

Good Actors

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A dharma talk in Olomouc, Czech Republic

Here's a question for everybody: How can you get out of samsara, how do you get out of suffering? We're really lucky because we have a good practice situation. We can help and support each other, come here freely and nothing is stopping us from practicing except our "I, my, me" mind. But many times when you want to go for a retreat or do bows or sitting, there is a tiny little voice in the back of your mind: just a minute... I'll do it later... first I must wash the dishes... phone someone... or to do this or that. So in a way this situation is a good situation because a bad situation is a good situation, a good situation is a bad situation. The important thing here is that you want to practice.

What is practice? Sometimes we think, "Oh, we'll do thousands of bows, ten hours of sitting and then get something." It's not like that. If your direction is not clear, you can do millions of bows and sit all day and night but nothing will happen... maybe your legs will hurt a lot and after a while you'll just give up. "My legs are hurting, my body is aching, and I didn't get anything!" So if you have a clear direction then your practice will be non-stop, 24 hours a day. But for many people the question is, what do I want? Why do I practice? To get what?

Many times we want to get something from practice, but enlightenment means to lose everything - not to get anything. You don't get anything, you lose everything. You have to be prepared for that. You have to be ready to really lose everything, to lose all illusions about yourself. That's not easy. We don't like it. We want to keep at least a little illusion, to have at least something, some little thing to hold onto so we can feel secure.

I know lots of students who have ideal situations. They can practice as much as they want. Not so long ago we held a dharma teacher meeting in Warsaw. A dharma teacher is somebody who's been practicing for several years. This is a good test, because at the beginning you have inspiration and motivation, you want to get something, and after you practice for some years you can become a dharma teacher. So you already have some status; you get a long robe and have heard many dharma talks. You know the teachings very well - "Only Go Straight! Just Do It 100%!" This is a very dangerous time because you think, "Oh, no problem. Zen is very easy. I've already got something." We think that there isn't much more to get. Maybe if I become really desperate, I can become a Ji Do Poep Sa. But that's a lot of work, so most people think, "Maybe later. First I'll take care of my life, have children, build a house, buy a car, and then I'll think about it."

But let's get back to the meeting where I discovered that people tend to be lazy. They have faith in practice, motivation to become Buddha and get enlightenment. Great idea! Everybody wants that, but what you really need is discipline, and discipline is something many older students lose. Discipline means to get up every morning no matter what your situation is, no matter what your condition is - you just get up. This is because your situation, condition and question are coming and going, constantly changing. Sometimes your life is smooth - no problems. You fall into this lazy state of mind, "OK, I'll do it tomorrow, I'll get up and do it... no problem... now I'll take a break." But life is very short - day, night - night, day - finish. Maybe you'll wake up because some suffering comes knocking on your door and then you think, "I have to do my bows!"

Last Sunday everybody came and we had a big Buddha's Enlightenment Day Ceremony. It's wonderful having these ceremonies because I get to see all the dharma teachers and older students. Now I know why we have these ceremonies! One student came to me, who was always very shy and never said anything, but this time he said, "I came here for this retreat but this is my last one. Zen is not for me. I've practiced for six years and nothing's happened." I asked him, "When was the last time you came for a retreat?" He thought for a while and said, "Four or five years ago."

"And what is your daily practice?"

"Well, sometimes I get up in the morning and do 108 bows and sit for fifteen minutes, but I can't do that everyday, just sometimes."

"So what do you expect? You only have what you make, which isn't very much as you're not doing very much."

Just try three simple things in your life: precepts, meditation and kong-ans. If you are doing these three practices, it's like being on three tracks simultaneously, then you grow very fast because they're about discipline, which you need if you want to learn anything. Meditation can give you what we call samadhi, which is a clear mind. Meditation is like a wind blowing across the sky: the more you do, the stronger the wind blows, quickly clearing the sky of clouds. No meditation - no wind and it's just gray, like today. Then there's kongan practice which is about wisdom. Just sitting isn't Zen. It's just about good feeling. After three days you might not feel it, but if you sit a retreat for a week or a few months there's a point at which your mind settles down and is like a calm sea, peaceful and quiet, the most wonderful experience of your life. The sutras call this stillness bliss. But you can't stop there. If you're a Zen student, you have to go for interviews and sometimes make a fool of yourself! This is the path of wisdom, which we don't always want because no one likes to feel stupid or have the feeling they didn't pass the exam. For many it brings back memories of school - bad marks, this unpleasant feeling... another bad mark again.

I remember making a fool of myself so many times and feeling terrible! I remember an interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn in which I did this crazy action to answer, and I'll never forget how he looked at me: what??? He

couldn't hide anything, and it was like, what is she doing? Zen Master Seung Sahn is a great Zen Master, so the stress I was experiencing was intense. His teaching taught me not to take myself so seriously, "OK. I'm stupid, so what. He wasn't always so wise either."

Kongan practice has many functions, one being that when you practice for some time you get the feeling you understand something, especially if you rarely have interviews and just practice at home. Then you go for an interview and get a big "don't know." Then we see that more practice is necessary. One time I had a student who knew the answer to her kong-an for over six months but she just couldn't get up and do it. At the last seven-day Yong Maeng Jong Jin she did it and we were both so happy. It was a wonderful experience. Zen Master Seung Sahn teaches us that we must become good actors. This whole world is like an interview room and if we learn something in this intimate teacher-student relationship then we can use it in our everyday life. I remember once when I couldn't pass any kong-an for a long time and started thinking, who needs those old stories about ancient Zen Masters? They have nothing to do with my life. I didn't tell Zen Master Seung Sahn this, but he told me, "If you have problems with kong-ans, then you have problems in your everyday life."

Each kong-an is like a little gate which you open one by one. There is the emotional gate, the shy gate, the perceiving gate and many others. The situations in our lives are not the same as in kong-ans, you're not hanging onto a tree in your everyday life [laughter], well, maybe, sometimes. The point is that if you open this gate then it works for you in your everyday life.

Question: If kong-ans are like opening gates, is there anything there when they're opened. Does everything suddenly open?

PPSN: It can seem like this opening process is endless. I only have twenty-one years experience, and the more I practice the more gates I see to be opened.

Q: And is it always at the same tempo?

PPSN: Tempo is interesting because for a while you take big steps forward. I remember one particular Yong Maeng Jong Jin where I made real progress but then I felt as if I was walking round in circles. So the rate of progress is strange, but this is just the feeling you have. You're never going backwards, you're developing and growing if you keep practicing. If you have a strong expectation habit, then you'll want something to happen, some lights, some miracles, and then you think, yeah, I'm close to enlightenment! There is a story about expecting which helped me a lot. In our Zen tradition there's a great duo of master-student, Nam Cheon and Jo-Ju, before he became a great master. Jo-Ju was sixty at the time, having already practiced for forty years. He had practiced very honestly with the question he constantly asked Nam Cheon, "Master, what is the True Way?" It's like asking, what's life about? It was a very serious question for him in his universe. During this winter's Kyol Che at Warsaw there was a student I've known for a

long time, and she asked me the same question: "We've known each other for so long, so what's the secret? You can tell me."

I started laughing and told her that the irony is that she already has this secret but only she can discover it. We often think that there's some hidden meaning when the teachers say, "The sky is blue." Nam Cheon replied to the same question saying, "It's everyday mind, nothing special." Changing the baby's nappies is the True Way, drinking beer with your friend is the True Way. Everyday life is the True Way.

But Jo-Ju couldn't believe this, so he asked, "Shall I keep it or not?" Nam Cheon said, "If you try to keep it, this is already a big mistake." "But if I don't keep it," Jo-Ju was still trying, "how can I understand?" He still had a strong habit of wanting to understand what it's all about. We all make this mistake so often, trying to understand through thinking. So the last HIT Nam Cheon gave was, "If you want to understand... understanding is illusion, not understanding is blankness. If you truly want to understand the True Way, it is before thinking, clear, bright and infinite. So why do you make right and wrong?" Upon hearing this, Jo-Ju's mind completely opened.

In this story, there is a great teaching. When I first heard it, I thought, Jo-Ju's been practicing for forty years - this doesn't sound good. We all have this idea at the beginning that we'll practice strongly and finish, and then get back to our everyday pleasures or whatever. Jo-Ju's forty years of practice gives me a good perspective on what I'm doing. Nam Cheon said that everyday life is the True Way, and this is also good teaching because most of us want something special, some miracle. There is a miracle, the practice - we transform! That's the real miracle for me, seeing how people change. It doesn't usually happen suddenly, "Wow! I can fly in this dharma room," that's not what it's about.

So let's get back to the true miracle and continue these terrible kong-an interviews!

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