

Zen is Understanding Yourself

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Chapter 1

One day a student from Chicago came to the Providence Zen Center and asked Seung Sahn Soen Sa Nim, “What is Zen?”

Soen Sa Nim held his Zen stick above his head and said, “Do you understand?”

The student said, “I don’t know.”

Soen Sa Nim said, “This don’t-know mind is you. Zen is understanding yourself.”

“What do you understand about me? Teach me.”

Soen Sa Nim said, “In a cookie factory, different cookies are baked in the shape of animals, cars, people, and airplanes. They all have different names and forms, but they are all made from the same dough, and they all taste the same.

“In the same way, all things in the universe—the sun, the moon, the stars, mountains, rivers, people, and so forth—have different names and forms, but they are all made from the same substance. The universe is organized into pairs of opposites: light and darkness, man and woman, sound and silence, good and bad. But all these opposites are mutual, because they are made from the same substance. Their names and their forms are different, but their substance is the same.

Names and forms are made by your thinking. If you are not thinking and have no attach-ment to name and form, then all substance is one. Your don’t-know mind cuts off all thinking. This is your substance. The substance of this Zen stick and your own substance are the same. You are this stick; this stick is you.”

The student said, “Some philosophers say this substance is energy, or mind, or God, or matter. Which is the truth?”

Soen Sa Nim said, “Four blind men went to the zoo and visited the elephant. One blind man touched its side and said, ‘The elephant is like a wall.’ The next blind man touched its trunk and said, ‘The elephant is like a snake.’ The next blind man touched its leg and said, ‘The elephant is like a column.’ The last blind man touched its tail and said, ‘The elephant is like a broom.’ Then the four blind men started to fight, each one believing that his opinion was the right one. Each only understood the part he had touched; none of them understood the whole.

“Substance has no name and no form. Energy, mind, God, and matter are all name and form. Substance is the Absolute. Having name and form is having opposites. So the whole world is like the blind men fighting among themselves. Not understanding yourself is not understanding the truth. That is why there is fighting among ourselves. If all the people in the world understood themselves, they would attain the Absolute. Then the world would be at peace. World peace is Zen.”

The student said, “How can practicing Zen make world peace?”

Soen Sa Nim said, “People desire money, fame, sex, food, and rest. All this desire is thinking. Thinking is suffering. Suffering means no world peace. Not thinking is not suffering.

Not suffering means world peace. World peace is the Absolute. The absolute is I.”

The student said, “How can I understand the Absolute?”

Soen Sa Nim said, “You must understand yourself.”

“How can I understand myself?”

Soen Sa Nim held up the Zen stick and said, “Do you see this?”

He then quickly hit the table with the stick and said, “Do you hear this? This stick, this sound, and your mind—are they the same or different?”

The student said, “The same.”

Soen Sa Nim said, “If you say they are the same, I will hit you thirty times. If you say they are different, I will still hit you thirty times. Why?”

The student was silent.

Soen Sa Nim shouted “KATZ!!!”

Then he said, “Spring comes, the grass grows by itself.”