

Zen Master Bon Yeon (Jane Dobisz)

Practicing with Zen Koans in Your Everyday Life

Week Two: “Correct Situation, Correct Relationship, and Correct Function”

June 11, 2018



Welcome to week two of our Tricycle course on Zen koans. This week I would like to talk about something that is really important. It's called Correct Situation, Correct Relationship, Correct Function, and Just Do It.

The first time I saw Zen master Seung Sahn give a big public talk, there were a lot of people in the room. He was asking all kinds of questions. At some point in the talk, he looked at the audience. He picked up a cup just like this one. It had water in it. He had a Zen stick [*keisaku*, used to wake people up in meditation sessions] and he said, “Here is a cup. If you say this is a cup, you are attached to name and form and this stick will hit you 30 times.” He had a twinkle in his eye. You didn't think he was really going to hit you with the thing, but still everybody paid more attention. People sat up straight in their seats. My heart was beating a little bit more, wondering, “What is this?”

He continued, “If you say this is a cup, you're attached to name and form and this stick will hit you 30 times. If you say it is not a cup, you're attached to emptiness and the stick will also hit you 30 times. What can you do? What do you call it?” At that point, everybody in the room was just panic-stricken, myself included. We don't like to be called out. We're so trained to know the answer. The way we're educated, we want to put our hands up, we want to get an A, we want to know the answer. We don't like to say that we don't know. We certainly don't want to be called out in front of a group of people and be revealed for not knowing the answer.

Everybody's sitting there looking at each other like, “Oh my god, is it a cup? Is it not? He's going to hit me with the stick.” In his benevolence—he had a great sense of humor—he pokes this monk sitting next to him and he says, “You, please help them out.” The monk takes the cup and picks it up and drinks from it. That was our free giveaway koan. That is *the* free giveaway koan, we always let people have that one. It's really interesting, and all koans are like this. You have a situation with opposites: Cup, not cup. Form, emptiness. Good answer, bad answer. I hit you, I

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don't hit you. It's all opposites, it's a set up. It's a complicated situation but in the middle of this complicated situation—like a big smoke screen—there's something very clear right there. The correct situation—that's you and the cup. The correct relationship—human being and the cup—meaning what's your relationship to the cup? We don't sit on the cup, we don't put the cup on our head, we don't dance around the cup. What sort of relationship to the cup is this? And the correct function—what do you do with that cup? You drink.

So, there is the situation, relationship, function, and just do it. This is a really wonderful thing. Then the monk picked up the cup and drank, there was a lot of good teaching in that. There's nothing like having that drink of water when you're thirsty, right? It's a direct experience. It's not an explanation of water. It's not reading a book about water. That's not going to do it for you if you're thirsty. What you really want is that drink. You can think about this in so many ways. The same thing is if somebody asks you to try to describe “sweet.” Try to describe “chocolate.” What words would you use? How would you describe that? You can't, right? You can't do it. You have to taste it. It has to go on your own tongue and that way, when you directly experience that, then that becomes yours. Then it's yours. Then nobody can take that from you; that's your experience.

In Zen practice, that's what we're going after. There's a lot of schools that are scholarly, and that's great. I don't happen to be a scholar at all, so hopefully you got that right from the get go. This is not the intellectual part of Zen, this is more the direct experience. That was the part that always interested me the most. I could experience that and then use that in my life. Correct situation, correct relationship, correct function, and just do it.

There's a lot of koans. There's like twelve thousand koans. People make up koans. There are classical koans from China, Japan, and Korea. Classic cases are the *Mumonkan* [*The Gateless Barrier*, a 13th-century collection of Zen koans], and the *Blue Cliff Record* [a collection of 12th-century Chinese Zen koans] is another famous collection that's used ofll these stories. If you

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really have a clear mind, you can penetrate right through to the center of the story and catch the meaning. Correct situation, correct relationship, correct function, and just do it. Which is why I always really appreciated that free giveaway koan that Zen master Seung Sahn taught us all about.

We could use the same example with a watch. You probably will know how to answer this now. Here is a watch. If you say it's a watch, you're attached to name and form and this stick will hit you 30 times. If you say it's not a watch, you're attached to emptiness and this stick will also hit you 30 times. Then what can you call it? What do you think? Are you all out there telling me the answer? I bet you are. The answer is [checks watch] “It's 4:29pm.” That's the correct situation, relationship, and function of a watch. And that's different from the cup. How does that work in our life? Sometimes people think these koans are esoteric but for me, they're just so basic and so simple that they *seem* esoteric. They're not really. They're just really basic, and quite useful too.

So how would that work in your life? When you're keeping your correct situation, relationship, and function, you'll find that you don't have conflict. The only time in my life when there's a conflict is if I'm not doing one of those things. For example, if you're at a funeral, you might be keeping your correct situation by being at the funeral. But if you're cracking jokes and laughing and being silly and disrespectful, then you're not keeping your correct function. Somebody somewhere isn't going to be too happy about that. Not including Irish Catholic funerals of course—I was raised Irish Catholic—there is a fair amount of joking at those funerals. But not during the serious part. You have to keep doing your job. You have to understand where you are and you have to have your relationship in order.

This dates back to the monastic time. If there was an older teacher and a younger student, your correct relationship to that person would be one of deference. It would be one of respect. It would be one of gratitude. That's the same way that you want to have it in your families and in

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your workplaces. You just want to have that correct relationship. You can fool around and horse around with somebody in a certain setting, but not in another setting.

This correct situation, relationship, and function works in koan practice certainly, and it also works in life. I can't tell you how often that teaching has come back to me. I think that's the true bone of the teaching—how you take what you learn on the cushion, and what you get from your meditation, and use it in a faster moving situation, which would be with other people when you are in your regular busy life and you're juggling more balls in the air. You want to keep those things going.

When you go into the interview room with the teacher, the correct situation, relationship, and function is just to go in there with a completely open mind. Don't care at all about getting the answer. Some people get really hung up on getting the answer and then koan practice is ruined for them. They might not want to come back because they're embarrassed. But what the koan is supposed to do is to give you that moment. Is this a cup or isn't it? In that moment before Sahn Sunim [Zen master Seung Sahn] had that monk give us the answer, everybody had that little moment of “Ah!” In that moment where you're stuck, where you're just completely before thinking, that's where the koan wants to bring you back to. That's the energy we want to cultivate. We call this “don't-know energy.”

We're walking around all day thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking. It's like a little engine up there. It never stops. The second your alarm goes off in the morning, it starts. *Gotta go here. Gotta go there. Gotta do this. Gotta get that done. Bah bah bah bah. Oh, here comes this guy. He's this way. She's that way.* When we live like that, we lose our sense of wonder. We lose our sense of connection to the universe. We can't hear the birds singing in the spring because we've got this thing going in our minds.

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Keeping our correct situation, relationship, and function is so important. Not only for ourselves. Not only for solving a Zen koan. What about our relationship to this whole planet? What about when we see videos online of plastic floating in the sea in a patch as big as the state of Texas? What about that? We see that and we have to understand our role in that. We have to understand the effect of our actions, not only on ourselves and the people close to us, but also when we throw that plastic bottle and we don't recycle it. Or even if we buy something that's plastic, if we can make a choice not to toss it away, then we're not contributing to ruining the ocean. We're not contributing to a great whale dying because its stomach is full of plastic.

All these things have this ripple effect. That's keeping our correct relationship to the planet—as a human being, doing our correct function. Find that recycling bin. Don't buy that plastic in the first place. It's just one example, but there are so many examples of how this correct situation, relationship, and function just permeates absolutely every aspect of our life and of koan practice.

What should you take away? What should you remember? Number one: don't get hung up on having “the answer.” The whole magic of it, the whole thrill of koan practice—I never get sick of it—is that sense of wonder. That moment where you're like “Ah!” That moment when your “don't-know” is touched and awakened and then you can connect. So don't care about the answer. You have your whole life to get the answer. You have your whole life to raise your hand and get the A+ grade. Where has that gotten any of us? It's gotten us a better job, or a better car, but it hasn't really gotten us the chance to go inside and really connect with what's really important which is: “What am I? What's my correct situation? What's my correct job? What's my function as a human being?”