



TEN GATES

The Kong-an Teaching of
ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

ABOUT THE BOOK

Zen is famous for koans (called *kong-ans* in Korean, and in this book), those bizarre and seemingly unanswerable questions Zen masters pose to their students to check their realization (such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”). Fear of koans keeps some people from ever giving Zen practice a try. But here, through the experience of seeing a modern Zen master work with his students, you can see what koan training is really like: It’s a skillful, lively practice for attaining wisdom.

This book presents the system of ten koans that Zen Master Seung Sahn came to call the “Ten Gates.” These koans represent the basic types one will encounter in any course of study. Each of the ten gates, or koans, is illuminated by actual interchanges between Zen Master Seung Sahn and his students that show what the practice is all about: it is above all a process of coming to trust one’s own wisdom, and of manifesting that wisdom in every koan-like situation life presents us with.

For more information on the author, Zen Master Seung Sahn, visit his website at www.kwanumzen.com.

ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN (1927–2004) was the first teacher to bring Korean Zen Buddhism to America, having already established temples in Japan and Hong Kong. In 1972 he came to the United States and started what became the Providence Zen Center, the first center in what is now the Kwan Um School of Zen, which now includes more than eighty centers and groups worldwide. His students called him Dae Soen Sa Nim, “Great Honored Zen Teacher,” and he was the 78th Zen master in his line of dharma transmission in the Chogye order of Korean Buddhism. His books include *The Compass of Zen*, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, *Only Don’t Know*, and *The Whole World Is a Single Flower: 365 Kong-ans for Everyday Life*.

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TEN GATES
The Kong-an Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn

REVISED EDITION EDITED BY

Zen Master Dae Kwang

FOREWORD BY

Robert Aitken



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John Stevens collection

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How Are You?

A Foreword

Soen Sa Nim begins his letters by asking, “How are you?” and his students take up the question too. “How are you?” they ask in turn in their letters to their teacher. We begin to notice this most routine of American greetings as though for the first time.

Does Soen Sa Nim’s “How are you?” differ from his students’ “How are you?” Is their “How are you?” just an echo? Are they being imitation Soen Sa Nims? If so, that won’t do. Soen Sa Nim stands on his own feet, you stand on yours, I stand on mine.

If you stand on your own feet, then what do you say? “Fine!” might be all right, or maybe you are just temporizing. *Temporizing*—there’s an interesting word. It means you are gaining time, but gaining time for what? The next question and the next temporizing? When will you come to terms?

“How are you?” “Fine!” That’s more like it. There are other questions like this in this book. Please pay attention.

—*Robert Aitken*

Koko An Zendo, Honolulu

Spring Training Period, 1987

Introduction by Zen Master Dae Kwang

The kong-an (Ch., *kung-an*; Jp., *koan*) is a unique and distinctive feature of the Zen tradition that sets it immediately apart not only from other Buddhist meditation practices, but also from all other spiritual traditions.

A kong-an is a seemingly illogical question posed by a Zen teacher to awaken a student. During the golden age of Zen creativity in the Tang dynasty in China (618–907), teachers and students lived in close proximity and spontaneously confronted each other in everyday life situations. One famous kong-an involved a student approaching Zen Master Dong Sahn while he was weighing flax and asking, “What is Buddha?” Dong Sahn replied, “Three pounds of flax.” The clarity and directness of the reply—its quality of pointing directly to mind—made it valuable as a teaching tool even beyond that immediate situation. It was remembered, recorded, and used over and over again.

For the practitioners of that era, it was like living on the razor’s edge—one could not afford to be slothful. In those days every person could be both teacher and student at the same time. Every exchange, no matter how innocuous, was a potential minefield and a test of one’s attainment of the enlightened mind. There were numerous instances when the exchange between teacher and student helped the student reach enlightenment.

Such exchanges were avidly recounted all over China and became part of Zen folklore. It was not until the Sung dynasty (960–1280) that the exchanges were formally recorded and organized into collections, then commented on and used as teaching tools by generations of Zen teachers. The two most important collections of kong-ans are still in use by Zen teachers today. The *Blue Cliff Record* (Ch., *Pi-yen-lu*; Jp., *Hekigan-Roku*) was compiled in 1125 and was similar to the Models of the Elders gathered by the monk Hsueu-tou (988–1052). A century later the *Gateless Gate* (Ch., *Wu-men-kuan*; Jp., *Mumonkan*) appeared, collected by the monk Hui-kai (1184–1260).

Today, the body of traditional kong-ans numbers 1,750. From these, Zen Master Seung Sahn selected ten, which he calls the Ten Gates and through which he requires his students to pass. The Ten Gates represent the various styles of kong-ans to be found among the 1,750. Zen Master Seung Sahn explains:

Many kong-ans are quite similar. From among all the kong-ans I have chosen ten which are representative of all the different types and show a distinctive style. So the Ten Gates are like a map to all the traditional 1,750 kong-ans.

For example, there are four kinds of “like-this” kong-ans:

1. “Without like this” kong-ans: true emptiness, silence, complete stillness.
2. “Become-one like this” kong-ans: KATZ, hit, etc.
3. “Only like this” kong-ans: the meaning is truth—“When spring comes, the

grass grows by itself.”

4. “Just like this” kong-ans: just doing is truth—go drink tea, wash your bowls, etc.

There are also “opposites questions” kong-ans that address issues like good and bad. There are kong-ans that teach “moment to moment keep correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function.” Then there are kong-ans where seemingly you can’t do anything, but one clear action is required. And then there are kong-ans where you “just do it.” There are kong-ans called “last-word” kong-ans, such as Duk Sahn carrying his bowls. The Nam Cheon cat kong-an teaches “moment-to-moment great love, great compassion, and the great bodhisattva way.” This is a “love” kong-an that points to attaining unconditional love. The mouse kong-an is a “subject-like-this” kong-an, very simple, very easy.

Each of the ten chapters in this book, corresponding to the ten types of kong-ans, begins with a statement of the kong-an followed by Zen Master Seung Sahn’s questions and commentaries. Over the years he added two more gates, the eleventh and twelfth, to help deepen his students’ wisdom.

Zen Master Seung Sahn used kong-ans to teach students correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function in their daily life. Here the kong-an is not so much a “test” as a technique to reveal how to live with wisdom and compassion. He called this his “Zen revolution,” using the kong-an to teach us how to function in our everyday lives. As he says, “Do not think that the kong-an is separate from your life.” It is not a rarefied or dry intellectual game played out in the interview room. Rather,

[y]our kong-an practice and your daily life must connect. This is very important. Moment-to-moment correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function give rise to great love, great compassion, and the great bodhisattva way. So we use kong-an practice to make our everyday life correct. Then there is no difference between what we understand during interview time and the way we act in everyday life. Getting enlightenment is not special. Take away “opposites” thinking, become the absolute, and then there is no understanding, only wisdom! At that point, action and understanding have already become one.

Zen Master Seung Sahn was always a traveling Zen master. As a result, it was not always possible for his students to have personal meetings with him. He always encouraged them to write him about their problems and questions regarding practice. These letters grew into a voluminous correspondence, selections from which were then collected into “kong-an books.” In residential Zen centers, a letter to Zen Master Seung Sahn and his reply are read as part of formal morning and evening Zen practice. These lively exchanges full of wit, pathos, cleverness, and arrogance—in short, the whole range of human experience—have served as the raw material for this book.

Kong-ans originate in the “before-thinking” mind, what Zen Master Seung Sahn called “don’t-know mind.” A clear response to a kong-an can only come from the same source, hence the reputed difficulty *and* the simplicity of kong-an training. If you are not thinking, the kong-an is no problem. But how can we reconnect to our before-

thinking or don't-know mind? That is the point of Zen—finding our original self and allowing it to function to help our world. A good answer or a bad answer to the kong-an doesn't matter; an answer appears, an answer doesn't appear, it doesn't matter. What is important is keeping a don't-know mind moment to moment in your everyday life. Kong-an practice is a very powerful tool in this endeavor. The only way to attain it is to practice it; thinking won't help you.

However, if all this true, of what use is a book like this? Its genesis lies in what Zen Master Seung Sahn calls his students' "understanding sickness." We human beings suffer from our desire to rationalize and reduce our experience to something that will fit comfortably into our private world views. While it is the function of kong-ans to shatter our opinions, it is also necessary to treat understanding sickness with "understanding medicine." In a country such as Korea, which has an established Zen tradition, students are not accustomed to seeking, nor do they receive, elaborate explanations about kong-an practice. Students may encounter a Zen master, receive a kong-an, and practice it for years while having little or no contact with the teacher. After a lot of hard training, they again visit the master to test their minds. Here in the West, with our newly emerging Zen tradition, students have many questions, as well as strong opinions about practice. There is a tendency to rely on an outside authority in the form of a teacher, coupled with a real lack of information about kong-an practice—both what it is and how it is used. Hence this book.

As a teaching tool, kong-ans are an effective way for Zen teachers to check their students' attainment. The word *kong-an*, or "public case," refers to the Chinese custom of authenticating copies of public documents with a seal:

If you have copies of a paper elsewhere, then you can compare the seals to check whether it is a true copy or not. So if someone says, "I have attained enlightenment," then the Zen master uses the kong-an to check whether that is true or not. He uses it to find out whether the student had correct understanding.

In the ongoing dialogue of kong-an practice, the teacher continually offers half of the public case and checks the authenticity of the student's half. In Zen Master Seung Sahn's words, "Your bodies are different, but your minds are the same." This face-to-face meeting in Zen dialogue is sometimes called "Dharma combat." In the following excerpt Zen Master Seung Sahn explains Dharma combat and how he has adapted it to teach kong-ans through letters. The student is checked on two things: clear mind (meditation energy) and wisdom (cognition).

First clear mind is checked:

Korean Dharma combat style is like swordsmen fighting. A very high-class swordsman will, with his first attack, strike and completely kill his opponent. The next class of swordsman must attack and strike two or three times before killing. A Zen master is like a sword master, always checking his student's mind by allowing space for attack. If the student's mind is not clear, then the master will strike and kill his student. But if the student is keen-eyed, he will attack in the space and with one blow strike the master dead.

For example:

Q: What is the way of Nam Cheon?

A(holding up a sickle): This sickle cost me thirty cents.

Q: I didn't ask you about your sickle!

To this second question, the keen-eyed student would answer, "The dog runs after the bone," which means "You are attached to my words." Then the master would say, "Is this correct?" to which the student would respond, "A second offense is not permitted." The master would then say, "Oh, wonderful!" Both attacking and defending are very important. This style of checking the student's meditation energy allows no chance for thinking and is used in face-to-face interviews.

Second, the student's cognition is checked by using such kong-ans as "Nam Cheon Kills a Cat" or "Duk Sahn Carrying His Bowls." The student is given the kong-an repeatedly and is allowed time to respond. Answers show the student's wisdom and whether he or she has attained the correct situation. Thus it is possible to be accurately checked in letters. For example:

1. The mouse eats cat food, but the cat bowl is broken. What does this mean? (the Tenth Gate)
2. One man makes a sword sound, another takes out a handkerchief, and another man waves his hands. What does this mean? (the Twelfth Gate)

In Korean style, attack and defense in these kong-ans is not necessary. Only one word or action is very important.

The basic requirement for undertaking kong-an practice is an attitude Zen Master Seung Sahn calls "try-mind," something a teacher can point out but not create in a student. It is the mind that refuses to quit, that comes back to try again even after mistakes, obstacles, and discouragement appear. Only through such trying can students come to believe in themselves completely. Without that sort of independence, simply understanding kong-ans is not enough.

You may understand that the sky is blue, but how much do you believe in that? That is important. If I ask you, "Why is the sky blue?" then what? If your mind is clear, then a correct answer can appear. "The sky is blue" must become yours! The understanding of a kong-an must become yours! Then you have wisdom.

There is perhaps an inevitable tendency for students to turn kong-an practice into something special, mysterious, or competitive. Actually, it is nothing special: a tool we can use—or a tool that uses us!—changing us in ways we can't foresee. Most important is not attaching to the kong-an. As Zen Master Seung Sahn says, we must "use kong-ans to take away our opinions. Don't attach to kong-an practice! Don't make it special. OK?"

A special thanks to Stanley Lombardo and Dennis Duremeier who prepared the first edition of this book.

Ten Gates

Open the gate—
All Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,
All human beings and animals,
All hungry ghosts and demons,
All together dancing.

Close the gate—
All things high and low,
Big and small, holy and unholy,
Disappear, disappear.
Cannot find anything.

Good and bad gate,
Dragon and snake gate,
Heaven and hell gate,
Appearing and disappearing gate,
Nirvana and Enlightenment gate.

KATZ and HIT gate,
Smile and one finger gate,
Stone dancing girl gate,
Snow fire gate,
Demon holding Buddha's baby gate,

Joju's "Mu" and four gates,
Three pounds of flax gate,
Nam Cheon kills the cate gate,
Duk Sahn carries his bowls gate,
Dropping ashes on Buddha gate,

Zen Master To Sol's three gates:
Where is your true nature now?
How then will he be reborn?
When the four elements disperse, where do you go?
Open your mouth, lose your tongue.

Zen Master Ko Bong's three gates:
Why does a cloud obscure the sun?
How can you not step on your shadow?
How can you escape being burned?

Holding your body, already you are dead.

Originally, there is nothing.

How do you open and close?

The mouse eats catfood but the cat bowl is broken.

DO!¹

Through the gates—north south, east west.

—*Zen Master Seung Sahn*

Providence Zen Center

August 2, 1980

[1](#) Path.

FIRST GATE
[JoJu's Dog](#)

*Someone asked JoJu Zen Master, "Does a dog have buddha-nature?"
JoJu said, "Mu." ("No.")*

The first question is: Buddha said all things have buddha-nature. Nature means substance. All things have this substance. But JoJu said a dog had no buddha-nature. Which one is correct?

The second question is: JoJu said, "Mu." What does *mu* mean? This *mu* has no meaning. If you find a meaning, that's a big mistake. If you are attached to yes and no, you will have a problem. Mu is behind yes and no. Behind yes and no means behind everything. Our world is an opposites world—heaven, earth; yes, no; man, woman; good, bad—what is not opposites? But who made these opposites? God, Buddha, human beings? We make opposites. If you put it all down, return to before thinking, then there are no opposites. If you have no opposites then mu is alive. If you have opposites thinking, then mu hits you. JoJu said, "Mu," so this monk is very surprised.

The third question is: Does a dog have buddha-nature? What can you do? Many students understand this, but understanding cannot help. You must attain the correct function of freedom from life and death—only understanding freedom from life and death cannot help you.

Dear Soen Sa Nim,

How are you?

Thank you for the letter you sent me. Also, thanks for the kong-an "JoJu's Dog." I have played (wrestled) with this kong-an for days, but I feel ready to reply to you:

You ask who is correct, JoJu or Buddha?
Buddha's finger points to moon
JoJu's finger points at moon.
Same moon, different finger.
You ask what "Mu!" means.
"Mu!" is JoJu's bark, "Mu!"
You ask if a dog has buddha-nature.
Dogs and men are just like this.
When hungry they must eat, when tired
they must sleep.
AAAGH!

Well, I hope I have done well; if not, you must have a long stick to hit me in Alabama! I enjoy kong-ans and would like to continue my practice more with you. So until then, good-bye and thanks.

Ned

Dear Ned,

Thank you for your letter. How are you? I have just returned to Providence Zen Center.

About your dog kong-an: Your answers are not good, not bad. But first, Buddha and JoJu: Which one is correct? You say, "Buddha's finger points at the moon. JoJu's finger points at the moon. Same moon, different fingers." You are making many fingers. Also, you are attached to these fingers. How do you see the moon? So I say to you, your answer is like hitting the moon with a stick.

Next, you say JoJu's Mu means JoJu's bark, Mu! Why make JoJu's bark? I want *your* bark. I say to you, you are scratching your right foot when your left foot itches.

Next, you say, "Dogs and men are just like this. When hungry they must eat; when tired they must sleep." You say, "Just like this." But your speech is "only like this." Just like this and only like this are very different. Example: Here is a bell. If you say it is a bell, you are attached to name and form. If you say it is not a bell, you are attached to emptiness. So what is it? At that time, if you say, "When hungry, eat; when tired, sleep," or "The sky is blue, the tree is green," these are "only like this." They are only the truth, but they are not correct answers. At that time, you must pick up the bell and ring it. That is just like this. So just like this and only like this are different. Again I ask you, "Does a dog have buddha-nature?" Tell me! Tell me! If you don't understand, only go straight. Don't be attached to your understanding. Your understanding cannot help you. The true way is not dependent on understanding or not understanding. Only go straight, don't know. Then your opinion, your condition, and your situation will disappear, and the correct opinion, correct condition, and correct situation will appear. Then you are complete. OK?

I hope you only go straight, don't know, which is clear like space, soon finish the great work of life and death, get enlightenment, and save all people from suffering.

Yours in the Dharma,

S.S.

Dear Soen Sa Nim,

It is March 8. A gray mist surrounds my house and soaks the air. Monday, your letter came and hit me like a brick. You say I make "gates" (last letter) and "fingers" and

“hindrances.” I think this is so. I must make many things. I feel like I am attached to my thoughts and chase them (like a dog after its own tail). You say my answers are “not good, not bad.” Thanks, I needed that!

About my dog kong-an: Does a dog have buddha-nature?

My answer is “I think so.”

You say you hope I will only go straight and don’t know. I will try.

I hope the Zen Center is doing well, and so are you. Thanks for writing me; I enjoy your letters very much. It is exciting to find my mistakes.

Respectfully yours,

Ned

Dear Ned,

Thank you for your wonderful letter. How are you?

Your mind is very smooth. Your only problem is that you are holding your understanding. Don’t check your understanding. When your understanding disappears, then your mind is clear like space. If it is clear like space, it is like a clear mirror. Red comes, red; white comes, white. If somebody is sad, I am sad; if somebody is happy, I am happy. You can see; you can hear; you can smell; all, just like this, is truth.

Your answer to the dog kong-an was “I think so!” So I hit you thirty times. Why think? Zen is cutting off all thinking and becoming empty mind. Then this empty mind shines on everything; then everything is clear. The sky is blue, the trees are green.

The questions are:

1. Buddha said all things have buddha-nature. JoJu said the dog has no buddha-nature. Which one is correct?
2. Next, JoJu said, “Mu!” What does that mean?
3. I ask you, does a dog have buddha-nature?

Three questions. If you don’t understand, only go straight. Don’t check your understanding. If you are attached to understanding, you have a problem. Put it all down. Only don’t know, always, everywhere. Don’t worry about thoughts coming and going. Let it be. Try, try, don’t know for ten thousand years nonstop. OK?

I hope you will only keep don’t know, which is clear like space, soon finish the great work of life and death, get enlightenment, and save all people from suffering.

Yours in the Dharma,

S.S.

Dear Soen Sa Nim,

Thank you for your dog/master letter. How are you?

In this letter, you asked me about JoJu's dog. If I were JoJu, I could have considered cutting that monk up into little pieces, although he's hardly worth the effort. Some people mistake JoJu's answer and say, "JoJu said that a dog does not have buddha-nature." This, as Yuan Wu says, is like adding frost to the snow. Just by opening his mouth, that poor monk had already dropped into hell; JoJu just didn't want to follow him there. So using his mindsword, JoJu said, "Mu!" and stopped that hell-bound train before it was too late.

Now, if you ask me this question—"Does a dog have buddha-nature?"—I might chase my tail around and around looking for an answer, but you know a dog chasing its tail has motion but no direction.

Yours in the Dharma,

Mark

Dear Mark,

Thank you for your letter. How are you? Happy New Year.

Your dog letter is not good, not bad, but much thinking, thinking, thinking. I hit you thirty times!! Again I ask you: A monk once asked JoJu, "Does a dog have buddha-nature? JoJu answered, 'Mu!'

1. Buddha said everything has buddha-nature. JoJu said a dog has no buddha-nature. Which is correct?
2. JoJu said, "Mu!" What does this mean?
3. Does a dog have buddha-nature?

You must answer these three questions. A lot of thinking is no good; you must believe in yourself 100 percent. Many words are not necessary . . . just one point, OK? If you don't understand, only go straight, don't know. Don't make anything; don't hold anything; don't check anything.

I hope you only go straight, don't know, which is clear like space, soon finish the great work of life and death, get enlightenment, and save all people from suffering.

Yours in the Dharma,

S.S.

SECOND GATE

JoJu's Washing the Bowls

A monk once asked JoJu, "I have just entered the monastery. Please teach me, Master."

JoJu said, "Did you have breakfast?"

"Yes," replied the monk.

"Then," said JoJu, "wash your bowls."

The monk was enlightened.

What did the monk attain? This is very simple. "Please teach me." "Did you have breakfast?" "Yes." "Then wash your bowls." That's correct function, correct relationship. That is everyday mind. This is an everyday-mind kong-an. Just do it. Everyday life is the truth and the correct way. Everyday life is the great bodhisattva way.

The Second Gate kong-an is a just-like-this kong-an (see the following letters). What did the monk attain? Don't attach to the Zen master's speech. If you attain that point, you understand correct situation, correct function, and correct relationship moment to moment. This monk attained his correct situation.

Dear Soen Sa Nim,

Thank you for your letter of July 8. You ask me, "What did the monk attain when JoJu told him to wash his bowls?" I don't know what the monk attained. I have never been to Paris, but I hear that it is a beautiful city.

The sky was empty before creation,
The sky is empty in creation;
Creation is not there in the secret,
Creation is not there in the manifest.
The head is painful when hit by a stick,
The stick is empty.

Will you please explain what you mean by the word *Dharma* when you use it at the end of your letters?

Respectfully with love,

Norm

Dear Norm,

Thank you for your letter. How are you?

You don't understand this kong-an. If you understand it correctly, you are already a great Zen master. If you "cannot," you cannot. If you say, "I can," you can. This can-mind means try, try-mind. If you don't understand the kong-an, you must only go straight—try, try, try, moment to moment, for ten thousand years nonstop. A good answer will then appear by itself. Good answers and bad answers don't matter. Here is a hint: Zen mind is not special. Everyday mind is Zen mind. Everyday mind means when-you-are-doing-something-you-must-do-it mind. When you are hungry, what? When you are tired, what? You already understand. That is Zen mind. Its name is "don't know"; its name is try-mind.

If you understand, you understand this kong-an. So I ask you one more time: JoJu Zen Master said, "Did you have breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Then wash your bowls."

When he heard this, the monk got enlightenment. What did the monk attain? Very easy. Don't think. Only just like this.

Your poem was wonderful. You are very attached to empty. I ask you, "What is empty?" Tell me! Tell me! If you open your mouth, I will hit you thirty times.

Next, you ask me, "What is Dharma?" How many eyes do you have? You can answer this. This is Dharma. Do you understand? If you don't understand, only go straight, don't know. Try, try, try for ten thousand years nonstop.

I hope you only go straight, don't know, which is clear like space, soon finish the great work of life and death, get enlightenment, and save all people from suffering.

Yours in the Dharma,

S.S.

Dear Soen Sa Nim,

Welcome home from Europe.

I hope you enjoyed yourself and enlightened many people.

The newsletter said Zen Center has a new home. This is great. Maybe one day I can come visit you there and leave my "pen-zen" behind.

Eighty-four thousand thank-yous for my homework, "JoJu's Washing the Bowls"! As to what the monk attained,

Don't know has no-answer
with Nothing to Attain
only a clean bowl.