

What is wrong with this Zen Master's words?

Dear Ram,

I have a question about Zen. I don't know if it's kosher to ask one enlightened person about another's teachings but I do believe different words can penetrate an individual's mind with different degrees of clarity despite pointing to the same thing.

I've recently been reading a lot about Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn. He told his students correct practice was to "only don't know". [Here](#) is a dialogue which gives an idea of his method. This "don't know" is meaningful to me and means the same thing as the Ramana quote:

*"Do not meditate - be!
Do not think that you are - be!
Don't think about being - you are!"*

I have a doubt as to whether this "don't know" Zen can take me all the way, which Seung Sahn implied, so I sought your advice.

Hi Carl,

Here is a quote from the Zen guy. Let's analyze it.

"When you are thinking, your mind and my mind are different. When you cut off all thinking, then your mind and my mind are the same. If you keep "don't know" mind one hundred percent - don't know - at that time, your "don't know" mind, my "don't know" mind, everybody's "don't know" mind are the same. "Don't know" mind has already stopped thinking. Stopped thinking means no thinking. No thinking means empty mind. Empty mind means before thinking. Your before thinking is your substance. My before thinking is my substance (hits his chest). This stick's substance, universal substance, everything's substance, is the same substance.

So, when you keep "don't know" mind one hundred percent - don't know - at that time you are the universe, the universe is you. You and everything have become one. That is, as we say, primary point. So, "don't know" is not don't know, "don't know" is primary point. Primary point's name is "don't know." Some people say

primary point's name is mind, or Buddha, or God, or nature, or substance, or absolute, or energy, or holy, or consciousness, or everything. But true primary point has no name, no form, no speech, no word, because it is before thinking. Only when you keep a "don't know" mind one hundred percent - don't know - at that time you and everything have already become one. So I ask you, when you keep "don't know," at that time, are this stick and you the same or different?"

In this quote you see what he means by 'don't know.' He means to have an open mind so that self knowledge can happen. In fact he is giving the person self knowledge. He is telling him about the self...the 'primary point.' From the way he uses words I think he is enlightened. But the language is experimental and dualistic. He does not tell the person that he is the 'primary point.' He is giving indirect knowledge. It may be that he is doing this because the person has a very agitated worldly mind that is full of desire and doings and this is the only kind of knowledge that he will understand.

It may be that the Zen he is teaching is experience based. I think it is. The 'stop thinking' teaching is a typical experiential teaching. It is quite misleading and unskillful because the mind and the self, awareness, are not equal. The mind is a lower order of reality, a dependent order of reality, and you, the self, are not cancelled by the thoughts in your mind. You are and you think. There is no contradiction between thinking and being.

If you do not have a sophisticated means of knowledge like Vedanta, you have to teach in this way. If you read my writings on experience and knowledge and the means of knowledge, it should become clear to you. Have you read my book, How to Attain Enlightenment? I think it would help you to get the 'big picture.' It is very important to have a clear idea of the nature of reality, both real and apparent and an understanding of the spiritual path, its methods and the purpose of each method and the qualifications necessary for the practice of self inquiry.

The mind is never the problem. Even the enlightened people have minds. The problem is the mind's understanding or lack of it. The problem is that the self...the 'primary point'...identifies with the mind. So the fundamental problem is ignorance. And you need to have a means of knowledge like Vedanta to remove ignorance. You cannot simply tell a person what the problem is...although the method the teacher uses here is probably appropriate. You have to show them how to remove their ignorance.

If you look at the words for the self...the 'primary point'...you can see that they are unskillful. Yes, you can figure out by implication that there is something other than the mind. You can believe it.

Notice in that teaching that he also uses the word 'believe.' Belief is also helpful but without a proper means of self knowledge, you have to ask the student to believe. It is probably appropriate for this student. But if you have a skillful teaching you can show the student the 'primary point' directly.

Anyway, the words 'primary point' are experiential. They are based on two ideas...that time and space are real...and give the student the idea that the self is situated somewhere in time and space. 'Primary' means 'before' which implies time and 'point' means space. And he leave the student where he is, contemplating this 'point' that is not present.

The other problem with this language is that there is no sense that the 'primary point' is conscious. The self is consciousness and it is conscious. This is something that the student knows about himself. He knows that he is conscious. So there is an opportunity for the teacher to directly point to the nature of the self. If a teaching does not do this, the student can only conclude that he or she must do something to close the gap between the 'primary point' and his or her present existential position. If you use this kind of language you have to make it clear that the 'gap' is ignorance and that it can only be 'closed' by knowledge. If the teacher says, 'you are consciousness' and makes it clear what consciousness is, the student has direct access to his or her self. Simply by contemplating the meaning of the words, his or her mind will realize the self.

Now let's look at the quote:

"Do not meditate - be!
Do not think that you are - be!
Don't think about being - you are!"

These words have a certain degree of truth but they do not constitute a skillful teaching because they are addressed to a doer, although the third one is direct knowledge. You will be left with the notion that what you have to do is not to do, not to think. Enlightenment is freedom from the notion of doership. There is absolutely nothing unspiritual about thinking or meditating or any other activity.

These activities become unspiritual if you lack self knowledge. Being is not something you do. Yet this is how it is presented in these words. Being is something that you are. It is not in conflict with doing. So the person will try to not do, to not think, to not do spiritual practice when it is precisely spiritual practice that is needed, not for liberation, but for preparing the mind to grasp the meaning of the teachings. At best these are very blunt entry level teachings for unqualified people. They serve a certain purpose but they can easily mislead.

Anyway, you can see all the arguments for and against this kind of teaching in my book.

All the best,

Ram