

The Practice of Together Action and Buddhist Wisdom

BY ZEN MASTER WU BONG

One of the most important roles of Providence Zen Center is its residential training program. In the Orient, where the monastic tradition has dominated Zen, residential training has historically been the main reason for the existence of Zen centers and monasteries. While Zen in the West is undergoing a phase of adaptation and experimentation, residential training is still an important part of the practice.

To live in a community such as Providence Zen Center is not easy. There is a structure and a set of rules that must be followed. There is less privacy than one would have living outside such a community. There are people living in the community or visiting it with whom one would have nothing to do if given the choice. There is sometimes food one does not like, and often a lack of food that one likes. There is the "getting up in the morning," one of the greatest problems facing a Center resident. And there are other obstacles to a life of leisure.

There are, of course, pluses to being a resident. There is a structure and a set of rules that help us put down our checking mind and help our discipline. With less privacy, there is more openness and less need to hide behind one's image. There are people with whom one learns to deal correctly, notwithstanding feelings of like or dislike. There is the opportunity to learn to appreciate food, and not be hindered by its taste. There is the joy and energy of getting up in the morning and practicing with the rest of the community.

To be a resident in a Zen community like Providence Zen Center is to let go completely of one's opinions. This is something which is impossible to do without the practice of "together action." Only by acting together with others do we discover the boundaries set up by our habits, our prejudices, our likes and dislikes - in other words, our karma. Only by experiencing our boundaries can we let go. Only by letting go can we allow our natural wisdom to grow.

While it is possible to practice together action without living at a Zen center, the Zen center is an expedient way to do this in the context of a formal practice situation. Without the structure of a community, many of us find it too tempting to relax our discipline and to hold onto our ideas.

Even if one is very disciplined and does not hold strong opinions, there is a very good reason for living in a Zen center. That reason is the wider community the center serves, and the other residents who benefit from the support of a strong housemember. Zen Master Seung Sahn calls it "potato rubbing" practice, after a method of washing potatoes in a pot so they rub the dirt off each other, rather than washing them one by one.

When the Buddha was dying, his student Ananda was upset and worried what would happen to all the students when the teacher was gone. The Buddha told him that already the students had Dharma, and, very importantly, they had each other.

When one's life situation and obligations allow one to live in a Zen center, it is important to take advantage of that opportunity, even if only for a limited period of time.

Finally, Zen center life is not special. Un Mun Zen Master once said, "The world is vast and wide; why do you put on a seven-fold robe at the sound of a bell?" This question relates not only to temple life, but, if we understand it correctly, it relates to every one of our daily activities.

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