

# An Investigation of Seung Sahn's Seon: "Don't Know" Mind, Ten Gates, and Systems of Hierarchy and Authorization

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to identify the relation of the school of Seon (Zen) taught by the Korean master Seung Sahn to both Korean Seon and its Japanese counterpart by focusing on the three innovative devices he employed in his teachings. These are "don't know" mind, the Ten Gates gongan practice, and the systems of hierarchy and authorization he established, each representing Seung Sahn's perspective on Seon thought, practice, and authorization of teachers, respectively. As for "don't know" mind, I analyze its relation to Korean Seon and Huineng's Chan, and investigate the reasons for its popularity among the Western public. Then, I examine the purpose of the gongan approach known as Ten Gates and determine its relation to the Japanese Rinzai koan curriculum. Finally, I focus on the unique features of the hierarchy and authorization systems, especially the inclusion of lay practitioners in leadership and the authorizing function of the practice community.*

**Keywords:** Seung Sahn, "don't know" mind, Ten Gates, Kwan Um School of Zen, Korean Seon, American Zen

## Introduction

Korean Seon 禪 (Chan in Chinese; Zen in Japanese)<sup>1</sup> Master Seung Sahn Haeng Won 崇山行願 (1927–2004) arrived in America in 1972. At that time, Japanese Zen had already begun spreading among the American public. Zen had been introduced in America by Soen Shaku (1860–1919), a Japanese Rinzai Zen master, at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. As of the mid-twentieth century, Zen was continuing to gain popularity among a postwar younger generation attracted to it by a series of Zen books by D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966). By the 1960s, an influx of Zen masters from Japan was promoting the popularization of Zen in America; thenceforth, Zen began to be practiced as a system of spiritual training, not as a mere philosophical pursuit by intellectuals as it had been before. Subsequently, major Zen centers sprang up across the country, including the San Francisco Zen Center in 1962, the Rochester Zen Center in 1966, and the Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1967.

During this period when Japanese Zen was proliferating in America, Seung Sahn set out for the West to unfold his version of Seon there. Eventually, he founded the Kwan Um School of Zen in 1983, a decade after he had first set foot on American soil. It has now been almost ten years since that school's charismatic founder passed away. Lacking any central leadership or organization, the Kwan Um School of Zen seems to have lost its original vigor and entered a period of stagnancy, though as of 2013 it still has a total of 93 affiliated centers around the world.<sup>2</sup>

Like any other Zen master, Seung Sahn emphasized the realization of one's true nature; unlike others, however, he was tolerant toward, even encouraging of, the cultural adaptation of Zen to the West. That is why he often said he had just delivered Korean-style Seon to America, but that American teachers in his lineage would create their own style. He even permitted his students, "if they wish, to begin their own schools with their

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1. In the Western world, the Chinese Chan 禪 is generally referred to by its Japanese pronunciation of Zen. In Korea it is pronounced Seon. In this article, I will distinguish between Korean Seon, Chinese Chan, and Japanese Zen.

2. For the most current list of centers and web addresses, visit [www.kwanumzen.org/centers](http://www.kwanumzen.org/centers).

own traditions, their own centers.”<sup>3</sup> This is unprecedented in view of the fact that in the Zen tradition of mind-to-mind transmission, “lineage” is of utmost importance.

A lack of academic research makes it difficult to have an objective perspective on this lineage.<sup>4</sup> However, in general, Seung Sahn's Seon (hereafter, SSS) employs a less formal method of training, which is clearly of the Korean style, and shows aspects of early Chinese Chan in its freewheeling style, unhindered by the formal procedures characteristic of Japanese Zen. More importantly, SSS attempts to shift the core of Zen training from enlightenment itself to the moment-to-moment functions of enlightenment unfolding in daily life.

A number of Korean Seon teachers have made an impact on the American Buddhist community, including Kyungbo Seo (1914–1996), the first Korean teacher of Seon in America, who visited Columbia University in 1964; Kusan Sunim (1908–1983), an influential Korean Buddhist leader who arrived in America to inaugurate the Sambosa temple in California in 1972; and Samu Sunim (b. 1941), who achieved particular prominence in the 1990s teaching the Korean Seon tradition (Seager 2012, 191–193). However, SSS, the representative of Korean Seon in the West, is a meaningful experiment in the Western context, in which there have been an unprecedented number of Asian meditative traditions simultaneously. Viewed in this way, SSS, as one of the Western-friendly living Zen traditions, carries many implications for contemporary Zen practitioners.

In this article, I analyze SSS by focusing on its “don't know” mind, Ten Gates, and practices of hierarchy and authorization, each of which represents innovative aspects of Seung Sahn's Seon in terms of thought, practice, and system, respectively. I examine each of these three factors in relation to Korean Seon and its Japanese counterpart, with the aim of fostering

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3. “Transmission to the West: An interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn,” *Primary Point* 10.1 (Winter/Spring 1993): 4.

4. There has not been much research on SSS either within or outside of Korea; those studies that have been done have not dealt comprehensively with the system of SSS, which may result in a wrong understanding of it. The author hopes that the discussion of the topics addressed in this article might be a catalyst for a thorough illumination of SSS.

a better understanding of SSS.

To summarize this article, the section “Don’t Know’ Mind” deals with similarities between “don’t know” mind, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng’s (618–907) Chan, and the *hwadu* 話頭 (*huatou* in Chinese; *wato* in Japanese) approach of Korean Seon as a meditative device. This is followed by an investigation into why “don’t know” mind has been so popular among Westerners. The following section, “Ten Gates,” highlights some characteristic features and the goal of this *gongan* (*koan* in Japanese) approach, which is quite different from the Japanese Rinzai *koan* curriculum. The next section, “Systems of Hierarchy and Authorization,” demonstrates the non-traditional features of these two systems, with a particular focus on the inclusion of lay practitioners in leadership and the authorizing function of the practice community.

### “Don’t Know” Mind

The meditative phrase “don’t know’ mind” is an underpinning and hallmark of SSS. Based on “don’t know” mind, SSS presented a different approach to existing Zen: it stressed the function of enlightenment, rather than enlightenment per se, in Zen practice. Such a different approach was efficacious in attracting the attention of Westerners by meeting their secular and pragmatic need to seek happiness in daily life rather than in religious experience. Here, I suggest my view on the relation of “don’t know” mind to the Sixth Patriarch Huineng’s Chan theory, and to *hwadu* investigation, a meditative technique of the Korean Seon tradition.

#### *Effective Meditative Device*

In an interview, Seung Sahn explained “don’t know” mind thus:

[D]on’t know mind is no thinking and no thinking means empty mind. Empty mind is before thinking. When you keep don’t know mind 100 percent, then you are already the universe, and the universe is you. You and everything have already become one. As we say, that is the Primary

Point. The name of the Primary Point is Don't Know. Somebody could say that the Primary Point is mind, or Buddha, or God, or nature or apple, or consciousness, or anything. But the true Primary Point is no name, no form, no speech, no word, because it is before thinking.<sup>5</sup>

Judging by the above citation, perfect attainment of “don't know” mind appears similar to the enlightened state of Zen in which there is no longer any discrimination between self and others. Practitioners are always required to maintain “don't know” mind whenever they are engaged in *gongan* practice or a *gongan* interview situation. And teachers in this lineage use *gongans* “to understand the students' practice, and to give them ‘don't know’ mind.”<sup>6</sup> This implies that in SSS, maintaining “don't know” mind takes priority over *gongan* study itself.

Then, what does it mean to maintain “don't know” mind? As stated by Zen Master Wu Bong, it means three things: first, cutting off all discursive thoughts; second, helping to see our true nature; and third, sticking to the present moment.<sup>7</sup> And none of the meanings are separate, but all are interrelated.

These three meanings of “don't know” mind seem similar to Huineng's “Three Nos,” i.e., no-thought (*wunian* 無念), non-form (*wuxiang* 無相), and non-abiding (*wuzhu* 無住), which can be explained as follows:

Good friends, in this teaching of mine, from ancient times up to the present, all have set up no-thought as the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis. Non-form is to be separated from form even when associated with form. No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought. Non-abiding is the original nature of man (Huineng 1967, 137–138).

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5. “An Interview With Zen Master Seung Sahn, Part I,” by Diana Evans, *Dharma Zen Center Newsletter* 2.1 (winter 2008), accessed August 18, 2013, <http://www.dharmazen.com/DZC-Winter08-Newsletter.pdf>.

6. Wu Bong, “Only Keep ‘Don't Know’ Mind,” Kwan Um School of Zen, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.kwanumzen.org/1990/only-keep-dont-know-mind>.

7. Wu Bong, “Only Keep ‘Don't Know’ Mind,” Kwan Um School of Zen, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.kwanumzen.org/1990/only-keep-dont-know-mind>.

As the main doctrine in the teaching of Huineng, no-thought, often rendered as equivalent to no-mind (*wuxin* 無心), is further described as being “unstained in all environments” (Huineng 1967, 137). Huineng continues to explain what is meant by “no” and “thought” as follows:

“No” is the “no” of what? “Thought” means “thinking” of what? “No” is the separation from the dualism that produces the passions. “Thought” means thinking of the original nature of True Reality. True Reality is the substance of thoughts; thoughts are the function of True Reality. If you give rise to thoughts from your self-nature, then, although you see, hear, perceive, and know, you are not stained by the manifold environments, and are always free (Huineng 1967, 139).

Here, Huineng’s no-thought is interpreted as thought without dualism, without delusion, and without false discrimination. Such a definition of no-thought precludes the possibility of its being interpreted as the absence of thought or lack of any psychological activity; instead, no-thought can be considered as clear, non-deluded thinking itself. And the thought in no-thought is further presented as the function (*yong* 用) of its substance (*ti* 體), the original nature of True Reality (*zhenru benxing* 眞如本性); thus, thought can be expressed as the realization of our true nature. These aspects of no-thought seem to be equivalent to those of “don’t know” mind in their focus on “cutting off discursive thoughts,” or “clearing the mind,” which leads us to our true nature.

Huineng further presents non-form and non-abiding as follows: non-form is being outwardly separated from all forms, and when you are separated from form, the substance of your nature is pure; non-abiding is to be unfettered and free from clinging to successive thoughts in all things, and therefore if one instant of thought is cut off, successive thoughts will have no place for attachment to anything (Huineng 1967, 138). Thusly defined, non-form and non-abiding seem to be also related to such aspects of “don’t know” mind as “taking us to the wellspring of our true nature” and “sticking to the present moment” because the attainment of non-form, or outward separation from all forms, is not to diverge from our pure nature, and because non-abiding, or being unfettered, forms an unimpeded basis for

living in the present moment.

To be more specific about “sticking to the present moment,” it is true that all Zen traditions call attention to the present moment; this is because if we awaken to the real nature of things without delusion, things are manifested just as they are. In Zen, awakening to the present moment is naturally connected with the emphasis on Ordinary Mind (*pingchangxin* 平常心), namely, the state of our mind that abides by reality as it is, and on mindfulness in everyday-life situations. In a similar vein, Mazu Daoyi's (709–788) “Ordinary Mind” also has a parallel meaning with “don't know” mind when the former is defined as a “mind lacking artifice and mistaken discrimination, the natural condition of sentient beings.”<sup>8</sup> In American Zen as well, not a few Zen masters have stressed the importance of applying Zen insights to everyday life for similar reasons.<sup>9</sup> Seung Sahn was no exception, but he took a stricter stance on this subject than any other Zen master has done. In his case, the idea of sticking to the present moment forms the basis for achieving the goal of Zen practice, namely, unselfish engagement in compassionate activities in everyday life.

The fact that Seung Sahn advocated the Jogye (another name for Huineng; Caoxi in Chinese) Seon tradition strengthens the assumption that SSS is closely related with, or a successor to, Huineng's Chan in another respect. According to Seung Sahn, Huineng's Chan emphasizes *sisimma* 是甚磨,<sup>10</sup> or “What is this?” which refers to perceiving not-knowing (Seung

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8. “If one wants to know the Way directly: Ordinary Mind is the Way! What is meant by Ordinary Mind? No activity, no right or wrong, no grasping or rejecting, neither terminable nor permanent, without worldly or holy” (Cheng 1992, 65).

9. For meditation in everyday life, see Aitken (1992), Beck (1989), Kabat-Zinn (1994), and Nhat Hanh (1990, 1991).

10. *Sisimma* can be traced back to a historical event in which Chinese Chan Master Nanyue Huairang 南岳懷讓 (677–744) met with the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, as described in the *Platform Sutra*. When Huairang came to pay his respects to Huineng, Master Huineng asked him, “What is it that comes like this?” (什麼物怎麼來?). Huairang replied, “To say it's like anything wouldn't hit it” (說似一物即不中). See *Luizu dashi fabao tanjing* 六祖大師法寶壇經 (The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch), *T[aisho]* 2008:48.0357b. From this simple exchange, Korean Seon has evolved the decisive meditative questions: What is this? What is the thing that drags this corpse? and What am I?

Sahn 1997, 275–279; Shrobe 2004, 3). In this regard, “don’t know” mind is comparable to *sisimma*. *Sisimma* is considered by Koreans as the fundamental question raised in all the thousands of *hwadu* (literally, “head of speech”; the key phrase in a *koan*) used in Korean Seon, and thus the source of all other *hwadu* (Buswell 1992, 155). As is generally known, the technique of contemporary Korean Seon is to look wholeheartedly into (i.e., meditate or ruminate upon) a *hwadu* as the subject of meditation.

The heart of *hwadu* investigation practice is the arousal of a great doubt. This has given rise to a Zen adage, “A great doubt leads to a great enlightenment; a small doubt, a small enlightenment.” By intense concentration on the doubt at all times, practitioners are led to a realization, namely, “sudden enlightenment.”

The *hwadu* investigation proceeds from arousing *uisim* 疑心 (doubt), manifesting *uijeong* 疑情 (sensation of doubt), transforming this into *uidan* 疑團 (ball of doubt) and then *uidan dongno* 疑團獨路 (exclusively revealing the ball of doubt), and developing *taseong ilpyeon* 打成一片 (one-pointedness of mind) (Bulhak Yeonguso 2005, 232–236).<sup>11</sup> As the sensation of doubt is fully matured through this process, practitioners come to cut off all passages of thought, as if they had encountered an *eunsan cheolbyeok* 銀山鐵壁 (an invincible barrier of the silver mountain and iron wall) (Bulhak Yeonguso 2005, 236). It is not until they penetrate this final barrier that they can attain enlightenment.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the relation between keeping *hwadu* doubt and “don’t know” mind, Seung Sahn states, “If you sincerely ask, ‘What am I?’ sooner or later you will run into a wall where all thinking is cut off. We call this ‘don’t know.’ Zen is keeping this ‘don’t know’ mind always and everywhere” (Seung Sahn 1976, 12). Here, I suppose that the state of intensive *hwadu* doubt in which all thinking is cut off is equivalent to that of “don’t know.”

11. In the discourse records of some Zen masters, the stages from *uijeong* to *taseong ilpyeon* are sometimes dealt with without distinction.

12. The *hwadu* approach is different from *koan* practice in Japanese Rinzai Zen, where students are taught to “become one with” (*narikiru* in Japanese) the critical phrase itself, or to come up with the “right” answer for the private interview. See Joo (2011). For more on the topic of *narikiru*, see Hori (2000, 288–289).



### *Appeal to the West*

What is the reason “don’t know” mind finds such appeal in the West? Let me suggest three points in answer to this question. Firstly, the meditative phrase “don’t know” mind arouses a feeling of familiarity; in fact, it reminds us of a well-known saying of Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, “I know that I don’t know.” This was reportedly in reply to the question “Do you know who you are?” asked by a man who had heard Socrates say, “Know yourself.” Evoking a Socrates-style paradox in the mind of Westerners, the motto “‘don’t know’ mind,” along with other well-known ones like “primary point,” “Go straight. No thinking,” and “Just do it” had simple yet dynamic effects. These adages cogently present the core of traditional Zen teachings without depending on any Buddhist doctrines. Moreover, such rhetorical adaptation has contributed to the wide proliferation of SSS among the general Western public, as they were well-tailored for the secular Western audience.<sup>13</sup>

I think these simple phrases also appeal to, and act as catalysts for, a spiritual thirst latent in Western society despite its outward preoccupation with material progress and affluence. In this context, Western materialism needs to be counterbalanced by some sort of spiritual pursuit. Exposed from the mid-twentieth century to a variety of Buddhist meditation systems, including Vajrayana, Vipassana, and Zen, many American seekers have devoted themselves to a practice of their own choice. Although Japanese-derived Zen traditions were already dominant at that time, the catch-phrases that Seung Sahn invented and presented through diverse media, namely, books, the Internet, and broadcast, were efficacious enough to draw the attention of Western seekers. Seung Sahn’s slogans apparently

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13. Stephen Altschuler, an American author and student of Seung Sahn years ago, associates popular interest in “don’t know” mind with other phrases popular among Westerners. According to him, “don’t know” mind was “180 degrees from the Western teaching of ‘I Know’ or ‘I think, therefore I am.’” He goes on to say that the “don’t know” approach to life is a humble attitude that adopts the “Beginner’s Mind” of Suzuki Roshi, or the “Serenity Prayer” of Reinhold Neibuhr. See Stephen Altschuler, “‘Don’t Know’ Mind,” last modified August 11, 2013, <http://anenlightenedworld.com/dont-know-mind>.

tried to focus on the fresh and unique feature of his version of Seon compared to those of his Japanese counterparts (Low 2010, 276).

Secondly, Seung Sahn's freewheeling and charismatic personality expanded the effect of these watchwords. His energetic, untiring activities deeply impressed the Western audience and contributed to establishing his own style of "Just do it" Zen characterized by a simplified and informal approach. In contrast, Japanese Zen traditions in America in the 1970s were faithful to a strict and formal practice, and mostly engrossed in the matter of how to transplant this exotic Asian culture into the New World. Such a difference in the style of Zen, I think, played a key role in popularizing SSS, which successfully asserted its non-Japanese, non-religious, and fresh approach to Zen despite its supposedly heavy reliance on the Japanese Rinzai Zen for its method of practice (which I will discuss in the following section). Moreover, Seung Sahn was comparatively independent from the Jogye Order he belonged to; this probably allowed him to adapt Jogye Seon to the demands of the West.

Thirdly, "don't know" mind helped Westerners to awaken to a new aspect of Zen: how to live a selfless life. After all, SSS prioritizes "how to help others" over "how to attain enlightenment." This perspective accords with the lay-oriented tendency of Western Zen, but it is quite different from that of traditional Zen, in which wisdom (*prajñā*) takes precedence over compassion (*karunā*). For instance, Yasutani Hakuun (1885–1973), the founder of the Sanbo Kyodan Zen organization, speaks from the traditional viewpoint as follows:

Fundamentally, such matters as saving sentient beings are the delusions of bodhisattvas. Where are the sentient beings to be saved? From the pits of hell to the summit of the Buddha realm, there is not even a single deluded sentient being. Sentient beings are originally Buddhas. All are nothing but Tathagatas of pure gold. Is there any saving to be done?<sup>14</sup>

Here, Yasutani Roshi apparently takes the view that compassion presup-

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14. Nelson Foster, "How Shall We Save the World? An Anniversary Essay on a Perennial Topic," The Zen Site, accessed October 17, 2013, [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/How\\_Shall\\_We\\_Save\\_the\\_World.htm](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/How_Shall_We_Save_the_World.htm).

poses wisdom, or from a fundamental point of view, that helping others without attaining enlightenment is a mere delusion. Yet Seung Sahn, reversing the traditional view, gives more weight to compassion than wisdom in an effort to meet the demands of the times.

### Ten (or Twelve) Gates<sup>15</sup>

The official *gongan* collection of the Kwan Um School of Zen is Seung Sahn's *The Whole World Is a Single Flower: 365 Kong-ans for Everyday Life*.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, Seung Sahn presented Ten Gates, or a set of ten *gongans*, which are used for providing practitioners with a direction for Zen practice. That direction is called "don't know." According to this approach, answering the *gongan* is not enough, but practitioners are required to attain the *gongan*'s wisdom to reach the state of "don't know" (Seung Sahn 1997, 355).

To analyze the structure of the Ten Gates, each of these ten *gongans* is composed of three elements, namely, a *gongan*, checking questions, and a commentary. Let us take, as an example, the First Gate: Jo Ju's (Chao-chou in Chinese; Joshu in Japanese) Dog.

*Gongan:*

A monk once asked Jo Ju, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" Jo Ju

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15. The original complete set of Ten Gates first appeared in the appendix "Mind Meal" of his book *Only Don't Know*. They are also the subject of his book *Ten Gates*. An eleventh gate was added as an addendum to Ten Gates, and, more recently, a twelfth gate was added. All of these *gongans* appear as part of the collection *The Whole World is a Single Flower: 365 Kong-ans for Everyday Life*. His short commentaries are all taken from this last collection.

16. According to its editors' preface, xii–xiii, the *gongan* collection of the Kwan Um Zen includes Christian and Taoist *gongans* as well as the more familiar Japanese *koans*. The "Buddhist" *gongans* are selected from the classic collections *The Gateless Gate* and *The Blue Cliff Record*, as well as from a large number of orally preserved *gongans* from Korean Seon teachers, especially Seon Masters Man Gong and Ko Bong. The Christian *koans* are derived from the poems of the German mystic Johannes Scheffler (1624–1677); the Taoist *gongans* come from Stephen Mitchell's 1988 translation of the *Tao Te Ching*.

answered, “Mu!” (No).

*Questions:*

1. Buddha said everything has Buddha-nature. Jo Ju said a dog has no Buddha-nature. Which one is correct?
2. Jo Ju said, “Mu!” What does this mean?
3. I ask you, does a dog have Buddha-nature?

*Commentary:*

Silence is better than holiness, so opening your mouth is a big mistake. But if you use this mistake to save all beings, this is Zen.

Being presented with a *gongan* in this way, students are required to perceive the *gongan*'s inner wisdom, but not through conceptual thought (Seung Sahn 1997, 355). As shown in the above example, an important aspect of the *gongans* in SSS is that they each contain questions and a commentary. These checking questions are said to point to the wisdom of original mind and how it functions right now. By means of these questions and commentaries, students are provided with a basic direction for their *gongan* practice and *gongan* interviews with the teachers (Seung Sahn 1997, 357). Once provided such a basic direction, students are instructed to study *gongans* as follows: “If you don't understand [a *gongan*], or if you have an answer but don't know how to respond, only keep ‘don't know’ mind. That's *gongan* practice.”<sup>17</sup> Practitioners should always keep “don't know” mind whenever they are engaged in *gongan* practice.

The Ten Gates approach has been widely criticized for lacking in identity because such a step-by-step *gongan* practice is quite different from contemporary Korean Seon's single *gongan* practice, which is considered in itself to bring the student to full awakening, and because it is alleged to be a heavy adaptation of the Japanese Rinzai Zen in thought and praxis (Joo 2011, 1; Low 2010, 276; Choe 2013, 152–166). In addition, there has been criticism of Seung Sahn's unique lay teacher system and Dharma transmission procedure to lay people, both of which are unprecedented in the his-

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17. Wu Bong, “Only Keep ‘Don't Know’ Mind,” Kwan Um School of Zen, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.kwanumzen.org/1990/only-keep-dont-know-mind>.

tory of traditional Zen.

In discussing these kinds of criticisms I would like to suggest some matters to take into consideration in order that we can understand this modern Seon master more correctly. Matters to consider are the relation of Ten Gates to the single *gongan* practice, and to the Rinzai *koan* study.

First, as regards the relation of Ten Gates to the single *gongan* practice of the contemporary Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, I assume they are fundamentally the same in terms of their purpose, though differing in method. Taking a step-by-step approach, the technique of Ten Gates directs students to a single goal, i.e., “don't know” mind, which is parallel to the enlightened state of mind that can be reached through the intensive *hwadu* doubt of the single *gongan* practice.

Second, Ten Gates and the Rinzai *koan* curriculum, as has been asserted, resemble each other in some points: the step-by-step *gongan* study, *gongan* interviews, and common *gongans* (Choe 2013, 155–159). Granted, there are such apparent similarities, but I nevertheless assume we need to examine the relation between the two methods more closely so that we can get nearer to and illuminate the truth. Therefore, I would like to put forward my view on this matter in the following respects.

First, the form and content of Ten Gates are much simpler and less formalized. In comparison, the Rinzai *koan* curriculum, which consists of hundreds of *koans* from several *koan* collections, starts from the beginner level, in which either of the two breakthrough *koans*—namely, “Mu” and “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”—is presented; after passing this, students move on to a higher level to study other *koans* from *The Gateless Gate*, *The Blue Cliff Record*, and others (Hori 2003, 17).

According to Seung Sahn, the simplified style of Ten Gates is appropriate for the modern world. As the Ten Gates “represent the major teaching points or ‘styles’ touched on by all the major *gongan* collections” (Seung Sahn 1997, 355), passing each Gate is equivalent to passing a corresponding level of *gongan* practice covered by all of the major collections. Accordingly, if you pass the Ten Gates, you understand the nature of all *gongan* practice (Seung Sahn 1997, 355). As a corollary, the *gongan* practice in this lineage is directed toward “instantly perceive[ing] correct situation, correct rela-

tionship to that situation, and correct function in that situation” (Seung Sahn 1997, 357). And if all three points instantly and intuitively become one, one can save all beings (Seung Sahn 1997, 357).

Secondly, I consider it neither convincing nor meaningful to posit the similarity of the techniques on the basis of their common selection of *koans* (Choe 2013). Ten Gates consists of a set of *gongans*, that is, stories drawn from classical texts or from the teaching records of Chinese Chan masters. Hence, a particular set of *gongans* is not restricted to any particular Zen sect, but can appear in the various *koan* collections of any Zen sect. The Kwan Um School’s formal *gongan* anthology, *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*, is a collection of traditional *gongans* on the basis of old cases, as are the other major collections *The Gateless Gate*, *The Blue Cliff Record*, and *The Record of Equanimity*.

Third, the techniques are dissimilar in purpose. Ten Gates is specially tailored to direct students to perceive their situation correctly, and thus to help others, but not to attain enlightenment as is the case in the Rinzai curriculum. Since the *gongan* practice in SSS pursues “how to connect don’t-know mind with everyday life,” it does not matter whether *gongan* answers are correct or not, provided that everyday life is lived clearly and correctly from moment to moment (Seung Sahn 1997, 356). This is a quite different viewpoint on *gongan* practice than those of other Zen traditions, including Japanese-derived ones.

Fourth, Seung Sahn was critical about Rinzai *koan* study. Seung Sahn’s criticism toward the traditional *gongan* approach is clearly expressed in an interview, in which he states that “In some zendos, *gongan* practice is made into an overly special experience. It is very hard to connect this kind of practice with actual everyday-life situations. The students are taught to only follow this *Mu gongan* very strongly, in a very strange manner. Every day, every action, they just make ‘Muuuuuuuuuu!’ But how does *Mu* connect your before-thinking mind with everyday life in a complicated world? This teaching point is seldom made clear.”<sup>18</sup>

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18. Wu Bong, “Only Keep ‘Don’t Know’ Mind,” Kwan Um School of Zen, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.kwanumzen.org/1990/only-keep-dont-know-mind>.

As a non-traditional, Western-friendly approach to *gongan* practice, the Ten Gates approach can be deemed a fresh interpretation. In a fundamental sense, however, the question arises as to whether we can engage in compassionate activities without attaining enlightenment. In other words, is it possible for us to be free from egoism without undergoing a real transformation in character? It remains to be seen whether the emphasis of SSS on the function of enlightenment, rather than on enlightenment per se, will be sustainable in the Western context. In this regard, I suppose SSS is susceptible to a criticism that it caters to secularized Westerners who are eager to bring Zen into their daily lives, rather than engage in a rigorous discipline to attain enlightenment.<sup>19</sup>

Besides its distinctive *gongan* system, SSS also includes 108 prostrations and chanting as well as sitting meditations. Even though Seung Sahn advises each technique should be used correctly to find the true nature of things, and warns against developing an attachment to any one practice method (Seung Sahn 1997, 245); I wonder if some techniques, including prostration, which a majority of the Zen centers have already abandoned, will be able to survive the American public's aversion to it as a seemingly dispensable remnant of Asian culture.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Everyday-life Zen spread actively in America in the 1990s as an attempt to bring Zen insight into daily activities. At that time, Zen centers in America barely escaped extinction, surviving a series of sexual scandals in which Zen masters had been involved. As a result, the image of Zen masters as living embodiments of perfect enlightenment was seriously damaged. Disillusioned Zen practitioners turned their attention from pursuing enlightenment to applying Zen insight to aspects of daily life. As a result, Zen masters came to be considered as mere instructors, guiding their students within the confines of realistic, secular, and institutional rules. Also, the goal of Zen practice was drastically changed from enlightenment to happiness in everyday life; as a result, Zen masters' authority was not recognized any longer. However, more fundamentally, these changes can be attributed to Westerners' practical tendencies. Though Americans almost uncritically accepted Zen Buddhism at the outset, as Westerners themselves gradually replaced Asian teachers, they hastened to adapt Zen to American culture, especially to their secularized everyday life. See Jang (2013, 189–194).

20. One author explains the reluctance of some new students to practice bowing: "Some beginners have strong aversion to some ritual forms, like bowing. . . . A common sentiment is, 'I'll sit but I won't do that other hocus-pocus.' The problem is that there is

## Systems of Hierarchy and Authorization

There is a hierarchy in the teaching system of SSS. Teachers in the hierarchy are classified into four groups, all having reached different degrees of mastery and understanding. The titles and qualifications of each teaching group are as follows (Ford 2006, 102–107):

1. Dharma Teacher: An individual who has taken the Ten Precepts, completed a minimum of four years of training and a minimum of eight weekend retreats, understood basic Zen teachings, and has been confirmed by a Zen master to receive the title.
2. Senior Dharma Teacher: A Dharma teacher who, after a minimum of five years, has been confirmed by a Zen master and has taken the Sixteen Precepts.
3. *Ji Do Poep Sa Nim* (JDPSN), or Dharma Master: An authorized individual who has completed *gongan* training (having received *in-ga* 印可), and is capable of leading a retreat.
4. *Soen Sa Nim*, or Zen Master: A JDPSN who has received full Dharma transmission (*jeonbeop* 傳法), master to master.

As can be seen, the last two types of teachers (JDPSN and Zen master) are authorized ones.<sup>21</sup> There are 17 Zen masters and 26 JDPSNs registered at the Kwan Um School of Zen website, many of whom are lay people. Among them, 14 Zen masters (eight men, six women) and 23 JDPSNs are currently teaching. Seung Sahn explained the certification process of these higher-level teachers thus:

At [a JDPSN certification] ceremony, anybody can ask any kind of question, and if the candidate answers with no hindrance then he or she can

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strong social pressure (however subtle) in the zendo to conform closely to ritual prescriptions. Refusal to do the offensive ritual is noticed and makes the beginner uncomfortable, whereas doing it brings frustration and what Goffman calls mortification” (Preston 1988, 113).

21. For detailed information on the teachers of the Kwan Um School of Zen, see the school website <http://www.kwanumzen.org/teachers-and-teaching/teacher-index>.



become a JDPSN. After three years, each JDPSN is tested again by doing Dharma combat with Zen Masters both outside and inside our school. Three years after they successfully complete this Dharma combat, I check their teaching again. At that time, if their teaching is clear, their mind is clear, and their actions are clear, then transmission is no problem. Meditation and wisdom have come together; their practice is now ripe.<sup>22</sup>

As described above, the candidates for higher-level teachers are required to receive authorization by a designated group as well as by the *Soen Sa Nim* in the school. As for the respective roles of the *in-ga*, or transmission, recipients, Judith Roitman, the school's latest Zen master appointee, stated in an interview:

When you have *in-ga*, you are teaching independently within the school: leading retreats, giving *gongan* interviews, the whole ball of wax. People with *in-ga* can help decide who else will get *in-ga*, but they can't decide who will get transmission. When you get transmission you can help decide that too.<sup>23</sup>

As explained by the sources cited above, both the hierarchy of teachers and the authorizing system of SSS are among its non-traditional innovations. Let us explore the hierarchy first, and then the authorization system.

First of all, as for the hierarchy between teachers, this kind of hierarchical order is unique and unprecedented in that each teacher group is open to anyone, if qualified, whether lay or ordained, and whether male or female. As far as I know, there is no parallel to this system within the tradition of Korean Seon, where there have been almost no lay teachers or lay Seon masters, nor hierarchical orders based on individual capacity or achievement. Of course, there is division in Korean Seon as well, but this is on the basis of each monk's office, which is assigned during a three-month

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22. "Transmission to the West: An interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn," *Primary Point* 10.1 (Winter/Spring 1993): 3.

23. "Bon Hae Judith Roitman interview," *Sweeping Zen*, accessed August 13, 2013, <http://sweepingzen.com/bon-hae-judith-roitman-interview>.

retreat occurring twice a year. By the beginning of the retreat, the meditation precinct *seonwon* 禪院 has its own set of officers, who are charged with the meditative training of the monks. The following are major officers (Buswell 1992, 203–215):

1. *Seonsa* 禪師 (Seon Master): The spiritual and administrative head of the largest Korean monasteries.
2. *Yuna* 維那 (“Rector”; *karma-dāna* in Sanskrit): The nominal head of the meditation compound and second only to the Seon master in authority and respect.
3. *Ipseung* 立繩 (Succentor): A monk enforcing the schedule and regulations of the meditation hall. He strikes the *jukbi* 竹篋 (a warning stick) during the meditation periods, and checks that the duties of the meditation monks are performed.
4. *Cheongjung* 清衆 (Disciplinarian): The succentor’s second-in-command, literally “he who purifies the assembly.” He administers punishment to monks who have broken the rules of the meditation hall.

Except for such division of duties, Korean Seon has no hierarchy according to individual monks’ varying degrees of achievement. Today, Seon monks in Korean Buddhism are generally addressed by the titles *sujwa* 首座 (head seat) or *napja* 衲子 (patch-robe monk). I assume this kind of non-hierarchical title designation resulted from the tendency of Korean Seon to place a lot of weight on the attainment of enlightenment itself. This tendency in turn resulted in a single set of criteria for Seon practitioners: enlightened and unenlightened, with nothing in between.

More fundamentally, such a strict dichotomy can be attributed to the principle of “original enlightenment” on which Zen Buddhism is based. According to it, human beings are inherently enlightened on the ultimate level; nevertheless, they do not realize it because they are hindered by deluded thoughts on the phenomenal level. Based on this dichotomous concept, Seon practitioners exert themselves to realize ultimate, pure mind-nature by penetrating through phenomenal, unsubstantial delusions. And thus, if they reach ultimate reality through rigorous practice, they directly enter the stage of the Buddha; if not, they remain ordinary men

and women in the phenomenal world, however long they have practiced. Here, these ordinary men and women are non-hierarchical and of the same stage of being unenlightened.

From the perspective of Korean Seon, the hierarchy of teachers in SSS is unconventional. Above all, the hierarchy does not discriminate between lay and ordained, which is among the radical innovations unprecedented in traditional Asian Zen. As regards participation of lay people, Korean Seon has traditionally considered the monk community to be the sole representative, to the exclusion of lay people. However, in Western Zen centers, a lay-oriented tendency is the norm rather than the exception; this necessitates the emergence of lay-centered Zen practice in everyday life.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is safe to say that this hierarchy resulted from the transformation that Zen has undergone in the West.

Next, the authorizing system of SSS is unconventional in two regards. On the one hand, authorization is no longer the exclusive authority of a Zen master, but is largely checked and undertaken by a select group of people from within and outside of the school. This method of authorization is not found in Japanese Zen, nor is it practiced in other Zen traditions in America.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, authorization is divided into two

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24. In an interview titled "Wearing a Kasa, Carrying the World: Uncovering the mystery of form" with *Primary Point*, Seung Sahn said about everyday Zen: "Zen has come to the West and here lay people practice Zen, so this has changed the character of Zen. Now we teach Zen in everyday life. Sitting Zen all the time is not possible for lay people. Everyday life Zen means learning mind sitting. Mind sitting means the mind that is not moving. How do you keep not-moving mind? Put down your opinion, condition, and situation, moment to moment; when you are doing something, just do it. This is everyday Zen." Cited from the Kwan Um School of Zen, accessed August 18, 2013, <http://www.kwanumzen.org/?teaching=wearing-a-kasa-carrying-the-world>.

25. In the Rinzai Zen, *inka* (the Japanese pronunciation of *in-ga*) is equivalent to Dharma transmission, and is conferred on an individual who has finished the entire course of *koan* training and received the title *roshi*. In other schools, such as the Sanbo Kyodan, *inka* is approval that goes beyond Dharma transmission—granted to a master who is confirmed to be an enlightened successor of the Buddha. The Japanese Soto school also confers *inka shomei* 印可証明—meaning "the seal of approval to a realization of enlightenment"—upon students, and the student must undergo a *shiho* 嗣法 ceremony to receive Dharma transmission. See the following sources: Matthiessen (1998, 277), Sharf

separate phases: *in-ga* and transmission. In Korean Seon, however, the terms *in-ga* and *jeonbeop* (Dharma transmission) are basically synonymous—though the former can mean simply the informal, private recognition by a teacher of a student’s potential to finish his practice and ultimately gain enlightenment.<sup>26</sup> The latter, on the other hand, is the formal, public conferral of a master’s teachings to someone who has already received *in-ga*, and is thus the official recognition that the student has advanced sufficiently in his practice to teach others (Buswell 1992, 204).

I consider the participation of the practice community in the course of authorization to be significant to Zen in America. Now the practice community can take part in choosing their teachers by their own criteria. As Zen teachers are appointed by American people themselves, American Zen can develop its own way of Zen. I assume that this is the intention Seung Sahn had in mind when he stated, “As more [American] Zen Masters appear, their individual styles will emerge. Perhaps some of them will make their own schools. So maybe, slowly, this Korean style will disappear and be replaced by an American style or American styles. But the main line does not change.”<sup>27</sup>

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(1995, 433), Foulk (2000, 42), and Bodiford (1991, 423). In other Zen traditions in America, such as the lineage of Taizan Maezumi and also the Boundless Way Zen School, Dharma transmission comes first, and then, potentially, a rarer, final form of acknowledgment comes later—*inka shomei*. See Ford (2006, 102). At least within the lineage of Maezumi Roshi, one who receives Dharma transmission uses the title *sensei* and one who receives *inka shomei* receives the title of *roshi*. See “Robert Joshin Althouse Interview,” *Sweeping Zen*, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://sweepingzen.com/robert-joshin-althouse-interview-2>.

26. According to Bulhak Yeonguso (2005, 357–358), the *in-ga* approval is the last of the five stages in the practice of Korean Seon, the other four being *balsim* 發心 (arousing the bodhi mind/thought), *chamun* 參問 (“seeking instruction” or “coming for the teaching”), *chamgu* 參究 (trying to penetrate the *gongan*), and *gambyeon* 勘辨 (“judging a person’s capacity in Buddhist practice” or “examining and defining”). And the *in-ga* approval is not given until the student is confirmed by his/her teacher to have reached enlightenment after passing through the *hwadu* on the basis of the strict procedure of *gambyeon*. Thus, the recipient of *in-ga* approval is said to be able to understand his/her own enlightenment without a shadow of doubt.

27. See “Transmission to the West: An interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn,” *Primary Point* 10.1 (Winter/Spring 1993): 4. About the role of JDPSN, Seung Sahn also said:

## Conclusion

This article has examined the thought, practice, and authorizing system of SSS by analyzing its core devices, such as the “don’t know” mind, Ten Gates, and its systems of hierarchy and authorization, in relation to Korean Seon and its Japanese counterpart. As I have suggested above, “don’t know” mind is firmly grounded in Korean Seon; the Ten Gates approach is an innovation to help modern Westerners live a compassionate life on the basis of Zen insight; and the unprecedented hierarchy and authorization systems of SSS are intended to allow Westerners to establish their own traditions independent of Asian culture.

Seung Sahn’s contribution to the Western spiritual scene was his alternative interpretation and presentation of Zen during its formative period. Thus, based on the tradition of Asian Zen in the essential aspects, Seung Sahn’s Seon presented Zen to the West in an innovative way.

By way of conclusion, I have two suggestions for the Kwan Um School of Zen for greater sustainability. First, the school needs to establish a sound relationship with the Jogye Order. Maintaining a harmonious relationship with each other will be of mutual benefit for growth. An established rapport between these two groups, representing tradition and modernity, respectively, will enable them to complement each other and increase their synergy. Second, the innovative approaches of SSS need to be further refined, this time by Americans themselves, to secure their legitimacy. In doing so, SSS will be able to establish itself as an American Zen tradition.

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“Before, everybody was my student, but now the Ji Do Poep Sa Nims have their own students. Now the Ji Do Poep Sa Nims will decide the Kwan Um School of Zen’s direction; they understand American mind better than me. I taught only Korean style Buddhism; now the Ji Do Poep Sa Nims are teaching American style Buddhism, so that’s already changing.” For more detail, see “Wearing a Kasa, Carrying the World,” Kwan Um School of Zen, accessed August 18, 2013, <http://www.kwanumzen.org/1989/wearing-a-kasa-carrying-the-world>.

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