

Silly Mountain:

A New Commentary on the Maxims of Master Han Shan Deqing

By Daniel Scharpenburg

Introduction

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Han Shan Deqing (1546-1623) is an important figure from the history of Ch'an Buddhism who isn't well known. They called him Silly Mountain(not to be confused with the other monk named Han Shan, who they called Cold Mountain).

He lived in China and is regarded as a great reformer. He spent a lot of time just wandering from monastery to monastery giving teachings and helping spread the dharma. He was renowned as a great lecturer and commentator and he advocated practicing Ch'an and Pure Land practice side-by-side, which is pretty universal in modern Ch'an Buddhism today.

It has been suggested that he questioned the value of the system of Dharma Transmission, saying that real enlightenment is beyond such things as certificates and doing the right rituals. Even today, in the modern west, that's a scandalous thing to say. Throughout much of the Ch'an/Zen community Dharma Transmission is considered beyond questioning.

Han Shan wrote many commentaries, lectures, and poems. He was a great inspiration to Master Hsu Yun and as such he is revered in the lineages that are descended from him, but outside of those groups he's largely unknown in spite of his great accomplishments. I'm going to see if I can help spread some of his teachings. I've put together this collection of Han Shan's Maxims and I've written a commentary of most of them. This text is intended for a general audience and the maxims that appear in it without commentary are the ones that I think really lend themselves more to one-on-one conversation with a teacher.

I'll close with an example of a poem that Han Shan Deqing wrote. I think this a profound statement about our practice on the path and requires no commentary from me:

“When the bow's stiff, its string is first to snap;

The sharper a blade is, the easier to chip.

Trouble results from a talkative tongue,

Harmful deeds reflect a hardened heart.”

The Maxims of Master Han Shan

Translated by Richard Cheung, edited by MingZhen Shakya

with a new Commentary by Daniel Scharpenburg

1. When we preach the Dharma to those who see only the ego's illusory world, we preach in vain. We might as well preach to the dead.

As I walk the Bodhisattva path, I feel a sort of responsibility to share the teachings with anyone that wants them. I know I've had the experience where people express an interest but I think they're not really interested, so I'm reluctant to share the teachings with them. That's not the right attitude. As Buddhists we don't go out and try to win people over. Buddhism is not a path that advocates trying to convert people. However if people express interest, it's a good idea to share the teachings with them whenever possible.

That being said, that isn't what Han Shan is talking about here. This is a statement against evangelizing. Don't go out and chase after people who aren't interested in the Buddhist path. If people aren't interested, then we're preaching in vain, wasting our time, and probably making ourselves look bad. We can't decide who's interested in the path. We don't know unless they tell us.

How foolish are they who turn away from what is real and true and lasting and instead pursue the fleeting shapes of the physical world, shapes that are mere reflections in the ego's mirror. Not caring to peer beneath the surfaces, deluded beings are content to snatch at images. They think that the material world's ever-flowing energy can be modified into permanent forms, that they can name and value these forms, and then, like great lords, exert dominion over them.

Material things are like dead things and the ego cannot vivify them. As the great lord is by his very identity attached to his kingdom, the ego, when it attaches itself to material objects, presides over a realm of the dead. The Dharma is for the living. The permanent cannot abide in the ephemeral. True and lasting joy can't be found in the ego's world of changing illusion. No one can drink the water of a mirage.

A key Buddhist teaching is impermanence. Everything is fleeting. A lot has been made of the word 'Emptiness' in Buddhism. I don't think Emptiness means that there's nothing, I think it means there's nothing to hold onto. We put so much value on the things we want and also on the things we have already. The fact of the matter is that you can't take it with you. Not only that,

but also this: whatever your clinging to is probably not going to be around all that long. Things break, relationships end, money runs out, our physical bodies wear out, faster and faster as we get older.

All the things we are clinging to are illusory, in that they won't bring us lasting happiness. And often the things we try to own end up owning us, afflicting us with further obsession and clinging.

True refuge can't be found in material things.

So stop clinging so much. Hold on loosely.

2. There are also those who, claiming enlightenment, insist that they understand the non-substantial nature of reality. Boasting that the disease of materialism cannot infect them, they try to prove their immunity by carefully shunning all earthly enjoyments. But they too, are in the dark.

Going around saying you're enlightened is kind of like going around telling everyone how great or patriotic you are. If you have to say it, I'm not sure I can believe you. "I totally understand Emptiness" would be a weird thing to say too. I think we all struggle a bit with ideas like Emptiness. We should not to be boastful.

Don't tell people how Enlightened you are. It's better to show them anyway.

And there are those who want to prove how unattached they are. Giving up things is great. It shows great willpower and hard work to refrain from doing the harmful things that we enjoy. But, again, we need the right reasons for this. Giving up things as a way to show off isn't real renunciation.

And also, there's a part of the Buddha's story that's relevant here.

Siddhartha, after he left his father's palace, went on a spiritual journey. He was trying to find teachers to help him figure out the problems of human existence. He wanted to understand suffering and the way out of suffering. He studied with some teachers for a while and didn't really find what he was looking for. Then he found some guys who were essentially starving themselves to attain Enlightenment. They thought that the body is the problem and if we can just force the body to let go of all the things it needs, then the mind can do it's work and take us to Enlightenment. So these guys just walked around naked all the time, barely ate, and didn't sleep. They just denied themselves all comfort in life. Siddhartha tried this and it didn't work. It was only after he tried starving himself that he realized that the road to Enlightenment is a middle way, something in between indulging every desire and starving ourselves. It was only after this that he sat under the Bodhi tree and attained Enlightenment, becoming the Buddha.

So, maybe we don't need to shun all earthly enjoyments. Maybe if we try to do that we are just trying to show off. But, that being said, we can have a more mindful relationship to the things we enjoy.

3. Neither are they correct who dedicate themselves to exposing the fraud of every sensory object they encounter. True, perceptions of material objects give rise to wild desire in the

heart. True, once it is understood how essentially worthless such apparent objects are, wild desires are reduced to timid thoughts. But we may not limit our spiritual practice to the discipline of dispelling illusion. There is more to the Dharma than understanding the nature of reality.

Let's also not get so hung up on proving we understand the reality by attacking everything all the time. That can lead us down into a deep pessimism that doesn't help anyone. There is more to this practice than tearing down delusion. Delusions will come and go and our focus should be more about working on our own delusions than the delusions of the people around us. And also, there is more to the dharma than understanding, of course. Our practice should include cultivating wisdom and concentration, but also virtue. That third one is the one people sometimes forget. Virtue is not necessarily about living according to rules. We have plenty of rules in Buddhism. Living by rules is important, but more important, in this context, is the idea of living in harmony with others. We should strive to bring harmony to all of our relationships, whether personal or professional. If we set an example of virtue we can make the world a better place. Is it virtuous to attack things all the time? Even things that are bad? Maybe not. Promoting harmony is important. I don't really think of Buddhists as people on the attack. But in the climate of the world today it seems like people are often interested in tearing each other down and proving that ideas that they disagree with are wrong, often pointlessly.

4. What is the best way to sever our attachment to material things?

First, we need a good sharp sword, a sword of discrimination, one that cuts through appearance to expose the real. We begin by making a point of noticing how quickly we become dissatisfied with material things and how soon our sensory pleasures also fade into discontent. With persistent awareness we sharpen and hone this sword. Before long, we find that we seldom have to use it. We've cut down all old desires and new ones don't dare to bother us.

We are endlessly attached to things. We are also so often disappointed. The things we cling to don't last and also often don't even meet our expectations. We spend so much time wishing for things that we don't have...and the truth is that sometimes when we get everything we want, we still aren't fulfilled.

So, we are attached to material things.

What do we do?

The "sword of discrimination" is a common metaphor in Buddhism. There's a bodhisattva called Manjushri who is said to represent wisdom and he wields a flaming sword that cuts through ignorance. We can sort of understand this metaphor when we think of the way we might say someone has a sharp focus.

That's what we're talking about here. Focus, mindfulness, awareness. We want to train our minds so that our awareness is sharp like a good sword, not dull like a bad one. If our minds are

sharp, then we can cut through our ignorance and emotional baggage, we can cut away the things that don't serve us. Cut away your delusions so you can be in the world as what you really are.

5. True Dharma seekers who live in the world use their daily activity as a polishing tool. Outwardly they may appear to be very busy, like flint striking steel, making sparks everywhere. But inwardly they silently grow. For although they may be working very hard, they are working for the sake of the work and not for the profits it will bring them. Unattached to the results of their labor, they transcend the frenetic to reach the Way's essential tranquillity. Doesn't a rough and tumbling stream also sparkle like striking flints – while it polishes into smoothness every stone in its path?

There's an old zen saying that goes like this:

“Before Enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.

After Enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.”

That means that although we are on this profound spiritual path, we are also in the world. And our practice isn't limited to our time in a temple or on the cushion. The point of this practice is that we are supposed to take it out into the world. If our meditation practice just helps us be calm on the cushion and doesn't help us be calm in day-to-day life, then it's really not helping them that much.

Working for the sake of work makes me think of that famous quote by Harry Truman, which has often been imitated and paraphrased by others: “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.”

Just do your work.

The very last of the Lojong slogans says: “Don't expect applause.” I think that line is really relevant here. Don't do things to get rewards, don't do things to make people like you, don't even do things to make yourself feel good. Just be in the world doing good works. Whatever rewards you might want probably won't come in the way you expect them to anyway, because life often doesn't match our expectations.

And life is hard. It's a rough and tumbling stream. We're all broken and beaten down by life. It is always that way and always has been. We're all a little broken, but the broken part of ourselves is also the part that gives us the most opportunity to open our hearts and minds.

At the risk of putting too many quotes here, Ernest Hemingway said, “We're all broken. That's how the light gets in.”

I agree with that. It's the struggles of our lives that polish us. Our ability to weather the storms of life is important in shaping who we are.

6. In the ego's world of illusion, all things are in flux. But continuous change is constant chaos. When the ego sees itself as the center of so much swirling activity, it cannot experience cosmic harmony.

For example, what the ego considers to be a devastating hurricane is, as far as the universe is concerned, a perfectly natural event, a link in the endless chain of cause and effect. The universe, having no ego, continues its existence without rendering judgments about hurricanes or ocean breezes.

We think of ourselves as the center of the universe a lot of the time. This is how powerful our delusion is. We make enemies out of everything all the time because we have this idea that we are separate and also important. We sometimes build mountains out of sandcastles, seeing great importance in every little desire and every perceived wrong that's done to us. And we rail against change, lamenting the passage of time or denying it altogether. We go to great lengths to pretend life won't disappoint us. But it will. As my favorite fake Shakespeare (Fakespeare?) quote says, "Expectation is the root of all heartache."

We have to stop expecting things all the time.

But this is the message, really. The cosmic harmony that Han Shan is talking about is really important. It's just realizing one important thing. We don't come into the world. We come out of it. We can shift our minds just a little bit and realize that the world isn't something out there. It's us. We are part of our environment in countless ways. Thinking of the world as something "out there" doesn't always serve us very well.

It's because of our perceived separation that we feel things like jealousy and endless desire.

I like to quote the poet Rumi who said, "You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop."

If we can be present, fully present, then we can learn how to see things as they really are. We can see ourselves as part of a whole, fully awake, luminous and free.

That is cosmic harmony.

When we are empty of ego we, too, can carry on in calm acceptance of life's varying events. When we cease making prejudicial distinctions – gentle or harsh, beautiful or ugly, good or bad – a peaceful stillness will permeate our mind. If there is no ego, there is no agitation.

This is equanimity, an attitude that accepts the way things are with a calm and even mind. Equanimity is the attitude of regarding all beings as equals, regardless of their relationship to oneself. This sounds simple, but it's very difficult to cultivate. It involves trying to view all

things as equal, not being attached to our circumstances or to our desires. Letting things just be as they are.

A mind of equanimity is a mind without distinctions, a mind that doesn't chase after this or that. When your mind is in equanimity, whatever you do is the same as doing nothing at all. The Zen text "Faith in Mind" by Sengcan begins by addressing equanimity. It begins with the line:

"The Supreme Way is not difficult

If only you do not pick and choose.

Neither love nor hate,

And you will clearly understand."

It's about cultivating equanimity and practicing without a goal in mind.

The Supreme Way at the beginning refers to Enlightenment. The wisdom of the Buddha, the wisdom of Emptiness seems really hard for us to grasp. But the teachings tell us that Buddha nature is our true nature, that we have the awakened state already.

The second line tells us what stops us from realizing our awakened state. Picking and choosing. I want this, I don't want that. What I call the mind that says "I-Me-Mine" all the time. We often make our problems worse when we try to get out of them, especially when we pretend they don't exist.

The third and fourth lines tell us that if we can get away from this "I-Me-Mine" mentality, then Enlightenment is ours. It's said that if we stop thinking with this dualistic mind, then we can immediately awaken.

This relates to our sitting practice. When we sit, sometimes we don't want to. Sometimes we are distracted. We think about things we'd rather be doing. That's the mind of picking and choosing.

Putting great importance on likes and dislikes can tend to get in the way of our practice. If we can just let things happen and let the world unfold as it is, then we will be happier.

There's a saying that goes: "Put down the myriad thoughts. Take up the practice." The myriad thoughts are all those things that take us out of our practice. And we want to think about these other things. We want to be distracted.

That's what we're talking about here. When we are engaged in sitting practice, but our monkey minds take us all over the place, that's picking and choosing. Our minds are trying to choose anything but sitting still.

Sengcan's point is that just keeping in mind, "Avoid picking and choosing" can be helpful to us. I think Sengcan addressed equanimity really well and also it's meaningful that an important Zen text begins by talking about. Han Shan very likely knew and studied "Faith in Mind".

7. Our mind and body are by nature pure; but we sully them with sinful thoughts and deeds. In order to restore ourselves to our original purity, we need only to clean away the accumulated dirt. But how do we proceed with the cleansing process? Do we put a barrier between us and the occasions of our bad habits? Do we remove ourselves from the places of temptation? No. We cannot claim victory by avoiding the battle. The enemy is not our surroundings, it is in ourselves. We have to confront ourselves and try to understand our human weakness. We have to take an honest look at ourselves, at our relationships and our possessions, and ask what all our self-indulgence has gotten us. Has it brought us happiness? Surely not.

This is the concept of Buddha Nature. Our minds are pure. At our core we are good and awakened. Some people think of the spiritual path as gaining more and more awareness and awakening, finding more and more truth.

But that's not what this path is about. This path is about cutting away delusion to find the truth that's already there.

Han Shan is describing the Bodhisattva path here. He's saying we don't run away from our weaknesses and temptations. We don't want to hide from our delusion. Our neuroses and bad mental habits aren't things to hide from or get rid of. They are things to work with. Pretending we don't have weaknesses doesn't not work.

We're all a little broken and it's important to note that we don't have to be perfect. This isn't about perfection, but about trying our best. We can acknowledge our weaknesses and pay attention to them rather than judging ourselves harshly for having them.

If we are ruthlessly honest we'll have to admit that it was our own foolish egotism that soiled us. This admission is painful to make. Well, if we want to melt ice we have to apply heat. The hotter the fire, the quicker the ice melts. So it is with wisdom. The more intense our scrutiny, the quicker we will attain wisdom. When we grow large in wisdom we dwarf our old egotistical self. The contest is then over.

I like it when Han Shan suggests we should be ruthlessly honest. I think that's what Buddhism challenges us to do., to be really honest about our strengths and weaknesses, to face ourselves as we really are instead of being dishonest with ourselves. Buddhism for me is about becoming more and more real, meeting the world in a more authentic and honest and open way.

Giving into our temptations and delusions hasn't made us happy. For most of us, that's why we're on the path. These are really the things that have caused to struggle so much. Our idea of the way things should be is what stops us from appreciating the way things are. We are so often our own worst enemies.

But if we cultivate wisdom and awareness, we can manage these issues. We can make things better for ourselves.

8. There are times when we act with unshakable faith in the Dharma even though we don't understand the situation we're in. There are other times when we understand our situation but are afraid to be completely faithful.

In one instance, we have heart; and in the other we have mind. We must put these two together! Understanding and faith!

A note on the word faith.

I think we might be better served by words like "confidence" or "diligence." People sometimes attach cultural baggage to the word "faith"

Faith in this context means that we strive diligently. We don't give up. We don't practice just when it's easy and walk away from the path when we feel like it.

There are said to be three things that are essential to the Zen path, They are great faith, great doubt, and great determination. Great faith may not, at first, seem to fit in with those other two essentials.

Great faith means having faith in our mind's ability to recognize our Buddha Nature. This is clearly very different from what other religions usually mean when they suggest that we should have faith.

This faith is a grounded belief that our true nature is Enlightened, that we share the same basic essence as all things, that it's only our delusions that cause us to perceive separation. In the midst of our delusion we don't see our true minds.

What I mean by faith here is faith in yourself, holding on to the belief with confidence that your true nature is Enlightened, that you have Basic Goodness.

9. With one small fulcrum, a lever can move tons of weight. With one greedy thought, years of integrity can be corrupted. A greedy thought is the seed of fear and confusion. It will grow wildly. The material gain that a greedy act brings is a small gain indeed. To act without greed and lose some material benefit is also, therefore a small loss. But to lose one's integrity! That is an immense loss! The enlightened person stands in awe of the fulcrum.

This probably doesn't get talked about enough. We have to be really steadfast in our integrity. What seems like a minor mistake can come back to haunt us again and again and again. One mistake can lead to a tidal wave of consequences. I think that's what the Buddha and other teachers of his day were talking about when they talked about Karma. I don't think Karma is some mysterious force that causes your future lives to be impacted by your actions now, but rather the results of our actions now, the way everything we do can have monumental effects on our lives. We have to be very careful. Every little action and reaction matters.

10. What do people strive for? Money, or fame, or successful relationships, or the Dharma. Well, one man may become very rich but be hated by his family. Another man may be loved by everyone but not have a penny to his name. Still a third man may be hailed as a hero by his countrymen and then find himself with neither funds nor loving family. Usually, so much effort is put into achieving one goal, that the other goals cannot be attained. But what about the man who strives to attain the Dharma? If he succeeds he has gained in that one goal far more than the other three combined. He who has Dharma lacks nothing.

We spend a lot of time chasing after goals. We tell ourselves a lot of stories. "If I just have the right job, then I'll be happy." "If I just have the right partner, then I'll be happy." "If I have the right amount of respect, then I'll be happy." But does this work or are we just forever striving and never relaxing? Han Shan is comparing the way we strive for other worldly things to the way we strive on the spiritual path. We tend to think of so many goals as important and the spiritual journey sometimes takes a really distant back seat. But what we're talking about is important. We are trying to transcend suffering. Ultimately "things" will not make us content, so we need to make sure we're focusing on our practice too.

11. "Put a fish on land and he will remember the ocean until he dies. Put a bird in a cage, yet he will not forget the sky. Each remains homesick for his true home, the place where his nature has decreed that he should be.

Man is born in the state of innocence. His original nature is love and grace and purity. Yet he emigrates so casually without even a thought of his old home. Is this not sadder than the fishes and the birds?"

Our true nature is basically good. The core of our being is awakened. This is the opposite of the idea of "original sin" that so many of us were raised with.

What if we have original purity? What if the center of our being is good? What if the truth is that we are good enough?

We are, as he says, naturally in a state of love, grace, and purity. I know that's hard to believe sometimes. But what if it's true? What if our true nature is love and grace?

Many of us struggle to feel worthy in our lives. But you are worthy. We all are.

When the Buddha attained Enlightenment he looked up at the morning star in the sky and he said, "I and all beings have attained Enlightenment!" He didn't say, "I and all beings who try really hard..." or "I and all beings who have enough money to go on expensive retreats..."

All beings, no one gets left out.

That's so important. Awakening is the center of your being. Basic Goodness is your home. It's easy to forget, though.

We are consistently held back our emotional baggage, our neuroses, and our preconceptions. These things are delusions. You are the sky and all the things holding you back from realizing that are just the weather.

Enlightenment really consists of recognizing the Buddha nature that is within us already. You are that. There is no separation. And no one gets left out.

12. Those who pursue money are always rushed, always busy with urgent matters. Those who pursue the Dharma, go slow and easy. "Boring" you say? Maybe. Maybe it's downright dreary to stop and smell a flower or listen to a bird. Maybe a glint of gold is really more dazzling than the sight of one's Original Face. Maybe what we need is a better definition of "treasure".

Han Shan is talking about money.

Our jobs sure do own us sometimes. The accumulation of wealth is a big motivator in the modern world. That being said, this is problematic. We have to work. And the truth is that a lot of us are struggling to make ends meet and we have to work as much as we possibly can just to almost get by without falling into debt. The modern world is probably not something Han Shan could have imagined.

But this isn't about making enough money to get by. We have to meet our basic needs and that is just the way it is. This is about the obsession we might have with getting more and more. This isn't about needs, but about wants. I remember seeing a T-shirt many years ago that said, "He who dies with the most toys...still dies." And I think that's really relevant here. You can't take it with you. There's an old saying: "There are no pockets in burial shrouds." Again, you can't take it with you.

So, it's easy for Han Shan to say "Those who pursue the Dharma, go slow and easy." But often that doesn't seem to match reality for us in the modern world. That being said, though, I like what he says about stopping to take in the wondrous things around us.

There is tremendous wonder in our lives that we miss out on. The scent of a flower, the songs of birds, even just looking up at the sky can engage a sense of awe. We just have to learn to slow down. These things aren't boring if we learn to pay attention to them. The world is an amazing place full of wonder and we can be full of wonder too. It reminds me of the Lojong teachings

where the text says, “Be a child of illusion”
We can cultivate that childlike sense of wonder.

I’m going to close with the story of Ma-tsu and the treasure.

In the 8th century a student went to visit the great master Ma-tsu.

The master asked, “Why have you come here?”

And the student replied, “I seek enlightenment.”

The master said, “Why go out to see it and forget that you have the treasure already? I have nothing to give you.”

The student said, “But what is my treasure?” The master answered, “It contains everything and lacks nothing. There is nothing to seek outside of yourself.”

There are actually a few similar stories about Master Ma-tsu. I really like this one. The student has come asking for some kind of secret to be revealed, a key to Enlightenment.

Ma-tsu is telling him there is no secret. We all have the treasure inside and it’s our true nature. Enlightenment is not something to seek outside of ourselves.

That is the message.

You already have a priceless treasure. You’ve had it this whole time. Just pay attention to it.

And there’s another level to this. We seem to have lost our ability to relax in the modern era. We try hard to keep busy. But there’s something more significant than that. We also don’t want to be bored. Entertainment is so common these days that we’ve come to expect it. By entertainment I mean anything that’s designed to take you away from where you are. Maybe most people don’t think of their phones as entertainment, but that’s what they are. I struggle with that myself. I really don’t want to be waiting in line anywhere, so when I’m waiting in line I’m checking my phone. I’m either scrolling through Facebook or reading emails. I’m always doing this. Where did I get the idea that I should be entertained all the time? And I don’t think that’s rare. From what I can see by watching other people, that thing I do in line at the store is really really common. We should be willing to let ourselves be a little bored. This is advice I really need to take. Go for a walk alone without wearing headphones. Drive to work without the radio on. Just sit on the couch, not checking Facebook, not watching Netflix, no doing anything. Just BE. The truth is there are no ordinary moments. Even the moments that seem boring can be full of wonder. We’re just missing them. Let’s bring back boredom.

13. The heart’s weather should always be clear, always sunny and calm. The only time the weather could turn bad is when clouds of lust and attachment form. These always bring storms of worry and confusion.

This comes from the concept of Buddha Nature. The core of our being is wakefulness. Our natural state is full of love, kindness, and wisdom. We have an original goodness that is our true nature. We only aren't aware of this basic goodness because we have emotional baggage, attachments, and preconceptions that confuse us and lead us into worry and confusion. These things are like clouds in the sky. When they're very bad they are like storm clouds. But our true nature is the sky behind the clouds. Your basic goodness is the sky. Everything else is just the weather.

Having this understanding helps us a great deal. If we think our true nature is basically good and awake, then we don't beat ourselves up for struggling so much, and also the path doesn't seem so insurmountable. If we can believe our true nature is good, then being compassionate to everyone sure sounds a lot easier.

14. A single speck in the eye blurs good vision, we see double or triple images. A single dirty thought confounds a rational mind. Many errors in judgment can arise from it. Remove that speck and see clearly! Remove that dirty thought and think clearly!

After all those wonderful words about our basic goodness, Han Shan wants to remind us of something else. Negative actions and even negative thoughts always have consequences. So we always practice and we keep practicing. Even great masters like Han Shan have to keep practicing to keep the mind clear, so we can see that blue sky.

Seung Sahn said, "Try, try, try for 10,000 years."

That's not literal, of course, but it's meant to indicate that we must have unlimited diligence in the path. Things are going to get hard. There are going to be situations where we really don't want to practice, when we don't want to be mindful and compassionate. We have to do it anyway.

15. Great accomplishments are composed of minute details. Those who succeed in attaining the Whole have attended carefully to each tiny part. Those who fail have ignored or taken too lightly what they deemed to be insignificant. The enlightened person overlooks nothing.

We aren't practicing Buddhism only in some parts of our life. This is an important point. The journey to awakening is part of who we are. If we limit it to the cushion or to visits to the temple, then we are making a mistake. Everything we do is an opportunity to practice being more aware and more compassionate. The path is available at all times. So, if we're looking at some parts of our lives as insignificant or not related to our practice, we are making a mistake.

16. Why are certain material objects so treasured? A gem is virtually useless and a gilded scabbard is no better than a plain one.

Man decides that gold is valuable because it is rare and enduring and brilliant. He then thinks that if he possesses gold he, himself, will become rare or unique, that his individual worth will endure, and that he also will be considered a rather brilliant fellow. So obsessed he may

become with these foolish notions that in trying to obtain gold, he will destroy the very life he is trying to embellish.

In the darkness of delusion the unenlightened believe that they can glorify themselves by reflecting the qualities they have assigned to their possessions. Those who live the enlightened life readily discern that the qualities of an object are not transferred to its possessor. A heap of treasures piled in their path will not obstruct their vision. They can see right through them. Gold in the pocket is not gold in the character.

17. Look at people who keep tigers as pets. Even while they're laughing and playing with them, in the back of their minds they're afraid their pet will suddenly turn on them. They never forget how dangerous tigers are.

But what about people who lust after possessions, indulging themselves with one acquisition after another. They remain completely unaware of any danger.

Yet, the tiger can eat only a man's flesh. Greed can devour his soul.

Han Shan is telling us to think about the things that are important to us, the possessions that seem really meaningful. We can take some real time to think about the things we think of as valuable. There are many things that we might think are important only because it's what we've learned.

Is gold better than silver? Well, it's more expensive. Do we like gold because it's actually meaningful or is it a useless chunk of metal that people have always told us is important.

I once saw a t-shirt that said, "Diamonds: Because Money=Love". I think there's a lot to that and here's why: we're told diamonds are valuable because they're beautiful and rare. But if we think about it we know that fake diamonds are usually just as beautiful as real ones AND the rareness is artificial. The companies that sell you diamonds are making them scarce on purpose.

One more example from the world of capitalism. There was this guy who owned a vodka company. He was selling vodka and it was going kind of okay, but he wasn't having the success that he wanted. And he came up with a plan that worked. He tripled the price and was able to create the image that his vodka was better than the others because it was fancier and more expensive. There was nothing *better* about it. The only thing that set it apart was the price tag. It's called Grey Goose and lots of people buy it because it makes them feel important.

There so much delusion around material possessions. We try to own so many things. And sometimes we're consumed by our desires for more. And a lot of the time the things we own end up owning us. We can really wreck our lives trying to own all the best things. How many of us have gotten into trouble with debt because we're trying to consume so much? Getting more and more is what the modern world seems to be about much of the time.

This is a fundamental truth: when you are unaware of your surroundings, when your attention is fragmented and you aren't seeing your true nature, when you feel like you aren't good enough...it's really easy to sell you stuff. And everyone that's trying to sell you stuff knows this.

That is how the Buddhist path is tied to all of this. The delusions caused by greed and attachment to things affect us a lot more than we realize. We are so often consumed and destroyed by greed. Our practice can help us.

18. It is easier to do the right thing when we know what the right thing to do is. We can't rely on instinct to find the Way. We need guidance.

But once we're shown the path and begin to climb it, we find that with each step up we grow in wisdom and fortitude. Looking down we see how many of our old desires have fallen dead on the wayside. They look so feeble lying there that we wonder why we ever thought we lacked the courage to resist them.

The Mountain of Wisdom is different from other mountains. The higher we climb the stronger we grow.

There's some debate in modern Buddhism over whether you need a teacher and also how close your relationship to your teacher needs to be. I'm not going to enter that discussion here, except to say that there are some who say you should give your whole life to your teacher and that kind of devotion makes me uneasy. I'd rather have a spiritual friend than a guru.

Anyway, leaving all that aside...

We are lucky to live in the modern world. Buddhist teachings are everywhere. There was a time when people had to travel great treacherous distances to find any teachings at all. Now you can search on the internet or in your local library and find something to study.

The point is that Buddhism isn't something to make up as we go along. We shouldn't and more importantly, we don't have to. With the mass availability of sutras, lectures, commentaries, etc...we are standing on the shoulders of all the Buddhist teachers throughout history. We have more guidance today than anyone ever has.

And, the truth is, that the path does get easier as we go along. It reminds me of that old saying, "The first million dollars is the hardest". The first glimpse at transcendence, at your true nature, at a moment of just being here...is the hardest. And once we start putting down our baggage and stepping out of our delusion, it just gets easier to see other things we can put down.

There will be things that are hard to let go of, things that will be hard no matter what we do, but we start to gain clarity, we can see what our strongest delusions are. There is freedom just in seeing them. The first step is knowing you have a problem.

As long as we're continuing to practice...it's getting better all the time.

19. People are always looking for the easy way. The hard way – the way learned by difficult experience and painful realizations – doesn't interest them. They want a short-cut. True Dharma seekers are afraid of short-cuts. They know better. They know that without effort, there's no sense of accomplishment. It's that sense that keeps them going.

People who don't appreciate the struggles of climbing lack understanding of where they've been, awareness of who they are, and determination to continue climbing. That's why they never attain the Dharma.

Once in a while I see someone say “You probably have to practice for X amount of time to become a dharma teacher.” And there are always those that argue, people that say things like “Why should it be so hard? Why should it takes years instead of a weekend? Why should it require one long retreat (or several)?”

People want it to be easy and also to not take very long. I don't know why, and I wonder if other religions have this kind of debate.

That being said, that's not really what Han Shan is talking about here. He's not talking about the journey to become a Dharma teacher. He's talking about the journey to Enlightenment. (although to some that's the same thing).

This path is difficult and there are no shortcuts.

You have to face your personal shit and be really truly honest with yourself. There are no excuses on the Buddhist path.

So often we lie to ourselves about our own shortcomings. Buddhism requires you to face yourself, to recognize your place in the world and to test your limits with things like patience and concentration. We are working to transform ourselves, to become more aware, mindful, and kind. Transformation never comes easily. And there will be constant struggles. Our attachment to our selfishness and our baggage is very strong. And it's hard. There are things we realize about ourselves that are very painful. We have to face everything and there's nothing that we can hide from.

We can only try our best. But pretending it's going to be easy doesn't help anyone.

20. What are the two most common goals for people who live in the world? Wealth and fame. To gain these goals people are willing to lose everything, including the health of their body, mind and spirit. Not a very good exchange, is it? Worldly wealth and fame fade so quickly that we wonder which will last longer, the money, the fame or the man.

But consider the goal of enlightenment, of attaining the wealth of the Dharma. Those who reach this goal are vigorous in body, keen in mind, and serene in spirit...right into eternity.

The message is that wealth and fame won't make you happy. We sacrifice too much in trying to acquire wealth, in trying to have the biggest house or the nicest car. And people sacrifice so much integrity for wealth sometimes too. There are plenty of real life examples of this, but I'd like to resort to using examples from movies.

Pretty Woman and Iron Man. These are two very popular films where the main character starts out as someone who is doing something that's morally ambiguous in the name of wealth. And in both films the character's journey leads them to some level of understanding, they learn the error of their ways. Richard Gere decides to stop raiding and destroying other people's businesses and Robert Downey Jr decides to stop making weapons. And they're both better off when they move toward what we call Right Livelihood.

Giving in to corruption, accumulating wealth on the backs of the bruised, these things can wear you down. And it's all like a sandcastle anyway. As we know, as we've said before, you can't take it with you.

The Bodhisattva path, though difficult, really lifts you up. We can transform our greed into generosity, our aversion into kindness, and our delusion into clarity.

Now, it might seem like Han Shan is implying that we have to be poor. I don't think that's the case. I think what he's saying is this: making money isn't the problem. The problem is being obsessed with money. In the modern world it's easy to become obsessed with accumulating wealth. The same must have been true in Han Shan's time.

Money is important. It's the only way we can survive. But we have to remember it's not everything.

21. There are people who, though having accomplished nothing, connive to receive great honors or high positions of authority. Well, people who gain high rank without having earned it are like rootless trees. They live in fear that even the slightest wind will topple them. Undeserved honor is a preface to disgrace.

We are being warned here about the danger of egotism. It is especially dangerous to us if we start getting rewards or respect that we haven't earned. I'm imagining someone who was born into incredible wealth and acts like they've earned it. Don't look for easy ways to gain respect and admiration. Just do your part to work toward awakening.

22. The rich are admired because they've saved money. But what's been saved can be spent. The admiration goes with the money. A king receives loyalty because his

people regard him as noble. If they decide he's acting badly, he may lose more than his throne. Those who are rich in the Dharma and noble in the Buddha's Way always retain – their wealth and the fealty of the people.

Anything we have can be taken away. It's so easy to lose things and we need to keep that in mind as we're always chasing after things, especially reputation. Anything you have can be taken very suddenly at any time.

23. By successfully concealing his crimes a person can't consider himself honorable. He knows he's done wrong. By constantly bragging a person can't claim to be famous even though he does hear his name mentioned everywhere he goes. By affecting the manners of holy men monks may receive veneration, but a pious demeanor never made anyone a saint. What are true honor, true recognition and true piety? They are internal qualities, not superficial acts or appearances. When a man's conscience is free from stain, he is honorable. When his reputation for integrity precedes him, he is famous. When humility and reverence for the Dharma flow naturally out of his character, he is esteemed.

Famous Zen teachers are a big thing today. Some people seem to have this attitude, "Do you know who my teacher is?" I think that can be harmful. Don't worry about being famous or successful. Just be humble and good. Everything will take care of itself. If we chase after fame or respect, we're never going to get it. So just be humble and reverent and see what happens.

24. If men can't evade the demands of their father and emperor, what can they do when Death gives them an order? They protest bitterly and scream at heaven, but they've got to obey. The man who howls the loudest is the one who thinks he's just reached the pinnacle of worldly success. The enlightened understand life and death. They always live well and never complain.

There's no escaping death. Life is not permanent. It doesn't matter how powerful we are, or how much wealth we accumulate. We can face the reality of growing older and changing with fear and anxiety, or we can try to take it in stride and accept the reality of things. With acceptance comes contentment.

25. People think that if they possess worldly knowledge they know everything. But that's not correct. Even when subjects are mastered there's always room for error. And if the finest archers can miss their targets occasionally, what about the mediocre ones? When we know the Dharma, we have all the information we need. No matter what the other facts we acquire additionally, our storehouse of knowledge, though very deep and wide, is already full.

Don't think you know everything all the time. You don't. I see this a lot in the world today. Everyone is an expert at everything when they start arguing on the internet. And, in fact, "I don't know." Is taken as a big sign of weakness. The truth is, we almost always don't know. Master Seung Sahn referred to a state called "Don't-Know-Mind" which is where we accept that we don't have the answers to a lot of life's questions and we rest in that acceptance. Here's a zen story about knowledge:

A philosopher went to see a Zen master. The philosopher tried to impress the master by telling him how much he knew. He talked about the different branches of Buddhism and the nuances of the more complicated teachings. The master put out two cups and started pouring tea into a cup for his visitor. And he kept pouring when the cup was full, causing it to overflow and spill.

The philosopher said, "What are you doing?"

And the Master replied, "Your cup is so full already. I can't add to it."

This philosopher was convinced he knew everything. We should try not to be that way, even when we've been practicing for a long time, even when we feel like we have a lot of life figured out.

26. Everything in the universe is subject to change. There's only one exception: death always follows life. Isn't it strange that people haven't noticed this, that they conduct their lives as though they're going to live forever, that death is nothing to worry about? Of course if they really want to live as long as they obviously expect, they'd better pursue the Dharma. Life, death, and change itself are transcended in the Dharmakaya.

I think we know the reality of impermanence. Everything in our lives comes and goes..but too often we try to resist instead of accepting that. I'm thinking of people who go to great lengths to appear younger. Age exists as a constant reminder of the impermanent nature of all things. Sometimes we have to tell young people about impermanence but we never have to tell old people. They already know.

In Buddhism we talk about what's called the Three marks of existence. It's said that when the Buddha was sitting under a tree and he attained enlightenment he realized these three things that are fundamental to life.

They are: Suffering, Impermanence, and No Self.

Life is full of suffering. All things are impermanent. Deep down there is no you, just a collection of things.

Suffering and Impermanence are pretty obvious truths about our lives. No Self is a little bit trickier to understand.

That being said, although impermanence is obvious, we try to hide from it. This is what makes Buddhism unique. We can all see that life is fleeting. That is self evident. But, in other spiritual traditions it's usually posited that there is some permanent thing at our core, a soul or a spirit. The Buddha dispensed with this and said, "No. It's all impermanent." He said that even the gods (who he may or may not have believed in) were ultimately impermanent too, though their lives were much longer than yours or mine.

So, Han Shan is telling us that life is impermanent and we need to really seize the day. The fact is that although our lives are short in the scheme of things, we can get more out of life. This spiritual practice isn't about living forever. It's not even about living longer. It's about living

more fully. It's about paying attention to the things we want to pay attention to. It's about re-adjusting our focus so we are engaging our lives instead of just reacting to things all the time.

Dharmakaya is a word that's difficult to translate, so I am going to just leave it and say that we transcend these things, life, death, and change, by cultivating a more awakened way to engage the world. It's not that those things go away, they don't. But if we learn how to live, really live, then death doesn't have so much power over us.

27. I glean what the harvesters have overlooked or rejected. So why are their baskets empty while mine is bursting with so much good food? They didn't recognize their Buddha Nature when they saw it.

Everything in life depends on the choices we make.

Our true nature is always there, beneath the surface. The concept of Buddha nature is the idea that we have awakening at our core. Your true self is enlightened and luminous and free. It's only obscured by delusion, that's why you don't feel enlightened all the time.

Here's a story:

In ancient times there was a place that they called The Temple of the Golden Buddha. This temple had a giant Buddha statue that was made out of gold. People from all over came to this temple to see the statue.

One day, the country was being invaded. Invaders were attacking neighboring villages and robbing the temples and news came that they were headed for the Temple of the Golden Buddha. The monks were very worried. They said, "What will we do? They're going to smash our golden Buddha!" And to them, smashing the golden Buddha would be sacrilege, a horrible crime.

A young novice monk had an idea. He said they should gather mud and rocks and cover the Buddha, disguising it as an ugly stone statue. They thought it was worth a try, so all the monks in the temple went out gathering mud and rocks. They covered the statue completely, so none of the gold could be seen. They finished just in time.

The invaders came to the temple and saw nothing of value. There was nothing for them to steal. They walked right by the disguised statue. They didn't even notice it. The invaders left and the monks were relieved. But they knew they had to leave the statue covered in case the invaders returned.

Years and years went by. Generations of monks came and went. A time came when no one remembered the true nature of the statue. When the temple was no longer in danger, no one was left to remember that the statue was gold underneath.

One day, a monk was meditating by the statue and noticed a glint. He pulled and some of the dirt and rocks and saw the gold underneath. He ran and grabbed all the other monks. They uncovered the statue and looked on it with wonder.

So, the point of this story is that the statue was gold underneath, but it was obscured by dirt and rocks. In the same way, our true nature is good and pure, but it's obscured by delusion. Enlightenment isn't something we're trying to get to, we're just trying to uncover it. It's there beneath our delusion.

Sometimes spiritual practice is called "recollection". This is because we're trying to remember who we really are, to re-awaken our Buddha Nature.

28. In polite society everybody notices if a man's hands are dirty. He'll be stared at contemptuously. Why, the fellow will be wretched until he can wash his hands.

But isn't it funny how a man can have character that's defiled by greed and hate and nobody will pay the slightest attention? He'll move about in perfect ease. Evidently, a dirty character isn't worthy of notice as a dirty hand.

Don't judge a book by its cover? Is that really the message here?

Han Shan is talking about people in general, the way we tend to judge people. We may see someone with a strange appearance or an annoying habit and judgments come into our minds without us even knowing. Or, if not judgments, maybe expectations. We are filled with expectations based on what we see. Our minds are great at making up stories about what a person is like when we see them. We usually don't even know it's happening.

I'd also like to talk about dharma teachers here.

So, when we find dharma teachers, they may or may not look how we expect them to look. I'd argue that they probably won't look how we expect them to look. We have this strange way of putting teachers on pedestals these days, it seems. This may have been true in Han Shan's time too.

The message here is that someone can appear to be perfect when they aren't. Greed and hate are sometimes below the surface.

The truth is that if a teacher seems a little too perfect, that makes me uncomfortable. No one is perfect and teachers, in my view, should be completely open. I want a teacher who is real and authentic, not one who is constantly faking perfection.

A teacher who is trying to convince you they're perfect is probably trying to sell you something.

Bodhidharma, the teacher who is credited with bringing the zen tradition to China, famously had a weird appearance. They say he looked like a barbarian. In pictures and statues he's usually depicted as a scary looking guy with a giant beard and an angry look on his face. He's not what most people picture when they think of what a zen master looks like.

Bodhidharma was like the wretched fellow with dirty hands that Han Shan was talking about.

So, that old cliché applies. Don't judge a book by its cover.

29. If a man carries too many worldly burdens, his body will soon wear out. If he worries about too many worldly problems, his mind will soon collapse. To be so occupied with material things is a dangerous way to live, a foolish waste of energy. A man ought to simplify his needs and use his strength to attain spiritual goals. Nobody ever ruined his mind or body by exercising self-restraint.

We can simplify our lives. Han Shan isn't telling us we have to, this isn't a command. But he's telling us it's a good idea.

Ming Zhen Shakya said, "In its own quiet way simplicity does the most to ensure our success on the path."

I think that's right. Our lives are simple and we make them complicated. We don't need to spend a bunch of money on clothes or nice cars or the cool new gadget or whatever.

In Fight Club Brad Pitt said, "We buy things we don't need, to impress people we don't like."

Simplifying is good for our Zen practice and it's also good for our bank account.

We also benefit from freeing ourselves from the need to compete, to try to get the best things. Our value isn't in the things we own. So often we live in a state of competing with others in collecting material things or dressing ourselves up to create a big presentation.

It's all flash and no substance.

Also, how many things do we have that we can get rid of, things that serve no purpose? If you've ever had to move without any help, you really know how much junk we collect. The things we own end up owning us, and sometimes we need entire extra rooms for things we never even use.

Another way to simplify is to get rid of things, take stock of your possessions and see if anything is just taking up space.

Simplify your life. You'll be glad you did.

30. What, ultimately, is the difference between hardship and pleasure? A hardship is an obstacle and an obstacle is a challenge and a challenge is a way to use one's Dharma strength. What is more pleasurable than that?

People are always so afraid of hardship. They go through life trying to avoid the difficult and embrace the easy. For me, it's just the opposite. I don't discriminate at all between hardship and pleasure. Whether the path ahead of me is difficult or easy, I don't hesitate to follow it.

Just let life unfold. Don't worry about what good or bad things happen, just let the universe unfold. That's a really simple thing to say, but of course it's not easy.

This about equanimity, having an even mind regardless of circumstances. It's really hard and not something we will always succeed at, but it's something we are cultivating.

Here's a zen story about equanimity.

There was this Zen Master named Hakuin. who lived alone. He was well respected in the community. One day, a young woman became pregnant and claimed Hakuin was the father. After she had the baby, her parents delivered him to Hakuin and said, "You have to raise this child because you did this. Shame on you!"

Hakuin was unperturbed. He just said, "Is that so?" and accepted the child.

He took really good care of this child, raising him as his own. They bonded.

Years went by and the mother of this child felt bad for lying. She told her parents who the real father was. So, they went to Hakuin and said, "We're very sorry. We believed a lie about you. We will take the child back now, we will relieve you of this responsibility."

And again Hakuin was unperturbed. He just said, "Is that so?" and let them take the child back.

So, this story is telling us that in what should have been an emotional series of events, Hakuin kept an even mind. Even when they were taking away the child he had raised, who he had taken the time to bond with, he still just let it happen.

I'm sure I would have fallen apart in this series of events, but Hakuin was calm and collected. That's how we want to be. A lot of the time things are going to just happen. We worry so much about things we have no control over. We want to change the things we can and work toward happiness.

But in the case of things we can't change, it helps to just say, "Is that so?"

31. People indignantly condemn thieves to steal material goods. I worry about the kind of thief who steals souls. People act to protect their property. They build walls. They hang every thief they catch. What measures do they take to protect their minds from corruption and loss?

Han Shan is being a little clever here. He's making a comparison. The things that distract us from the path are like thieves. There are always things that are ready to steal your attention.

When I'm trying to be in the moment and focus, the past and future are both trying to steal my attention. When I'm sitting on the cushion all sorts of elaborate fantasies are trying to steal my attention. When I'm working, my phone is consistently stealing my attention. Even when I'm playing a game with my kids, some thoughts or memories or projections are trying to steal my attention.

We don't think of these things as stealing because there's not really a thief. We can't point to a guy in a black mask with a bag with dollar signs on it and say, "He stole from me!"

Han Shan is telling us the effect is the same, so we may as well try to handle it in the same way. We don't think of our attention as important, but it is. We have a limited amount of it, so it's important to learn how to focus our attention on the things we want to pay attention to. A lot of times the things that steal our attention end up being meaningless nonsense anyway.

We stop thieves by locking our doors at night. We can work on the things that steal our attention by training our minds. That's what he's talking about here. This is a big encouragement for our practice.

32. A man with good character is gentle, humble and free of material desires. A man with bad character is harsh, proud, and enslaved by greed. Gentleness indicates greater strength than harshness. Humility is more admirable than insolence. Freedom is always preferred to slavery. It's obvious. A man with good character has a better life.

The things to strive for are gentleness, humility, and contentment. These are the things that make a good person, and they are the things we should strive for. If we are harsh, proud, and greedy... we won't be happy. This is an important point. There's a quote attributed to the Buddha, "You will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger." I like that sentiment a lot (although the Buddha didn't say that). Making enemies out of everything all the time is harmful to us and our well-being.

33. There are material gains and spiritual gains. To gain the material objects of its desire, the mind searches the external world. When it seeks spiritual gains, it turns its attention to the heart.

A person ignores his heart becomes attached to the material world. The Dharma seeker looks inward and attends to his heart. That's where he wants to form attachments.

Sometimes it's hard to engage the spiritual path. Our journey encourages us to look within for what we're seeking, instead of looking out at the world around us. That's sharply at odds with what we're doing most of the time. Peace is not found in finding the right circumstances or the right things. It's found in our hearts. It's been with us all the time. We just have to tune into it.

34. You can't be comfortable if you've got splinters in your skin. Worse, if you don't get them out, the skin becomes infected. Infected skin becomes necrotic.

It's the same with the heart. You can't be comfortable if splinters of greed are stuck in it. And if you don't get them out, your heart becomes infected. What will you do if your spirit dies?

I'm thinking a little bigger than he is when he talks about splinters of greed because really there are all sorts of splinters. Have you ever had one person say an unkind word and it ruins your day? Or one annoying incident shatter your wellbeing for a really long time? These are like splinters. They get in us and irritate the hell out of us. It doesn't matter that they're small and insignificant, like a splinter. They're bothering us anyway. We've got to figure out how to get those splinters out.

35. A natural disaster, a so-called Act of God, doesn't discriminate between its victims. It damages everybody – rich and poor, good and bad. Whenever you have power over people, keep natural disasters in mind. Be godlike in your fairness.

We think of natural disaster as having an incredible ability to cause harm, and rightly so. Human beings think we are very powerful and in control a lot of the time. But once in a while a hurricane or tornado comes to remind us that nature is powerful too. And there is no discrimination. When a volcano erupted and destroyed Pompeii it didn't just attack the people who were unprepared or the poor people. It wreaked havoc all over the place. Likewise, in the modern world people fall into the paths of hurricanes and wildfires and their lives are ruined, or worse they are killed.

We aren't talking about natural disasters for no reason, or just to say, "Look how powerful nature is!"

There's a point to this. We think of how much harm can be caused by hurricanes. We don't always think of how much harm we can cause. We have to watch our actions carefully. That's what the cultivation of virtue is about, because we have an incredible ability to cause harm to both ourselves and others. Part of the reason we are training in mindfulness is because when we're mindful we are better at seeing potential consequences. It's often the case that actions that seem harmless at the time do untold harm, not just to others, but to ourselves as well.

The hope here is that recognizing the amount of harm we can cause will help us choose our actions more carefully.

36. The best way to convert other people to the Dharma Way, is to convert yourself to it first. Be an example for them to follow. One natural act flowing out of good character is more convincing than the most eloquent speech.

If you're living in the west, there's a good chance that in a lot of the circles that you move in, you are the only Buddhist. There is a good chance that people sometimes think of you as their one Buddhist friend, or the one Buddhist in the office, or something like that.

That means we have an opportunity to set an example. If the one Buddhist in the office is not very mindful and kind, that isn't a good thing. But if the one Buddhist in the office consistently shows seemingly limitless patience and kindness that is a very good thing. It may make people curious about trying out Buddhism for themselves or it may not, but we shouldn't be thinking about that. As Buddhists we aren't trying to convert anyone. The only reason people come to the path is because they see something that makes them interested. We can't convince anyone to try cultivating mindfulness and compassion. We can only manifest mindfulness and compassion ourselves and do our part to try to make the world a better place.

Even if we think someone we know could really really use some more mindful awareness in their lives...showing them will always mean more than telling them.

And I don't mean to say we should be fake, that we should feign gentleness and virtue. If we're doing the work, these things will show and that is a very important point. It's when we are slacking off, when we are not doing the work that we run into trouble.

One more thing about setting an example.

Several years ago I ran a Dharma School, kind of like a Sunday school for the children of Buddhist parents. It was rewarding and also very challenging, at times. Once in a while a parent would say something along the lines of, "I want my kid to meditate at home. How do I get them to do it?" Because they wanted their kids to be more mindful and focused, kinder and happier. These are good things to want for our kids. But when I was asked questions like this over and over I learned that the parents usually didn't meditate at home. They didn't do it but they wanted to convince their kids to do it.

So, again and again I had to tell people, "Parents who don't meditate have kids who don't meditate."

Be a light. Set an example.

37. It's easier to go from poverty to luxury than it is to go from luxury to poverty. Everybody knows that. Poverty is like being tossed around in troubled water. If a person is alert, he can find a way out. But luxury is like drifting gently in a river current. He'll fall asleep and won't wake up until he's in the ocean. Welcome hardship. Regard rain as so much morning dew. Be afraid of sunny days. It's hard to climb with the blazing sun on your back.

If you find your life has led you to a good situation that is great. Don't forget to appreciate what you have gained. If you stop appreciating, then it will be easy to fall apart when good things are lost.

38. Our Buddha Nature is always clear and bright. If we can't see because our eyes are darkly veiled with emotional dust. We can't clean dust with dust and we can't calm emotions with

emotions. So how do we remove that veil? We use Dharma wisdom. Enlightenment lifts the veil and illuminates our Buddha Face.

This is the concept of Buddha Nature again.

The idea is that we are Enlightened already. We have an intrinsic awareness of the oneness of things and at our core we have what's called Basic Goodness. This stands in opposition to ideas like Original Sin. We are awake already, the only problem is that we have delusions that keep us from seeing our true nature. I like to compare it to clouds that are blocking the sun. Our true nature is the sun and we just really need those clouds to move out of the way.

It's the poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion that stop us from seeing our true nature. Our path is about transcending those poisons. Enlightenment isn't something you gain or achieve. It's something that you come to understand you have already. That's why it's sometimes called Realization.

So, we are using the Buddhist path to clear away these things that are preventing us from seeing who we truly are. We are trying to part the clouds and see the sun.

39. The great quality of wisdom is that it always responds with precisely what's needed. Like a well-aimed, sharp pointed sword – it always hits the spot. When we grow in wisdom we understand and can control our mind.

A wise person is always kind and considerate. He always sees what's needed. He lets snow flakes fall on an overheated body. He provides cool water to slake a desperate thirst.

40. The easy path is always so appealing. So why do I prefer the hard way? On the easy path we take things for granted. We get lazy and bored. This is a formula for trouble and loss. When we go the hard way, we know we can't let our guard down for a moment. We have to stay alert to meet the challenges. Solving problems makes our mind keener and our character stronger. This is achievement! This is true gain!

I think everyone that sits down to meditate knows that the path isn't easy. Bodhisattvas are sometimes called "Spiritual Warriors" and there's a reason for this. This path is hard. We have to face reality. We have to tear down all the walls we've built to keep ourselves disconnected from others. We have to let go of all the lies we tell ourselves about who and what we are. We have to be authentic and willing to face the bad parts. We have to take off our armor and face the world with openness, honesty, and humility.

We live in a guarded state sometimes. We've all been kicked in the heart and that causes us to wrap our hearts in armor, to try to shield ourselves from the emotional vagaries of life.

What Han Shan is challenging us to do is to open our hearts, to dwell in the world with an openness toward all the people around us.

41. We all have a tendency to like those who listen to our advice and to dislike those who ignore it. We should guard ourselves against this tendency. If we allow our emotions to influence us, we're guilty of ignoring the Dharma's advice. Love and hate can infect consciousness and jeopardize our ability to perceive clearly, to see with unprejudiced eyes. In the darkness we may stumble. When we control our emotions, we preserve the light.

Do you ever have that situation where someone asks for advice?

They've got two options and it's really obvious to you what they should do. So, you tell them what you think...and they proceed to take the other option. And you're left thinking, "Why did they even ask me?"

That can be irritating. Especially if it's very obvious that they're making a mistake.

But, what Han Shan is telling us is important. I'm actually surprised he addressed this sort of thing. It's a source of really minor human conflict, but I suppose the point is that even little things matter.

Han Shan is telling us a simple thing. If someone doesn't listen to good advice, that's their problem. We can only do our best when people ask and being attached to the outcome doesn't serve us. Even if people ask for advice every day, they're going to do what they want. Unless it directly has an impact on us, it doesn't make a lot of sense to be attached to the outcome. If we are annoyed that someone isn't taking our advice that's really not our way of wanting what's best for them. It's our ego getting involved. It's "How could they possibly not listen to me?"

And that simply does not help anyone.

42. People crave sensory stimulation. They enjoy this kind of external excitement. But I consider such craving a form of suffering. Sensory stimulation feeds on itself, grows larger and larger, and develops an ever-increasing appetite. People will destroy themselves and others, too, in trying to satisfy it. Pleasure derived from Dharma wisdom is internal excitement. Happiness grows along with the capacity to enjoy it. When given a choice between enjoyments, enlightened people always choose the Dharma.

Han Shan is telling us an important thing about our cravings. A lot of times our cravings can't be satisfied. We can just consume more and more forever. This is especially apparent in things like the accumulation of wealth. No matter how much money they have, people seem to always want more.

It also applies addiction to sense pleasures. I'll use food as an example. A lot of us keep eating well after we aren't hungry anymore. Our desire is more important than our hunger.

There's another kind of pleasure, though. There is happiness in stillness, in setting our desires aside and just turning the light inward. The joy we get from our spiritual path might seem far removed from the joy we get from eating a big piece of cake or drinking a soda, but it's not as fleeting. If we can dwell in stillness on the cushion, that joy follows us into our daily life.

The Buddha described that joy as, "Like a shadow that never leaves."

43. Look, all worldly successes have their downside. The richer you become, the more pride you have. The higher your rank, the bossier you act. The greater your ambition, the more inconsiderate you are. Success in the Dharma works differently. The better you become, the better you become.

Our spiritual journey is unlike anything else we strive for. The better you become the better you become. Many things in life are like a double edged sword, with benefits and consequences, often in equal measure. The Dharma is not. There is no downside to being more aware, wise, and compassionate.

44. Waves roughen the sea and windmill turn because of the wind. Take away the wind and the sea becomes calm and the windmills come to rest. For every effect there is a cause.

The waves of desire for things in the material world churn our minds, keep up in a constant state of agitation, scrambling in all directions. What do you think could happen if we eliminate desire?

Our various struggles can really get us down sometimes. Life is hard and we need to do whatever we can to keep it together. We are like the sea. We have different forms of emotional baggage and neuroses that cause us all sorts of harm. We want things to be different, we want things we don't have, or we want things to not change when the truth is everything does. All of these things, our delusions and attachments, are the wind and we are the sea. This is a wonderful analogy for our practice and I like it a lot. We are trying to just settle down the sea. There are big waves sometimes and little waves other times. And sometimes the sea is very calm. People have described the aim of meditation practice in various ways over the years. I like the image of a calm sea. We are agitated by our desires. And we want to be calm instead.

45. The flow of a stream is sluggish if the source is shallow. A water-wheel won't turn in it. A tall building won't last if the foundation is shaky. Walls crack and soon the floors collapse. Depth and firmness are indispensable for good work and endurance. The saints knew this. That's why they rooted themselves deep in the Dharma. They became towers of goodness that nothing could topple. Their enlightenment was a beacon that guided and inspired others for generations. Don't be content to study the Dharma, to memorize its surface. Plunge into it. Go as deeply as you can.

This is about having diligence and depth in our practice. I want to talk about diligence now. It's something we're trying to cultivate on this path and I think people sometimes forget about it when they're thinking so hard about things like insight and compassion. Diligence involves continuing to persevere when the path is difficult. It includes right effort, enthusiasm, and the energy needed to overcome unwholesome thoughts and attitudes as well as the cultivation of positive virtues, study of Dharma and the choice of right actions.

Diligence requires eagerness and sharp interest in the path. It requires active bodily or mental strength to improve our personality for individual enlightenment and supreme Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. We need the energy of diligence to stay on the path.

When we are on the right path, we will be diligent in studying ourselves, in seeing the true reality, and in having the sustained energy needed to attain Buddhahood. Through diligence we can generate great compassion to help others and ourselves. To me, this is how we root ourselves deeply in the Dharma.

46. Limitless heaven and the huge earth are easily seen by the eye; but a tiny piece of lint can destroy that eye's vision. A heart filled with love can expand into the universe; but a single hateful thought can puncture that heart and let the love drain out. Never underestimate the power of small things. The saints always gave full consideration to the tiniest thoughts.

Our hearts are often closed because we've all been kicked in the heart in our lives. Most of us have been kicked in the heart many many times. But sometimes your heart can be closed even if you've just been hurt once. If we can act with an open heart, we can change the world. That's not to say it's easy. Of course it's not. It takes a lot of effort on our part to open our hearts and to keep them open.

47. Even though a hundred persons of great erudition predict failure, the wise person who has confidence in this own abilities will persevere and succeed. Even if these same hundred persons predict success, the person who has only knowledge and not the self confidence born of wisdom will fail. Book knowledge alone gives rise to doubts and doubts cause confusion. In such conditions, no self confidence can develop. But wisdom leads to trust and trust inspires insight and clear thinking. Dharma followers pursue the path of wisdom in order to eliminate doubt and put knowledge to good use.

This is not a path that involves blind faith. We aren't doing this because Han Shan said we should, or because the Buddha said we should. We're going down this path because we can test the teachings for ourselves and see what works. That's important and makes Buddhism unique among world religions. The Buddha said, "Try it for yourself."

48. Not too long ago, when a person fell into the gutter, he'd feel such same that he'd vow with his blood to mend his way and never fall again. Nowadays, when a person finds himself in the gutter he sends out invitations for others to come and join him. This is really sad, isn't it?

This is like that cliché, “Misery loves company.” While we may need someone to talk to when we’re struggling, we also want to make sure we aren’t burdening them.

49. The only thing we can be sure of is that we can’t be sure of anything. The only fact that doesn’t change is the fact that all things constantly change. The saints cultivated patience. No matter what situation they found themselves in, they calmly waited. They also understood that in matters of the heart it’s not the object alone that alters, but the subject, too, which proves fickle. Desire just might be the most changeable thing of all.

This is about the virtue of Great Doubt. The western philosopher Socrates said, “The only thing that I know is that I know nothing.” That’s what we’re talking about here. We can’t know what’s going to happen. We can try to plan for the future, but the truth is we don’t even know what’s going to happen in five minutes, let alone in five days or five years. Life has a way of messing up our plans. So we have to learn how to be comfortable with uncertainty. In Buddhism this is usually expressed in terms like “patience” and “forebearance”. I’m not sure if those words are great for what we’re talking about here, but they may be the best words we have. We’re talking about really managing our anxiety about the future and letting events unfold.

50. Cultivate the habit of going to sleep early. This is the best regimen for maintaining a strong and peaceful mind. People who stay up late need to show off and entertain their friends. Or else they’re bored and need excitement. Even if they sleep late, they’re still tired when they get up, still sluggish in body and mind. They can’t work or think well at all. People who follow the Dharma lead fuller, richer lives. They don’t need other people for support. Good habits are like muscles, the more they are exercised, the stronger they become.

We can call this, “Get plenty of sleep” instead of “Go to sleep early” if that’s what you would prefer. I think he’s right though. I know someone will probably think to themselves, “There are day people and night people.” But I don’t think that’s true. I think our bodies evolved to sleep at night and so sleeping at night is a good habit to get in for well-being. I wouldn’t say force yourself to go to bed if you’re not tired, but I’ve sometimes wondered, “Am I staying up late for no reason?”

51. All rivers, large or small, clear or muddy, flow into the ocean and the ocean responds by yielding vapors that become clouds which rain and fill the rivers. That is the cycle. The saints show love and respect to all people, rich or poor, good or bad. The people, seeing such exquisite fairness, respond venerating the saints and trying to emulate them. This, too, is a cycle. Regard the Dharma as a river regards the ocean, the source of its very nature and its endlessly renewing destiny. Regard the Dharma as saints regard the people, the object of love and the reward for loving.

52. If you treat other people as other, as separate, or as people different from yourself, you will not be inclined to be fair or merciful in your judgment of them. But if you treat other people as if they were just versions of yourself, you will understand their errors and appreciate their qualities. Are we not fortunate that this is the way Heaven regards earth.

If we can respond to others with love and kindness, then we are creating harmony. That is what this path is about. Be kind to others. It's what so many different spiritual paths say. I'll only quote Jesus once here. He said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's the same message. It isn't "Be nice to your neighbor," it isn't, "Show mercy." It's love them. Love them the same way that you love yourself. And just so we're clear... everyone is your neighbor. How much positivity can we bring into the world if we really love our neighbors? How much joy is there in treating others as though we aren't separate from them? Many of our problems come from lashing out at each other, or judging each other. What if we just love each other?

53. If one sees only superficial forms of matter and does not penetrate the true nature of visual reality, one is spiritually blind.

If one hears only temporary function of noise and does not penetrate to the true nature of auditory reality, one is spiritually deaf.

Forms and sounds are only illusions. We use vision and hearing to determine their essence to understand the true nature of reality.

54. The unstoppable stream of the ego's conscious thoughts cannot stay still long enough to comprehend the truth. Yet people are always trying to think up a barrier to the flow, to use thoughts to stop thinking. Thoughts are like wildcats. We would never use one wildcat to tame another.

How then do we enter the state of non-thought? We understand the non-substantial nature of both the one who thinks and the thought itself. We understand that in reality there is not even a single tiny thought of a thought, or a thinker either. When we bear witness to this reality, our own testimony liberates us from bondage of thoughts of having no thoughts.

This might be a little confusing. He's advocating a formless meditation practice here. Rather than other methods that might try to use thoughts to trick the mind into become still, formless practices just try to settle in to the stillness that's already present.

This is the practice of "just sitting" It involves sitting and being aware of what is going on in this moment. This is generally not a technique for beginners. It's where we just see where the mind goes and pay very close attention to it, rather than trying to influence it or take control. Why would this be hard? Because our goal is to just observe what the mind does, not let it take us somewhere. Our training in the other practices is what makes this practice possible. is often simply called Sitting Zen. This isn't limited to the cushion. It refers to of being rooted in whatever happens and practicing harmony in whatever we do.

55. The very nature of mind and body is clear and calm and possesses not a single thought. It is the ego that thinks just as it is the ego that thinks that it desires not to think. The ego causes problems it tries to solve. To be empty of ego is to hear the soundless sound, to see the invisible sight, to think the thoughtless thought.

You are not your thoughts. If we delve deeply into the question, "Who am I?" ultimately we may come to a place where we identify only with our thoughts. "I think therefore I am" but even our thoughts are ephemeral. They come and go, they change so quickly. Paying attention to them

gives us a lot of insight. Thoughts passing through our minds are doing just that, passing. Our nature is not the thoughts passing through our minds.

56. When one reaches the state of the thoughtless thought, one thinks that he is awakened to the Dharma. He thinks about his meditation experience and how it will change his thoughts about his environment. He thinks that it is absolutely wonderful that he has controlled his mind. It wouldn't be right to say that he has more to think about. Actually, he has less.

57. The clearer the body, the brighter one's Buddha Nature shines. In the beginning, we still need the body. It's like a lamp. The Buddha Nature is this flame. But we may still be conscious of shadows. As we progress we feel that the body is the universe itself and that our Buddha Self shines throughout it like the sun.

On the path we are getting better and better. When we come to engage our true self, we bring more and more authenticity into our being. As we keep practicing our Buddha Nature shines more brightly. Sometimes it shines in ways we don't notice, but it's always shining.

58. There is no beginning to what came before, and no end to what will come after. It is thought that interrupts the flow of time and calibrates it. It is thought that decides that night follows day, that death follows life, that some things are tiny while others are huge. What, to the universe, is big or large, bright or dark, future or past?

This is a little heavy. Time exists because of the way we perceive it. Well, that's not exactly right. Time exists in the way it does because of how we measure it. Because we are there to measure it, there are concepts like long and short that are assigned to it. And even these are ephemeral too. When we have the experience of time seeming to go by quickly or slowly, we learn just how delusional our view of the passage of time is. How many things in life are significant only because we measure them?

59. Acts are small; the Principle is great. Acts are various; the Principle is one. Those who live the Principle, who let its meaning flow through their very bloodstream, never act at variance with it. In whatever they do, they fulfill the Principle. Whether busy or at ease they are never deceitful, never manipulative. They have no hidden motives and need none.

The principle here is our true nature. It's called our Buddha Nature. It's sometimes called Basic Goodness. It's the idea that at our core we are Awake and Compassionate and Free. We just have delusions that are confusing us and obscuring the truth. If we can dwell in our true nature, then our actions will be in accord with kindness, wakefulness, and harmony. The path we're trying to walk is the path of spreading harmony everywhere, with everything we do.

60. Nothing in the world is gained without desire, without motivation. You can take the route of honesty and be sincere in the pursuit of your desire or you can take the route of deceit and get what you want under false pretenses. One way or the other, when you acquire the object of your desire you'll become attached to it – for at least as long as it takes you to desire

something else. But between the routes of sincerity and guile lies a path in which neither strategy is necessary. This is the route that leads to understanding worldly desires for what they are. On this route your motivations die in their tracks while you move straightforwardly on.

61. When you think of a thing, you impart existence to it. Objects which cause desire to arise disappear when the mind's eye closes to them. They blend into the scenery. It is the same with emotions. Hopes, fears, judgments of right and wrong, and feelings of pleasure or misery also vanish when the mind remains uninvolved in the worldly events that occasioned them. When uncluttered by worldly refuse, the empty mind can hold infinite space. Peace pervades its purity, heaven gleams, and the harmony of the spheres resonates throughout.

With our thoughts we create reality. We attach so much importance to things that aren't meaningful. And we're never truly satisfied, or when we are it's really only for short periods of time. That cliché, "the grass is always greener on the other side." Is true. If we run around chasing after contentment there will be no end to our running. The secret is in turning our minds away from the obsessions we have with having the right things..or even the right feelings. There is tremendous peace in accepting things as they are. That doesn't mean not working to change things. It just means working to change things in a way that's not obsessed about the outcome. It's about letting things unfold. That is being in harmony with the spheres.

62. The more people try to use willpower to obliterate a desire, the more they strengthen the desire. The additional force only serves to confuse them. They become obsessed with the problem. The more people talk about the Dharma without knowing what it is, the more they strengthen their ignorance. They grow in this ignorance and soon consider themselves towers of rectitude. They're like fish out of water who attempt to teach others to swim, or like caged birds who offer lessons in flying. If you want to conquer a desire, take off its mask and see it for what it is. Instantly, it becomes insignificant – not worth a second thought. If you want to discourse on the Dharma, let it become your natural habitat. Be at home in it. Familiarize yourself with human nature by recognizing your own errors and base desires. Instantly, you'll forgive others for their mistakes. Be humble and gentle in your love for humanity. That's the way to set an example for others to copy. Proud rigidity isn't rectitude. It's spiritual rigor mortis.

Don't beat yourself up for your struggles. We all struggle and if we start look down on ourselves, then we will have a problem. We overcome our delusions and bad habits by paying attention to them, by noticing all the ways they harm us. We aren't doing this because we're told that we're supposed to. We're doing it because we can see how much pain our attachments are causing to us and others and we know deep down that there has to be a better way. There is a better way. This is not, however, about pretending we're perfect. We all struggle and it's best to be honest about that. When we're honest with ourselves and with others about our struggles it's much easier to forgive them about theirs.

63. Those who are serious about the Dharma seek the insights of wisdom in everything they do. Whether busy or at rest, whether alone or in a crowd, in every situation they find themselves, they strive to remain consciously aware. Such

vigilance isn't easy. But once they get used to the practice, it becomes so natural an activity that nobody around them even suspects what they are achieving.

I had a friend once say to me that he really wants to make the world a better place, but he doesn't know how. He works in a technical field and he's got a big family to support, so he can't exactly walk away from that to go work for a charity or something. I told him that we can make a difference wherever we are. If we do our jobs well, if we make sure we are aware of the world around us, if we spread harmony and kindness to the people around us, then we are acting with wisdom. If we go around our workplace talking about how we hate our jobs and we're cranky all the time, then we are not acting with wisdom. Just be aware and spread harmony and you can make a difference in the lives of the people around you, even if they don't realize it.

64. If you subtract a single blade of grass from the universe, the universe can no longer be said to be all-inclusive. If you put one tiny thought of greed or lust into a pure mind, the mind can no longer claim to be undefiled. Be careful of small things. Their absence or presence can change everything.

Little things matter. Actually, there are no little things. Even the little things are big things. So we've got to be careful and train our minds well.

65. The mind expands, into the universe; the body shrinks to mouse-like size. To be enlightened is to appreciate the dynamics of the Dharma. When the mind soars into boundless space, the body remains confined to earthly habitats. It is usually found scurrying around in the dark.

66. What a waste of time and energy it is to strive to obtain material objects of desire. No lasting satisfaction can result from acquiring them since by their very acquisition they have ceased to be objects of desire. They are consumed like firewood and "burnt offerings". We spit out the ashes in our mouths and search for another tree to cut down. The saints strove for spiritual insights. They questioned the meaning of life. Achieving this insight, they gained the universe. There being nothing else left to desire, they lit no sacrificial fires.

67. Vast as the universe is, it fits inside the mind. Small as the body is, there is not enough in creation to satisfy it.

This was the great reform that the Buddha advocated. The religion of his day involved doing complicated rituals to placate gods and offerings and sacrifices. The Buddha cast all that aside. He rebelled against the religion of his day and said, "This isn't helping anyone." He taught that insight is within us, not in the sky or in a temple or complicated ritual. You can see the truth by looking within. The whole universe is inside you. As Han Shan says, it's vast but it fits in your mind.

68. Everything in the universe has One Nature. People who live in the Nature have all that they could possibly want. The enlightened possess. The unenlightened desire.

If we can see our true nature then we can be in harmony with the world around us. We can stop trying to make enemies out of everything all the time and we can stop grasping at things so much.

69. The person who considers himself superior to others constantly renders judgments and perceives differences. He rigidly deals in opposites: good or bad, right or wrong. If he follows his own standards of fairness, he'll have to reject at least half of creation. A person who follows the Dharma strives to unify himself with the rest of humanity. He doesn't discriminate and is indifferent to qualitative distinctions. He knows that Buddha Nature is the One, Indivisible Reality. A person who follows the Dharma strives to remain ever-conscious of his inclusion in that One.

Constantly putting things into categories doesn't make us happy. Not only that, but also those categories don't match reality very well. All the divisions we see in the world are ones we're creating with our minds. That said, that doesn't mean we're talking about getting rid of divisions completely. I don't want to cross a busy street when cars are coming. I'm making that division between cars coming and cars not coming. And I'm okay with that division. We're not talking about getting rid of divisions entirely so much as using them when they help and casting them aside when they don't. If I look at other people and think "they're not like me" that's usually not a helpful division to be making.

And Han Shan is telling us not to put ourselves above others. I think that's important too. There's a Zen vow that says, "I vow to neither praise myself nor belittle others." And I think that applies here. Humility is a very important virtue. Anyone that talks about how much better they are than other people is going to be caught in a trap of constantly trying to prove it. That's not good for anyone. And it's not true. We're all one, so we're all equal. Let's unify ourselves with the rest of humanity.

70. Mountains, rivers and the earth itself are parts of The One. The clear mind is transparent; all existence can be seen through it. The mind clouded by illusion of ego sees nothing but itself. Strive to realize that you are included in The One! Your body may dwell in the material world, but your mind will understand that there is nothing apart from itself that it can desire.

71. In the Dharma's perfect stillness, the heart perceives and understands everything. There are no words for the tongue to speak, no sound for the ear to hear, no sights for the eye to see. Those who live in the Dharma live in their hearts. It's strange that though their bodies may be decaying, their breath is always like a fragrant cool breeze. How wonderful it is to be near them!

We don't come into the world. We come out of it. We are intimately connected to the world around us and to other beings in countless ways. But we still lash out. We still try to make enemies out of everything all the time. We still ceaselessly want more than what life is giving us, to the point where we are being harmed. Everything is interconnected and dependent on everything else. In this way the entire universe is connected. The Buddha once described all things with the Indra's Net analogy. This teaching is part of the foundation of the Huayan School of Buddhism, one of the precursors to Zen. He described all things as reflective gems reflecting each other in a giant net that encompasses the entire universe. In this way, all of the gems bare the reflection of all of the other gems.

Indra's Net reminds me of a Mirror Maze I went to once in Branson. I was surrounded by mirrors. I could see myself in the mirror in front of me. But, because of the way the mirror walls and corridors were set up, I could also see myself in all of the other mirrors. My reflection was boundless and infinite. That is how the world is. We are boundless and infinite.

And if we can cultivate stillness, we can start to see that more clearly. We can start to see ourselves as part of an interconnected whole without being quite so plagued by these delusions we're carrying around. Stillness is where the truth is.

72. I have learned so much from people who have been shunned by society. Yes, it's true. Take my advice. If you want to find good teachers, seek out those who have been rejected for being blind, deaf or ignorant.

Han Shan is celebrating misfits and renegades. I love that about him. The Buddha left what was normal for society to go on his spiritual journey. Just because someone is doing what they're supposed to doesn't mean they're right. No one gets left out of this path. All have Buddha Nature and the same potential for awakening. If we think of the blind and the ignorant as being less than the rest of us, then we are losing the point of these teachings. No one gets left out. Ikkyu went and taught to street people, the lowest people in his culture. We can do that too. Because there are no lowest people. We're all the same. And everyone can strive to awaken. Everyone, even the people that seem the most deluded, or the most broken. This is important because sometimes we think of ourselves as bad or unworthy. This path is for us too. No one gets left out.

73. The objects of the material world are the props, sets and characters of a dream drama. When one awakens, the stage vanishes. The players and the audience too, disappear. Waking up is not death. What lives in a dream can die in a dream; but the dreamer has a real existence that doesn't perish with the dream. All that is necessary for him to stop dreaming, to cease being fascinated by dream images, and to realize that he has merely been a dreamer.

Han Shan is encouraging us to really think about what is and isn't real. The way we see the world is like a dream most of the time. We see things that aren't there. We see things as very

different from what they are sometimes. When we really want something all of it's good qualities seem stronger. When we want to get away from something all of it's bad qualities seem stronger. Rarely do we see things and just let them be as they are. We pile our delusion on everything we see. But it's all a dream.

74. Most people only perceive change. To them things come in and out of existence. Sooner or later, what's new becomes old, what's valuable becomes worthless. Their egos determine the nature of destiny of everything When existence is defined in such finite, ephemeral terms, the power to control people and things is naturally seen as an exercise of ego. And why not? Isn't the ego an authority on the subject of change? Of course, when it comes to the One Thing That Never Changes, the ego is amazingly ignorant. Nowadays people don't appreciate the Changeless. They scramble to keep up with every fad and fashion. They're like comedians, desperately trying to acquire new jokes. Their lives depend on keeping the audience laughing. What's truly funny is their conviction that they're free, powerful and in control. In reality they're merely helpless slaves to an illusion.

We are carried around by our delusions, as though we have no power. It's very hard to resist that tendency, like going against the current of a flowing river. Our delusions are powerful. We give so much power to our thoughts and feelings and the labels we put on everything. That is something we can work toward changing. With the right amount of cultivation we can take that power back and stop struggling with delusion all the time.

75. There are two ways to perceive the Dharma: the Sudden Way, the way in which the obstacle of illusion is shattered by a striking awareness; and the Gradual Way, the way in which illusion is dispelled incrementally, by continuous effort. One way or the other the obstacle must be destroyed.

Historically there have been two opposing views for how Enlightenment happens. Some say it happens suddenly, all at once. Others say it happens by tiny increments. "The Platform Sutra" tells us of a great contest. All of the students of Hongren, the 5th Patriarch, were invited to compose a poem to demonstrate their understanding. A student named Shenxiu composed a poem that described the mind as like a mirror that we're cleaning. A student named Huineng composed a poem in response that says there is no mirror. These two students had expressed the two different views. Shenxiu expressed the gradual way and Huineng expressed the sudden way. It's said in the Sutra that Hongren passed the lineage to Huineng, who founded the Southern School of Zen. The reality is more complicated. Both Shenxiu and Huineng claimed the title of 6th Patriarch and the truth is we don't know. But, it as a result of that Sutra the sudden way became heavily celebrated.

So, Han Shan is challenging the conventional wisdom of the time. He's saying it's not either/or. He's saying that both views are good.

76. The Buddha Mind contains the universe. In this universe there is only one pure substance, one absolute and indivisible Truth. The notion of duality does not exist.

The small mind contains only illusions of separateness, of division. It imagines myriad objects and defines truth in terms of relative opposites. Big is defined by small, good by evil, pure by defiled, hidden by revealed, full by empty. What is opposition? It is the arena of hostility, of conflict and turmoil. Where duality is transcended peace reigns. This is the Dharma's ultimate truth.

That's heavy. Separation is an illusion. We put things into categories and then pretend those categories are important. We forget that things like "good" and "bad" are things we created. They don't have reality. There is power in realizing that all the labels we put on everything all the time aren't real. If we create them, then it stands to reason that we can change them any time we want. We can shift how we see things. We can change our view and see ourselves as part of a connected whole. That is what we are. One with everything.

77. Though, in fact, the Dharma's Truth cannot be expressed in words, teachers talk on and on, trying to explain it. I suppose it's just human nature to say that something cannot be explained and then spend hours trying to explain it. No wonder people walk away. Well, we could be more entertaining. We could make up amusing stories and appeal to our audience with flattering assurances. Of course, we'd just be piling illusion upon illusion. But what would that have to do with the Dharma?

78. A person who is alone can't hold a conversation. A drum has to be hollow for its sound to reverberate. Absences count. Words limit. Interpretations differ. What isn't said is also relevant. Absolute Truth cannot be expressed in words. It must be experienced.

And then, in eloquent silence we best reveal that we have awakened to the Dharma.

What we do is more important than what we say. It's amazing how many long Buddhist texts say things like, "This can't be expressed in words." It's a special kind of paradox to declare words aren't going to work for expressing the truth and then try your best to express the truth with words. Actions are certainly more important. Showing others your awakening is better than talking about it. If we try too hard to figure out how to talk about it, it's going to feel hollow and fake. At the end Han Shan talks about silence. The space between words is important too. When we're in meditation we usually aren't listening to anything.

Pick up a cup and look at it. Any cup will do. The part of the cup that matters is the space. Without that space it wouldn't be a cup at all. Without ending this and telling you to go sit and reflect in silence, this wouldn't be a teaching at all. The space between this moment and whatever you do next is more important than the reading you've done here.