

Understanding It, Doing It

BY ZEN MASTER WU BONG

Recently, a friend of mine, while giving a Dharma talk, reminded me of an interesting figure in the history of Zen. This particular Zen Master was famous not only for his clear and simple teaching, but perhaps even more for his unusual lifestyle. Known as "the bird's nest monk," he lived in a tree, depending on his followers for help with basic necessities of life. At one time, a great Buddhist scholar from the neighboring province came to visit him. The scholar was an eighty year old monk who was very learned in all the major scriptures and commentaries, and was curious to meet someone who, although not very learned, was even more famous than himself. The scholar asked the Zen Master for his teaching. The "bird's nest monk" replied: "Don't do any evil; do good." The scholar scornfully pointed out that this kind of simplistic teaching is something that even a four year old child understands. To this the Zen Master replied that while it is true that a four year old child understands it, even an eighty year old man cannot do it.

The teaching of Zen is very simple, and very clear. One way to present it is by "don't do evil; do good." Unfortunately, just understanding this principle, or even believing and aspiring to it, by itself cannot help us to accomplish it in our everyday endeavors. Practice is essential. The war in the Persian Gulf is a good example of this. In television interviews before the conflict started, both our President and the President of Iraq stated their abhorrence to war and support for peace. The same was true of the people interviewed in the streets, who expressed the hope that conflict would be avoided. But the Americans and the Iraqis saw the dispute very differently. As long as we hold on to our opinions, and our ideas, we will continue to face the dichotomy between our beliefs and our actions. It is only by letting go of "I," "my," "me" that a "correct idea", "correct opinion," can appear. This means "Bodhisattva idea," which means an idea for all beings, not just for my family, my country, not even just for people; for animals, for trees, for water, for air, for this whole world. This also means that without the "I," "my," "me" there is no separation, no wall between our understanding and our action. The taking away of "I," "my," "me" brings us again to the subject of practice. Like any endeavor where we seek some kind of perfection, practice is essential. It is not enough to understand that the selfless state just described is our natural state, our natural heritage. It is not enough to understand that everyone is essentially an enlightened being, a "Buddha." A final very important step is necessary. We must make that understanding completely ours, which means that we must attain "that." It is for this reason that Zen Centers, retreats, and teachers are all important. It is for that reason that a regular daily formal practice schedule, as an adjunct to our everyday practice, is important. It is only for the encouragement of the practice that Dharma talks and articles like this one are important.

Finally, does it all make any sense? Then do it.

Make a daily schedule. Make the effort to practice regularly together with other Sangha members. Regularly join an intensive retreat. Make the effort to regularly attend a Dharma talk. All of these activities help your practice, and your participation and your energy help other practitioners.

This article copyright © 2008 Kwan Um School of Zen