You Crazy!

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One night, back in the early Seventies, I gave the public Wednesday-evening talk at the Cambridge Zen Center. Then Soen Sa Nim, who had been sitting next to me the whole time, answered questions. It was his way of training his students to become teachers.

The very first question came from a young man halfway back in the audience, on the right side of the room, who, as he asked the question (I forget entirely what the import of it was) demonstrated a degree of confusion that caused a ripple of concern and curiosity to pass through the audience. Necks craned as discreetly as possible to get a look at who was speaking.

Soen Sa Nim gazed at this young man for a long time, peering over the rims of his glasses. Utter silence in the room. He massaged the top of his shaven head as he continued gazing at him. Then, with his hand still rubbing his head, still peering over his glasses, with his body tilted slightly forward toward the speaker from his position sitting on the floor, Soen Sa Nim said, cutting to the chase as usual: “You crazy!”

Sitting next to him, I gasped, as did the rest of the room. In an instant, the tension rose by several orders of magnitude. I wanted to lean over and whisper in his ear: “Listen, Soen Sa Nim, when somebody is really crazy, it’s not such a good idea to say it in public like that. Go easy on the poor guy, for god’s sake.” I was mortified. All that transpired in my mind and probably the minds of everybody else in the room in one moment. The reverberations of what he had just said were hanging in the air.

But he wasn’t finished.

After a silence that seemed forever but was in actuality only a few seconds, Soen Sa Nim finished: “. . . but [another long pause] . . . you not crazy ennuffff.”

Everybody breathed a sigh of relief and a feeling of lightness spread through the room.

It may have been beneficial for this young man to receive such a message at that particular moment and in that particular way from the likes of someone of Soen Sa Nim’s lineage and imposing stature. At the time, it actually felt both compassionate and skillful, given the circumstances. I have no idea whether it was useful for him or not. I hope it was. I can’t recall if Soen Sa Nim followed up with this man or not, but one thing was very clear about him—he never gave up on anybody.

I like to think that Soen Sa Nim was saying that we need to dare to be sane, to take on our craziness unabashedly and hold it with compassion, to face it, name it, and in doing so, be bigger than it, no longer caught by it, and therefore, intimately in touch with our wholeness, not only sane, but saner than sane. Especially when what passes for sane these days on the world stage is often madness itself—with truth often the first casualty.

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