prompted him over and over.

Then, at one moment, he came up with something:

“Still pond, still pond. Frog jumps, the splash.” Actually, this is what he saw and heard. Outside the window there was a garden, and there was a small pond, and a frog had jumped in.

And the Zen master said, “That’s wonderful!”

This little moment, when he was completely in the moment—it’s very interesting. Where did he find this? Where did he find this point? His teacher asked a question, and that helped Basho to reach his before-thinking mind, his before-analyzing mind. Sometimes we say these experiences are coming from don’t-know mind. Maybe he wasn’t 100 percent conscious where he got this answer from, but he was sure, and this beautiful haiku came out.

Perhaps he didn’t even think they were his own words, only that words appeared. And sometimes we call these “alive words.” There was actually in the past a Zen school called Alive Words.

One more story. This one is about a person living in the eleventh century, who was also quite young. He was unusually bright, so he was quickly employed by the government. Because of that, he was always traveling. He was well-educated and very clever. He also wanted to explore Buddhism. So he went to different Buddhist temples. At that time, Buddhism was quite well developed in China.

He was always asking questions because he could memorize many things. He could memorize what was on page 145 and compare it with what was on page 233. So, he would go around and ask questions: “Tell me, what is the teaching on page 245?” Nobody could do it; they just couldn’t give him answers. So he was proud, and he memorized everything he wanted.

There he was, going out with all this knowledge about Buddhism. Finally, at one point, people started to call him Mr. Scales. He could weigh the mind or the memory of anyone, all the people around. But one day, someone he was talking to told him, “You may try this Zen master. You might have a problem with him. You might try to challenge him.” So he decided to go there and do it. He actually came into the dharma room without waiting. It was traditional to wait until someone opened the door, but he just came in and sat down with his back to the Buddha.

This was quite arrogant behavior in this tradition. The master came and said to him, “Oh, such a great and famous person has come. Please, welcome.”

And then Mr. Scales said, “Yeah, I came to see you. I’m just traveling around. I have my important jobs. And then I just came to see you. It’s a good opportunity for you to meet me to exchange something with you.”

And all of a sudden, this Zen master shouted, “KATZ!” and asked, “Tell me, Mr. Scales, how heavy is this?”

And then Mr. Scales looked in his mind to all the many pages and pages he had studied. He just couldn’t



Photo: Andrew Wadsworth

find it. So, that was the beginning of when he started to open his mind. He got stuck, and even his great memory couldn’t help. His clever mind couldn’t help him. That’s the beginning of his path of practicing.

Before that, he did lots of reading. But then, from this moment, he started to actually practice until he stopped checking. That was the beginning of his don’t-know mind.

So, I guess I have more stories, but now I will try to embrace all this, our stories, and my life story—the story of how we get to a don’t-know mind.

They present some teaching. My question is: What is that? What actually are all these stories about?

KATZ!

This little or big question, which may appear randomly, or someone may put on us and push us to look into it, is very important. And this keeping before-thinking mind is very important, too. So today, I presented my first dharma talk. Thank you for listening. And thank you for being here. ♦

Buddha's Birthday Poem 2025

Zen Master Gu Ja

Since time immemorial
How many times have there been spring,
summer, autumn, and winter?
How many mountains have arisen and
become plains?
How many flowers, bees, trees, and people
have lived and died?

A child is born, grows older, and awakens
to the question:
Will I die too?
Is there a meaning to all this, and if so,
what?
Why fight? Why be unhappy?
Why so much suffering?
Why, why, why?

Spinning around in circles, searching for
an answer like a frog trapped in a bucket.

Boom!

Suddenly the bucket falls apart, the frog
jumps out.

See for the first time with the naked eye
the blue sky, the brown earth, the vast
ocean,
people loving, people hating, people
fighting, killing, dying . . .

Realize for the first time
That's me, that's all me! This sky, this
earth, this ocean, all this love, this hate,
this killing,

And the dog.

Please don't beat the dog, I beg you, for I am
that hungry dog too.
Feed it with loving-kindness so it doesn't bite
in despair.
And bring him back home.

I still hear Zen Master Seung Sahn's voice
saying, "When I die, I will be reborn in
hell," and his question, "Will you come
with me?"

Hell is indeed the birthplace of all Buddhas.
Where else would there be Buddhas, and
where would the work be done?

By just doing it,
each time a Buddha comes into life with
hands outstretched:
How can I help you?

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Photo: Marek Bohdalek

Precepts Revisited

Zen Master Hyon Ja (Alma Potter)

Recently Arne Schaefer JDPSN and I officiated a precepts ceremony in Helsinki, Finland. Two wonderful people—Julia and Harri—took the five precepts. They prepared a beautiful environment, invited friends, and offered delicious food. The ceremony was very important to them. It was a great honor for them to take the precepts, and it was a great honor for Arne PSN and me to officiate. The five precepts ceremony can be considered one of the most important and relevant ceremonies in committing to living your life as a true human being. So, I looked forward to their ceremony.

In preparation, I reread the traditional text we always use to guide the ceremony. I especially looked at the five precepts and was struck by the wording, which made me wonder once again about the impact of the wording on those taking precepts.

I considered the wording used in the traditional precepts and thought it would be interesting to look deeper. As I did so, I expanded the possible ways that each precept pointed to. The first precept in our traditional text is:

I vow to abstain from taking life. Killing roots out our seeds of love and mercy. To kill another is to feast on one's friends and relatives. Some day we shall be in one of the three painful realms in payment for our killing, for it is by bestowing life that we receive human life in return.

In other words, perceiving that *dukkha* arises from taking life, I vow to revere, protect, respect, and cherish all beings, sentient and insentient, woven together across all time and space.

I wondered about the word *killing*. We do not have to limit the definition of killing to mean killing another human being. What about killing our soil through overuse of pesticides, or killing the rainforests to use the land for monocultures, or growing soy to feed cows, which then are killed to feed human beings? What about abusing our oceans and using them as giant garbage dumps, thereby killing them?

I remember when I was a very new student I visited the Zen Center in Los Angeles to meet Zen Master Seung Sahn. While there, one of the monks asked me if I would be willing to cook spaghetti for the dinner that night. I filled the pots and started heating the water. At that point, the monk returned and told me that Zen Master Seung Sahn wanted all of us to go to a restaurant for dinner. I asked him what I should do with the water. He replied with a smile: "Don't kill it." This impacted me greatly. So, I took the water and poured it on the grass outside.

The traditional text mentions the three painful realms in which we will be someday as payment for our killing. These painful realms are part of the cycle of samsara. The first realm is the realm of hell, where one experiences intense suffering

and torment. The second is the hungry ghost realm, where one suffers from insatiable hunger and thirst. Those who are there are very thin yet have huge stomachs, symbolizing unfulfilled desires. The third realm is the animal realm, where one exists in ignorance and is steered by instinctual behavior leading to suffering. Those in this realm lack higher consciousness and live in fear of being hunted and eaten.

Knowing all of this about the first precept, the suffering we face from causing death is clear. In this way we understand the teaching of samsara as taught in the early days of Buddhism. How can we apply these words to our time in 2025?

With our try mind, we strive to revere, protect, respect, and cherish the existence of all beings, both sentient and insentient (minerals, water, earth, even time and space). The traditional words used in precepts ceremonies may seem harsh, but they are better understood as powerful guardians linking actions to the harsh consequences of those times, rather than as punishment. In that way such wording links us to centuries-old traditions in Korea, which were useful in the days that they were written for. As our practice grows, so grows our wisdom. As we allow this precept to be consistently followed, our minds focus on the deep implications of taking life and of killing. Our practice gives strength to the perception of our actions, and following the precept in turn guides our life choices.

The second precept:

I vow to abstain from taking things not given. The taking of things not given cuts off the roots of virtue and wisdom; attaining ease, we shall lose this ease. By merely desiring anything of another, we are faced with animal rebirth in the future.

The second precept can also be expressed in this way: Perceiving that *dukkha* arises from desire, I vow not to take things not freely given. I vow to generously share my life and possessions, so that all sentient beings might have food, medicine, and comfort. I vow to help and be compassionate toward all beings—sentient and insentient.

The traditional way of wording the second precept raises the question, What are the consequences of being reborn as an animal? It is thought that being an animal means existing in ignorance and being steered by instinctual behavior and experiencing great fear, being preyed upon and lacking higher consciousness. We don't even have to wait to be reborn to have the feeling that we are steered by instinctual behavior or lack of higher consciousness. In a sense, we are already in the animal realm when we take things not given. Our practice allows our clear mind to immediately notice when we move away from this precept. We directly perceive

the suffering we cause ourselves when we live as if we are sleepwalking, living in fear and shame that we might be discovered as having taken or stolen something.

We can use this precept as strong guidance to be generous, striving to make sure that all sentient beings have enough food, medical care, and a safe place to live. Additionally, this precept guides us toward humility in how we talk, act, and care for others. Rather than profiling ourselves endlessly, we can be generous with our time and begin to listen deeply to others.

The third precept:

I vow to abstain from misconduct done in lust. Unchastity cuts off the seed of purity. Impurity is ultimately of the pure dharmakaya. Look rather at the cauldron, for therein are all those who in future years break this precept.

In other words, perceiving that *dukkha* arises from lustful misconduct, I will cherish, love, and respect all beings. I will act to reveal the buddha nature of all sentient and insentient beings.

In the traditional text the word *lust* is used. Lust implies intense longing or craving. It can also imply enthusiasm or eagerness. It can also mean intense or unbridled sexual desire. In extreme cases lust can trigger and sustain addiction.

The traditional text, brings in two additional concepts: unchastity and purity. To be chaste points to purity in thought and actions; to be pure means to be clean and spotless. It can also point to relinquishing sexual relations as some monastics and clergy vow to do. Our minds continually entertain concepts. Chastity, purity and misconduct can mean entirely different things to different people, as they rely on concepts of who we are and what boundaries we have. Meditation opens the door to wisdom when it sensitizes us to the boundaries involved in the concepts we hold on to.

But we would be restricting the third precept by pointing only to misconduct done in lust. We can become addicted to and overindulge in any sensual pleasures—gambling, food, drugs, material things, fame, power, money. We spend our lives intensely suffering because of addiction or because we desire things we do not have.

The fourth precept:

I vow to abstain from lying. Lying cuts off the seed of the truth; heaven does not allow the cheating of the saints, nor lying against the holy ones. Should liars avoid the hell where their tongues are ripped out, then they will be reborn as birds, in recompense for their evil.

Or, in other words: Perceiving that *dukkha* arises from deceit, I vow to abstain from lying. Understanding that deceit undercuts the bonds of trust, I vow to speak words that nurture and heal. I vow to support the roots of empathy and truth, and to use speech to promote harmony, unity, and peace.

The harsh tone of such traditional wording connects to the severe consequences that existed for lying when this precept was originally written. Tongues being ripped out sounds horrible and reason enough never to lie again. Lying is not

OK in today's time, but back then it was considered downright evil. Being reborn as a bird might not sound totally detrimental in today's times—it might be interesting to be reborn as a regal eagle or maybe a nightingale—but in the time when this precept was so worded, being reborn as a bird was seen as exile from the world of humans.

When is it a lie? I remember taking the five precepts with Zen Master Su Bong in Berlin in 1993. I remember speaking this vow loudly but thinking that “I don't lie anyway, so this one is easy.” However, I immediately noticed the day after the ceremony that sometimes I “adjusted” what I said ever so slightly to look better, or perhaps I was embarrassed to tell the truth as it was. This was not easy to admit to myself, and it's one of the reasons why it can be hard to keep the precepts in the beginning. But soon I began to quickly notice the exact moment when I was about to give excuses or adjust the truth as I saw it. Through this hard practice of paying attention, I gained courage and strength. Now, when I catch myself wanting to fudge a bit, I remember the ceremony in Berlin and the vow I spoke there. I am grateful for that ceremony.

The fifth precept:

I vow to abstain from intoxicants, taken to induce heedlessness. Liquor cuts off the roots of wisdom; generation after generation, we remain in a stupor, as one drunk. The Buddha teaches that one who does not keep these five precepts shall, in a future life, lose their human stature.

We can also look at this precept in this manner: Perceiving that *dukkha* arises from heedlessness, I vow to abstain from intoxicants taken with the intent to obscure the clarity and empathy needed to help others. I vow to abstain from activity that blinds me to the results of thoughts, speech, and action.

I remember asking Zen Master Wu Bong many years ago about a student who wanted to take precepts but first asked if it was OK to occasionally drink more than a few glasses of wine because in her country this was tradition. Wu Bong SSN simply said, “No problem. She can take precepts that include drinking wine.” I had been so sure he would say no. At first, I was disturbed, because I remember my sweet uncle who drank alcohol day after day until he died. But through the years I have come to understand that our precepts require all our intelligence, diligence, and honesty. We must stay vigilant and know when we can break the precepts and when we should keep them. If we are not sure what to do, then keep the precepts. But sometimes it is life-affirming to break a precept.

Alcohol and other drugs are not the only substances we can abuse or which can cause heedlessness. Many people harm themselves and those around them by eating huge amounts of food or smoking cigarettes. Others spend vast amounts of energy and money amassing useless things, and many glue themselves to social media. Heedlessness is like thick, dark clouds that obscure the light of our bodhisattva mind and cause us to lose the clarity needed to assist and be present in the moment.

(Continued on page 26)

Suddenly, You Are Always a Teacher

A Conversation with Jiří George Hazlbauer JDPSN

An interview conducted by Veronique Struis and Boaz Franklin

When did your journey with Buddhism start?

I have been looking for the meaning of life for as long as I can remember. In puberty, life took me away from this kind of question, but this nagging question in the back of my mind—"What is life about?"—remained.

I entered high school in Czechoslovakia under the Communist regime, but I graduated from high school after the regime changed to a democracy, which was an important change for many of us. Suddenly, this question—"What is life about?"—was even stronger,

because after the regime change, we knew much less what to do with our lives. We suddenly had so many opportunities, but many things were not defined yet, and we had no idea what was next.

So, I started working at seventeen in construction and quickly started my own company providing work for up to fifty people on some construction projects. And from this not knowing what to do with life and being told by my family that I was not going to achieve anything in life, suddenly within a year I had a successful company.

At that time, there was mandatory military service, and I ended up going into civil service at a home for the elderly instead. Seeing old age, and seeing people die, returned me to the question, "What is this life about?" After I finished civil service, I returned to my company, and I just felt this emptiness of life. At twenty-one, I had achieved everything I ever imagined.

My interest in the spiritual resurfaced, and at one point I just hit the wall. I gave my company to the people who worked for me and gave all of my belongings to my friends. I started traveling, looking for a spiritual teacher. During my travels I stayed with the Bedouins in Israel, and during that time I narrowed down my interest from any kind of spirituality to Buddhism and slowly focused on Zen. During this time, I read the book *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* by Zen Master Seung Sahn; it was the clearest teaching I had read so far in any book.

As I am a slow reader, when I finally got to the end of the book, I found an address for the Kwan Um School of Zen in the Czech Republic, and, instead of continuing my travels to Asia to find a spiritual teacher, I returned to the Czech Republic.

After I returned, I went to the address and I met Misa Mazacova, who lived there. She practiced with the Kwan Um School, but the Zen center was no longer there. She still tells new people our exchange after I rang her doorbell. I said I wanted to practice, and she said, "But this is my apartment. We don't have a Zen center." And I said, "What? You don't have any Zen center? Well, I'm going to build you one."

And about three weeks later, there was a retreat with Zen Master Dae Kwang in Brno, which I joined, and I never looked back. And then, through together action,



Photo: Courtesy of Kwan Um Zen Czech Republic

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we had the Zen center in Prague about three years later.

How did your relationship with your family and friends affect your direction?

My father died around a year before I joined the school, which was also one of those things that made me question life. Shortly after that, one of my best friends overdosed. So I had two significant deaths in a really short period of time, which was part of the process.

I didn't have a good relationship with my father, but I was fortunate enough to heal it just before he died. My mom was confused about what I was doing and especially the giving everything away part. But after a few years, she kind of got over it and in some ways understood not necessarily why I did it, but she said one thing that was really important to me: "I don't understand what you are doing and why, but you are the happiest person I know. And for me as a mother, that is the most important thing."

My friends were confused because I kind of switched directions almost overnight, which may have been a little extreme. When I felt I needed to do something, I did it. Many of my friends left me because they didn't understand what I was doing. And I don't blame them. If I look at myself at that time, I was probably not necessarily a pleasant person. I was trying to show everybody how wonderful this Zen thing is and how they should all do it. I just completely left all of my friends, family, everything, and I started my Zen life. And then through that, once I got a better hold on myself, on the practice and how it relates to this world, many of my friends started coming back into my life.

What attracted you to Zen Master Seung Sahn's teachings?

What attracted me to this teaching the most was the emphasis on real life. I like to bring our practice to day-to-day life. Meditation is not the point of Zen. It is a tool to wake up and help this world, to be a more compassionate and helpful person—this had a really strong attraction to me. And the emphasis on helping this world was also important to me. But mainly it was the emphasis on applying our practice in everyday life, which I didn't encounter in many other spiritual teachings.

How does that manifest in the way you teach?

I keep saying, "What is this?" to people. And yes, formal practice is important. But the point of formal practice is not the formal practice itself. I emphasize this point often, because it can be confusing for people, especially when you are starting with Zen practice. You often see people getting stuck, thinking they only need to do practice, and they give up on their friends, they give up on their families. They actually often give up on their responsibilities in life. And that is not our teaching.

I understand that, for many people, there is a need to take a step away from the situation they are in and create

a new one. I did it as well, in an extreme way. So, I sometimes say that you can do this, but it's not necessary. If you need this experience, sure, do whatever you want, but it is not necessary, especially now, with the online access we have to teachers around the world.

What was your path after you established the Prague Zen Center?

I wanted to practice, and the closest place to practice formally was Warsaw. So, I went to Warsaw and sat my first Kyol Che there. There, I saw a poster for a Kyol Che at the Providence Zen Center, and it showed the question, "What am I?" which I really liked from the very beginning. I received a scholarship, learned some basic English, and went to the Providence Zen Center. Because I was a professional carpenter, which they needed, I ended up spending almost eleven years there. During this time, I remained involved in activities in the Czech Republic and would fly back to organize Kyol Ches, always returning to the United States.

What brought you back to Europe?

I was not planning to come back to Europe. I never felt strongly about being Czech. What happened was we had a sangha weekend in Brno, and a sangha member told me that he felt that all senior students had left the sangha. I realized I needed to do something about it and believed that I had enough credibility in the sangha to build the Zen center we always wanted to have.

So we decided we were going to try, and I started looking for a place for the Zen center. And meanwhile, they voted me in as abbot of Providence Zen Center. Since I already made the promise to the Czech sangha, I told the board in Providence that I would serve as abbot for only one year. Meanwhile, we purchased the place in Vražné. I returned to the Czech Republic and started building the Zen center.

When you returned, you were not a teacher. How did things change after you became a teacher?

I did not really have an ambition to be a teacher, and when you become a teacher, suddenly all of the sangha are your students. With the new people, this is easier, but if there is someone with whom you have practiced for the last fifteen years, it is a shift in the relationship. It took a while for both the sangha and me to adjust to the fact that I am the teacher now.

What kind of growth happened to you when you became a teacher? What does that require of you in relationship to the sangha?

As a teacher, you can be friendly, but you cannot be real friends or buddies in many ways. So, one day I could tell them whatever is happening with me. And then, after I became a teacher, I could no longer do so. It was kind of a wake-up call, as suddenly there were things that were just not appropriate for a teacher to say or do, as people see you differently. This shift was kind of difficult for me, as

the sangha was pretty much my whole life at that point, and I felt I had lost my support network.

Suddenly, no matter what you do, you are always a teacher. It was difficult in many ways, but also it was a great teaching for me to be fully aware of every moment. So every moment, we have correct situation, relationship, function. I really had to learn that, and to be more aware of it all the time I am around the sangha, which, of course, is necessary in any situation we are in.

Do you feel this means you lost some of your authenticity with this change?

I do not think so. I mean, it can feel like that, but like in some ways you are always in some kind of role. Like when you put on your nice dress to go to the opera, are you losing your authenticity? Or are you just acting according to the situation? So I'm authentic to the situation I am in. I'm not trying to pretend to be somebody else, but I also need to see what is my relationship and function in that situation.

When I go out with my old friends, I can be me without any filter. It is wonderful, and sometimes that is something you need to do. But I don't see that as inauthentic. I see that as being there for the people you are with, like we change our behavior depending on the situation we are in.

Every teacher has their own strengths and their own direction in their teachings. How would you summarize your teaching style?

I think my biggest strength, which I definitely got from my mother, is I am extremely social, and I really love people. For me, human relationships are the most important thing there is. So sangha was always important, and I may not have been in this school if there had been no sangha, or if the emphasis were more on the teachers and less on the sangha. So, I always felt that the sangha is an essential part of the practice. I was trying to build the sangha before I was a teacher. And as a teacher, I am really trying to focus on the sangha. It's essential to help them to develop their relationships with one another and the relationships with the larger community.

And, of course, there is my engagement with other religions. I was always inspired by what Zen Master Seung Sahn used to do with other religions. I was already doing some interfaith activities when I was in Providence. And, when I returned to the Czech Republic, I really wanted to do something like this. Together with some other people, I started a nonprofit organization for interfaith dialogue. And nowadays I work with multiple orders within the Catholic church, different Protestant groups, and some Jewish groups. This opened up new opportunities for us, including teaching about Buddhism in multiple universities, doing retreats with Christians. We have an active exchange between us and mainly the Catholic orders. It's inspiring for our practice, but also it allows us to be part of the broader society. It also helps our sangha members to connect their practice with their regular life.

One of the things I have seen is the disconnect between sangha life and what we call normal life. The fact that families of sangha members would hardly ever visit any of our events, like there is a sangha and there is the rest of the life. I am trying to create situations where it is encouraged to cross these barriers. So we organize family events in Vražné, work retreats, we engage with Catholics, and so on. And we can learn from the Catholics—for example, their engagement with their families or with the larger Czech society is much more extensive because they have been in Europe for centuries, unlike Buddhism, so they know what they are doing, and we have a lot to learn from them.

It strengthens our practice. Not just that we have more possibilities to practice, but that we see different practices. And because we create this more inclusive environment, our sangha members are more likely to be able to go on a retreat because their families see it is not a problem. It is a part of normal life.



Photo: Courtesy of Kwan Um Zen Czech Republic

The connection with the Catholic church, is that also because it's more connected to Czech society, or have you considered engaging with other social organizations?

The Czech society is primarily atheist. They do not really see the point of Buddhism. There is often a disconnect between the larger society and religion in general. And if they are inclined to work with a religion, it would be likely an already established religion. So for me, the main thing is that these Catholic people we work with are absolutely wonderful practitioners. They are great people, good teachers. They are like dharma brothers and sisters, but just within a different religion.



Photo: Courtesy of Kwan Um Zen Czech Republic

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And as I said, it was difficult for me to lose my peers in some ways. Suddenly, I had peers who are going through the same things, just in a different religion. If you are a priest in a monastery, and you are in charge of your congregation, it is really similar to being a teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen.

We shared our problems, which are very similar problems, and I heard how they deal with them. And so again, it helped me to grow as a person, as a teacher, and it allowed us to start working together. And many of them see there is a need for Buddhists to be within our society. We can be helpful, but we need somebody to open the doors for us. And so often that is what they do for us. This is also how we started working with universities, got into the media, and collaborated on different books about spirituality. As a result, we are more seen. And that again allows us to do more things and grow our sangha. Our sangha members are happy with the opportunities they have. And we feel like a community which belongs to the larger community of Czech society.

What is your vision for the Czech Sangha?

My vision is that we will survive to the next generation. We really need to be inspiring enough for the next generation to join us and continue with this teaching. That is the biggest aspiration at the moment, because I believe that as a school we struggle to bring in young people. Sometimes they come, but to keep them, that does not seem to be something we are really successful at. And so that is at this moment my biggest focus—to find a way to connect with the new generation, to show them that what we are offering is something which can be helpful to them. And, of course, helpful to the whole society.

And I would love for the sangha to grow so we are able to do more things and have more retreat centers. And it is really important that it is not just about what it brings to me or to the sangha, but what it brings to the larger human society and how it is relevant to today's life. And how to connect what we are doing with the people who are around us.

Do you feel like something new is needed to attract the younger generations?

I think we should have really deep and regular debates on this topic within our school.

For example, I do love the robes, but I can see how, for a Czech atheist who just wants to learn meditation, it can be off-putting to come to a place where they have to wear Korean robes. We do have a great teaching around it, but they can go two streets over where they would do very similar meditation, and they do not wear the robes.

To me, things are perfect the way they are, because I grew up in it, and I am fine with it. But we really should look into what is needed, because that has been done through the centuries in every culture where Buddhism was introduced. It adapted to the new culture. And, to me, what Zen Master Seung Sahn did was great, but I do not think we should think that it is finished. I think it was just the first step for Zen to take root and become a part of our societies. We do need to really find a way to survive into the future.

We should be open to the possibilities of change and see that the change is not necessarily bad. And even differences may not be bad. For example, if you look at Asia, Hong Kong and Korea are quite different. And, at the same time, it is still distinguishably Kwan Um. I can see that there is an American flavor of Kwan Um and a Czech flavor and German and Israeli. I do not see a problem, because each of these cultures has something which is unique to them. And I think that we should be open-minded enough to recognize that and be able to accept those cultures, and adapt to their needs.

Any final words?

It has been an incredible journey with the school, with a bunch of ups and downs. Anytime I am visiting any of our sanghas, I cannot believe that this is my life and that I can share it with every one of you. And the question remains how to share it with the rest of the world, how to make our school visible enough that our teaching can reach through society, to make it accessible to everyone who sees this as their path; to see us as part of daily life, which I can see in Asia or here in Europe with certain traditions that have been around for a long time; and to meet people where they are. ♦

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Veronique Struis started practicing at the Cambridge Zen Center in 2011. She then lived and practiced several years in Europe, and is now back in the Boston area with her two children. She has been a part of the European Primary Point editing team since 2019, and this is her last contribution as European editor.

How Old Are You, Really?

Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN

Old Age

These two words, *old age*, carry a lot of weight of meaning, assumptions, and sometimes a lot of fear. When people ask us how old we are, we usually won't say, "Why are you making me old?" In most societies, birthdays are cherished milestones, celebrated with candles, cake, and a sense of joy. From childhood to old age, certain expectations, privileges, and restrictions are attached to these numbers we wear like badges. For children, age is often a symbol of opportunity. Each passing year unlocks something new—being old enough to ride a bike, to stay up late, or to experience the excitement of becoming a teenager. Children eagerly await certain ages, yearning to cross the thresholds that grant them freedom or responsibility. But as we grow older, our perception of age often shifts. Age becomes less about anticipation and more about limitation. What is old age, really? Is it the wrinkling of the skin, the slowing of the steps, the forgetting of names and faces? Is it decline or loss?

The Sight of the Old Man

The Buddha's teachings and stories often touch on old age, pointing to impermanence, suffering, and conditioned existence. One of the most moving moments that led Siddhartha Gautama to seek enlightenment was his encounter with old age. In the story of the four sights, Siddhartha lived a sheltered life as a prince, protected from the realities of human existence. But on a rare journey outside the palace walls, he encountered four sights that changed his perspective: an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and an ascetic. The sight of the old man made a deep impression on Siddhartha. He realized that aging is an inevitable part of life—no one can escape it. This realization led him to question the nature of life and set him on his spiritual journey.

Meeting Old Age Within

For most of us, encountering old age, inside or out, doesn't lead us to a spiritual journey. On the contrary, when we notice the body changing, we may create and cling to an idea, a story about ourselves being old, or still not as old. We notice that the senses don't work as they used to, that movement slows down, that pain appears. Sometimes it may seem that the body itself is falling apart. There may be a desire to remain useful, not to be dependent on others. Our cognitive abilities also change—memories flicker, here one moment, gone the next. Words sometimes escape us, leaving silence. Do we notice a tendency to cover it up, to push it aside, to pretend it isn't happening? We may struggle to function as we once did in

our families, communities, and society at large. Resistance to these changes comes quickly and may even turn into bitterness—a fear of losing "our" place, of being seen as a burden. A feeling of being unworthy—a special waste and so on. And, of course, this will affect our relationships, changing the way we relate to those around us.



Photo: Marek Bohdálék

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How Old Do We Truly Feel?

Around birthdays, anniversaries, or other significant events, people often ask how old we truly feel. How old is this thing, this body, that is sitting here, breathing the air, feeling the chair underneath? When we are watching a good movie, time can fly like an instant, and when we are in the hospital, even a minute can feel like a day. If you are reading these words right now, someone might take the time to tell you that it took you three seconds to read this sentence. We can measure time with a watch, but your actual reading experience has nothing to do with the number *three* or the word *seconds*. So what is it really?

Is Old Age More Glue on the Label of the Self?

We are so used to squeezing life into a number of years, a label, an age, or a time. Beneath the surface of these labels, there is something much bigger to be seen—something timeless, something beyond age altogether. Something without separation between the aging body and whatever feels it right now. Can that be revealed in this moment as you read these words? Our stories about ourselves appear so quickly in one form or another. As a Buddhist, as a Zen practitioner, as a parent, as a businessperson, as a young agile adult, or as a homeless old man or woman. Can we shed light on this? It seems that we are constantly trying to boost our self stories over and over again, but we don't want to look at them. We sweep them under the carpet of thinking and opinions and ideas. Or we numb our senses with the ten thousand favorite distractions. Can we spot even a hairbreadth of that self story when it shows itself? Or is that nit-picky? When the nits of the self are truly seen—and seen through—without evaluation or condemnation, then they may disappear by themselves. Then, what are we without our self story? Can we jump into don't-know and just be with whatever is left then?

Where Is the Place of Old and Young?

In many societies, older people are viewed with respect and have their respected place in these communities. In business, younger people are often preferred over older people, perhaps primarily for economic reasons. In religious communities, elders are often seen as having more wisdom than younger people. Is there something valuable about being an elder in a community, or is it just a practical matter of protection and power? When an older person speaks and their experience echoes, there is a different weight that resonates. There is an important place for that.

Is there a time to step back and let others take over? In many families, there is an issue of getting elders to give up driving or living alone. Are we stubbornly holding on to our skills and overestimating our own abilities? We may even have a vision of our own ending. Perhaps a fantasy of being in possession of all our

bodily functions until we fall over and die. Can this be seen? And how much space should the younger generation give to the older generation? What is the responsibility of the young to the old and the old to the young? It is a living kong-an, where one part of the seal is not enough. Only when both parts, the young and the old, fit together is it complete. I remember a young student always checking on Zen Master Dae Kwang and reminding him to take his medicine. And on another occasion, a student said to Zen Master Dae Kwang, "I really messed up the ceremony," and, without missing a beat, the Zen master replied, "I'm sorry, I didn't teach you well."

How Do We Deal with People Who Get Old?

Are we stressed or afraid when we meet older people? Going to a retirement home can feel like a draining of energy. Listening to the stories of old people can feel like a record that keeps repeating itself—the same stories over and over again. Do we want old people out of our lives by abandoning them in hospitals, nursing homes, or shoving them off to other relatives? Can we meet a person directly without an age, an idea in between, without the wrapping, but as they really are? To listen to them, no matter how many times we have heard a certain story. To perceive the whole atmosphere, as if it were for the first time. There's a certain freshness here—not one tied to any kind of memory, but one born of the raw and unrefined aliveness: the dance of sunlight on a face, the tone of a voice, the way the hands are moving or resting, the warmth of a quiet moment shared.

Can we approach getting old—in ourselves and in others—with curiosity, tenderness, and a willingness to let it reveal itself? Let's remain present and curious about whatever it brings—the pain, the fear, and the lack of control. Getting old and meeting old—are they the same or different? Here is an old story that brings it to a clear point:

The scholar Zhang asked the master Yangzhou, "How do I endure old age?"

"How old are you?" asked the master.

"Eighty," answered the scholar.

"That's pretty old," said the master.

"So how do I endure it?" asked the scholar.

Yangzhou said, "For the first thousand years, you're not even alive."

Sometimes, we all come into contact with leaving, declining, or losing energy. Sometimes we encounter gaining, increasing, or enhancing energy. Can we *not* attach to either one? Not be separate from whatever appears. Without resistance and division. What is there to be endured? Please listen carefully, right now. What is there? ♦

Facing Change Beyond Change

Jan Sendzimir JDPSN

For forty years, my “day job” was focused on helping communities adapt to change: sudden outbursts of insects, flooding, or fire would add shock to the chronic stress of drought or economic decline. Climate change has only added to the anxious uncertainty arising from ever greater impacts. In our Zen community, I am often asked, “How can we follow our true direction and help others in this time of great change?”

Change greets us daily from every direction. We recognize change by how much we work to deny it. We fix, clean, replace, heal, or grow things just to keep our world from changing too fast. But even if our little corner stays reasonably still, the larger world sometimes engulfs us with change so vast and powerful that all we can do is endure as the current carries us to a world we may not recognize. These days we often hear people say, “I no longer recognize my world.”

Many see our changing climate like this. The seasons come and go in ways new to us. Drought, hurricanes, fires, and floods surround us with overwhelming force, often stronger than anyone can remember. Millions of people are already on the move, fleeing rising seas, fires with smoke that pollutes the air across continents, and droughts that foreshadow those fires as the land turns to desert. Humans must learn to live in a world where we are no longer the “master of the landscape,” engineering everything to make it safe. Change is occurring at levels beyond our old understanding, change that we cannot control. We are facing change beyond change.

The rising tide of such big changes has been predicted for many years now. When students asked Zen Master Seung Sahn how to face great change, he replied, “Hide under the Path.” What does this mean? How does one keep an open and generous mind to support everyone in the face of change so vast that the future is hard to imagine? He didn’t pull any punches. Few places on earth have as many weapons as the Korean peninsula, and at times war seemed very near. When monks in Seoul fearfully asked what to do about missiles landing on their temple before war was even declared, he strode to the door, threw it open and shouted: “Welcome!”

But beyond the drama of such a wake-up call, how do we follow a responsible path day to day? We may try to lower the tension by focusing only on one kind of change, but deep reflection reveals that all these changes (to nature or to society) come together to upend *everything* around us: great change. We climate scientists shout warnings to wake people up to the need to find an answer because, even after a century of science, no one has the answer. So,

we all must learn new ways to live, and profound learning involves risk. Can our practice open us to the point where we risk learning new ways to live? How do we open ourselves to risk? You must open wider than you can imagine, according to Zen Master Ma Jo.

Layman Pang asked Great Teacher Ma Jo: “Who is the man who doesn’t accompany the ten thousand dharmas?” Teacher Ma replied: “Layman, wait till you’ve swallowed in one swig all the water of the West River, then I’ll tell you.”

This is our practice. There is no edge to don’t-know, no frame in which we can comfortably nestle what concerns us. There is simply this world, this life—an ocean in which everything swims. Within this open frame, we watch each thing arise and disappear. What is it that arises, perhaps again and again, and what disappears? What do we dwell on? Who is asking?

The waves wash back and forth. Some find the waves steepen and crash when charged with great emotion, like the fear arising that all this change feels like it is coming down on . . . ME! Why, some ask, should such awful uncertainty fall on *me* in this special time when *I* am alive? Who or what is this “I” that is asking? If we feel so special, it is easy to forget that humans have almost always faced change as profound as today. Consider a Zen student near the end of the Tang Dynasty (844 CE) in China when the emperor Wuzong, citing corruption and excessive wealth, ordered the burning of 4,600 Buddhist temples and 40,000 hermitages, along with forcibly returning more than 250,000 monks and nuns to lay life. A few surviving teachers fled to the mountains with a handful of followers.

What would it be like to practice Zen with all the temples and hermitages burning around you? Or consider a shepherd 9,000 years ago in the savannah that eventually became the floor of the Black Sea. The rising Mediterranean Sea came rushing up and over the Bosphorus in a giant waterfall larger than the Amazon River. It made a lake that chased everyone away as its shoreline advanced outward two kilometers each day, creating the early Black Sea in only 300 days—as if an ocean could strike like lightning. Every culture surrounding the Black Sea is founded on the myth of the great flood, so the shock echoes to this day all over the world.

Like our ancestors facing wars, plagues, glaciers, and floods, we now turn to face great change and wonder what really helps. As we practice, we see more clearly how our fears trap us, wrapping ourselves around every sordid detail, such that many do no more than complain. To truly break out of this trap, you have to go down to the source.

(Continued on page 26)

The Prajna Ship

Veronique Struis

Buddhists take refuge in the Three Jewels—that is, the Buddha (the Awakened One), the Dharma (the teachings), and the Sangha (our community)—for guidance, inspiration, and support on their path. Recently, a Zen teacher mentioned “the boat,” which the Buddha taught we must take across the ocean of samsara, a ship of wisdom or “prajna ship.”

The boat may also be seen as a metaphor for sangha, which helps practitioners navigate the ocean of life and reach the shore of enlightenment. I think this is a beautiful metaphor and would like to share my experience with this boat and what it taught me.

I started my practice at the Cambridge Zen Center, and it was a joy to visit a busy residential Zen center with regular practice hours and plenty of opportunities to meet other practitioners and learn about the dharma. After two long-distance moves and becoming a mom to two wonderful kids, I ended up in Europe, without a sangha nearby. Since the dharma seed was planted, I tried to engage in formal practice by myself; I joined Kwan Um Zen Online; and, more important, I started volunteering for the European sangha, first as a Facebook manager and, after a few years, as the European director.

Now, after all these years of practice, I realize that even though we tell new practitioners that our formal practice is done in three ways—bowing, chanting, and sitting—we perhaps should suggest a fourth “formal” practice form: together action, or helping to navigate the boat.

When I first started together action with other sangha members, I would use my rational and discriminating mind when interacting with them while solving difficult situations and interactions. But, as I volunteered and practiced longer, I realized that working with other sangha members is the perfect opportunity to put into practice the lessons learned during our formal Zen.

For example, I learned to let my don’t-know mind appear when difficult situations arise, like the kong-ans we practice. Sometimes, we may not immediately have an answer to a difficult situation when we work with others, but kong-ans teach us that we can take a step back when an answer doesn’t appear immediately and wait for an answer to appear. And the beautiful part is that while navigating the boat with other practitioners, they will understand and may encourage us

and give us the space needed to put this into practice.

I also learned how to apply skillful means. When a difficult situation arose while working on an issue of *Primary Point*, I saw one of our teachers put skillful means in practice and navigate between two opposing sides, addressing an issue with compassion and wisdom. In those moments teachings come alive, and we can find out for ourselves the meaning of teaching words and learn how to act with wisdom and compassion.

Most important, I learned to see my mind more clearly, and to notice when my inner voice of self-doubt and criticism was holding me back from doing things. This happened when I accepted the position of European director in the Kwan Um School, even though I had always told myself I was best off in the background, so I didn’t have to confront

my fears of public speaking, take up a leadership role, and make decisions that would not please everyone. And it also appeared again while writing this article that I was not going to finish because it likely would not be good enough. The opportunity to see my mind making things, but having support from others in our prajna ship, made me confront my inner voice, put everything down, and just do it.

Navigating the boat with other sangha members is therefore a rich experience. Doing together action with other practitioners who share our direction and who understand our practice creates a trusted environment that allows us to grow as practitioners and human beings. It will teach us to trust our before-thinking mind so that compassion will arise when we engage with others mindfully—and that even when we don’t like someone or something, compassion can be found not only for the other but also for ourselves.

Zen Master Seung Sahn said that the practice of living in a Zen center is much like washing potatoes. In Korean Zen temples, potatoes are washed by putting them in a large pot filled with water. The water is stirred with a stick, and the potatoes rub against each other, thus getting cleaned all together. But nowadays, we don’t have to live in a Zen center to experience this. Any opportunity we have to volunteer, either in person or online, is a way to experience this together action, and it will make our lives richer and make the dharma come alive, allowing for compassion and wisdom to arise while we head for the other shore in our prajna ship. ♦



Photo: Marek Bohdalek

The Building of Zen Forest in Lithuania

Linas Ryskus

Five years after I began to practice with the Kwan Um School of Zen, I became obsessed. In my mind's eye I envisioned an open place near water, flooded with light and space, and with endless views to the horizon. My obsession with this vision drove me daily. I traveled thousands of kilometers, reading every advertisement and after becoming familiar with every property within a hundred kilometers from me. I finally found the place in early March near the village of Čiobiškis, sixty kilometers (thirty-seven miles) from Vilnius on the bank of the beautiful river Neris. Standing on the edge of the river and looking at the fluid, peaceful movement of the water, my mind finally stopped.

At that moment I had no idea that my wife Edita and I would build a temple that would offer the dharma to thousands of people. Nor did we know all the joys and bumps and madness that would also appear.

My practice intensified and I spent hours with the Lithuanian monastics Bo Haeng Sunim, Won Bo Sunim, and Myong Hae Sunim JDPS. I participated in several retreats in Warsaw and in Lithuania.

20] This vision evolved, and I understood that my whole life could become the practice. All I had to do was create and live in a place where practice was inevitable, where Edita and I could dedicate ourselves to serving the people who would come to the place where we could facilitate their participation in retreats and in experiencing a silent space in the vast nature surrounding our place.

Bo Haeng Sunim encouraged and helped us so much. Things had begun to move quickly. The Buddha statue sitting on the altar in the dharma hall appeared almost as if out of thin air. It was a gift to Zen Forest after Won Bo Sunim spoke with her teacher Jin Myong Sunim in Seoul about the building of Zen Forest. This Buddha is sculpted out of wood and painted in gold and was crafted by Lee Jaesock, the son of a great sculptor in South Korea, who specializes in sculpting Buddhas and whose work is acknowledged as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

We then placed a big Buddha statue outside to greet all guests. This Buddha appeared to us after it had sat in an abandoned warehouse. This Buddha had traveled from Delhi and then sat for years in the famous Buddha Bar nightclub in Vilnius. We felt that this Buddha was a true Lithuanian Buddha of compassion which had seen with its own eyes all the sad scenes of false entertainment.

The eye-opening ceremony for this Buddha was officiated by Myong Hae Sunim JDPS, our beloved guiding teacher. She was assisted by seven monks from His Holiness the Dalai Lama's monastery in India, who were living in Zen Forest while touring to introduce Tibetan culture and traditions to Europeans. As the ceremony progressed, it seemed that the sound of Tibetan monks chanting mantras and

playing the huge Tibetan horns, called dungchen, and the fragrance of burning incense drifted down the river Neris to the ends of the universe.

The following Fall, Jin Myong Sunim arrived with other monastics and officiated special ceremonies blessing the grounds and the buildings, and led the ceremony of opening the eyes in the Buddha hall. It was Jin Myong Sunim who gave the Zen hall, the buildings and the surrounding area the name Zen Forest, honoring the Buddha Shakyamuni's famous historical grove in India where he started to teach.

By this time, I had quit my job and devoted myself exclusively to building Zen Forest. We began to search for funding. Edita and I worked closely on the architectural design and practically drowned in the bureaucracy of paperwork. Suddenly, our work was seriously impacted by COVID-19. Won Bo Sunim stepped in and started daily chanting to bless the construction. It is impossible to explain the impact of her dedicated practice. Unexpected help came from the timely sale of another property, along with so many other blessings.

Despite the pandemic and the financial concerns, the building was finished in eleven months. To save money, Edita sewed the curtains, designed and painted the altar, and tiled all the bathrooms by herself. I organized the construction and made purchases.

People began to discover Zen Forest and soon, along with Kwan Um retreats, groups from other traditions and educational programs found us and asked if they could hold retreats in Zen Forest. Edita, who is a well-known actress in Lithuania, became famous for her delicious vegetarian cooking for the retreats in between theater stints. For the fourth year in a row, Zen Forest is regularly and almost entirely booked a year in advance.

As I write this article, I experience deep gratitude to all the monastics and teachers who helped us so generously. I remember how much Zen Master Dae Bong, who married Edita and me, supported our family with his wise advice and great humor.

I am grateful to Edita and to myself for taking this huge risk. Only now do we realize what a crazy adventure we were involved in, and we feel so lucky to have had success. Reaching the top of the mountain requires a first step. And then only keep-going-straight mind. ♦

Linas Ryskus graduated from the Vilnius Art Academy and has more than twenty years of experience in the television and entertainment industry. In 2010, he developed an interest in Zen and became a member of the Vilnius Zen Center. In 2019, he made the decision to leave his career and commit himself to Zen Forest, where he is now the manager and retreat organizer. He is a dharma-teacher-in-training.

Our Desires and Climate Change

Algis Lankelis

Some time ago, I experienced a knee injury and sought help from a physiotherapist. I shared my health concerns and the actions I had taken to address them, such as walking more and taking up cycling. To my surprise, the physiotherapist responded, “Cycling is a good choice for your injured knees. While there may be more optimal exercises, cycling will suffice. You see, many beneficial exercises exist, but people rarely stick to them. They try for a couple of days and then give up.”

It struck me as curious how people often desire relief from their pain but fail to take action when presented with solutions. There could be several reasons for this, but one significant factor is the prison of negative habits: habits developed because of an unclear mind or inner direction. Breaking free from this prison of negativity is a challenge few can overcome. We investigate our habits—both negative and positive—when we practice.

As someone who has practiced Zen for a long time, I have observed that many who embark on their Zen journey eventually abandon it. Only a few continue on the path. It seems their disengagement is not due to disappointment with Buddhism but rather encountering certain obstacles. One such obstacle is the lack of a positive habit of practicing Zen. Without the habit of Zen practice, the motivation to continue gradually fades away. The essence of Zen practice lies in cultivating a habit of mindful awareness, transcending the self-centered notions of *I*, *me*, and *mine* and returning to the present moment.

There is a saying: “You don’t create your future; you shape it through your habits. Your habits determine your future.” A more elaborate version goes like this: “Master this moment, and you will master your thoughts. By mastering your mind, you govern your actions, and in doing so, you shape your habits. If you cultivate positive habits, your destiny lies within your grasp.” When many people gain control over their destinies, the fate of the world changes accordingly.

All global problems stem from our inability to fully embrace the present moment. In a world where the past and the future exist only in our minds, letting go of the present moment disconnects us from reality. Therefore, we must release our attachments and opinions, allowing ourselves to be in harmony with the present moment. It is through this alignment that we can truly merge with this present moment.

The refugee crisis on the Lithuanian border serves as a stark illustration of how a clear mind is connected to global problems. While people may blame this or that politician, the actions of politicians are not the sole cause.

Politicians might be merely exploiting an existing situation. The accelerating refugee problem arises from a more complex scenario involving, at its heart, rapid climate change. Due to global warming, agriculture becomes increasingly challenging in equatorial regions. As a result, the inhabitants of these lands lose economic stability and migrate to cities. However, the cities struggle to absorb such an influx, leading to societal tension. Ultimately, life in these countries becomes even more unbearable, prompting many to seek a better life elsewhere. And thus, the refugee crisis emerges.

Climate change is a consequence of human activities, and the state of our minds directly influences our actions. The climate crisis is an effect of the lack of a clear mind, as an unclear mind is susceptible to the common pursuit of ideas and opinions of what better living standards are. This pursuit invariably leads to increased consumption, further exacerbating ecosystem changes. In social media, there is an opinion that the Earth is overpopulated, attributing resource overuse to this factor. However, let us consider this: About eighty years ago, Lithuania had the same population as it does now, yet statistics show that Lithuanians consumed significantly fewer resources back then. So, the global crisis is primarily caused by excessive desires rather than overpopulation.

The problem lies in a materialistic society’s pursuit of happiness through tangible wealth, adhering to the notion that “the more we have, the happier we will be.” This mindset inevitably leads to finding happiness at the expense of others. Given the ongoing climate changes, it is crucial for us to utilize Earth’s resources more responsibly. However, there seems to be a lack of controversy surrounding this issue. The reason is simple: Without further exploiting resources, modern economies and societies would collapse. Hence, we are compelled to search for an alternative form of happiness, one that does not bring unhappiness to others in its pursuit. Through a dedicated Zen practice, we come to understand that true happiness is immaterial—beyond words and thoughts, money and things. In other words, a clear mind draws its happiness from the wellspring known as Buddha nature, as recognized by Buddhists. Such a mind is free and compassionate, while an attached mind remains limited, driven by worldly desires, ignorance, and anger.

During the pandemic, everyone was eagerly awaiting stability. Now, we find ourselves awaiting the end of the Ukraine war. However, it is challenging to envision these hardships coming to an end before people change their thinking habits. Wars, pandemics, and climate change are

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Pine Needle Powder

Avital Sebbag

My name is Avital, and I have the great pleasure to work as a vegan chef. I have been practicing for twenty years in the Israeli Kwan Um School of Zen. I have cooked for many Kwan Um sanghas in Europe and in the United States, and I've established a "Zen Around the Table" group for those wanting cooking lessons featuring vegan choices. I also have cooked in Greece for yoga groups.

Quality, quantity, and attention—these three words can accompany us in everything we do in life. Zen practice helps me take these three words, bring them to the surface without clinging to them, and enter the kitchen to focus my attention on what I want to eat, when, and how much.

As a mother of five sons, it was important for me to help them to understand the significance of our connection to nature and the seasons and to experience the human body as a wonderful machine that can heal and rehabilitate itself. I taught my sons to pay attention to the mind, which forms our eating habits, and to choose high quality raw materials. Our Zen training teaches us that mind makes everything, and knowing this is the key to supporting our human body when dealing with physical and emotional discomfort caused by food that does not benefit us.

I helped my sons and those around me to understand that through food preparation, one can develop the muscle of awareness, just as one can develop it by practicing meditation, walking, or doing any activity in our lives.

My choice to be vegan was gradual, but did not arise out of activism. Over the years, through learning and experimentation, I began to perceive which foods benefited me and which ones harmed me, and thus I gradually began to eliminate many foods that weighed me down, such as meat, eggs, and dairy products. Of course, this was my personal choice. Many people benefit from eating eggs and dairy products.

My Zen practice continuously shows me the oneness of our world and universe. Cultivating a mind that chooses quality over quantity, our preparation of healthy food is how we can honor the universe. I am acutely aware that I am a part of my surroundings. This awareness heightens my wish to care for nature without harming it. I believe that my true job is to offer compassion and love to this planet. This inner mind led to my choice to stop consuming animals. I felt it important to convey to my sons and everyone around me to be kind, to treat our food and water with respect, to love animals, and to help all beings.



Photo: Avital Sebbag

When I was searching for material for the cookbook I wrote, *Five Seasons in the Kitchen—Zen Inspired Vegan Cooking*, I was invited by Zen Master Dae Bong to visit Musangsa Temple, the mother monastery of the Kwan Um School in South Korea, where I was warmly welcomed to a Korean cooking lesson by a wonderful woman, Koo Bong Ju. She knew exactly what traditional Korean dishes Zen Master Seung Sahn loved to eat on holidays and ceremonies—inspiring foods such

as *kimbap*, nori seaweed filled with vegetables, cucumber stuffed with *kimchi*, and *japchae*—sweet potato noodles with shiitake mushrooms and seasonal vegetables.

One of my great inspirations has been Zen Master Seung Sahn's solo retreat in 1948. He secluded himself on Won Gak Mountain for a hundred days. His story is wonderfully described in the book *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. At the age of twenty-two, on January 25, 1949, Zen Master Seung Sahn experienced a great awakening.

As a chef and anthropological nutrition researcher, I was curious about why, out of all the food options he could have taken with him to the mountain for his solo retreat, he chose pine needle powder as the main component of his diet during the hundred-day solo retreat on Won Gak Mountain. I found out that pine pollen is considered a superfood due to its rich nutritional profile. (I am not encouraging anyone here to eat only pine pollen. That would not be a balanced diet.)

Zen Master Seung Sahn emphasized practice, not food. Food is part of the practice just as the sound of the moktak or the chirping of a bird outside the window is. Food by itself is not special. It is our mind that makes food into good or bad.

I have a passion for diving, which allows me to perceive the universe from within the depths of the oceans and seas. During one of my last dives in the Red Sea on the border between Israel and Egypt, in the summer of 2008, I dove with a group of friends. Our regular ritual was diving and then resting on the beach with a glass of beer and some seafood. The dive was, as usual, amazing. The underwater world brings different sounds that help me become one with what's happening at that moment among the corals, the colorful reefs, the pleasant water currents, and the schools of fish passing by.

Suddenly, a small, colorful fish in various turquoise colors—which to me symbolize tranquility, healing, and balance—stopped in front of me and looked directly at me. I was so surprised! This beautiful little fish was looking straight at me, and I was looking back at it. In that moment, a profound insight arose in my mind: we were two sentient beings experiencing each other. From that moment on, I stopped eating fish.

The path of sharing my kitchen knowledge with others led me to create retreats and cooking workshops, reaching audiences who want to learn the secrets of healthy cooking through my approach, from a simple, easy, and compassionate mind. In an era where culinary arts have become trendy, it is wonderful that people are choosing to return to their kitchens and prepare their own food.

Each of us can take the step toward increasing awareness and eating a beneficial diet. Restaurants are a serious industry where expanding awareness and consideration

for the planet and the health of the customers who visit them are changing the menus. We can make a point by requesting plant-based options when visiting restaurants. In this way, restaurant personnel can begin to help us to offer such foods. It is our work to investigate what is beneficial for us to eat and what is harmful. Informing the food industry and restaurants about our need for plant-based meals will enable the industry to make changes benefiting all of us and the universe.

The encounters with audiences in my workshops, which I call "Zen Around the Table," open dialogue beyond kitchen preparations. In these conversations, I listen to stories from people's daily lives—stories about traditional food, habits, fascinating lifestyles. I learn from them. And I teach them about quality, quantity, and awareness.

The participants gather for a cooking retreat, and by the end, they become one. Each of us gains increased respect and gratitude to Mother Earth and compassion for our planet. Of course, at the end we all enjoy a taste of exquisite, dark, sweet, vegan chocolate that rounds out the retreat.

I remember what Zen Master Seung Sahn said after he finished his solo retreat: "Any kind of food . . . only thank you!" I have learned along my food journey that gratitude is a major component in our eating—and more important than the healthiest food.

There is a connection between the quality of our sitting on the cushion and the relationship between consciousness and the digestive system. The digestive system is considered our second brain, and not without reason—the digestive system contains 500 million nerve cells that affect the autonomic nervous system. In personal experience, when emotional drama occurs in our lives, we usually feel it in our stomach as well—discomfort, pain, stress—and these directly affect our bowel movements. When we eat easily digestible foods or are fasting, the digestive system rests, and the quality of practice can improve wonderfully.

As we learn in our practice, you must find out if the tea in your cup is hot or cold. No one else can tell you. This means that you must investigate for yourself what kind of food is best for you. I have learned that our life direction is all-important: Why do you eat every day? ♦

Avital Sebbag, an anthropological food researcher and accomplished vegan chef, has been practicing Korean Zen for two decades. Today, she teaches and manages the Hasharon Zen Center in Israel. Avital has integrated her wide world of culinary content with Zen teaching, and she regularly visits Zen centers throughout the world to teach how to build retreat menus and provide classes about cooking seasonal food. For more information and recipes, please visit <https://avital-sebbag.co.il/avital-sebbag>.

The Cornflakes Bowl Kong-an

Jacob Shafir

It is morning. It is late. I'm in a hurry to get to work, and if I don't leave now, I'll be late. The child is still eating, but if she doesn't hurry she'll be late for kindergarten. I manage to convince her to finish eating and get on our way, but when she gets up from the table she drops her cornflakes bowl and everything spills on the floor.

I think to myself, "Oh, really," while loudly uttering some unconstructive criticism, and try to figure out what I'm supposed to do now.

I start cleaning, moving her so she won't be disturbed. She cries and I ask her to calm down, but I'm not really calm myself.

Finally, we manage to leave the house. I drop her off at kindergarten more or less on time and head out to work, and it looks like I'll arrive more or less on time, only completely exhausted—and the day hasn't even started yet.

On the way, I think about this morning, knowing that this isn't the first time something like this has happened and it probably won't be the last. I know I didn't react the way I would have wanted, and I ask myself, "What can I do better?"

Then I realize: I got a kong-an!

A kong-an is a question that is often used in Zen practice. It has no rational answer, and the teacher presents it to the practitioner not to get an answer, but to check whether he or she has understood.

Confused? Excellent!

This is already a good start, because it is not an analytical or theoretical understanding, and therefore the answers do not have to be literal, so confusion, or "not thinking" can sometimes help. But note that this is not just a case of babbling; the answer should show that you truly understand the matter. It is not that simple, and there are kong-ans that can accompany you for years until you solve them.

You might want an example to understand, but it's impossible to give real questions and answers because many times there is no single correct answer. Things depend on the situation in which you are asked, at that moment and in that situation, and you are required to respond accordingly.

In this aspect, it is an excellent practice of what Zen is trying to aim for—how to see things as they are, here and now, without noise, interpretations, predictions, and the like, and how to respond accordingly.

On the other hand, although the goal of the practice is ultimately to bring it into regular everyday life, sometimes it is difficult to recognize that you are facing a kong-an when you encounter it.

Maybe it's because most of the kong-ans that teachers ask begin with a story that takes place in ancient China and includes monks, teachers, and events from monastic life. But my daily life is mostly children, news, emails, and driving to afterschool activities. But there you have it, every now and then you realize that you come across a kong-an, and it's a wonderful opportunity to practice.

As I suspected, that terrible morning wasn't the last time the child would drop a bowl of cereal or something else off the table just when she needed to get out of the house, and a few weeks later it happened again. I'm rushing to get to work, she needs to go to kindergarten, and at the last minute she drops the bowl, and all its contents spill onto the floor.

This time too, the first thought that crossed my mind was "Oh, really," but I immediately recognized that it was my kong-an and focused.

I went up to her and told her to stop crying. I lifted her from the chair and put her aside. I quickly cleaned up the mess. I saw that we could still make it. I took the child, got in the car and we set off. Perfect operation. She arrived at the kindergarten on time. I arrived at work on time.

But I failed the kong-an.

I didn't need a teacher to tell me I hadn't solved it successfully. It was clear to me, even if I couldn't put into words why.

And then, as is the way with kong-ans, over time the question appeared again. This time I really planned the time correctly and the morning was relaxed, and yet a minute before leaving the house, something happens, cornflakes are on the floor, a child cries, and time is running out.

"This time I can do it," I said to myself. I came to her and said, "Everything's fine, go ahead, no harm done" while I cleaned up around her. "Come on, let's not be late," I added softly. I managed to clean it up and at some point she stopped crying; I put her in the car, and we drove off.

We arrived on time again, but I failed the kong-an again.

The years pass, and the kong-an continues to accompany me and erupt from time to time. The last time it happened was not so long ago. The child is going to school now, and I'm still trying to get to work. This time too—a stressful morning, exchange of words, cornflakes, floor.

But this time, I wasn't angry or resentful, and I didn't think any complaining or educating thoughts. I looked at the kitchen but didn't even see the ticking clock or the dripping mess.

I only saw a little girl crying.

I didn't clean, I didn't tidy, I didn't act, I didn't rush. I just came to her and said, "Everything's fine. I saw that it was a mistake." I hugged her lovingly, and we stayed like that until she calmed down, and only then did we get in the car and set off.

She was late for school, and I was late for work. But I solved the kong-an. ♦

Jacob Shafir practices Zen at the Pardes Hana Zen group in Israel. Living in Pardes Hana with his wife and three daughters, he also practices balancing family life with a career as a manager in a high-tech company and writes about how Zen practice meets the challenges and insights of fatherhood.

Falling Down with Try Mind

Alley Smith

“Fall down seven times, get up eight.”

—Japanese proverb

After I retired from the military, I spent a year living and practicing at Providence Zen Center as a resident. During that time, I found a great freedom from who I was and who I wanted to be by engaging in the physical practice of bowing.

Each day I woke up to Zen Master Seung Sahn’s great questions, “What are you doing in this world? When you are born, where did you come from? When you die, where do you go? Why do you live in this world?” At that point, I literally didn’t know. I felt lost.

As long as Buddhism has existed, bowing has been a core practice. For me, it became a personal mission and skillful means—to save myself from the depths of despair. It was my compass.

At the time, I struggled with post-traumatic stress, anger, and a nervous system that needed to be untangled and rewired from war, violence, speed, ego, and always having something to prove. I struggled with survivor’s guilt, hyper-vigilance, and classic thinking sickness.

In the beginning, the concept of bowing meant surrendering: giving up and giving in to an enemy. It meant failure, weakness, submission to authority, and hoisting up a tattered white flag on the battlefield. The practice didn’t come naturally or easily by any means. I metaphorically kicked and screamed quite a bit.

One afternoon, frustrated and curious, I asked Kwan Haeng Sunim JDPS, “What is the point of bowing?” Sunim replied, “There’s no point. You just do it. Cut off all thinking. Everything falls away. Bowing will make your direction clear.”

Kwan Haeng Sunim also said, “You know, Zen Master Seung Sahn did five sets of 108 bows every morning and he was always happy.”

I took this statement as encouragement—and I took it to heart with deep faith. Why? I wanted to be settled and genuinely happy. I wanted to stop carrying around my own corpse. And most of all, I admired Zen Master Seung Sahn’s strength of character as a war veteran. Together, we shared something in common—even though I never met him.

Therefore, I bowed and bowed and bowed—over days, weeks, and months with great determination. During

that time, I learned to yield, surrender, and release into don’t-know mind—despite the aches, pains, and personal struggle, the opposition and physical hardship.

Hundreds and thousands of bows opened me to a sense of oneness with the Buddha and the vast cosmos. Bowing became my primary practice: an act of deep care, devotion, and respect that connected me deeply with our lineage and the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Over time I became much calmer, quieter, and clearer. My mind naturally emptied. “So no thinking, no speech, no words, no idea, no name, no form,” as Zen Master Seung Sahn teaches in *Compass of Zen*.

I did not get enlightenment by any means, but I did learn how to fall down and get back up again with gratitude and complete nonattachment to myself. By cutting off the thinking mind, I found an interesting place: the still point of the turning world—a place of peace.

Thus, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan no longer rattled in my mind. I felt genuine joy in simply *not knowing* what would happen in my life next. I began to let it all go, day by day. Everyone can begin to let go in this way.

When we bow, we are not attached to who we are or who we were. When we bow, we are not attached to words or speech. When

we bow, we wake up. When we bow, we attain our correct job. When we bow, we live in this world. When we bow, we learn that *life is all about falling down and getting back up again and again. Bowing is like this:*

Fall down
Let go
Stand up
Hapchang
Do it again

Our faith tradition is grounded in great determination and try-mind. Zen Master Seung Sahn teaches, “Truth is beyond words. Truth is realized in an instant; the act is practiced step by step.” The truth is found in sitting, chanting, and bowing. When we attain this, everything is clear, everything is complete freedom—but only if we try. ♦

Alley Smith, a dharma-teacher-in-training, is retired from the U.S. Marine Corps and Navy Reserve as a decorated war veteran. She currently lives in Vermont and works for the East Montpelier Fire Department and as a university Buddhist chaplain.



Photo: Marek Bohdálék

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(PRECEPTS *Continued from page 10*)

If we include monastic precepts, at least hundreds of them exist, but there is one precept that summarizes all the other possible precepts. This is the vow to help all sentient beings and our planet. All precepts are included in this one great direction. The precepts become our lifeline. They help us navigate our lifeboats correctly even when the ocean of our lives is stormy.

It is a serious dedication and commitment to take

the precepts, and the decision to do so is based deeply in our hearts. The vow to assist and cultivate loving-kindness is the fundamental direction of our practice. This dedication does not depend on words. It depends on our clarity as we engage in each moment of our daily lives. Guided by precepts, and following a sincere practice, wisdom can arise. ♦

(FACING CHANGE *Continued from page 18*)

If we persevere and keep watching amid all the forms and dharmas that arise, we arrive at the root from which all these things grow: Mind makes everything.

Modern psychology has converged on this ancient Zen teaching. Current inquiry indicates that one of our brain's main functions is as a "prediction engine." From moment to moment, the brain predicts what will challenge us next, and to help us meet that challenge it generates feelings, emotions, thoughts, and ideas. It is like a fountain creating the universe again and again, from microsecond to microsecond, faster than we can consciously think. Seeing this process frees us from the trap of "Inside/outside", wherein all feelings and sensations arise from impacts from what lies "outside" of us. There is no outside. Each one of us is the author of our whole story. If we can own this great responsibility, then the flak doesn't keep us from what we need to do. We know the flak. We wrote it.

Exposing the root, our questioning expands to where everything does not swirl around **Me**, so then what becomes possible? Perhaps in each moment it becomes easy to see exactly what is needed to do to help. As Zen Master Dae Bong said, "In war there are not two sides, there is only the side of suffering." If there is no outside or in-

side and nothing to defend, then whatever stands before you, whatever work needs to be done, becomes clear. That frames our direction: address suffering where you find it. Address life or whatever needs a response where you find it. Our world offers many things besides suffering that may require a response. Some plant trees, others look after those who are weak or sick, and others raise children who are curious, open, and compassionate. There are as many ways to express our direction and invoke this compassionate world as there are people. All this builds a world where trust will help us to join hands and work together, taking the risks that we need to experiment and learn new ways to live.

Science has long warned us of the impending climate crisis, among other things, and tried to spread better understanding. But, even if we accept these truths, what will everyone do with that understanding? Practice points the way to use and build on that understanding as we help one another. Everyone has to work together to forge the way ahead, and our practice points each of us to the work right there at our feet. Understanding alerts us, and then our practice expands and directs us, revealing and unwinding the practical path forward to healing this world. ♦

(OUR DESIRES *Continued from page 21*)

not the causes of crises. Instead, they serve as signals from reality, inviting us to change and reconnect with our primary purpose. By doing so, we can discover and share an unbound nature that transcends words and thoughts within ourselves. There is a Buddhist saying: "An ideal horse starts trotting at the mere sight of a shadow of a whip. A good horse begins trotting when it sees the whip. An average horse scuttles only when it feels a light lash. A poor horse waits until the jockey strikes it hard. And the worst horse is the one that takes deep wounds before it starts running." Humanity is akin to the worst horse—without considering the numerous deaths and broken lives, there is no motivation to live without constantly pursuing standards of living that cause great damage to our planet.

Zen is not a form of therapy or a means to self-improvement. For me, it is a path that allows us to depart from the dead-end road we have taken in the pursuit of progress. It is a path that guides awakened minds toward engaging in our world with a clear direction of helping our planet and all sentient beings. ♦

Algis Lankelis is a senior dharma teacher and has been a member of the Kwan Um School of Zen since 1991. He is the abbot of the Vilnius Zen Centre, and works as a director of an art school in Vilnius.



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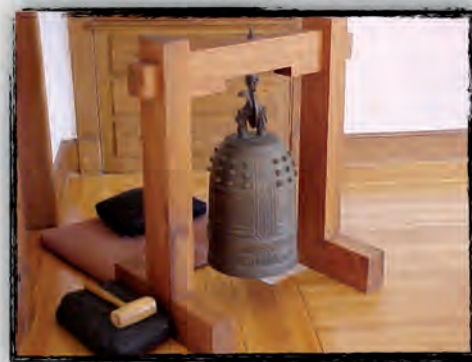
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