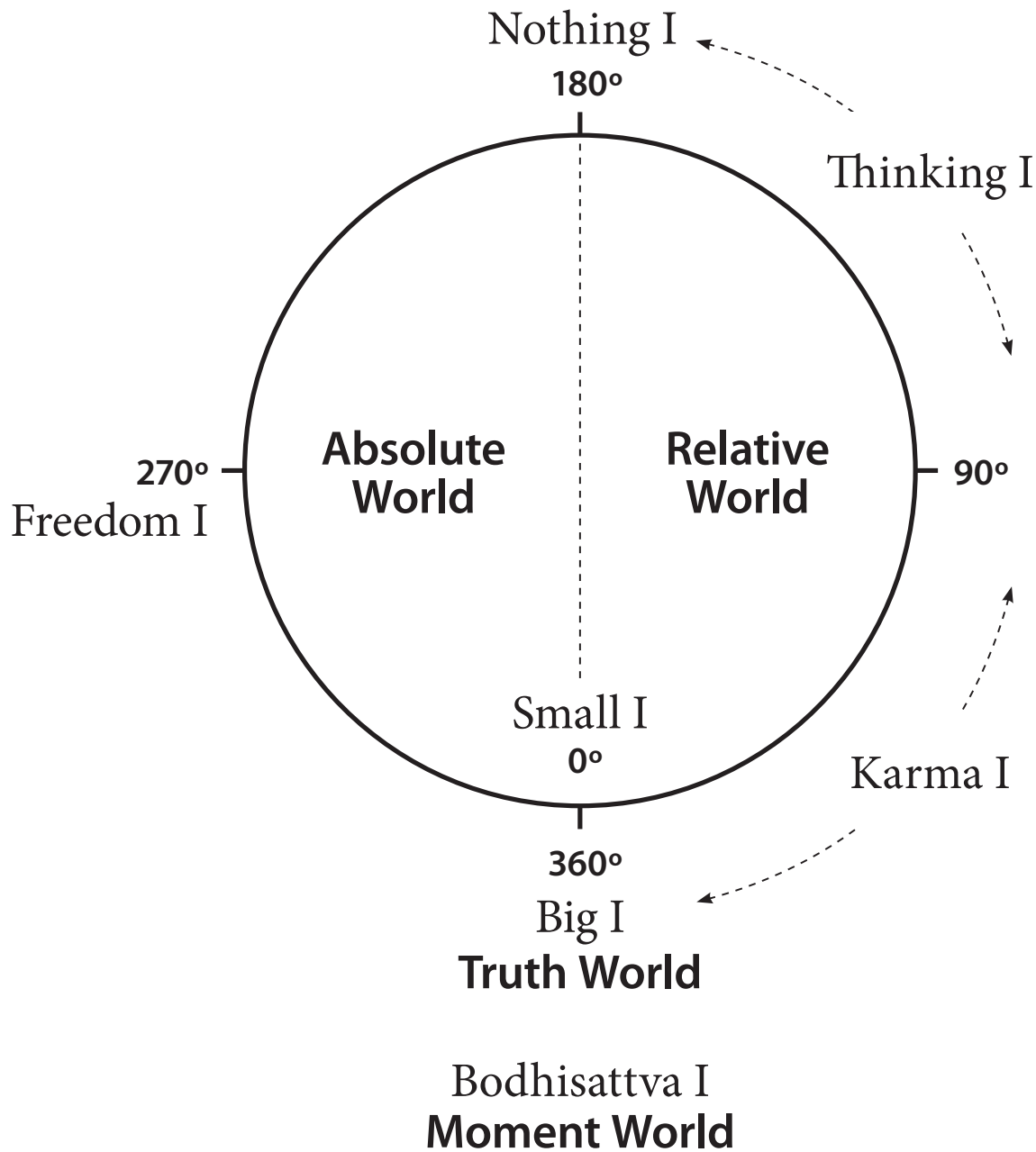


The Zen Circle

by Zen Master Seung Sahn



The Zen Circle is a teaching and learning tool developed by Zen Master Seung Sahn.

It is based on Buddhist insights and teachings throughout history, such as:

- The Awakening of Faith, Attributed to Aśvaghosa, (c. 80 – c. 150 CE)
- The Five Ranks of Ts'ao-Tung
- The Heart Sutra
- Hua-yen Sutra

The Zen Circle functions like a map that shows us different territories of mind.

There are five main points on the Zen Circle: 0°, 90°, 180°, 270° and 360°.

360° is exactly the same point as 0°.

The points on the Zen Circle do not indicate “progress”.

Our mind can be at any point on the circle at any time.

Buddha's Two Truths

Buddhist teaching addresses two aspects of truth:
Absolute Truth and Relative Truth.

The right half of the Zen Circle represents the relative truth, and the left half represents the absolute truth. (The Absolute and Relative are only shown separately for teaching and learning purposes.)

When we are attached at any point on the Zen Circle, the Relative and Absolute are out of balance.

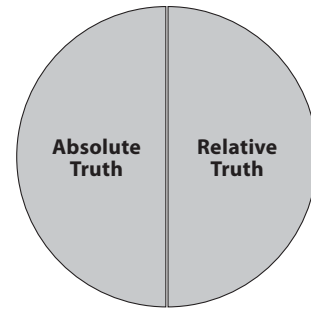
Because in the Absolute there is no name and no form, it can only be manifested through momentary Relative Truth.

Thich Nhat Hahn uses an analogy of the wave and water:

- A wave is a “relative” aspect of water.
- Water is the “absolute” aspect (substance) of the wave.

Zen Master Seung Sahn uses an analogy of a cookie factory:

Cookies can have many different shapes, appearances and flavors, but they are all made of the same substance.



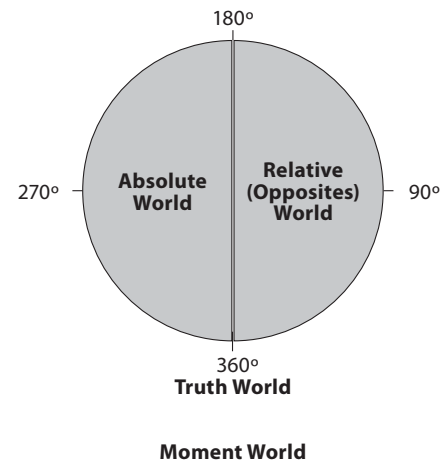
The Four Worlds

In our lineage, we often talk about The Four Worlds:
Relative World, Absolute World, Truth World and Moment World.

This incorporates Buddha's Two Truths into a model that shows us how to integrate the Relative and Absolute, and how to function correctly from moment to moment.

Seung Sahn's Four Worlds

- Relative World: 0–180°
- Absolute World: 180–360°
- Truth World: 360°
- Moment World: all degrees on the circle disappear



Relative (or Opposites) World: 0°–180°

0° to 90°: Karma I

We call the first half of Relative World “Small I” or “Karma I.”

This is the area of attachment to karmic habits. Karmic thinking separates everything into opposites: good and bad; beautiful and ugly; mine and yours.

“I like this; I don’t like that.”

“I want this; I don’t want that.”

“This is mine; that is yours (but I want it).”

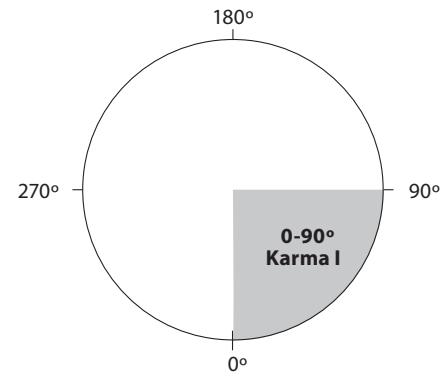
“Small I” tries to get happiness and avoid suffering:

“This makes me happy; that makes me suffer.”

There is also attachment to name and form:

Example of pencil and paper: “This is a pencil; that is paper.”

(And maybe, “But I like pens; I hate yellow paper.”)



90° to 180°: Thinking I

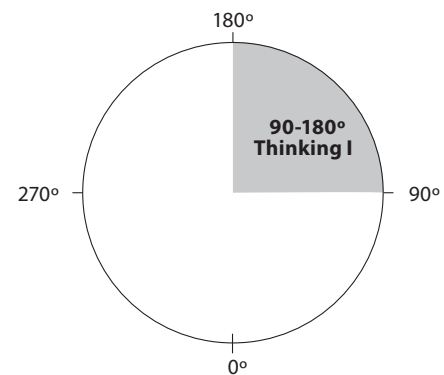
We call the second half of Relative World “Thinking I.”

This is the area of attachment to thinking and conceptualization rather than name and form. We try to understand our experience through conceptual or analytical thinking. Conceptually, we can perceive that all things are connected because they all share the same substance:

Heart Sutra: “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.”

“Thinking I” theorizes that happiness and suffering are one. But this is still only thinking:

Example of pencil and paper: “Pencil is paper; paper is pencil.”



Absolute World: 180°–360°

180°: Nothing I

At 180°, there is no thinking (we often say, “before thinking”). “Before Thinking”, there are no words or speech because speech comes from thinking.

This is true emptiness; “I” disappears and becomes “Nothing I.”

There are two manifestations of “Nothing I”:

1) **“Without like-this”**: This is complete emptiness/stillness/silence.

Heart Sutra: “No form, no emptiness.”

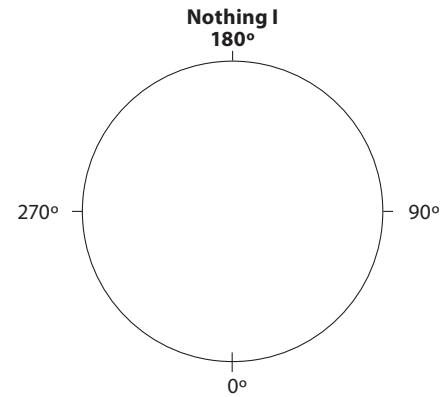
Example of pencil and paper: “No pencil, no paper.”

2) **“Become One like-this”**: This demonstrates Nothing I through action:

Lin-chi shouting “Katz!”; Te-shan hitting with a stick;

Ch’u-T’i holding up one finger; Seung Sahn hitting the floor.

If you stay at 180°, you become attached to emptiness and cannot help this world. “Become One like-this” points toward Truth and Moment Worlds, which is why our lineage emphasizes this aspect of 180° over “Without like-this.”



270°: Freedom I

This is the area of apparent “magic and miracles.” Here, there is complete freedom, with no hindrance in space or time.

If the mind is clear (i.e., not attached to “I”), connection to all things is possible. This is the manifestation, in action, of becoming one.

An example of this is two people picking up the phone to call each other as the same instant.

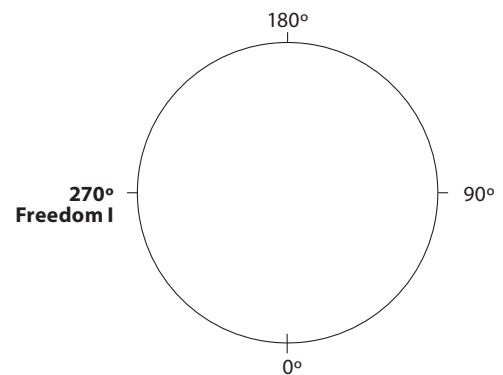
Anything is possible:

In this area, a statue can cry; the tree has no roots;
when shouting into a valley, there is no echo.

Example of pencil and paper: “The pencil dances, the paper laughs.”

Some sects of Taoism and yoga cultivate this point in order to use “absolute energy” to perform amazing feats. But if you stay at 270°, you become attached to freedom, and cannot help this world.

So “one more step is necessary.”



Truth World: 360°

360°: Big I

At 360°, all things are just as they are; the truth is “Only like-this.”
We call this realm “Truth World.”

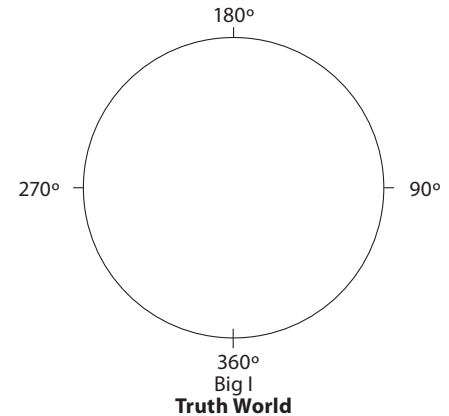
This point is actually the same as 0°. We “arrive” where we started,
where we have always been. But here there is no attachment to anything.

We call this “Big I” because the attachments of “Small I” disappear.

When the mind is clear, it is like a mirror; when red appears, red is
reflected; when the blue sky appears, blue is reflected.

Heart Sutra: “Annattara Samyak Sambodhi”
(Perfect unexcelled enlightenment).

Example of pencil and paper:
“The pencil is a pencil, the paper is paper.”



Moment World

Bodhisattva I

When we reach 360°, all degrees on the circle disappear. The circle is
just a Zen teaching device. It does not really exist. It is a tool we use
to simplify thinking and understand the territories of mind.

We call this realm “Moment World.” In Moment World, we perceive
the truth of this moment “Just like-this”. By attaining the truth with no
attachment to karma or thinking, we perceive our correct:

- situation in this moment;
- relationship to the truth of this moment;
- and consequently our correct function moment by moment.

This is “Bodhisattva I”.

Heart Sutra: “Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha.”
(gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond!!!)
(Zen Master Seung Sahn would say, “Just do it!”)

Example of pencil and paper:
The pencil writes “Wake Up and help this world!” on the paper.

