



Hello everyone. My name is Jane Dobisz and I'm the guiding teacher of the Cambridge Zen Center. I'm here today with Tricycle magazine to talk about Zen koan practice. In this four-week course, we're going to be discussing all different kinds of Zen koans. I hope that you enjoy the discussion because koans are often one of the things that people really don't understand about Zen practice.

I'll take a moment to introduce myself. I've been practicing meditation for 30 years. I started out in the Tibetan tradition and then practiced in the Vipassana tradition for several years, going all the way to Nepal when I was about 19 years old. I met Zen Master Seung Sahn in Barre, Massachusetts at the end of an Insight Meditation Society 90-Day Meditation Retreat. I started to practice with him at that time. Zen Master Seung Sahn is a Korean Buddhist Zen Master who founded the Kwan Um School of Zen in the United States about 40 years ago.

Sadly, Zen Master Seung Sahn has passed away. But he left behind quite a lot of Zen centers and quite a lot of Zen teachers. One of the unique things that he did was he taught us all how to use Zen koans. His method of teaching Zen koans was very unique and different than the usual, traditional way. He taught us how to use koans in our everyday life. I hope in this four-part series that you will learn a little bit about how to use Zen koans in your practice, and maybe if you're interested and you want to pursue it further, you can come and practice with us or you can practice in any of our Zen centers across the United States and around the world. We have over one hundred centers in Korea, Hong Kong, and many countries in Asia. We have centers all over Europe and the United States, and I am really happy and proud to be the guiding teacher here at the Cambridge Zen Center in Massachusetts.

In our four-part series, we're going to look at different koans and see how we can connect those to our everyday life and to our practice. In week one, we're going to talk about what koans are. When we hear koans like, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" we wonder, how do we



practice with that? How does that apply to my life? In this first week, we're going to talk about what a koan is, and I'm going to give you examples of how you can use koans in your everyday practice; not only on the cushion but when you're at work, or with your family, or in a difficult situation.

In the second week, we're going to talk about three things that were central to Zen master Seung Sahn's teachings. They're called “correct situation”, “correct relationship”, and “correct function.” These three things are very interesting because when the correct situation, relationship, and function are all in place, you'll find that things go smoothly, not only for you, but for the people around you too. If one of those things is off—if your correct relationship is off, or your situation is off, or you're not doing your correct job or your correct function—suffering tends to appear. I think we all know how that works in our life. But we're going to talk a little bit about how to use koans; by using the koans, we can observe and correct these things as we see them in our daily life.

In the third week, we are going to talk about the thing that's really the most important part of Zen practice and Zen koan practice in particular. I call that week, “Why do you eat every day?” The question “Why do you eat every day?” is all about your human direction and your motivation. Every kind of creature eats: dogs eat; cats eat; frogs eat. If a snake drinks water, the water becomes venom. If a cow drinks water, the water becomes milk. If you drink water, what does it become? This week we'll be talking a lot about the direction of our practice. *Why* do Zen practice? *Why* meditate? *Why* do we eat every day?

In the fourth week, we're going to be discussing something that I think is really important. I call it “no attainment with nothing to attain.” We Zen students can be a little clever and we can pass these Zen koans, and maybe we think we got something, maybe we think we're all done. But as we go through life and continue to see ourselves in different situations we find out that we still have a lot of work to do after all. We never really, truly pass the koan. We just keep evolving and



digesting the wisdom that we learned from the koan practice. We get to see it appear in many different settings in our life.

So, what exactly is a Zen koan? A famous master, Lao-tzu, once said, "Understanding only goes as far as that which it can understand." I want to repeat that, "Understanding only goes as far as that which it can understand." Then it stops. Understanding comes in really handy in our life for practical purposes—for taking tests; for doing our jobs; for knowing that when the light is red, you stop, and when the light is green, you go; and for adding one plus one to equal two. We need this understanding because it's how we get around in the world. The problem with understanding is that it only goes as far as that which it can understand, and there is a whole realm of human existence that cannot be understood.

A concrete example I could give you would be something like this: When you die, where do you go? I think this is a question that really defines the human condition. Before we were born, where did we come from? Who are we? When we die, where do we go? Our understanding *cannot* go there. Right? It can't. You know that from your own experience and I know it. We try to figure these things out and we come up to a stone wall. We just can't get there.

There's an old saying that our eyes can't see our eyes. If we try to use our eyes to see our own eyes, we just get really frustrated and nothing happens, because we can't do that. In that same way, our mind can't perceive our mind. We have this alternate way that we can access that which is before thinking. We call this "don't-know mind."

Take a metaphor of a stone wall. On one side, understanding only goes as far as that which it can understand but it stops at the wall, it can't get to the other side. Understanding works beautifully in that realm of everyday life that we just discussed. But on the other side of this wall is this whole other part of our human existence, you could call that the "unknowing mind" or "don't-know mind." Some people call it God, soul, energy, love, or absolute. There are many,



many names for this other sphere, and that's the sphere that we human beings have been interested in forever. It's where all art, poetry, and great literature comes from; it's from human beings trying to access that which is before thinking.

How do we access that which is before thinking? If our eyes can't see our eyes, in the same way, our thinking cannot that access that which is before thinking and these questions that we have. I like to use the example of the question “When you die, where do you go?” because that one's very real for all of us. It's just something we all think about, we all would like to know, and we all don't understand. How do we access that? The knowing mind can't access that. But there's something in Zen we call “don't-know mind.” What's really amazing is that if you practice this “before thinking”, or this “don't-know mind”, don't-know can access that which can't be known.

This “don't-know mind” is the real point of entry to access this whole beautiful, huge, before-words part of our existence. The whole purpose of koan practice—in fact, the whole purpose of Zen practice—is to really cultivate this “don't-know mind.” Now we walk around all day long thinking, *I know this. I know that. My name is such-and-such. My body. My family. My country. My state. My house. I, I, I, I. Mine, my, me.* But we never really take the time to stop and say: *What is this “I”?*

Socrates used to walk around Athens and say to his students, “Know thyself. Know thyself. Know thyself.” Finally, one day, one of Socrates' students looked at him and said, “Hey, Socrates, do you know yourself?” Socrates replied, “No, I don't. But I understand this ‘don't know.’” Our teacher Seung Sahn used to love to tell this story about Socrates. Over the course of his action-packed teaching career, he tried so hard to get us all to take that question and ask it of ourselves because this question is the really important question: What am I?

I could ask you here, in this koan class we're doing together, *what are you?* I don't mean your title, or your gender, or your job. In Zen we're talking about our true self. *What am I?* It's very



interesting. How do we use the koans here? We could take “When you die, where do you go?” as a great example. I love to stay concrete.

Koans are interesting. They are famous cases of conversations; *koan* literally means “public case.” They originated during the [Chinese] Tang dynasty [618–907 C.E.], when you would have two masters, or a master and a student, talking to one another in Zen monasteries. One little snippet of their conversation that would be taken out and discussed and that would become the “public case” or the *gong'an*. *Gong'an* is the original Chinese way of saying it, then the Japanese pronounced it *koan*. In America, we kind of tend to pronounce them the Japanese way, as *koan*. In our school, we call it *kong'an*.

People would look at these questions and access them in the way I was telling you about, not by understanding, but by letting your “don’t-know mind” get in there. How do you do that? Let’s say you were not working with a public case, but with something really concrete, real, and true to you along the lines of, “When I die, where do I go?” How do you use that in your practice?

You put the question into your computer up here, in your brain. Seung Sahn used to call our brains our computer. You put the question in there and you can ask yourself that question, “When I die, where do I go?” Then, to answer this koan, you don’t stay up in your brain and try to figure it out. You can tell when people are staying in their brain trying to figure these things out; you can just look at their face and see furrowed eyebrows, the eyes looking up to the head to access a path. We default to the tried and true path that we know, which is to try to figure something out with understanding.

In koan practice, you put the question up into your head and you work by returning to your technique, whatever your practice is. For most of us, that practice is counting the breath or focusing on the breath, or it could be repeating a mantra—anything that doesn’t require thinking.



We're going to just come back to our belly, to our breath, come back to your gut and let your “don't-know mind” do all the heavy lifting.

I say this all the time to my students: *You don't want to try to figure it out.* That's not what this is about. There is so much we don't know. We don't know anything. God doesn't know, Buddha doesn't know, you don't know, I don't know. My theory on this is the best thing you can do is only go straight: Don't know. Then you get everything because everything in the world is functioning according to this “don't know” principle. Water always flows to the sea, it never flows up. Dogs always bark, they don't meow. A lemon tree doesn't make a cherry. Spring comes and the grass grows by itself. One by one, each thing in this universe is functioning according to this “don't-know” principle, according to this thing that has all these names we call energy, soul, absolute, “don't know mind”, or consciousness.

There are many names for it but they're all like fingers pointing to the moon. *Kong'an* [koan] practice is like a finger pointing to the moon as well. The goal here is to see the moon, to perceive the moon, and not to be attached to the finger. In this case, the finger would be our concepts, our ideas about ourselves, and our notions of good and bad, inside and outside, subject and object, life and death. You'll notice that they are all opposites. Practicing “don't-know mind” means transcending opposites and entering into the place that is *before thinking*.

This is the place where we want to be. How do you do that? It's really easy. You're just going to return to your breath, to return to your practice. Or if you're not sitting down, a nice way I like to always remember is to ask myself, *What are you doing right now?* Sometimes I find myself getting rushed or stressed out in my day, just like you. We are all very busy. When I catch myself getting too rushed, or angry, or stressed out, or upset, I just say to myself, *Jane, what are you doing now? Just do it.*



In that moment, the universe and I connect. You can do this too. We can all do this. This is the really wonderful part about koan practice and Zen practice in general, that it's so easy to access this thing that can't be known. The simple and direct path to do that is to just come back to the present moment. Come back to what you're doing now. Every time you do that, you and the universe become one. When you and the universe become one, all koans are solved. There's no “I”. There is no “other”. There is no problem. Everything becomes one.

In our koan practice we want to just keep on accessing that which can't be known by thinking. We still use our thinking. We want to have clear thinking, we want to have correct thinking. It's not like we don't want to think. I think a lot of Zen students think *I shouldn't be thinking*. No, thinking is also empty, just like sound, just like touch, just like everything. It has no substance. We want to have *clearer* thinking. Want to have *correct* thinking. The way we do that is moment to moment to moment to moment when we're doing something, just do it.