

How can you answer?

A talk given by Zen Master Su Bong
at the Cambridge Zen Center, 1993

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Zen means understanding myself. What am I? What is a human being's job on this Earth? Why do we eat every day? An old Chinese poem says, "Coming empty-handed, going empty-handed." Then why are there so many problems in the world? We come empty-handed and we go empty-handed. Then why is there so much fighting, so much suffering? Why is it that this world as we know it may soon disappear?

Five and one half billion people live on the earth these days and every one of us is checking each other. This has created a problem for our world. I am checking five and one half billion people, you are checking five and one half billion people. Husband is checking wife. Brother is checking sister. Everyone is checking each other— which means our world has become a very narrow world, a totally "me" world. We have the view that this world is made only for me. "This dharma talk is being given only for me." "My driving down the street is just for me." "Going to the restaurant is only for me." We think: "Only I exist in this world; the whole world is made for me." This is the problem that human beings have made. Human beings cannot help each other, they cannot trust each other. If you cannot trust another human being, then how can you trust you? Without trusting yourself, your teacher, your friends, your parents, your son, your daughter, your family, how can you trust you? That is an amazing view, but it's true if you perceive the world's situation.

Formerly, eastern Europe was under communist control. And in a very funny and awkward way, that was wonderful, because communism at that time meant the control of all countries— Lithuania, all Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Slovakia, many other places. It was like a communistic zoo. The zoo had many strange animals, tigers and lions, elephants, pigs... many kinds of animals that were controlled, caged and fenced. Many different animals means many different traditions, different habits, different likes and dislikes. Completely different animals lead completely different lives. But communism kept everything in a cage so everything was under control. Nobody could hate each other, not openly at least. Nobody could do just any kind of action; they had to follow communism's way. That is not good, not bad. Yes, maybe a little bad; that wasn't regarded as freedom. But now everybody is free. The walls of the communism zoo came down and all the animals became free. But what do they do? The tigers want to control this big zoo, but dogs also want to control it. Gorillas want to be in charge and so do the birds. They're free! But nobody understands this freedom.

Now there is no cover. There is nothing telling us everything we must do. No one understands what to do. They are free, but once more make a cage—*my cage, my world* is the name of the new cage.

Everybody has made their own law. Every country has their own rule. My law, my rule. That's our world situation and direction, *only for my group*. "I want money for my group." "I want my group to survive." People's attitude is only for "my" greed, for "my" tribe, "my" flock, "my" herd, so Bosnia-Herzegovina appeared.

All religious people say, "we want peace." Orthodox Christians say, "yes, we want peace!" Catholics say, "yes, we want peace." Muslims all say, "we want peace!" But only their mouths say peace. Because inside, our boundary— all human beings' boundary— is too narrow. "This is my world and mine is the only correct world." In this way human beings cannot understand human beings, they cannot understand what is a correct human being's life on this earth. So this world now has a very a difficult situation. However, many people do have a correct direction. They want to understand what is a true human being's function. They want to understand, "What am I?" They want to understand, "What is my purpose on this earth?"

I went to Bosnia-Herzegovina because I was teaching in Bratislava, and Bratislava is very close to Bosnia. We have a student in Zagreb, which is quite far from the fighting area, who asked if I could come. When I got to Zagreb, they said that a soldier, Ivoca, who likes Zen meditation, wanted to meet me. He had wanted to meet a Zen teacher before, but under communism nothing was open. They have no books, and they don't know how meditation works.

We flew from Zagreb, and Ivoca picked us up at a town called Spitt. We continued to Mostar, the town where Croations and Muslims first began fighting. Strangely, we stayed in Medjugore, a town between ten and fifteen kilometers from Mostar, which has become very famous because twelve years ago, Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, appeared there to five Catholic children. Some of the five children still talk with the Virgin. She gives them instructions for how human beings should act. The mountain where the Virgin Mary appeared is very well-known. Before the war, 40,000 people visited this town every day, and Medjugore became a very rich town because of the number of tourists. But now, only ten kilometers away, all this fighting has appeared and hardly any tourists come.

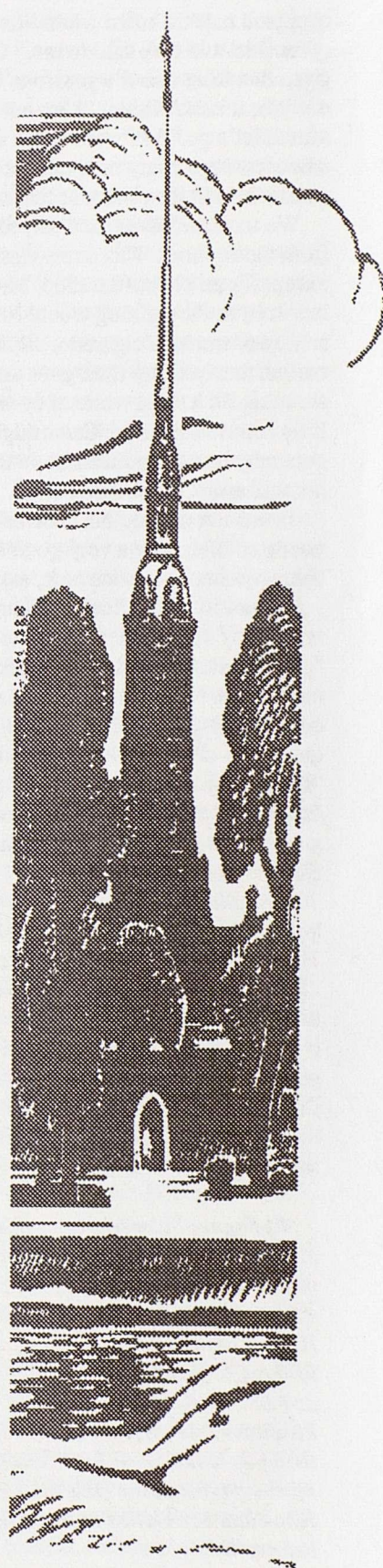
The fighting is done by young soldiers—all young men. At seventeen years old they are told to go to war. Ivoca is 27 years old, and he is very unusual because he's vegetarian. For four years he's been a total vegetarian. I said, "You don't like meat but you are killing people—Why?" Ivo said, "At this time, that's my job, but when this is over I want to come to Korea and practice Zen with you— I want to become a monk. I really want to do that and will never go out from the temple until I know what is a human being. But now, I must kill people."

I said, "I will wait for you and hope that you will come soon. But how is it possible that you don't eat meat? All the soldiers love meat and alcohol and those things."

He explained, "That is no problem because I am a very good fighting soldier. I am a killer. So, they understand that, and the mess hall understands; they give me extra bread, fruit and vegetables."

Because Ivoca is a leader for special forces, I was able to go to many places few people could go. It was a very difficult situation because there was so much gunfire and bullets. Not one or two shots, but continuous gunfire and small bombs exploding everywhere in the air. Everything was very loud. They shot off hand grenades. And, on the other side of the mountain, a large number of people were fighting in the town. We were on a hill watching the fighting when other soldiers came to us and said, "No, no. Don't stay here because the snipers are very good. They have guns that can shoot more than 4,000 yards. So if you stand up, they'll shoot you. They don't care who they shoot. Even the fact that you have no hair and funny clothes does not matter, they don't care, they'll shoot you." So I said, "Okay, okay," and we went down the hill.

Another soldier came from the mountain in Mostar and said that for one very long block, you could see burned buildings through the whole middle of town. Croats



occupied half the town while Muslims occupied the other side. Ivo then said to me, "Okay! If you want to go to this front line it's possible. I can take you—don't be afraid." I said, "I am with you, so I am not afraid, let's go." We went to the front line and came to a house where many men ran out and told us not to continue right then because the shooting was extreme.

We took the advice and stayed one street removed from the fighting. This street was completely empty except for an old coffee shop. Many of the soldiers involved in the fighting would run into this building, sit down, smoke a cigarette, drink some Coke or coffee, then pick up their guns and re-engage for more shooting. In a short while, they would reenter for a little rest. It is as if the Cambridge Zen Center were one army and the police station down the block another army, they're that close.

It was interesting, but suddenly one soldier, a very young soldier, with a very good face that could have been my son, or anyone here, asked me, "Where are you from?" I said, "Korea." Then he asked my friend, Ivo, "Why did you (Ivo and I) come here?" Ivo said, "Ah, I invited him to come because I like Zen meditation. He's a meditation teacher so he wanted to come." The young soldier asked me one big important question—not as an attack, but sincerely. He asked, "How can you help us?" If you had been there, how could you answer? That's my question for you. One young soldier asks you, 'How can you help us?' How can you answer him?

If you don't understand, only go straight, don't know. Then your mind can become clear like space. Then helping this soldier or anyone is possible.

Great love and great compassion is not something to do for the sake of doing good. Great love and great compassion is not a thing to do for the sake of doing a good deed. Great love and compassion is our original job. So I hope all of the people in this world can find their correct and original job, get enlightenment and save all people from suffering.

Epilogue: Six weeks after this talk was given, Zen Master Su Bong was teaching in South Africa. Every day he read the newspaper to find out about the world situation and how the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was progressing. When the war is over, he thought, Ivoca would soon join him in Korea. One day Zen Master Su Bong picked up the paper... the headlines said "Severe Street Fighting in Mostar." He thought, "I must call Ivo." Two hours later he received a fax at the Dharma Centre in Cape Town—Ivoca had been killed in street fighting a few hours before. ☉

A new feature in *Primary Point*

In the next issue, we will begin a regular feature in which students will have the opportunity to send in practice questions to be answered by the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sa Nims.

This column will be edited
by Jeff Kitzes, JDPSN.

If you have any questions you'd like to see in
Primary Point, please send them to:

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