

# Kong-Ans: Mind-To-Mind Connection

Zen Master Seung Sahn February 29, 1988

*This is an interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn about his system of kong-an practice.*

**Zen Master Seung Sahn:** Kong-an means public case, public exchange, public situation, or public document. In old China, when they made a copy of a government document, they put a "chop" or seal on the copy in such a way that half of the seal was on the original and half on the copy. So when they had to verify the authenticity of the copy all they did was to match the two halves.

In Zen tradition, kong-an means the student's understanding of a question is one-half and matches the teacher's understanding of the same question, which is the other half. When student and teacher share the same understanding it is called mind-to-mind connection.

If you want to practice correctly, you must ponder over old Zen enlightenment stories. If you understand their mind at the moment of enlightenment, that means your kong-an practice is correct. Nowadays, all Zen Masters use the old Zen Masters' enlightenment stories to teach their students. This is kong-an practice.

In the beginning there was no kong-an practice. Then the future seventh patriarch, Huai-jang, came to visit Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch. Hui-neng asked him, "Where do you come from?" Hui-jang replied that he came from Sung Shan mountain. Hui-neng asked again, "What is this thing that has come here?" Hui-jang could not answer.

That became the first kong-an in Zen tradition - "What is this?" It became a big question for Huai-jang and it took him eight years to understand.

Even before that there were situations in Buddhist history which became the basis of reflection by future Zen monks. Buddha sat down under the Bodhi tree with a big question: "What is life? What is death?" When Bodhidharma came to China, the future second patriarch came to visit him. Bodhidharma would not talk to him. To show that he was sincere in his quest, the second patriarch cut off his arm and presented it to Bodhidharma. Seeing this, Bodhidharma asked him, "What do you want?"

The second patriarch said, "My mind is not rested. Please pacify it for me."

Bodhidharma said, "Bring me your mind and I will pacify it."

The second patriarch was nonplused: "I cannot find my mind when I look for it."

"There," said Bodhidharma, "I have pacified it for you."

So this question, "What is mind?," became an inspiration for Zen monks.

Many questions came out of these stories: What is this? What is life? What is death? What is mind? All these questions became kong-ans and people started to use these questions for their own practice.

**PP:** Why do you use kong-ans in your practice?

**ZMSS:** Kong-ans are not special. But we use them to teach correct way, truth, and life. We use them to teach how it is possible to function correctly in everyday life. Sometimes old Zen Masters' answers to a question are not correct, but they used the situation to teach correct function, correct life to others.

For example, Joju's answer when asked if a dog has Buddha-nature ("MU!" or "no") is not correct, but he used mu to teach correct life.

Two monks were fighting over whether a flag was moving or the wind was moving. Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch, who was passing by, said, "It's your mind that's moving." Again, this is not correct, but he used "your mind is moving" to teach correct life.

One time Buddha held up a flower. None of the 1200 monks present understood. Only Mahakashyapa smiled. Buddha said, "I give my dharma transmission to you." This was not correct, but Buddha used "My dharma I transmit to you" to teach correct direction, correct life.

So kong-ans are only a technique to teach correct direction, correct life. Zen students should not be attached to correct answers or incorrect answers by the patriarchs. We use kong-ans to perceive directly how to function correctly in everyday life.

**PP:** Can't clear mind be attained without kong-an practice?

**ZMSS:** Yes, it is possible. Kong-ans are only one technique. It's like this: American people use forks and knives. Chinese people only use chopsticks. Korean people use chopsticks

and spoons. Indian people only use their hands. But they all have a full stomach when they eat, no matter how they eat.

**PP:** Isn't kong-an practice asking something?

**ZMSS:** If you make something, you have a problem. We use kong-ans to take away your opinion. When you take away your opinion, your mind is clear like space. Clear like space means only reflect action. Zen means correct conditional reflection. It means you respond to each situation correctly, meticulously. It means to understand your correct job in this moment. That means moment-to-moment correct relationship. If you practice correctly, this moment-to-moment correct situation, correct function, correct relationship will appear by itself.

If some one holds a kong-an, is attached to kong-ans ("I am doing kong-an practice"), or wants something from kong-an practice, then he or she will have a big problem. If you only keep one kong-an or "don't know," all the time without making anything, then correct direction and correct life will appear by themselves.

**PP:** What, then, is the best way to keep a kong-an?

**ZMSS:** Old-style kong-ans give us a great question: What is life? What is death? What is mind? What is this moment?

Correct kong-an practice means great question plus great faith and great courage. Great question means no intellectual-style thinking. An eminent teacher said, "Ten thousand questions are all one question." So one question means only don't know. No thinking at all. Just do it. That's correct kong-an practice.

But if you are attached to a kong-an or this style of practicing, then you have a big problem. A kong-an is only a finger pointing to the moon. If you are attached to the finger, you can't perceive the moon. The most important thing is your direction. This direction is "only don't know."

**PP:** What is the relevance of kong-an practice from ancient China to contemporary American society?

**ZMSS:** In correct kong-an practice, there is no American mind, no old China mind, because correct kong-an practice is keeping a before-thinking mind. In ancient days,

people used only kong-ans and practiced very hard to get enlightenment.

Now we use kong-an practice differently in our school. Enlightenment, no enlightenment doesn't matter. We use kong-an practice to make our direction clear, to help in our daily life. So don't attach to a kong-an. Use a kong-an to function correctly, make your moment to moment life clear.

**PP:** What is the best way to answer a kong-an? How does one open oneself up so that a direct and "correct" response is possible?

**ZMSS:** Put down everything, put down your opinion, your condition, your situation. Moment to moment, only don't know. Then a correct response will appear by itself. Hitting the floor or shouting KATZ is only a technique. Sometimes using this technique is necessary, sometimes it's not necessary.

**PP:** Are there dangers in kong-an practice?

**ZMSS:** If you only want to "understand" kong-ans, then you have a big problem. It's a kind of sickness. Then a very strong "I-my-me" mind appears. Sometimes people are attached to a good answer. That is not correct kong-an practice.

**PP:** Do you think that trying to pass the ten gates leads to a sense of competition? Does it lead to a sense of pride? Isn't trying to "solve" kong-ans particularly dangerous in our goal-oriented society?

**ZMSS:** Correct practice is necessary. When you don't practice correctly, then your "I" mind appears, then competition appears, then pride appears. If you correctly "attain" kong-ans, than this kind of mind never appears. Kong-an practice means cutting off all (analytical) thinking. That means throwing away our attachments to our conditions, opinions, and situations. American mind is intellectual, very analytical. The intellectual mind cannot pass kong-ans. Correct kong-an practice means your mind becomes very simple. In simple mind, there is no "I-my-me." Then practicing kong-ans is no problem.

Our style of kong-an practice means not holding the kong-an. The old style was to go into the mountains, cut off the outside world, and just work on one kong-an. Our style of practice is to learn how to function correctly in everyday life through kong-an practice.

So, when you are doing something, just do it. In that doing, there is no thinking, no subject, no object. Inside and outside become one. In our style of practice, correct kong-an practice, correct life, and correct direction are all the same. If we make our everyday life clear, then kong-an practice is no problem. Then kong-an practice is not special.

If our everyday life is clear, then kong-an practice is not necessary. Then kong-an practice is not for us, it is only to teach other people. So we use kong-ans, old kong-ans and new kong-ans, only to teach other people.

Sometimes a person's own life can be very clear, but they don't understand how to teach other people how to function correctly in everyday life. Also, they don't understand how to teach truth and correct way. When clear life, truth, and correct way come together in a meticulous way, moment to moment, that's a kong-an. Only "my life is clear" is not enough. For example, if you eat only one kind of food all the time, your body will have a problem. So, your body uses different kinds for a good balance, for a correct body.

**PP:** Can you explain your system of kong-an teaching? What are the different kinds of "like this" kong-ans you use?

**ZMSS:** We use four kinds of "like this" kong-ans:

**1. Without like this** = true emptiness= primary point

= silence

= complete stillness

Example kong-ans: "What is true emptiness?" "What is complete stillness?"

**2. Become one like this** = KATZ!= correct demonstration of primary point

= hit

Example kong-ans: "Buddha picked up a flower, Mahakashyapa smiled. What does it mean?"

**3. Only like this** = meaning is truth = true function of primary point

Example kong-ans: "Spring comes, grass grows by itself." "3 x 3 = 9." "What is

Buddha?" "Three pounds of flax."

**4. Just like this** = just doing is correct life = one-point correct function

Example kong-ans: "Go drink tea." "Go wash your bowls."

We can understand these four kinds of kong-ans in this way. You go into the interview room; the teacher places a cup and a pen before you and asks you if the cup and the pen are the same or different. The four kinds of "like this" answers will be:

**Without like this:** maintain complete silence, a don't know mind.

**Become one like this:** hit the floor or shout KATZ!

**Only like this:** saying "cup is cup, pen is pen."

**Just like this:** drink from the cup, write with the pen.

So, "just like this" is just doing it, correct function, correct everyday life.