

# Dropping Ashes on the Buddha

BY ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

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"Somebody comes into the Zen center with a lighted cigarette, walks up to the Buddha statue, blows smoke in its face and drops ashes on its lap. You are standing there. What can you do?"

This question, first posed to Zen Master Seung Sahn's American students almost thirty years ago, sparked an exchange that still reverberates timelessly and that has made *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* a classic guide for Zen students pursuing the true way. Like much of Zen literature, which encourages flashes of instinctive understanding of enlightenment by showing ancient Zen Masters in interaction with their students, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* is a record of a Zen Master's way with his students. What makes this book unique, however, is that Master Seung Sahn is very much alive, that his students are young Americans, and that the dialogues set down here took place in the United States. Thus, for the first time, the *kong-an* method may be seen applied within a thoroughly modern context.

Consisting of dialogues, formal Zen interviews, Dharma speeches, and letters using the Zen Master's actual words in spontaneous, living interaction with his students, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* is a fresh presentation of the Zen teaching method of "instant dialogue" between Master and student that, through the use of astonishment and paradox, leads to an understanding of ultimate reality.

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# **An Extract from “Dropping Ashes on the Buddha”**

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## **Does the Cat Have Buddha Nature?**

One evening, after a Dharma talk at the Cambridge Zen Center, a student pointed to Katz, the Zen Center cat, and said to Seung Sahn Soen-Sa, "You said before that this cat doesn't say it's a cat, that it has a don't-know mind. Is the cat enlightened? But if it is, why does Buddhism teach that only humans can attain enlightenment?"

Soen-sa said, "What is enlightenment?"

"I don't know."

"Enlightenment is not enlightenment. If someone says, 'I have attained enlightenment,' he is mistaken. Many students think 'I want enlightenment! I want enlightenment!' With this kind of thinking, they will never attain enlightenment.

"The cat doesn't think enlightenment or no-enlightenment

"The cat is just a cat. I ask you: Does the cat have Buddha-nature? If it has Buddha-nature, then it can attain enlightenment. If it has no Buddha-nature, then no enlightenment. "

"Hmmm... I don't know."

Soen-sa laughed and said, "Yah, don't know is good. Very good."

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