

Dropping Ashes On The Buddha PDF (Limited Copy)

Seung Sahn



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Dropping Ashes On The Buddha Summary

Finding enlightenment through direct experience and humor.

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About the book

In "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha," Seung Sahn, a renowned Korean Zen master, invites readers on a transformative journey that transcends the confines of traditional Buddhism, offering profound insights into the nature of existence and the art of enlightenment through an accessible, yet deeply philosophical lens. This engaging collection of teachings interweaves personal anecdotes, koans, and practical wisdom, challenging us to confront our attachments and illusions while awakening to the raw reality of life itself. Whether you are a seasoned practitioner or a curious newcomer, Sahn's authentic voice and unorthodox style encourage us to question our perceptions and explore the profound depths of our own consciousness, ultimately leading to a limitless understanding of self and the universe. With each chapter, readers are beckoned to drop their own ashes on the Buddha, opening the door to a more vivid and liberated experience of being.

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About the author

Seung Sahn was a renowned Korean Zen master and the founder of the Kwan Um School of Zen, respected for his unique approach to Zen practice that emphasized the importance of direct experience over theoretical understanding. Born in 1927 in Korea, he began his monastic training at a young age, eventually achieving enlightenment at the age of 19. Throughout his life, Seung Sahn dedicated himself to teaching and spreading Zen Buddhism to the West, often employing humor and straightforward language to convey profound truths. His influential works, like "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha," reflect his insight into the nature of mind and the practice of meditation, offering a compelling bridge between Eastern spirituality and Western thought. Seung Sahn's teachings continue to inspire and guide countless practitioners in their quest for wisdom and enlightenment.

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Chapter 1 Summary: 1. Zen Is Understanding Yourself

In Chapter 1 of "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha" by Seung Sahn, a profound exploration of Zen philosophy unfolds through a dialogue between a student and the Zen master. The essence of Zen, as conveyed by Soen-sa, centers on self-understanding and the nature of reality.

1. **Understanding Zen:** The chapter begins with the student's inquiry about Zen, to which Soen-sa responds with a provocative question about understanding. He introduces the concept of the "don't-know mind," signifying a state of openness and lack of attachment to preconceived notions, which he identifies as foundational to Zen.
2. **The Unity of Substance:** Soen-sa illustrates the idea of all things in the universe being different forms of the same substance through a metaphor of a cookie factory. Although cookies may take many shapes and names, they share the same dough. Similarly, he posits that the diverse elements of the universe—nature and human entities alike—are fundamentally identical despite their superficial differences.
3. **Dualism and Understanding:** The conversation transitions to the nature of opposites—light and dark, good and bad—emphasizing that they are intrinsically linked, a product of our thinking. He asserts that when one transcends these distinctions, one recognizes that all are part of a singular

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substance. This realization leads to the understanding that one's essence is interconnected with all, fostering a sense of unity rather than division.

4. **Misunderstanding and Conflict:** The metaphor of four blind men and an elephant highlights the limitations of perspective and comprehension. Each blind man perceives the elephant differently based on limited contact, mirroring how people argue and clash over differing views of truth. This lack of holistic understanding, Soen-sa argues, fuels conflict in the world.

5. **The Path to World Peace:** The student questions how Zen can lead to global harmony, to which Soen-sa explains that desires—rooted in thought—are sources of suffering, preventing peace. By relinquishing these attachments and thoughts, one can reach a state free from suffering, which is synonymous with attaining world peace.

6. **Discovering the Absolute:** The dialogue culminates in the student seeking to understand the Absolute, an abstract concept linked to the essence of being. Soen-sa responds by emphasizing that self-understanding is the key. To illustrate, he draws attention to the Zen stick and the sound it makes, prompting the student to contemplate the relationship between perception and reality.

The chapter concludes with dramatic intensity as Soen-sa's actions and the shout of "KATZ" serve as a catalyst for awakening. This powerful moment

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encapsulates the Zen experience—provoking immediate insight and revealing that the essence of existence can be realized in the simplicity of being, akin to the effortless growth of grass in spring. Thus, the dense layers of Zen philosophy are distilled into a call for self-exploration and awareness, inviting engagement with the essence of life itself.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embrace the Don't-Know Mind

Critical Interpretation: Imagine standing at the precipice of your daily challenges, embodying the profound concept of the 'don't-know mind' described by Soen-sa. In this moment, let go of your preconceived notions and be open to the unknown. Embracing this state of mind invites you to approach life with curiosity and a fresh perspective, unburdened by fear or expectation. By doing so, you open yourself to possibilities, allowing for spontaneous growth and insights that may otherwise be hidden beneath the weight of certainty. With this mindset, each moment becomes an opportunity for discovery, fostering not only personal growth but also deeper connections with the world around you, leading you towards a more harmonious existence.

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Chapter 2 Summary: 2. The Zen Circle

In his Dharma speech at the Providence Zen Center, Seung Sahn Soen-sa delves into the essence of Zen, framing it as a journey of self-understanding, captured through the metaphor of a circle divided into significant degrees. Each segment represents a different state of awareness and understanding, fostering deeper insights into existence and suffering.

- 1. Understanding the Circle:** The circle is divided into five key points— 0° , 90° , 180° , 270° , and 360° . At 0° , individuals grapple with attachment and desire, where thinking leads to suffering as people separate experiences into opposites such as good and bad. This attachment manifests through a pursuit of happiness while evading suffering.
- 2. Karma and Consciousness:** As one progresses to 90° , they enter the realm of Karma or Consciousness I, where attachment to names and forms begins. Here, the cycle of birth and death is revisited—zero represents prior existence, one signifies the present, and beyond that lies zero again, indicating a return to emptiness. The realization dawns that all things share a common essence, arising from and ultimately dissolving back into emptiness.
- 3. Experiencing True Emptiness** At 180° , thinking ceases entirely. This represents the experience of true emptiness, devoid of dualities or

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distinctions—no mountains, rivers, or divine entities exist in this state of pure awareness. It is a profound silence that transcends the need for words.

4. **Magic and Freedom:** Progressing to 270° introduces the realm of "magic and miracles," characterized by absolute freedom, where barriers of time and space dissolve. Here, one can envision limitless possibilities—transformations, alternate realities, and the fluidity of life and death, symbolizing that existence itself is malleable.

5. **The Realization of Oneness:** Finally, at 360°, one recognizes that all states are interconnected, and the reality is simply as it is—without attachment. The understanding that 360° equates back to 0° emphasizes a cyclical nature of awareness. The distinction lies in the quality of thinking: attachment thinking at 0° versus no-attachment thinking at 360°. This clarity reveals the essential nature of actions, where instinctual responses occur without desires impeding clarity.

In essence, Seung Sahn articulates a profound understanding of self: at various points along the circle, perspectives shift, revealing different truths about existence. Ultimately, he highlights a Zen paradox—every answer given at each stage may offer a piece of understanding yet also points to the fundamental truth that all concepts are inherently flawed. The pursuit of understanding oneself remains integral to the practice of Zen. The concluding moment of the talk leaves the audience with a powerful reminder

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of the simplicity nestled within complex understanding—an exhortation to confront both clarity and confusion with equal mindfulness.

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Chapter 3: 3. My Dharma Is Too Expensive

In this chapter, the interaction between Zen Master Hyang Bong and a persistent student unfolds a profound exploration of the nature of Dharma and the pathways to understanding it.

1. **Value of Dharma:** The chapter begins with the student earnestly requesting to be taught the Dharma. Hyang Bong, however, bluntly states that his teaching is costly, prompting the student to ask how much it would cost. This exchange reveals the idea that true understanding cannot be quantified in material terms. The Master's insistence that even the wealth of a mountain or multiple lives would not suffice emphasizes the intrinsic value of spiritual knowledge over worldly possessions.

2. **The Student's Commitment:** Initially, the student offers his coins, which reflect a misunderstanding of the depth of what is being sought. As he immerses himself in Zen training, his willingness to sacrifice more—his life, and then his mind—illustrates his deepening commitment to seeking wisdom. However, Hyang Bong rebuffs each offer, labeling the mind as "a

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Chapter 4 Summary: 4. Advice to a Beginner

The correspondence between Patricia and Soen-sa-nim throughout Chapter 4 offers profound insights and practical advice on the journey of Zen practice, particularly for beginners. In his responses, Soen-sa-nim emphasizes the necessity of experiencing Zen beyond the confines of intellectual understanding and encourages a direct engagement with practice through an open, questioning mind.

1. Initial Disconnections: Patricia communicates her struggle to relate Zen to her daily life. Her engagement with Zen has been largely intellectual, leading to feelings of isolation and confusion. She expresses a desire for a more concrete practice and guidelines to follow, feeling that the precepts she's encountered are meant for those who have already attained understanding.

2. Practice Beyond Words Soen-sa-nim responds by highlighting a critical distinction: thought and understanding are not synonymous. He asserts that thinking can obstruct the comprehension of Zen. Instead, he urges Patricia to cultivate a "don't-know" mind—a state of being that transcends conceptual thinking. This approach suggests that Zen cannot be fully captured in words and must be lived through practice. Calculated actions, like driving or talking, can also embody Zen when they are undertaken with this mindset.

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3. **Nature of Mind:** Soen-sa-nim explains that all behaviors and thoughts should be approached with openness and without preconceived judgments. He reinforces that the essence of Zen lies in recognizing the interconnectedness of all things. The distinction between one's self and the external world is an illusion rooted in cognitive separation—this is remedied by engaging with the world directly, without making any unnecessary judgments.

4. **Emotional Realities:** As Patricia communicates her emotional fluctuations and the difficulties of maintaining a consistent practice, Soen-sa-nim reassures her that both enthusiasm and discouragement are part of the journey. He compares a mindful approach to tuning a guitar, suggesting that a balanced approach is essential for maintaining the clarity of practice. The ability to observe one's mind without attachment allows for spontaneous and authentic actions.

5. **Three Principles of Practice:** Soen-sa-nim outlines three vital elements for Patricia's practice: great faith, great courage, and great questioning. These principles inspire a commitment to practice with unwavering determination, similar to how a hen nurtures eggs or a cat focuses intently on its prey. This focused and sincere questioning arises naturally from a state of "don't-know" mind, which ultimately leads to a deeper understanding.

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6. The Illusion of Beliefs: Soen-sa-nim encourages Patricia to transcend the fragmented nature of her previous beliefs, explaining that the clarity she seeks lies beyond the dichotomy of shattered versus intact beliefs. The journey requires moving beyond conventional oppositions to embrace a state of true emptiness—an essential tenet of Zen thought.

7. Life as Practice: The correspondence highlights the essential practice of keeping a “just-now mind.” Acknowledging the transient nature of life and the fluidity of perception is crucial. Patricia's growing appreciation for the world and the connectedness she feels demonstrates the transformative potential of Zen practice, further emphasizing that the mind shapes one’s experience.

8. The Essence of Zen: In concluding correspondence, Soen-sa-nim introduces a challenging Zen koan about Buddha—a call to Patricia to examine her understanding while grounding her inquiry in lived experience. It evokes the notion that reality cannot be captured in rigid definitions but exists as a living, breathing experience.

In summary, Chapter 4 encapsulates the essence of a beginner’s Zen practice through dialogue laden with wisdom. Soen-sa-nim’s guidance emphasizes the importance of engaging with the practice without attachment to thoughts, fostering awareness that sees past dualities, and nurturing a profound, embodied understanding of the self in relation to the universe.

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Chapter 5 Summary: 6. A Child Asks About Death

In a poignant story, Seung Sahn Soen-sa encounters a seven-year-old girl named Gita, who is grappling with the death of her beloved cat, Katz. After attending the burial and participating in a chant to Amita Buddha, Gita seeks understanding about the nature of life and death through an interview with Soen-sa.

1. The Nature of Existence: When Gita asks what happened to Katz, Soen-sa prompts her to reflect on her own origin by inquiring where she comes from. This questioning leads her to a moment of silence when asked about her mother's origin. Soen-sa uses this as a springboard to convey a profound truth: all things arise from a singular source, much like cookies made from the same dough in a factory. Everything—cats, people, trees, and even inanimate objects—is essentially interconnected, despite their outward differences.

2. Names and Identity: He explains that while people assign names and shapes to things, the essence of these entities transcends such classifications. The distinction lies in human perception; everything is the same when one is not confined by thought or language. Gita realizes that when asked about the nature of things, a response devoid of words reveals deeper truths.



3. The Illusion of Separation: Continuing with the lesson, Soen-sa invites Gita to engage playfully. He asks her to define concepts such as Buddha, God, her mother, and even herself—prompting her to respond by hitting the floor each time, symbolizing the understanding that they all stem from the same existential fabric. He emphasizes that all forms of existence are fundamentally one.

4. Embracing Truth Over Convention As Gita smiles in enlightenment, she is confronted with an unresolved question about Katz's fate. Soen-sa, leaning in closely, affirms her understanding without providing a direct answer, underscoring a central idea: true comprehension often lies beyond words. In the end, Gita realizes this abstract truth, expressing her amusement and a hint of rebellion by stating that she will answer differently at school, opting for conventional responses.

Through this encounter, Soen-sa illustrates essential Zen principles: the interconnectedness of all existence, the limitations of language in conveying deeper meanings, and the importance of seeking one's own understanding of life and death. By blending humor, simplicity, and wisdom, he guides Gita—and by extension, the reader—toward a more profound reflection on the nature of reality.

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Chapter 6: 8. You Are Attached!

One evening at Yale University, a dialogue ensued between a student and Seung Sahn Soen-sa concerning the concept of "clear mind". The interaction begins with Soen-sa raising his watch and questioning the student's perception. When the student identifies the object as a watch, Soen-sa points out that the student exhibits attachment to "name and form". This notion is central to Soen-sa's teaching, emphasizing that true understanding transcends superficial labels and appearances.

As the discussion unfolds, Soen-sa illustrates the teachings of the Diamond Sutra, which encourages viewing all appearances as transient. He explains that attachment to the physical form of objects obstructs the understanding of their true essence. The student grapples with this paradox, eventually confessing his confusion. Soen-sa offers a practical demonstration by drinking from a cup, highlighting that the essence of the cup is its utility—not merely its label. This prompts a significant realization: thoughts and labels are constructs of human perception.

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Chapter 7 Summary: 9. About the Heart Sutra

In a correspondence dated November 21, 1974, Ed expresses curiosity about the Heart Sutra, seeking clarity on several intricate concepts regarding Nirvana and Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi. His first concern revolves around the seeming contradiction between the Sutra's assertion of "no-attainment" in Nirvana, contrasted with the attainment of complete enlightenment by Buddhas. Secondly, he questions the distinction between Nirvana and Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi, particularly the metaphorical difference reflected in their degrees of attainment—180° versus 360°. Thirdly, he inquires whether the appearance of the “like this” mind follows the disappearance of the mind at 180°. Finally, Ed expresses confusion regarding the Sutra’s statements about form and emptiness, seeking further explanation on their relationship.

In reply, S.S. employs a direct and sometimes playful approach to Ed's inquiries. He answers the first question about the lack of attainment in Nirvana with an enigmatic yet illustrative statement—a form of a Zen teaching—that suggests understanding comes from an intuitive leap rather than logical reasoning. Here, he invites Ed to explore the fundamental paradox of existence, delineating that while Nirvana signifies a static, empty state, Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi represents a dynamic engagement with the world.

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When addressing the difference between Nirvana and Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi, S.S. elaborates on the emptiness represented by Nirvana, likening it to an empty mirror devoid of attachments. He warns against becoming fixated on this state of emptiness, which leads to a disconnection from the experiences of suffering and joy in the world, thus hindering one's ability to help others. In contrast, Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi, at 360°, symbolizes a comprehensive understanding that encompasses both suffering and happiness, fostering a compassionate Bodhisattva path for the benefit of all beings.

As for the nature of the “like this” mind, S.S. asserts that true empty mind does not appear or disappear; rather, it is a transcendent understanding that goes beyond dualistic thinking. He emphasizes that terminologies like 180° and “like this” are pedagogical devices meant to steer practitioners away from attachments to conceptualizations.

Lastly, S.S. dives deeper into the tenets of form and emptiness, presenting a nuanced interpretation of the Sutra's key phrases. He illustrates the progression from understanding form as emptiness to the realization that they are indeed synonymous, rather than contradictory—this understanding reaches a profound truth beyond words. To drive his points home, he concludes with a vivid poem that invites reflection on the joy of engaging with the world after experiencing isolation in Nirvana, a metaphorical return to the richness of life after profound contemplation.

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Through this exchange, S.S. not only addresses Ed's queries but also encourages a deeper introspection into the nature of reality, existence, and the path of compassion as laid out in Buddhist teachings. The responses hinge on the complexity of enlightenment while grounding the discussion in real-world implications of compassionate engagement.

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Chapter 8 Summary: 10. Not Difficult, Not Easy

In May 1975, a student contemplating a move to the New Haven Zen Center reached out to a Zen teacher for advice. The teacher emphasized that Zen training is inherently hard work, echoing the sentiments of Dogen, who noted that those pursuing an easy path do not seek the true way. Struggling with the concept, the student then sought counsel from Seung Sahn Soen-sa, who provided a perspective that would shift the student's understanding entirely.

1. **Desire and Illusion:** Soen-sa explained that the notions of "easy" and "difficult" are both forms of desire—attachments that cloud one's journey in Zen. He argued that true Zen practice involves relinquishing these desires entirely, allowing one to discover the authentic path. This perspective challenges the common belief that Zen is an arduous journey fraught with challenges, a notion often perpetuated by those experiencing "Difficulty Sickness."

2. **Converging Perspectives:** Although Zen might appear difficult to some, Soen-sa insisted that it is, in many ways, inherently easy. He posits that both views—Zen being difficult and easy—can coexist, each providing unique insights into the teaching. He illustrated this with the teachings of Jo-ju, who controversially denied that a dog has Buddha-nature, inviting questions about truth and perception.

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3. Understanding Through Experience: The story of Busol, a deeply enlightened layman, demonstrates the conflicting views surrounding Zen practice. When approached by an inquirer, Busol claimed Zen is akin to hitting the moon with a stick—an impossible endeavor. His wife’s contrasting view likened Zen to the simplicity of touching one’s nose when washing one’s face. This duality left the inquirer perplexed, prompting him to seek clarification from the family’s son and daughter. The son remarked that Zen is neither difficult nor easy, while the daughter brought clarity by declaring that our perceptions shape our experiences; if one perceives Zen as difficult, it becomes so, and vice versa.

4. The Essence of Zen: Ultimately, the daughter illuminated the crucial lesson that true Zen transcends these labels of difficulty and ease. It is simply existence in its pure form, free from attachment to words and concepts. In pressing the inquirer to consider the state of his mind in that very moment, she pointed out that Zen practice is about present awareness, not about clinging to notions of difficulty or ease.

By the end of this exploration, the inquirer experienced a moment of realization, suggesting that Zen—when stripped of its complexities and dogmas—manifests itself as it is: straightforward and profound. Thus, Seung Sahn Soen-sa teaches that understanding Zen requires an open mind, one that does not dwell on classifications but instead embraces the present

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reality. The essence of the teaching reminds us that Zen transcends the dichotomy of easy versus difficult—it simply is.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embrace the Present Reality

Critical Interpretation: In seeking the true essence of Zen as described by Seung Sahn, you are prompted to let go of your preconceived notions that life must be either easy or hard. Imagine experiencing each moment just as it is, devoid of attachment to labels or judgments. By doing this, you cultivate present awareness, liberating yourself from the constant struggle of desire and expectation. This perspective invites you to appreciate the simplicity of existence—recognizing that both joy and challenge are part of the same expansive experience. It's a call to embrace the now, where peace resides, and to acknowledge that the journey is not about the difficulty or ease but simply about being fully alive in the moment.

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Chapter 9: 11. A Dharma Speech

In a profound Dharma speech delivered by Seung Sahn Soen-sa during the opening ceremony of the International Zen Center of New York on April 20, 1975, he emphasizes the interconnectedness of existence and the pursuit of true self-realization through Zen practice. He begins with a thought-provoking inquiry—whether a Zen stick striking the table represents closure or openness. He warns that affirming either position leads to limitations: asserting “closed” confines one to a hellish existence, whereas declaring “open” invites chaos and interactions with demons.

Seung Sahn highlights that the gathering of individuals at the Zen center signifies the culmination of previously created good karma—a convergence that presents an invaluable opportunity toward achieving true freedom and peace. This is aligned with the teachings of the Buddha, asserting that while phenomena may seem substantial, they are ultimately devoid of inherent essence, echoing the Buddhist principle that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form."

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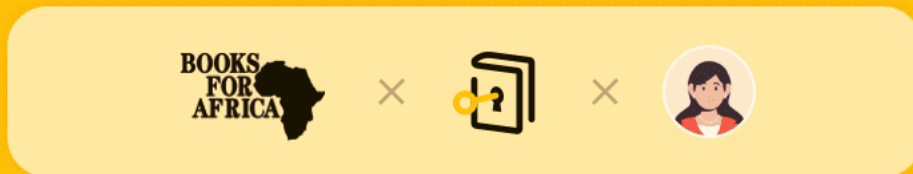
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Chapter 10 Summary: 14. You Must Become Completely Crazy

In a poignant exchange at the Providence Zen Center, a visitor approached Seung Sahn Soen-sa with a pressing question about attaining enlightenment through Zen practice. The visitor expressed his struggles with feelings of being trapped by various attachments, which prompted Soen-sa to challenge him with deeper inquiries about the nature of his suffering and the authenticity of his attachments.

1. The first principle articulated in this dialogue is the transient nature of life. Soen-sa reflects on the unpredictability of death, urging the visitor to mentally act as though he is already dead. This radical perspective shifts the focus from living with desires and attachments to embracing an immediate sense of freedom, as attachments would lose their power if considered from the viewpoint of a deceased individual.

2. The conversation continues to explore the concept of perception and emptiness. Soen-sa references the Heart Sutra, asserting that true insight emerges from recognizing the absence of any concrete forms or senses within emptiness. He explains that in achieving this understanding, one can experience life without the burdens of attachment and desire, akin to passing by a restaurant without indulging in its offerings.



3. A critical turning point is Soen-sa's insistence on the significance of the great existential question: "What am I?" Through this introspective inquiry, he encourages the visitor to recognize the futility of labeling oneself or conceptualizing divinity as "one" or "God." The act of thinking, he suggests, clouds the original state of mind, which is inherently simple and clear—void of definitions and categorizations.

4. In addressing the reaction from the visitor's social circle—specifically, their perception of his interest in Zen as "crazy"—Soen-sa offers a liberating perspective on insanity. He posits that true craziness brings joy and freedom, contrasting it with the partial craziness rooted in attachment. For enlightenment, he urges the visitor to fully embrace this 'craziness,' transcending ordinary social norms and expectations to discover deeper truths.

5. Finally, he emphasizes the concept of the "don't-know mind," a state devoid of preconceived notions and judgments. This mindset, rich in openness and inquiry, serves as the foundation of the visitor's authentic self. By maintaining this attitude of curiosity and non-attachment, one can navigate the complexities of existence without the shackles of identity or belief.

In summary, Soen-sa's teachings guide the visitor toward a radical reevaluation of life and self, proposing that true freedom lies in the release of

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attachments and the embrace of a 'don't-know mind.' It is within this framework of apparent madness that one can experience the joys of liberation and attain a deeper understanding of reality. The session is brought to a close with a simple act of sharing tea, symbolizing the shared journey of exploration and understanding that transcends words.

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Chapter 11 Summary: 15. The Story of Ko Bong

In the story of Ko Bong, a renowned Zen Master from the Sung dynasty, we embark on a profound journey exploring the nature of existence and enlightenment. At the young age of twenty, Ko Bong was presented with a challenging kong-an by his teacher, compelling him to contemplate the mysteries of life and death with the questions, "Where was I before I was born, and where will I be after I die?" As he delved into this inquiry, he felt lost in a dark forest of confusion, grappling with his delusions for three long years.

At the peak of his despair, Ko Bong sought the wisdom of Zen Master Seorl Am, who challenged him with a perplexing scenario involving the teachings of the Buddha about the inherent Buddha-nature within all beings. A striking moment of discomfort arose when Ko Bong was harshly dismissed by the Master after failing to grasp the meaning behind the Master's provocative question about a dog's Buddha-nature. This humiliation propelled Ko Bong into deeper introspection.

While returning to his monastery, Ko Bong experienced a spark of enlightenment ignited by the Master's initial question. With newfound clarity, he articulated a profound realization: "If a man kills his desire to search, he will surely find what he is searching for." Yet, when he attempted to convey this understanding to Seorl Am, the Master challenged him again,

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leaving Ko Bong dumbfounded.

The turmoil within Ko Bong continued to grow until a dream led him to an additional kong-an from his first teacher: “All things return to the One; where does the One return?” Struggling with this new weight of inquiry, Ko Bong wandered through a fog of confusion until an encounter with a portrait of the fifth patriarch struck a resonant chord. The patriarch’s stanza resonated with him deeply and ushered in yet another surge of realization. It was as though the universe had deconstructed before him, revealing the interconnectedness of all things and dissolving the barriers of self and other.

In a moment of profound clarity, Ko Bong returned to Seorl Am, this time confident in his understanding, exclaiming “KATZ!” when questioned about his lifeless body. However, his path to maintaining this enlightenment continued to be tested. An encounter with another Zen Master prompted a significant reflection on the nature of enlightenment in different states of consciousness, posing a vital question about the essence of the self.

Motivated by the Master’s advice—“When you are hungry, eat; when you are tired, rest” and the need for continuous self-inquiry, Ko Bong dedicated himself to the vital question: “Who is the master of this body, and where does he reside?” Despite the risk of madness, he remained steadfast in his exploration.

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Five years later, on a pilgrimage with a fellow monk, a seemingly trivial event—his friend's fallen wooden pillow during sleep—triggered a profound awakening within Ko Bong. At that moment, he experienced a burst of enlightenment that illuminated not just his own kong-an, but also the teachings of all Buddhas and patriarchs, culminating in his poignant reflection: “The man who has come to this is the man who was here from the beginning. He does what he always did. Nothing has changed.”

This transformative journey of Ko Bong illustrates critical principles of Zen practice, highlighting the struggle for understanding, the importance of questioning, and the realization of the inherent unity of all existence. Each challenge faced by Ko Bong emphasizes the necessity of deep introspection and the continuous quest for truth, culminating in a profound recognition of one's own nature that is both timeless and ever-present.

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Chapter 12: 16. How Can the Buddha Be Smiling?

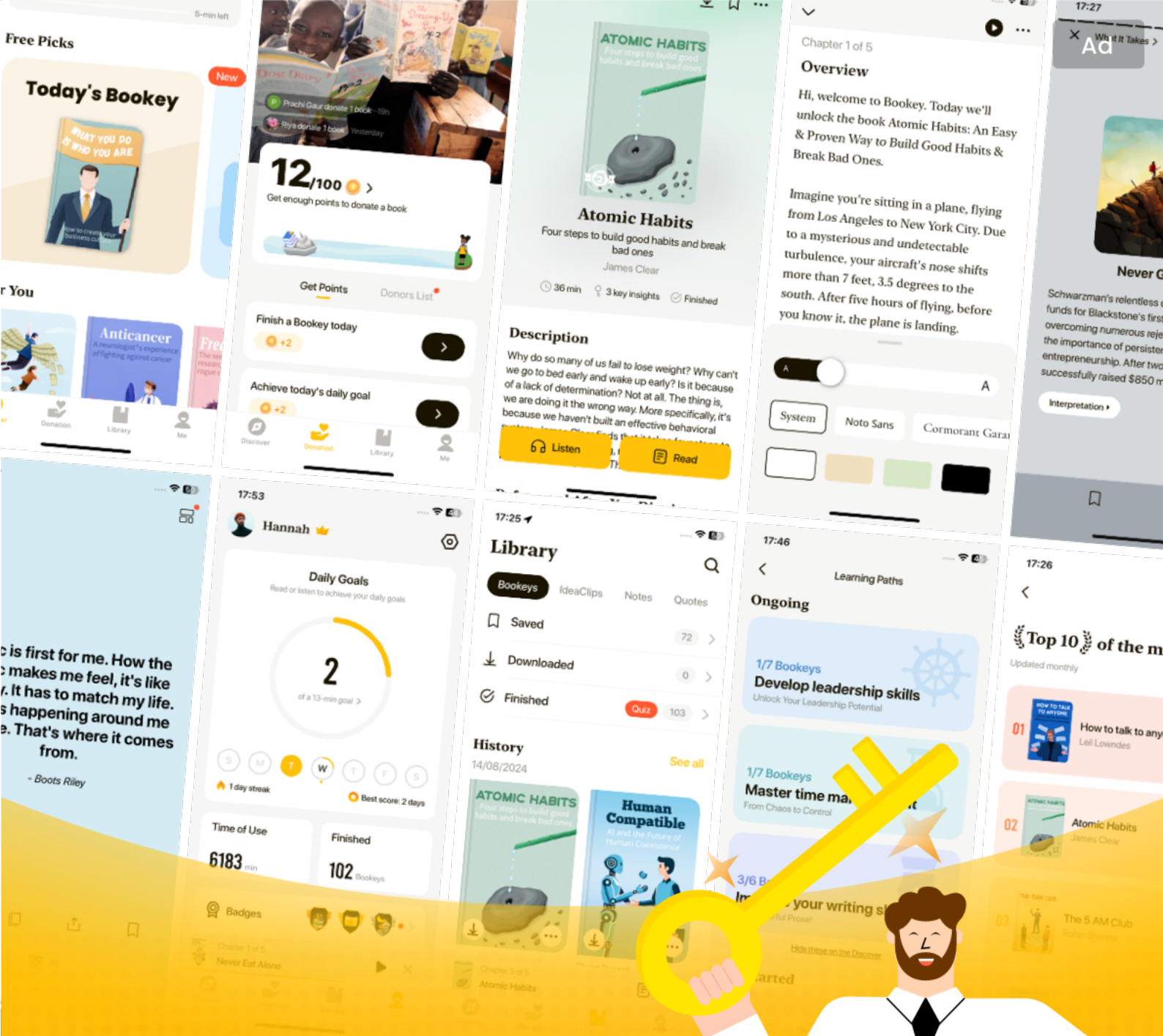
In this intimate exchange between Bobby and Zen Master Seung Sahn, the essence of Zen practice and the nature of existence are explored through their correspondence. Bobby shares his experiences at the Zen Center, highlighting the vibrant community engagement in Zen activities, including sitting Zen, chanting mantras, and enjoying the spring blooms. His letters reflect a sense of warmth and gratitude towards his peers and the Master, coupled with a touch of humor regarding the Zen discipline enforced by Alban, who paraphrased the Master's teachings through strict physical reminders during practice.

Responding to Bobby's observations, Seung Sahn expresses his joy at the flourishing community and acknowledges the challenges of leading the Zen Center. However, he pivots the conversation towards profound philosophical inquiries, questioning the very essence of their practices. This prompts a rich dialogue on perception, reality, and understanding.

1. The Nature of Actions: Seung Sahn emphasizes the significance of

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Chapter 13 Summary: 18. Kong-an Blues

In Chapter 13 of "Dropping Ashes On The Buddha" by Seung Sahn, we are presented with a series of letters exchanged between See Hoy and his Zen master, Soen-sa-nim. These letters capture the struggles and inquiries of a student deeply engaged in his Zen practice, particularly the relationship between practice, understanding, and the concept of 'don't know.'

- 1. Confusion and Ego:** See Hoy expresses his bewilderment regarding his practice. He states that he does not know what it is, oscillating between acceptance and confusion. This disorientation leads him to question his ability to play the shakuhachi (a traditional Japanese flute) without attachment to his ego. He longs to embrace each moment fully, akin to responding to musical notes, but struggles to achieve this state of awareness.
- 2. Kong-ans and Instruction:** The letters reveal the various kong-ans, or Zen riddles, given to See Hoy by different masters, including the notable ones: "What am I?" and "When were you born?" Each kong-an serves as a vehicle for deep introspection. However, See Hoy's attachment to these riddles creates confusion, especially around the idea of 'What am I?' and the simplicity of existential inquiry.
- 3. Master's Response:** In his response, Soen-sa-nim reassures See Hoy that confusion can be transcended through a complete 'don't-know' mind. He



emphasizes that true emptiness arises when one cuts off all thinking, thereby alleviating the sense of confusion. The Zen master uses the shakuhachi as a metaphor: it can only produce sound when its holes are opened, akin to how an open mind allows for clarity.

4. The Nature of Kong-ans: Soen-sa-nim further elucidates that kong-ans are merely pointers toward understanding and should not become objects of attachment. He encourages See Hoy to recognize the commonality in his inquiry and the concept of 'don't-know.' Each kong-an embodies the idea of not knowing, which leads to the ultimate realization of true self.

5. Encouragement and Humor: The master humorously accepts See Hoy's candid expression of frustration, reflecting a deep understanding of the student's journey. He suggests that true enlightenment arises not from striving for it but from dwelling in a state of open awareness and the 'don't-know' mindset. This approach reveals the paradox of Zen practice where the pursuit of enlightenment often hinders the very attainment of it.

6. Learning and Growth: Finally, Soen-sa-nim encourages See Hoy to learn from all his teachers, including Kimura Roshi, and to heed the lessons offered through his shakuhachi practice. He emphasizes that the path to understanding is available and accessible, rooted in the simplicity of just being present and adopting a 'don't-know' stance.

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The correspondence highlights key Zen principles, presenting a blend of personal struggle and philosophical depth. The journey of See Hoy serves as a reminder that confusion is part of the path and that the true essence of understanding lies in embracing the unknown.

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Chapter 14 Summary: 19. The 84,000 Levels of Enlightenment

In a lively exchange at the Cambridge Zen Center, a student approached Seung Sahn Soen-sa with inquiries about enlightenment. The conversation was peppered with humor as Soen-sa took an unconventional stance: "Enlightenment is very bad!" The student, intrigued, pressed on to understand the nature and levels of enlightenment, referencing the Buddha's teachings which outline seven limbs of enlightenment.

Soen-sa responded with an unexpected assertion that enlightenment comprises "many more than that," humorously suggesting there are "84,000 levels." When prompted for a clearer explanation, he used a cup of water to illustrate a significant point. After the student drank, Soen-sa assessed that he had achieved all 84,000 levels of enlightenment simply by experiencing the taste of water. This playful demonstration set the stage for a deeper dive into the nature of enlightenment.

He then outlined his teachings, revealing that Zen describes three distinct kinds of enlightenment. The first is akin to experiential enlightenment, where all things—self, Buddha, and objects—merge into oneness. This was demonstrated when the student snapped his fingers, prompting the recognition of first enlightenment.

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The second, original enlightenment, involves a more analytical recognition of things as they are, where one may describe the world in terms of colors or truths, akin to stating a simple mathematical fact. Finally, Soen-sa introduced the concept of final enlightenment, emphasizing that it is a singular, ultimate truth. He illustrated this by striking the moktak, affirming that the essence of truth is both simple and profound.

To further elucidate his points, Soen-sa recounted experiences of two Zen Masters addressing the question, "What is Buddha?" One answered with "three pounds of flax" and the other with "dry shit on a stick." This contrasted approach led to a conversation about the realization that both answers stem from the same fundamental insight—the nature of reality as perceived through a unified mind. The student concluded that while the answers differed, an understanding grounded in one-mind realization rendered them equivalent.

However, Soen-sa challenged the student's understanding, humorously suggesting that he needed to move beyond a simplistic view and aspire to greater clarity, likening it to transitioning from a blind dog to a keen-eyed lion. The dialogue emphasized the importance of persistent Zen practice, which would eventually lead to deeper insights into the nature of enlightenment and the self.

Through these interactions, Seung Sahn Soen-sa imparted a profound truth:

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enlightenment, in its myriad forms, invites practitioners to both experience the world as it is and to transcend mere conceptual understanding, ultimately guiding them towards a unified realization of truth.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embrace Enlightenment in Everyday Moments

Critical Interpretation: Imagine sipping a glass of refreshing water on a hot day. In that moment, you feel every drop, the coolness quenching your thirst, the taste reviving your senses. Seung Sahn Soen-sa's playful reminder that you can experience enlightenment through this simple act challenges you to find depth in your everyday life. You realize that enlightenment isn't a distant state to be achieved; instead, it's about fully immersing yourself in moments that might seem trivial. As you go about your day, let this paradigm shift inspire you—be present, appreciate the small things, and see them as gateways to a greater understanding of yourself and the world around you. This awareness transforms the mundane into profound experiences, guiding you toward a deeper realization of your own truth.

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Chapter 15: 20. What Is Freedom?

In an enlightening exchange at the Cambridge Zen Center, a young student sought clarity on the concept of freedom from Seung Sahn Soen-sa. To understand true freedom, Seung Sahn emphasized the notion of being unencumbered—specifically, achieving freedom from thoughts and attachments, including the duality of life and death.

- 1. True Freedom:** Seung Sahn articulates that genuine freedom exists when one is not hindered by external influences or internal concerns. He challenges the student's perception of freedom: merely rejecting parental guidance out of a desire to assert independence does not equate to true freedom. Instead, true freedom allows for a fluid relationship with decisions devoid of attachment, illustrating that one can embrace life or death based on one's choices—recognizing that both concepts are creations of the mind.
- 2. The Nature of Life and Death:** The dialogue pivoted towards a critical existential question: what is death? Soen-sa pointed out that how one perceives life and death stems from personal mental constructs. By

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Chapter 16 Summary: 23. What Have You Brought Here?

In Chapter 16 of "Dropping Ashes On The Buddha," the Zen master Seung Sahn engages in a series of interviews with students at the Providence Zen Center. Each interaction serves as a profound exploration of Zen principles, emphasizing self-awareness, understanding, and the essence of practice.

1. The initial encounter highlights the concept of realization and truth. When a student responds to Seung Sahn's question about what they have brought by hitting the floor, the Zen master challenges this act, implying that while the gesture signifies an understanding of "One," it lacks a deeper comprehension of "Two." This distinction illustrates the importance of recognizing layered truths in Zen practice.
2. The dialogue progresses with a student who admits to not knowing why they practice Zen, indicating an essential aspect of the journey: the 'don't-know mind.' Seung Sahn emphasizes that this state of mind transcends overthinking and cultivates true quietness. He encourages the student to perpetually question their own existence, reinforcing that maintaining a 'don't-know mind' is crucial for deeper self-discovery.
3. The third student introduces an energetic intensity by shouting "KATZ!" in their response to Seung Sahn's inquiry. The master humorously reacts by

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pretending the shouts harm his ears, touching on the sometimes chaotic nature of Zen practice. Through dialogue, Seung Sahn subtly directs the student towards the importance of deeper communication beyond mere exclamations, inviting them to engage in meaningful exchange.

4. Another student is questioned about the nature of truth and time. Through the dissection of a Zen koan—“When you hear a wooden chicken crow, you will understand your mind”—the master guides the student toward understanding the absurdity that Zen can often present. The response about a stone girl dancing speaks to the beauty of illogical truths found within Zen teachings.

5. The chapter culminates with an illustrative scenario involving a disruptive individual at the Zen center, emphasizing that true understanding transcends mere reaction. The initial tendency to react with aggression is countered by the realization that genuine practice lies in a non-attachment to outcomes, including the ability to "just sit." This exchange highlights the essence of Zen teaching: an invitation to practice compassion alongside self-awareness.

Overall, Chapter 16 showcases Seung Sahn's teaching style that blends humor, directness, and profound wisdom, urging students to cultivate a deeper understanding of their practice and their own minds. The encouragement towards enlightenment intertwines with the necessity of genuine intention and mindful engagement in the Zen journey.

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Chapter 17 Summary: 24. Enlightened and Unenlightened Are Empty Names

In a profound exchange at the Cambridge Zen Center, a student inquired about the behavioral differences between enlightened and unenlightened individuals. Seung Sahn Soen-sa responded with a riddle-like sequence of numbers, leading to a deeper contemplation about the origins of thought and the nature of the mind. As the dialogue progressed, the student identified "mind" as the source but struggled to articulate its true essence, prompting Soen-sa to guide him towards the concept of "don't-know mind." This state of being, characterized by an absence of defined thoughts, is depicted as the true mind, which exists prior to conceptual thinking and language.

1. The Essence of Mind: Soen-sa emphasizes that true mind transcends conventional thought. It is an “empty mind” that exists beyond binaries like good and bad or enlightened and unenlightened. In this realm, mind is merely a label created by thought; devoid of thought, mind ceases to exist as we know it.
2. The Nature of Opposites: He explains that while thinking fosters dualities, cutting off thought leads to a realization of the Absolute—an undivided whole without oppositional distinctions. Under this perspective, the teachings of the Buddha, which declare that all beings possess Buddha-nature, are simultaneously acknowledged and questioned through



the lens of Zen Master Jo-ju's stark denial of a dog's Buddha-nature.

3. Words as Tools: The dialogue reveals the futility of labeling and the limitation of language in capturing the essence of true experience. The nature of questions posed, such as the comparative behavior of enlightened versus unenlightened beings, illustrates that many such inquiries are ultimately unanswerable or lead to circular reasoning.

4. Enlightenment and Unity: Soen-sa reinforces the idea that, for those who have yet to attain enlightenment, existence may appear fragmented and diverse. However, for the enlightened, all things unify in a singular experience of oneness. This illuminates the transformative power of enlightenment, suggesting that it leads to a profound change in perception and behavior.

In conclusion, the teaching intertwines the theme of emptiness, the limitations of dualistic thinking, and the quest for truth beyond words and concepts. Soen-sa's mastery lies not in providing direct answers but in directing students to explore the vastness of their insights and the nature of their experiences, culminating in a shared understanding that true wisdom often lies in the mystery of not knowing. The student, absorbing these lessons, acknowledges the complexity of the inquiry and expresses gratitude for the enlightenment process.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embrace the 'Don't-Know Mind'

Critical Interpretation: Imagine stepping into your daily life with the mindset of 'don't-know,' unbound by preconceptions and labels. This chapter invites you to shed the weight of certainty that often colors your interactions and decisions. By embracing this empty mind, you find freedom from judgment, allowing a space for genuine curiosity and openness to emerge. In moments of uncertainty or difficulty, remember that your mind's true essence lies beyond defined thoughts; by cultivating 'don't-know mind,' you create opportunities to connect more authentically with others and experience life in its purest form. This not only enhances your understanding of the world but also fosters compassion as you recognize the shared struggle of uncertainty inherent in every being.

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Chapter 18: 25. Why We Chant

In Chapter 18 of "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha," Seung Sahn Soen-sa addresses a student's question about the necessity of chanting in Zen practice, emphasizing the importance of collective activities within the Zen community.

1. Unity in Practice: Soen-sa explains that practicing together—whether through bowing, chanting, eating, or sitting—serves to unify individuals amidst their diverse backgrounds and opinions. Each person's unique life experiences influence their views, creating a multitude of opinions that can complicate personal growth and control over one's karma. When individuals adhere to their opinions, their personal struggles continue unabated. Thus, shared practices help cultivate a sense of community and diminish these conflicting desires.

2. Structured Rituals: The Zen Center operates under established Temple Rules that participants follow, even when they feel resistive. For example, members bow 108 times every morning and practice eating in a

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Chapter 19 Summary: 26. A Dharma Speech

On the occasion of Buddha's birthday in 1973, Seung Sahn Soen-sa delivered a thought-provoking Dharma speech that delved into the essence of enlightenment and the nature of the Buddha's identity. He began by referencing an eminent teacher who claimed that even before the Buddha emerged in the Kapila Empire, he had already alleviated all human suffering. This statement serves as a foundational understanding of the deep wisdom inherent in the Buddha's existence, emphasizing that one need not articulate everything verbally; true comprehension transcends the need for expression.

He illustrated the birth of the Buddha, describing how he emerged from his mother and, after taking seven steps in four directions, declared his unique holiness. This declaration invites introspection into the concept of 'I,' which he explained as an empty notion that embodies fullness—a paradox that encompasses all beings and phenomena. Through this, he prompted listeners to ponder the origin of Buddha's teachings and their applicability to all individuals.

In his discourse, Seung Sahn referenced Zen Master Un-mun, who provocatively stated that he metaphorically "killed" the Buddha, suggesting that the narratives surrounding the Buddha may not capture his essence. He called for a critical view of conventional understandings, asserting that both the Buddha's words and his own are flawed and worthy of examination. In

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doing so, he confronted the listener with the idea that questioning and exploring the nature of truth and enlightenment is essential.

He then engaged a student in dialogue about the nature of the Buddha. Through the exchange, he emphasized that while there are varying interpretations of the Buddha's identity—ranging from divine to merely wise—the true essence resides in the mind that recognizes its own ignorance. This mind, marked by a lack of certainty, is where the Buddha's teachings begin.

Ultimately, through this layered conversation, Seung Sahn illuminated the significance of Buddha's birthday. Rather than a celebration of a historical figure, it calls for a deeper understanding of his teachings. By embracing the paradoxes and questions presented, one can begin to grasp the very essence of what it means to recognize the teachings of the Buddha in the context of personal enlightenment and the quest for wisdom.

1. The essence of Buddha's enlightenment transcends verbal articulation; true understanding is found internally.
2. The paradox of 'I' as empty yet full serves to illustrate the interconnectedness of all beings.
3. Critical examination of Buddha's teachings requires questioning accepted norms and recognizing their limitations.
4. The mind that recognizes its own ignorance is inherently aligned with the

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nature of the Buddha.

5. Celebrating Buddha's birthday is a call to engage with the teachings rather than simply commemorate a historical figure.

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Chapter 20 Summary: 27. The Story of Won Hyo

In the narrative of Zen Master Won Hyo, we encounter a profound journey of transformation, self-discovery, and compassion set against the backdrop of ancient Korea.

1. The Beginning of Transformation: Over thirteen centuries ago, a young Won Hyo witnessed the devastation of a civil war, filled with sorrow from the loss of friends and the destruction surrounding him. Overwhelmed by the emptiness of life, he chose to escape to the mountains to become a monk. Despite diligently studying sacred texts and adhering to monastic precepts, he found himself still searching for a deeper understanding of Buddhism. His quest led him to China, where he believed enlightenment awaited him.

2. An Epiphany in the Desert: On his arduous journey, Won Hyo found temporary solace in a small oasis where he drank what he thought was water. The next morning, however, he discovered that the cup was actually a skull. This grim realization brought him to an epiphany: the act of thinking had transformed his earlier experience of refreshment into disgust. He observed that thought creates dualities—good and bad, life and death—and concluded that without thought, the universe, Buddha, and Dharma are utterly empty. Thus, he felt no need for a Zen Master, realizing he already grasped the essence of life and death, prompting him to return to Korea.

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3. Recognition and Influence: After twenty years, Won Hyo had established himself as a revered monk, respected by the king and admired by his community. He lived in comfort and shared his wisdom with those eager to learn. His life took a turn when he heard about a little Zen Master who lived simply in the mountains, known for his unconventional teachings.

4. Encounter with Compassion: Upon finding the Zen Master, Won Hyo was astonished to find him weeping beside a dead fawn, which had died from hunger after the Master had tried to care for it. The Master expressed deep empathy, explaining that his grief stemmed from the interconnectedness he felt with all beings; its hunger was his hunger. This encounter unveiled to Won Hyo the true nature of a Bodhisattva—someone whose happiness and sorrow are intertwined with the suffering of others.

5. Teaching through Experience: Moved by the Master's compassion, Won Hyo requested to learn from him. The Master took Won Hyo to a geisha-house, challenging him to confront the darker aspects of life he had previously avoided. He urged Won Hyo to experience life fully and compassionately, reminding him that true enlightenment involves engaging with the world, even in its most morally ambiguous corners. Despite his initial hesitation, Won Hyo accepted this challenge, realizing the importance of experiencing all facets of life, rather than merely residing in the safety of his monastic ideals.

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6. Embrace of Duality: In letting go of his preconceptions, Won Hyo immersed himself fully in the night of excitement and revelry. His joyous, uninhibited expression the following day symbolized the understanding that the universe encompasses both light and dark—pleasure and suffering. His newfound realization was that all experiences, regardless of their nature, are interconnected and part of the human experience.

Through the tale of Won Hyo, we resonate with the essential Zen teachings emphasizing awareness, compassion, and the acceptance of life's complexities. Embracing both the sacred and the mundane leads to a deeper understanding of existence and a more profound connection with all beings. In recognizing the duality of thought and experience, the essence of Zen is revealed—not in austere solitude, but in the richness of life's varied experiences.

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Chapter 21: 28. Porcupines in Rat-Holes

In this chapter, Byon Jo expresses his gratitude to Soen-sa-nim for the insightful guidance that has helped him deepen his practice and teaching in Boulder. He describes his positive state of mind and the stimulating environment created by the enthusiasm of his students, contrasting it with past experiences that involved indulgence in drinking, sex, and drugs. He raises important questions about the practice of asking "What am I?" and its relationship with thoughts and sensations, particularly during challenging emotions.

Soen-sa-nim responds by emphasizing the significance of maintaining an open, non-attached attitude toward all experiences, including actions traditionally viewed as moral or immoral. He draws an analogy with a porcupine stuck in a rat-hole to illustrate the difficulties of attachment. It becomes evident that attachment, whether to indulgent behaviors or negative emotions, results in suffering; true liberation comes from non-attachment.

Regarding the question "What am I?", Soen-sa-nim underscores that it

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Chapter 22 Summary: 29. Practicing Zen

In a thought-provoking exchange at the Vihara in Washington, D.C., Zen Master Seung Sahn Soen-sa engaged a student seeking guidance on practicing Zen. Initially, when asked about the essence of Zen practice, Soen-sa posed a counterquestion, prompting the student to reflect more deeply. The student articulated a belief in the fundamental unity behind the diversity of all things, leading to the notion of oneness with the universe. However, the Zen master challenged this understanding by probing the meaning of “one,” unveiling the complexities and the seemingly paradoxical nature of Zen teachings.

Through a series of exchanges drawing upon the teachings of past Zen masters, Soen-sa illustrated the simplicity and profundity of Zen practice. He referenced Zen Master Dong Sahn's answer to the question, “What is Buddha?” stating “Three pounds of flax.” This analogy served as an invitation for deeper contemplation rather than straightforward interpretation. The ensuing dialogue exemplified the Zen approach of relying less on conceptual understanding and more on direct, experiential insight, a hallmark of Zen practice.

In a subsequent teaching moment, the master employed vivid metaphors, stating, “Your head is a dragon, but your tail is a snake,” generating confusion yet emphasizing the non-dualistic nature of reality. The Zen

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master's conundrums and the use of humor—"I don't give acupuncture to a dead cow," and "The arrow has already passed downtown"—prompted the student to acknowledge that conceptual understanding alone was insufficient.

The interaction culminated in an exploration of various perspectives on understanding within Zen. When presented with different interpretations of 'Buddha'—ranging from "Three pounds of flax" to "Dry shit on a stick"—the student was encouraged to confront the underlying truth in both answers. This challenge led to an enthusiastic yet superficial response, as the student shouted "KATZ!!!," which was met with acknowledgment from the master but also the recognition that attachment to concepts still limited the student's understanding.

Soen-sa further elaborated on the Zen circle, outlining four distinct perspectives: at 90°, a mutual identity between the book and the pencil exists; at 180°, responses are reduced to elemental expressions; at 270°, emotions influence perceptions; and at 360°, distinct colors represent the nuanced experience of objects. Each viewpoint was accepted as viable, yet Soen-sa's response to "They're all good," invoked a playful hit as he reminded the student of the present moment, stating, "Today is Saturday."

1. Zen practice transcends conceptual understanding and invites direct experience.

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2. Zen teachings often utilize humor and paradox to convey deeper truths.
3. Responses to questions may vary, highlighting the non-duality and interconnectedness of all things.
4. The journey to understanding requires moving beyond attachment to concepts and embracing the present moment fully.

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Chapter 23 Summary: 30. It Is Your Mind That Is Moving

In a correspondence dated November 24, 1974, Peter addresses Soen-sa-nim with questions reflecting his contemplation of life's transient nature, using the metaphor of fallen leaves and the wind. He observes how people tirelessly sweep leaves only to watch the wind blow them away again, expressing frustration over the futility of their efforts. This scenario leads him to ponder deeper truths about existence, symbolized by his notion of "if the tree has no roots, how can it stand?"

In response on November 29, 1974, Soen-sa-nim acknowledges Peter's letter, emphasizing that the true issue lies not in the leaves, wind, or people's reactions but in the mind of the observer. He offers a teaching derived from an ancient story involving the Sixth Patriarch, who illustrated that both the flag and the wind are not the true source of motion; rather, it is the observer's mind that perceives movement. This teaching presents a critical understanding of perception: when the mind is stirred by external circumstances, it creates a distortion of reality.

1. Transience and Acceptance Soen-sa-nim advises Peter to recognize the impermanence of thoughts and feelings represented by the leaves and the wind. Instead of resisting their movement, one should accept the transient nature of these experiences as part of life's flow.



2. Understanding the True Source The essence of the situation is to realize that it is not the events themselves that disturb inner peace but the way our minds interact with them. By recognizing this, one learns to stabilize the mind, reducing attachment to fluctuating emotions and environments.

3. Form and Emptiness: The teaching reveals an essential Zen concept: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." This principle asserts that while things exist in a tangible form, their essence is rooted in emptiness—their impermanence and the fluid nature of reality. This understanding invites individuals to see beyond surface appearances, recognizing that both form and emptiness coexist.

4. Letting Go of Attachment: Soen-sa-nim stresses the importance of not becoming attached to thoughts or words. Instead, he encourages Peter to embrace a state of “don’t-know” mind, which emphasizes openness and the rejection of preconceived notions. In this way, freedom from mental hindrance emerges, which allows for genuine understanding and insight into the nature of reality.

5. The Search for Truth Within Finally, the dialogue points to the notion of finding one's "true home," a metaphor for achieving a state of inner clarity and realization. Understanding that the tree has no roots

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becomes a symbol of freedom from the heavy burdens of attachment, helping individuals realize their intrinsic connection to the unfolding of life itself.

Soen-sa-nim concludes by expressing a desire to continue sharing insights with Peter, signifying the ongoing journey toward understanding and growth. This rich exchange encapsulates the profound teachings of Zen, illustrating the relationship between the mind, perception, and the nature of reality.

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Chapter 24: 32. Five Kinds of Zen

In a thought-provoking dialogue at the Providence Zen Center, Seung Sahn Soen-sa articulated five distinct kinds of Zen, each encapsulating unique approaches to meditation and insight into the nature of reality. Firstly, he identified the Outer Path Zen, representing a broad array of meditation practices from various traditions, including Christian meditation and Transcendental Meditation.

The second category, Common People's Zen, focuses on concentration techniques that can be found in everyday activities like sports, tea ceremonies, and ritual ceremonies, emphasizing the meditative potential of life's simple pleasures.

Hinayana Zen, categorized as the third type, delves into the insights concerning life's fundamental truths—impermanence, impurity, and non-self. It goes deeper into personal realizations that challenge the inherent nature of self and existence.

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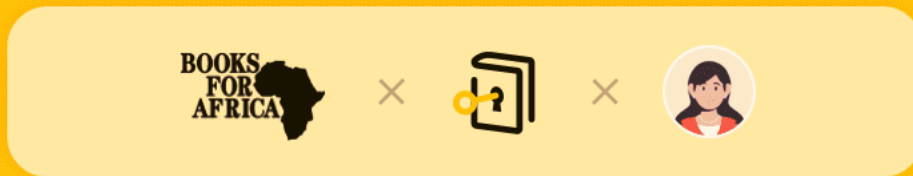
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Chapter 25 Summary: 34. Don't-Know Mind, Continued

In a dialogue at the Cambridge Zen Center, Seung Sahn Soen-sa delved into the concept of "don't-know mind," emphasizing its significance in Zen practice. He explained that don't-know mind is simply the state of being without attachment to answers or labels. The discussion began with a student's inquiry about the relationship between action—such as driving—and the essence of the question "What am I?" Soen-sa clarified that being present in the moment and embracing "just the question" reflects a state of don't-know.

1. Seung Sahn defined don't-know mind as the essence of clarity and openness, devoid of preconceived notions. He asserted that when one engages in an activity like driving without being preoccupied by thoughts of knowing or not knowing, they embody don't-know mind.
2. The conversation took a humorous turn as students grappled with the paradox of understanding don't-know. Soen-sa used everyday examples, such as stating the color of a door, to illustrate how even simple responses can demonstrate attachment to knowledge rather than the purity of not-knowing.
3. A key point of the discourse was that names, including the Zen master's own multiple names, are merely labels that distort the true essence of one's

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identity. The original state of being, as exemplified by an infant, is free from the complications of knowing or not knowing. Babies embody a pure form of existence without attaching meaning to their identity.

4. Seung Sahn stressed the importance of detaching from words and concepts. He posited that true understanding arises from a state of not thinking—just living life. Through actions like drinking water, one can engage in life without the need for intricate mental justifications, showcasing the essence of don't-know.

5. When exploring the question "What am I?", the master encouraged abandoning rigid oppositions of knowing and not knowing. Instead, he proposed embracing a simple, straightforward approach to existence. He playfully challenged students to move beyond the confines of thought into a liberated state of being.

Ultimately, Seung Sahn's teachings reinforce the idea that don't-know mind is a powerful state of clarity, inviting individuals to experience life authentically and without attachments. The essence of this mind lies not in answers, but in the simple act of living in the present without the burden of judgment or predefined structures. The dialogue instilled a sense of lightness and spontaneity within Zen practice, urging practitioners to cultivate a genuine awareness of being that transcends conceptual limitations.

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Chapter 26 Summary: 35. Zen and Tantra

In a memorable exchange at the Boston Dharma-dhatu, student inquiries spark a profound dialogue between Seung Sahn Soen-sa and his audience regarding the distinctive characteristics of Zen and Tantra. During this interaction, a student references a claim made by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche that positions Zen as starkly black and white, contrasting it with the vibrant hues of Tantra. Seung Sahn’s playful response—asking the student for his shirt color, which happens to be red—catalyzes a deeper inquiry into attachment, inviting laughter from the audience.

1. The initial point of this discussion revolves around personal preference portrayed through the colors one embraces, suggesting that attachment to preferences can cloud understanding. When the student proposes that Soen-sa might be attached to the concept of black and white, Seung Sahn alludes to a deeper message, humorously suggesting that it reflects an already completed thought: “The arrow has already passed downtown,” implying that the conversation has gone beyond surface-level interpretations.
2. As the dialogue unfolds, Soen-sa employs metaphoric language and humor to illustrate the nuances of thinking and perception. He states, “When you are thinking, your mind and my mind are different. When you are not thinking, your mind and my mind are the same.” This pivotal distinction emphasizes the interconnectedness that reflects true understanding—beyond

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the dichotomies of color and form.

3. The crux of the exchange culminates in a moment of clarity, as Seung Sahn expands upon the idea that in a state of "not thinking," there exists an empty mind, a conceptual space devoid of labels such as color, black, or white. He pushes the boundaries of the conversation by questioning if color persists in that state of emptiness. The student candidly admits uncertainty, prompting Seung Sahn to assertively bring the point home in an unexpected manner—"I hit you!" This jarring declaration garners laughter while simultaneously awakening the audience to the profundity of the original mind: a space uncluttered by the constructs of language and thought.

4. Acknowledging the interchange of words, Seung Sahn points out the limitations imposed by verbal communication. He indicates that in the essence of original mind, there exists no room for any worldly dichotomies or attachments. After expressing gratitude, the student indicates an ongoing journey towards understanding one's true self, to which Seung Sahn heartily responds with hopefulness for the student's realization, reinforcing the idea that the path to enlightenment is both personal and unfolds dynamically through moments of insight.

In conclusion, this exchange encapsulates significant insights on the nature of perception, attachment, and the quest for deeper understanding within Zen practice. By using humor and metaphors, Seung Sahn effectively guides his

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students towards realizing the boundless potential of their minds beyond the confines of color, thought, and verbal expression.

Key Concept	Summary
Initial Inquiry	Discussion starts with student referencing Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's claim about Zen being black and white versus Tantra's vibrant colors, emphasizing personal preferences and attachments.
Understanding Attachments	Soen-sa humorously addresses potential attachment to concepts, indicating that attachments can obscure true understanding.
Thinking vs. Not Thinking	He explains that while thinking creates differences between minds, in a state of non-thinking, minds are the same, illustrating interconnectedness beyond duality.
Concept of Emptiness	The crux of the exchange revolves around the empty mind, questioning the existence of color in this state, leading to a humorous, profound revelation.
Limitations of Communication	Seung Sahn notes the limitations of verbal communication in expressing the essence of original mind, devoid of worldly attachments and dualities.
Path to Enlightenment	The conversation highlights the personal journey toward understanding true self, with Seung Sahn encouraging insight and realization.
Conclusion	This exchange illustrates insights on perception, attachment, and deeper understanding in Zen, using humor and metaphors to guide students toward realizing their mind's potential.

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Chapter 27: 36. The 10,000 Questions Are One Question

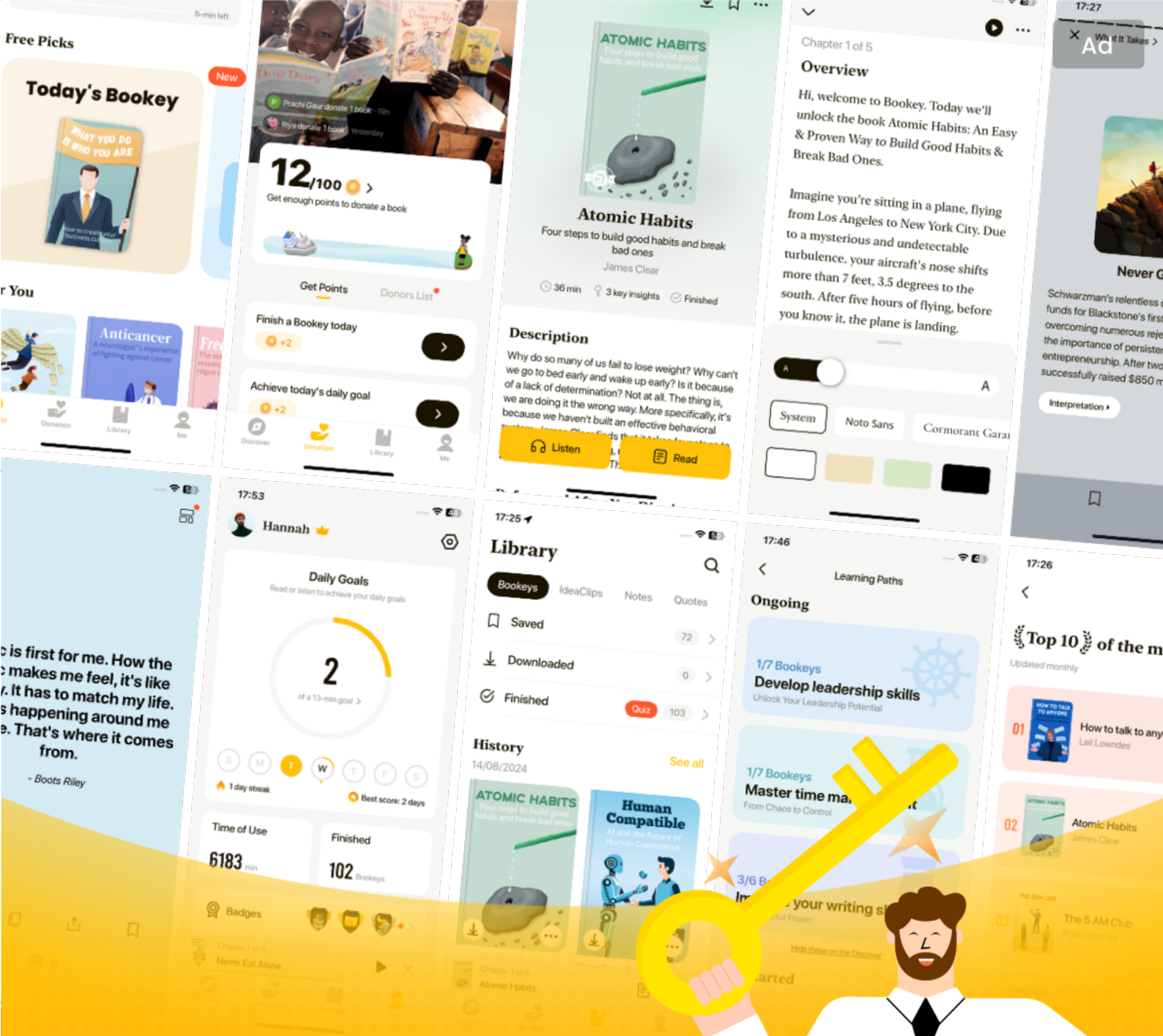
In a fascinating exchange dated April 12 and April 20, 1974, Seung Sahn addresses various introspective inquiries posed by Louise, bridging the abstract with the tangible in Zen practice. Sahn highlights a profound perspective on the nature of questions and self-discovery, delineating the complexities of existence through the lens of Zen philosophy.

1. The Nature of Questions: Louise's inquiries encapsulate fundamental existential dilemmas—questions about life, death, and perception. Sahn acknowledges the multitude of questions stirring within Louise but posits that they coalesce into a singular, overarching inquiry: "What am I?" This reduction emphasizes the Zen belief in the unity of existence, where myriad concerns ultimately return to the essence of self.

2. The Symbolism of the Diamond Sword: Sahn alludes to a symbolic object, the King's Diamond Sword, which represents sharp discernment and clarity. He urges the cutting away of thoughts that cloud understanding, asserting that the resolution of the ten thousand questions lies in

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Chapter 28 Summary: 37. Buddha Is Grass Shoes

In a reflective moment at the Corner Coffee Shop in New York City, Seung Sahn Soen-sa shared profound insights on the nature of spiritual practice during a breakfast gathering with students. One of them recounted an encounter with followers of the Nichiren sect, who practiced the powerful mantra “Nam yoho rengo kyo” yet lacked understanding of its meaning. This prompted a discussion on the essence of mantras and their potential impact in spiritual practice.

1. The first key point emphasized was that a correct intellectual understanding of a mantra is not essential for its effectiveness. Soen-sa underscored that the depth of comprehension regarding the origin of phrases like “Kwanseum Bosal,” referring to the Bodhisattva of Compassion, does not inhibit the practice or its benefits.
2. The students engaged in a deeper conversation about the inherent power of certain mantras, inquiring whether the mantra used matters in relation to universal energy. Soen-sa articulated that the three main components for a mantra’s efficacy are one’s intention behind the practice, a profound belief in the mantra’s power, and regular, consistent practice.
3. To illustrate his teachings, Soen-sa shared a humorous yet enlightening story from Korean Zen history about a monk named Sok Du, nicknamed

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“Rock Head,” who struggled with the complexities of sutras and Zen practice. Faced with confusion after a Dharma speech, Sok Du approached his Zen Master for clarity regarding the nature of Buddha. The Master’s response, “Juk shim shi bul” (Buddha is mind), was comically misheard by Sok Du as “Jip shin shi bul” (Buddha is grass shoes), igniting his years-long quest for understanding.

4. For three years, Sok Du contemplated the perplexing notion of Buddha as grass shoes while engaging in working Zen. His eventual enlightenment came unexpectedly after a moment of imbalance caused by carrying firewood, leading to a comical yet profound realization that radiated joy and clarity.

5. Upon returning to his Master, Sok Du excitedly revealed his newfound understanding. In a twist of playful inquiry, when asked to explain his insight, Sok Du responded by striking his Master with a broken grass shoe, which conveyed the essence of his enlightenment—not as a simple idea but as a life experience filled with awareness and realization.

The laughter shared between Soen-sa and his students at the conclusion of the story encapsulated the joy of understanding the teachings and the transformative nature of Zen practice. They resumed their meal with a lightness that complemented the depth of the conversation, affirming the continuity of practice intertwined with humor and realization. Through this

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exchange, Soen-sa illustrated the profound simplicity at the heart of Zen—where enlightenment resides in the ordinary, and the journey is often more significant than the destination.

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Chapter 29 Summary: 38. Three Interviews

In this chapter from "Dropping Ashes On The Buddha," Seung Sahn Soen-sa conducts a series of three dialogues with different students, each designed to challenge their understanding of Zen principles and the nature of enlightenment.

1. The first interaction highlights the notion of direct experience versus intellectual response. When the initial student repeatedly shouts "KATZ," he is met with physical reprimands as he fails to expand beyond his surface response. The lack of deeper insight is emphasized through Soen-sa's insistence on questioning the weight of the student's assertion, ultimately leading to a feeling of emptiness, reinforcing the idea that mere words without comprehension are insufficient.

2. The second interview centers around the duality of answers provided by historic Zen masters regarding the nature of Buddha. The student initially deems the claim of "dry shit on a stick" as incorrect, but later finds himself echoing the same sentiment upon Soen-sa's prompting. This reveals a cyclical understanding of Zen where conventional judgments dissolve and equivalent responses challenge established perceptions of right and wrong. The subsequent exchange illustrates a fundamental lesson in non-attachment to words, culminating in the student's realization of the futility in engaging with dichotomous thinking.



3. The third interview conveys a practical application of Zen teachings in everyday interactions. When posed with the scenario of a person disrespecting a Buddha statue, the student expresses a desire to clean the statue but struggles to find a method to address the deeper issue of the individual's misunderstanding of holiness and attachment. This moment encapsulates the essence of Zen practice, which is not merely about external actions but the internal cultivation of understanding and compassion. Soen-sa encourages the student to engage in rigorous practice, indicating that with dedication, one may attain the realization needed to become a Zen Master themselves.

Through these three interviews, a profound exploration of Zen's core teachings unfolds, emphasizing the importance of direct insight, the limitations of language in conveying truths, and the necessity for personal development in achieving enlightenment.

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Chapter 30: 39. When the Lights Go Off, What?

In a thought-provoking exchange following a Dharma talk at Yale University, a student engaged Seung Sahn Soen-sa in a deep exploration of Buddhist concepts. The inquiry initiated with the student pondering the relationship between form and non-form, which elicited a succinct affirmation from Soen-sa: “Yes.” Yet, the conversation quickly delved deeper into fundamental questions about the nature of thought and existence.

1. **The Nature of Thinking:** When prompted about the origin of thinking, the student traced it back to questioning, which he attributed to Buddha-mind. This back-and-forth highlighted a critical aspect of Buddhist philosophy—the origins and nature of thought itself, suggesting that questioning is a crucial element of understanding one's consciousness. Soen-sa playfully cautioned against overcomplicating concepts like Buddha, urging the student to avoid fabricating definitions and instead focus on their essence.

2. **Symbolism in Lights:** The dialogue turned to a more vivid illustration of

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Chapter 31 Summary: 40. Testing the Mind

In a captivating exchange at the Cambridge Zen Center, a student earnestly sought to understand how a Zen Master assesses the minds of his pupils, prompting Seung Sahn Soen-sa to explore the intricate nature of consciousness and understanding. The conversation initiated with a fundamental inquiry: "What is mind?" When the student admitted ignorance, Soen-sa illustrated the complexity of the question through a Zen koan involving Zen Master Ma-jo, who intriguingly offered two contrasting definitions of Buddha—first asserting that "Mind is Buddha, Buddha is mind," and later claiming that "No mind, no Buddha." This paradox led the student to express his confusion through a physical gesture, hitting the floor, but Soen-sa challenged the value of that response, emphasizing the need for deeper understanding beyond mere instinctual reactions.

1. The essence of understanding is not confined to dualistic thinking; both of Ma-jo's responses were deemed insufficient as they inadvertently created opposites—defining “mind” brings about “not-mind,” and positing “Buddha” engenders “not-Buddha.” This illustrates the limitations of linguistic concepts in grasping the Absolute, with Soen-sa invoking the admonitions of Zen Master Jo-ju, who distanced the practice from the confines of intellectual definitions.

2. When presented with the challenge of articulating a response, the student

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remained silent, prompting Soen-sa to query how one might react to provocation or aggression. The student's instinct to retaliate, while natural, reflected a lapse in Zen understanding, as it deviated from maintaining composure and clarity, which are vital in Zen practice.

3. The exchange culminates in the realization that Zen tests do not yield clear right or wrong answers, but rather assess the quality of one's mindful responses in the face of challenges. The interplay of witty remarks and profound inquiries showcases the dynamic nature of practice, ultimately reinforcing the notion that effective Zen teaching lies in transcending verbal formulations to connect with the essence of experience.

Seung Sahn concludes the session with humor, demonstrating the importance of both laughter and rigorous training in the path to enlightenment, leaving the audience with a richer understanding of the mind's complexities and the Zen approach to life's unpredictabilities. The engagement highlights that true understanding is less about definitive answers and more about embracing the mystery and fluidity of experience.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embrace the fluidity of understanding instead of seeking definitive answers.

Critical Interpretation: Imagine standing at the precipice of a vast ocean, waves crashing, the horizon ever-shifting before you. In those moments, you might find yourself wrestling with questions—what is my purpose, what defines me? Yet the wisdom of Seung Sahn's exchange beckons you to pause. Instead of grasping for rigid definitions and immediate responses, allow yourself to embrace the uncertainty and complexity of your thoughts. Like the Zen koans that dance between opposites, you can find strength in the fluidity of your own understanding, realizing that true clarity arises not from confining your mind, but from welcoming its endless nuances. In doing so, you liberate yourself from the burdens of expectation and judgment, learning to navigate life's unpredictable tides with grace, humor, and a heart open to the profound mystery that life offers.

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Chapter 32 Summary: 41. What Is Death?

In a quiet moment during Yong Maeng Jong Jin at the Providence Zen Center, a student approached Seung Sahn Soen-sa, seeking clarity on the profound question of death. The exchange that followed held deep philosophical significance and ultimately led to an understanding beyond the ordinary perception of existence.

1. **The Nature of Death:** When the student inquired, “What is death?”

Soen-sa responded with an assertive statement: “You are already dead.”

This provocative answer invoked confusion in the student, who felt that he was merely in the process of dying. Soen-sa’s intent was to challenge the student's preconceptions and to prompt deeper contemplation.

2. **Thinking and Existence:** The conversation shifted as the student

grappled with the implications of Soen-sa's words. The Zen master

elucidated that the very act of thinking about death creates a concept of

death. In the absence of thought, neither life nor death exists; the mind

remains unencumbered by labels or attachments. Soen-sa emphasized that

true emptiness lies beyond our thoughts, where distinctions like 'I', 'you',

'life', and 'death' dissolve.

3. **True Emptiness:** Soen-sa used the metaphor of a clear mirror to

illustrate his teachings. The mirror reflects everything without holding onto

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any of it. As colors and figures appear, the mirror remains unchanged; it recognizes all experiences as transient. Just as a mirror does not grasp the reflections that appear, one should not cling to the concepts of life and death. This state of seeing life and death as they truly are—without attachment—is described as the original pure mind.

4. Original Face: The master encouraged the student to seek his original face, which implies understanding one's true nature beyond the confines of societal labels and personal identity. By realizing this essence, one transcends the duality of life and death, witnessing existence without the burden of attachment.

The following day, the same student returned, having pondered over Soen-sa's insights. When asked again about death, the student confidently reiterated Soen-sa's earlier words: “You are already dead.” This shift from confusion to clarity exemplified the depth of understanding achieved through meditation and reflection on the nature of existence.

Through this interaction, Seung Sahn Soen-sa articulated foundational Zen principles, guiding the student—and by extension, the reader—towards a comprehension of life and death that defies conventional notions, inviting a deeper exploration of consciousness and the self.

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Chapter 33: 42. Wanting Enlightenment

In a compelling dialogue at the Providence Zen Center, Seung Sahn Soen-sa engaged his students in a deep exploration of the nature of desire, aspiration, and enlightenment. This exchange illuminated a profound teaching that stresses the importance of intention in one's quest for realization, detailing how the misperception of desire can obstruct true understanding.

1. Letting Go of Attainment: Soen-sa guides his students to abandon the pursuit for enlightenment as a personal achievement. He emphasizes that such thoughts only serve to perpetuate a sense of separation between the seeker and the desired goal. By relinquishing these notions, one can genuinely dive into the heart of practice without distraction, eventually leading to a state of deep inquiry and urgency regarding the ultimate truth. The cultivation of relentless curiosity about one's "great question" becomes the pathway to enlightenment.

2. Distinction Between Desire and Aspiration: When a student

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Chapter 34 Summary: 44. Can You See Your Eyes?

In this insightful discussion, Seung Sahn Soen-sa addresses the nuanced relationship between two prominent Zen practices: shikan taza, or "only sitting," and kong-an practice. The inquiry begins with a student's question about their differences, highlighting a common concern among practitioners. Seung Sahn eloquently clarifies that while Soto Zen and Rinzai Zen may appear distinct on the surface, they ultimately lead to the same realization. The distinction lies in their methods—Soto Zen employs breath awareness to quiet the mind, while kong-an Zen utilizes the paradoxical questions known as kong-ans. However, he emphasizes that if one remains unattached to either method, their essence remains interconnected.

1. **The Importance of Non-Attachment:** Seung Sahn underscores that attachment to specific practices can create a false dichotomy. True understanding transcends method; it's about cutting off thinking and realizing clarity of mind, which leads directly to enlightenment.

2. **The Nature of Struggle:** The student expresses concern about prolonged struggles with kong-ans, pondering if it indicates a misguided path or the nature of the practice itself. Seung Sahn advises against a mindset fixated on enlightenment. Instead, he suggests focusing on the "great question," which encourages a letting go of thoughts and an embracing of emptiness.



3. Enlightenment is Within Reach: Seung Sahn reveals a profound truth: enlightenment is already inherent within each individual, obscured only by their unawareness. The realization of this truth requires diligent practice rather than arduous struggle. His rhetorical question about seeing one's own eyes serves as a powerful metaphor—just as one cannot directly observe their own faculties of perception, one cannot grasp the mind through intense effort.

4. Understanding Through Relationship: To illustrate his point further, Seung Sahn draws a comparison between perceiving external objects, like a cup or sound, and internal consciousness. Our capacity to perceive suggests the existence of our mind, yet trying to scrutinize it introspectively is futile. Enlightenment arises when one embraces the duality of existence—the concept of not knowing and the experience of an empty mind lead to the recognition of one's true self.

By inviting practitioners to explore existence beyond oppositional thinking, Seung Sahn reaffirms that the ultimate goal is to cultivate an "empty mind" and embrace the present moment without attachment. Ultimately, he conveys that the path to enlightenment is not isolated in struggle; rather, it is inherent in the simplicity of being. Through relinquishing attachment and the concept of opposites, one can discover the profound ease present in recognizing their true nature.

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Chapter 35 Summary: 45. Special Medicine and Big Business

On a serene spring afternoon, three students engaged in a thought-provoking discussion with Seung Sahn Soen-sa at the Providence Zen Center, delving into the complex relationship between psychedelics—referred to as "special medicine"—and Zen practice. The conversation unraveled the nuances of using psychedelics, shifting the focus from a simple binary of good or bad to the intentions underlying their use.

1. Intention Over Dualism: Seung Sahn clarified that the merit of taking special medicine lies not in the action itself but in the intention behind it. Understanding through special medicine is commendable, especially when it enables individuals to transcend bodily desires and attachments. However, engaging with it merely for the euphoric sensations it provides leads to problematic attachments.

2. Temporary Insights vs. True Attainment While psychedelics may allow people to glimpse the emptiness of life, revealing that distinctions such as success and failure are ultimately insignificant, these insights can be fleeting. True Zen attainment goes beyond recognition of emptiness; it involves severing all attachments and thoughts. Freedom from like and dislike is essential for genuine understanding.

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3. **Natural-Style vs. Business-Style Living:** The dialogue brought to light the diversity in Zen practitioners' lifestyles, from those embracing a natural, relaxed way of living to those driven by business ambitions. Seung Sahn emphasized that both lifestyles can coexist in Zen practice, contingent upon whether they are motivated by self-serving desires or a genuine aspiration to help others.

4. **Bodhisattva Action:** Zen practice manifests in various forms, regardless of one's style. Business can transform into "Bodhisattva business" when approached without attachment, aimed at benefiting others. Similarly, natural-style living becomes noble when it is free from selfish desires, embodying the high ideals of a Bodhisattva.

5. **Attachment as Hindrance:** The conversation highlighted a crucial lesson: detachment is the path to enlightenment. Seung Sahn illustrated this with anecdotes, including one about a student's attachment to his long hair, suggesting that true freedom lies in cutting through such attachments, which serve as barriers to enlightenment.

6. **The Synergy of Zen and Business:** For practitioners in the business realm, the possibility of achieving non-attachment is attainable if they pursue their work with altruistic intentions. In this light, the distinction between Zen and business blurs, as both can embody the same spirit when aligned with the greater good of all beings.

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In essence, the interaction showcased the intricate balance between understanding and attachment, urging students to reflect on their motivations and the nature of their desires. Whether through psychedelics, a natural lifestyle, or business, the path to enlightenment remains uniform: liberation from attachments, direct engagement with the essence of life, and a commitment to serving others.

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Chapter 36: 46. Miracles

In response to inquiries about the use of miracles by Zen Masters, Seung Sahn articulates a profound understanding of the role and implications of such phenomena. The essence of his message can be organized into the following points:

- 1. Understanding the Nature of Miracles:** Miracles are often sought after by people, but they serve merely as a technique rather than a pathway to true understanding. A Zen Master engaging in miraculous acts could lead followers to become overly attached to these spectacles, diverting them from the real work necessary for genuine spiritual growth.
- 2. The Illusion of Easy Solutions:** Many individuals desire simple, miraculous solutions to their problems, expecting external figures to alleviate their suffering or grant them enlightenment. Such expectations foster dependency, much like a child who relies too heavily on a parent. Genuine teaching encourages independence and personal responsibility, urging individuals to confront their own situations and understand their

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Alex Walk

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Chapter 37 Summary: 47. A Dharma Speech

In a compelling Dharma speech delivered by Seung Sahn Soen-sa at the San Francisco Zen Center on February 9, 1975, the essence of Zen practice is masterfully explored through a series of provocative challenges and teachings. The discourse begins with the striking sound of the Zen stick on the table, which serves as both a literal and metaphorical catalyst for understanding. It serves as a reminder that, to truly grasp the concept of Unity, one must transcend the habitual tendency to categorize reality into myriad classifications.

1. Unity and Duality: Seung Sahn explicitly highlights that true understanding transcends the dualities of good and bad, and high and low. When one grasps the meaning behind the Zen stick's sound, they step into the realm of understanding the oneness of existence. By approaching each moment with mindfulness, one can cut through illusions of separation and recognize the interconnectedness of all things.

2. The Art of Sitting Zen: The speech illuminates the importance of sitting Zen as a practice. Here, one learns to remain fully present, where thoughts are quieted, allowing for the convergence of inner and outer realities. This practice is not only an exercise in concentration but a pathway to profound self-awareness. The metaphor of a 'diamond sword' is introduced, representing the capacity to sever attachments and delusions.

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3. **Mindfulness and Concentration:** Seung Sahn guides listeners through the image of walking on thin ice, which demands total concentration on every movement. This metaphorical walk signifies the care with which one should approach their spiritual practice; a misstep might lead to confusion or suffering. The idea is to cultivate awareness and clarity while remaining vigilant against distractions.

4. **Emptiness and Freedom:** Emphasizing the concept of true emptiness, the speaker points out that this state exists beyond intellectual constructions. While it is essential to realize this emptiness to attain clarity, one must also be cautious not to become attached to it. Detachment from emptiness yields a profound freedom, allowing individuals to engage with the joy of the world without the weight of preconceived notions about life or death.

5. **Beyond Words and Concepts:** The speech beautifully intertwines sensory experiences with spiritual understanding. The sounds of nature—birds singing and rivers flowing—are articulated as sutras, suggesting that the ultimate teachings are embedded in the natural world itself. Real clarity is achieved not merely through words but through direct experience, reinforcing that reality is rich in its simplicity and directness.

6. **The Paradox of Understanding:** The Zen stick again becomes a medium for deeper contemplation. Seung Sahn provocatively asserts that

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whether it is seen as the same or different from one's mind, neither position holds. Instead, the challenge lies in fully engaging with the paradox and experiencing the essence of reality directly, which eludes conventional knowing. He urges practitioners to enter the 'lion's den'—the realm of true understanding—where one can confront the fears and attachments that inhibit true spiritual awakening.

Through these layered teachings, Seung Sahn invites practitioners into a dynamic exploration of Zen principles, encouraging a direct engagement with life that transcends conventional thinking, thereby leading to a liberated and authentic experience of existence. In this approach, the teachings serve not just as theoretical insights but as practical guidance on the path to spiritual enlightenment.

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Chapter 38 Summary: 48. A Little Thinking, A Little Sparring

In Chapter 38 of "Dropping Ashes on the Buddha" by Seung Sahn Soen-sa, the dialogue unfolds through a series of exchanges primarily revolving around the themes of thought, reality, and the practice of Zen. The interactions illustrate the depth of Zen teaching through both humor and profound insights. Here, I summarize the key principles and encounters presented in this chapter.

- 1. Nature of Thinking:** A student questions the nature of thinking and its cessation during Zen meditation. Soen-sa elucidates that thinking is merely a construct of the mind and that true understanding transcends thought. By using playful examples, such as a cat's perception of objects, he highlights that names and forms stem from human thinking, which can lead to misinterpretations of reality.
- 2. Cessation of Thought:** The student grapples with how to halt thinking. Through practical exercises—like drinking water—Soen-sa demonstrates how engagement in direct experience (like drinking) can lead to a state devoid of thought. The act of drinking represents pure experience, free from judgment or desire.
- 3. Teaching through Direct Experience** Soen-sa relays a story from

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Buddha's teachings, emphasizing non-verbal transmission of wisdom. The silence and actions of the Buddha convey more than words; the act of holding up a flower signifies a direct, experiential teaching that transcends conventional understanding and language.

4. Freedom from Attachment: Soen-sa emphasizes that both attachment to thoughts and the rejection of thoughts lead to suffering. He articulates that liberation comes from maintaining awareness without discrimination, urging the student to embrace a state of “don't-know” where preconceptions are dropped.

5. Zen and its Practice: The chapter discusses the essence of Zen practice—not merely confined to formal sitting, but as a continuous engagement with life. Soen-sa stresses the importance of practicing in all actions, whether mundane or formal, and the necessity of maintaining an open mind.

6. Understanding Emptiness: A significant part of the dialogue touches on the concept of emptiness. Soen-sa warns against misconstruing emptiness as a future goal; rather, it is a present state of mind that must be realized in daily life—an understanding that all names and forms are empty.

7. Using Humor and Direct Questions: Throughout his discourse, Soen-sa employs humor as a tool for teaching. Through playful banter, he

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nudges students toward deeper realizations about Zen, breaking down their intellectual barriers and leading them to respond from their true selves.

8. Encounters with Students: The dialogues with various students reveal their misunderstandings and attachments, offering Soen-sa opportunities to redirect their focus towards true understanding and away from fixed ideas. He often employs paradox, challenging students to look beyond conventional wisdom.

9. Depth of Zen Wisdom: As students engage further with Soen-sa's questions, there's a notable shift towards silent realizations—often encapsulated by direct and succinct insights that reflect the essence of Zen practice. This drives home the principle that true wisdom does not arise from discursive thought but from an immediate recognition of reality.

10. Bodhisattva Mind: Soen-sa articulates that true enlightenment and assistance toward others stem from a mind free from attachment. Actions taken from a Bodhisattva perspective do not seek personal benefit; rather, they flow from a deep interconnection with all beings and the world.

Through this chapter, Seung Sahn Soen-sa masterfully conveys the nature of Zen practice, emphasizing direct experience over intellectual understanding and guiding students toward realizing their true selves through thoughtful dialogue and engaging exercises.

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