

Zen master Bon Yeon (Jane Dobisz)
Practicing with Zen Koans in Your Everyday Life
Week Four: “No Attainment with Nothing to Attain”
June 25, 2018



Welcome to week four of our course on Zen koans, called “No Attainment with Nothing to Attain.”

I had the great pleasure of working with Zen master Seung Sahn many years ago in Korea. We were at Shinwon-sa Temple—I think it’s known in English as the Chicken Dragon Mountain—for 90 days on a meditation retreat. During that time, we assembled a book of 365 Zen koans. It was his unique collection that he put together using some koans from the *Mumonkan*, which is *The Gateless Gate* [a 13th-century collection of Zen koans], a very famous collection, then some from the *Blue Cliff Record* [a collection of 12th-century Chinese Zen koans]. He had some Daoist koans, some of his own koans, and some koans from a Christian prayer, because Zen master Seung Sahn did a lot of teaching with Christian priests and brothers. He used some really interesting prayers and made them into the same types of questions we've been talking about. You don't have to use the classic cases. You can use whatever question is in your life.

If you really think about it, we have our own koans, which are questions like, “How do I deal with my coworker?” Or, “What am I going to do? Should I go live here or should I go live there?” Or, “So-and-so that I love so much is really sick, what can I do?” These are our real-world koans.

So we made this book. We have 365 koans in this book and I just want to hold this up and show you the calligraphy that Zen master Seung Sahn put at the end of the book. I don't know if you can see this. Can you see this? [holds up *The Whole World is a Single Flower* by Zen master Seung Sahn]. We worked on the book during the work periods of a 90-day meditation retreat, writing everything in pencil. Then Zen master Seung Sahn did commentaries and questions to go with these koans. At the end, he wrote this in Chinese. Can you see that? [holds up calligraphy.]

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It says *mu, mu, mu* [nothing, nothing, nothing]. That was the very last thing he wanted everybody to take away from this big book of Zen koans. *Mu* means nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing! What that meant was don't attach to koan practice, don't attach to words.

This is somebody else's saying—it's a famous saying—I don't know who made this statement, but it's a good one, “Even the truest words are like a stake in the ground to which a donkey can be tethered for ten thousand years.” That's so important. We get so attached. It's our human nature to want to attain. We come to a Zen center with all good intentions, we put on our robes, we learn how to chant, and we want to understand “don't-know.” It's ironic because “don't-know” is not about understanding.

We tend to just go at this by habit. We want to attain that which cannot be attained. It's always at play, it's always operating underneath. We pretend we're past it, but in the way we're trained we really do want to pass the koan. We do want to attain something, we do want to get to that place. It's almost like it's a destination, like New York or Los Angeles. We think if we attain something then all these petty little things that have bothered us will be gone, we'll be all set because we will have “arrived.” If only we could attain that. Meanwhile, everyone's telling us if you're a true Zen student, don't be attached to attainment. Going back to this calligraphy—*mu, mu, mu*; nothing, nothing, nothing—it's so important.

We transport our habits into the spiritual practice. I think it was Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche who talked about cutting through spiritual materialism. It's our spiritual materialism, and you can see it all the time. When you go to different retreats and places, you can see people trying to outdo each other and looking the part, or being peaceful or tough—whatever idea they might have of this or that tradition.

It's really about going beyond this. I'm not too good with the names, as you can see in this course, but it doesn't matter completely. You can look it up or learn the names of these sources



from someone else. But the teaching itself is really amazing. One teacher, I think it was Dok Sahn, said even if one masters various profound philosophies, it's like taking one strand of hair and placing it in the great sky. Even if you get all the sutras and all the teachings, it's like throwing a drop of water into a deep ravine.

What does that mean? It means there's no lasting thing that you can hold on to and say, “I’ve got it. Attained.” You can't have it. It's like putting a hair in the sky. This is what it's all about. That's what we call hard training—there isn't a safety net. There's no one who can do this work for you. Not a god, not Buddha. Not your husband, not your wife, not your mother, not your father, not your friend. Only you can do this for yourself. Only I can do this for myself. There is no place to stay, there is no place to stick, there is nothing to hold on to. There is no safety net.

All this work that we do is like a hair in the sky. We have to remember that every time we want to hold on and say, “I’ve got something.” I think it's really important to have a sense of humor about it too. You develop a sense of humor as you’re practicing and you catch those little thoughts that come through your consciousness.

Maybe you do technically pass a koan . Like I said before, you may “pass” a koan in an interview, but then how do you pass it again and again and again in your life? It's really different. Maybe you think you attained “The sky is blue, the tree is green.” And then five years pass, ten years pass, twenty years pass. Then again you say, “Ah, the sky is blue, the tree is green.” And it feels different and it feels deeper. You think, “Oh, I didn’t know at all what that meant ten years ago, now I know.” Ten more years pass, and you think, “Oh, so that's what it is.”

These things have a way of evolving and becoming richer and deeper as we digest them and as they become ours. It's a really neat thing that Zen master Seung Sahn also frequently talked about. He said we have a lot of understanding, and that's good, we need our understanding. But



we have to digest that understanding and as we digest the understanding, that is what becomes wisdom.

Doing this koan practice along with our regular practice is how we digest and learn how to use this, how it becomes ours, how it becomes wisdom. It's very important though not to cling to anything at all. I can remember situations where I was holding on to this or that. I would go in and talk to my teacher, and he would look at me a little bit exasperated and say, “You are my student. Why are you holding?” Then in that moment I would realize, “Ah yes.”

I've been doing this practice for a long time and I'm still holding onto things. Everybody does it and that's okay. If you have a sense of humor about it, you just see it, and as soon as you recognize that you're doing it, you can have a little laugh and let go. “Ah, yeah. Holding again. Let go.” This is the meaning of “no attainment with nothing to attain.” There are many famous koans that address this point. One of them is “How do you take one more step off the top of a hundred foot flagpole?” You're standing there, you have this beautiful view, you see 360 degrees around you. You might think you're done. How do you take one more step?

One more step means keeping your direction clear. Keep on practicing. Don't attach to anything and only go straight to “don't-know.” Save all beings from suffering. This is a really beautiful aspect of the koan practice because it's very tempting to wear our achievements like a badge of honor, like “I passed this,” like a Girl Scout badge that you got when you were little. “I passed all these koans.” We find out very quickly—as soon as we leave the Zen center, as soon as we get up from our cushion—you'll find out a thousand times a day that there is more work to do. There are so many opportunities for seeing our stuck parts during the day. There are so many ways that we can look and say “Aha! [I'm holding.]” As Zen students, we want to let go, we don't want to hold anything. Then you get everything.