

## "Just respond. Just be like a clear mirror"

### Q&A with Zen Master Bon Shim

Aleksandra Porter, Zen Master Bon Shim, is Regional Zen Master for the Kwan Um School of Zen in Europe. She also serves as the guiding teacher of Zen centers in Katowice, Krakow and Wroclaw, Poland; Prague, Czech Republic; and Catalonia. Zen Master Bon Shim continues to live at the Warsaw Zen Center, where she began training and served as Abbot for many years. She met Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1978, receiving inka in 1992 and permission to teach in 2006.

**Question:** I often get the feeling that people practice because they want some sort of change to occur, and there's a part of me that understands why people want to be different and change. But there's another part of me that appreciates accepting what is and what's just happening. So I'm wondering if you have thoughts on people's relationships to change and practice, and how practice can help you change or not change, or with what's going on. What is this?

**ZM Bon Shim:** Just sitting here. (Laughs.) You ask me a question and then I answer you. Just an exchange. With practice we become aware of that. We don't have to do anything special. We don't have to try so hard. We don't have to try to impress somebody or come up with some great idea or think interesting thoughts, or whatever. Just to share whatever you're feeling this very moment. That's basically what we observe—that we don't really need to do anything special. Just be as you are. Just care for other people. Just make sure that somebody's feeling good and comfortable. Children are great companions. They don't expect anything and don't project anything.

Whatever they're doing they just do their thing, and if you can plug into that, into their space without trying to improve the situation or take the situation on to another level or anything like that, then it'd be great! And not only children—with adults it's the same way. If you are authentic and you're really for this person, then you're not thinking about what other people would think about me, how do I look, am I doing well or not doing well . . . not checking yourself but instead being present and seeing what's in front of you. That's actually all we can do and all we should do. Just respond. Just to be like a clear mirror. Living in a Zen center is great. It's great training and a great opportunity. We meet each other in any kind of moment. Maybe you don't feel so good. Maybe you don't really want to see anybody (laughs) but you just go downstairs and you go to the kitchen and there's always somebody in the kitchen so there is always some interaction, which is really great training. I really feel the great benefits from being here and interacting with other people—seeing the mirrors in front of me at any moment. Whether you feel good, or whether you don't feel good, you still try to

do your best. It's wonderful and kind of rare in this world: we all live here and share the same direction, practicing kindness, generosity and patience. We support each other to do that and that's something really wonderful. I really feel that. There's not so much checking—you know everyone understands we cannot always feel great, we cannot always show our best face, our best smile or our clarity or great wisdom. (Laughs.) So we all understand that by living together and training our minds moment to moment we are much better able to go outside and interact with people in our daily life. You are just more honest. You allow yourself to be more honest because everyday practice supports you and helps you cultivate this kind of honesty.

**Question:** There's a quote by Zen Master Seung Sahn that says humans are the number one bad animal on the planet, but it seems like recently it's more clear that it's really the men that are the number one bad animal. In order not to become a "#MeToo," what would your advice be to men so that they won't take advantage of women or even other young men in situations of power when they have these instinctual drives or these sexual desires that drive them to manipulate other people? What kind of advice would you give to us men?

**ZM Bon Shim:** The same advice as to any person: if your direction is clear, if you have this mind that is "not for me" then there's no way you can be mean and hurt somebody. Maybe you can say something [hurtful] because you are frustrated or are not able to control your temper, but that's all you do if you have a very clear direction and if you practice every day. You say the four great vows every morning. You repeat this over and over and over and it goes into your subconscious. Our consciousness is like a field with all kinds of seeds, right? Seeds of anger, seeds of desire and seeds of love, as well as seeds of enlightenment. We don't take refuge in the political machinery or the situation we are living in. Now, things are currently coming up about the abuse of women. There's now more light on this kind of abuse, and it seems like this is something new but it's not. We practice because we all have this tendency. We don't always have pleasant thoughts, nice thoughts. With practice you can control your mind by becoming aware of your anger or desire. The first step is to become aware of your anger and desire and then you allow your mind to navigate to a more wholesome state of mind, a more wholesome way of thinking.

Everything comes from our mind. So, we practice to become aware of what is happening in our mind. What are our thoughts? If you become aware, your mind opens up and you can train this mind. So, instead of feeding the anger and desire you feed love, generosity, kindness, compassion and care—without care we cannot become aware of what we are doing. You can observe yourself. I'm sure everyone can observe what is happening in their mind and then do something about that. Doing this practice in a more intense way is very

important. When you sit a long retreat, you observe the coming and going of our mind, your thoughts and feelings and emotions as they come and go. If you don't try to reject them and don't try to grab them or hold on to them then that's the essential aspect of our practice. Not rejecting, not holding. Then you practice opening the mind. It's a bodhisattva aspect of our practice, which is warm, open and accepting of what is. It's all about how to apply this meditation and how to apply this teaching. But first you have to become aware of what's in your own mind.

Nothing comes out when it's not already inside so if somebody's abusive or aggressive it means these urges or feelings are already inside them. They are usually suppressed, and that's karma: condition and situation. Then karma appears and you react. We do something and usually we are surprised, "What am I doing? Why did I do this?" We don't plan to act in a bad way. It just happens out of conditioning and because we have no center. We cannot control ourselves, so this practice is very important to really understand what we are doing in our lives moment to moment. How are we reacting? What are our relationships? And you have to see it in your mind, see what's going on because if you don't see it and if you don't allow the thoughts and feelings and emotions to come out to the surface then you have no recourse of how to deal with them. So, the point is that we all have aspects of life we want to deny. Practice helps us to become aware of that and work on whatever it is. Otherwise it comes up and you cannot control it when you have a bad moment, or when something unexpected happens. I remember some video of an inmate with a life sentence for murder and they interviewed him. It was interesting because he said, "I don't know why I did this. I don't know how it happened." He wasn't planning to murder somebody. It just happened. "I don't know what happened. It's horrible. I really couldn't control myself. It just happened." So really get to know yourself and know your mind! Know what you are denying, what you are trying to hide. We're denying something because we are afraid of some aspects we don't want to see, but that doesn't make any sense. It doesn't help our life. There are no inherently bad or good people. (Laughs.) There are only people who cannot control themselves and have not enough awareness of what is happening in their mind.