

# Practicing Alone: A Letter

FROM ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN

New York, New York  
June 26, 1978

Dear Soen Sa Nim,

Thank you for your letter and for the picture of Kwan Seum Bosal. Thank you so much for your care.

I went to Yong Maeng Jong Jin held at Bob's house on Long Island last weekend. I found practicing with other people very difficult. It is as if I struggle with some deep barrier; I become very strange with people, so that I cannot really act appropriately and want a lot of special attention. I know that this is not good for other people. I cannot bear to do it, but I can't seem to control it either.

You say that practicing with others will help my bad karma. But I feel as if I would take much more than I could give — that I would be a burden. I do not want to do that again. That is why I have been living and practicing alone. It is so important for me to work every day and to keep my balance.

George, the Master Dharma Teacher, said none of us is special, especially good or especially bad, but I feel so very different from other people. It is strange. I myself do not understand, and I am sorry. I feel that I must continue my practice alone.

Thank you so much for your concern.

Yours sincerely,

Gail

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July 6, 1978

Dear Gail,

Thank you for your letter. How are you?

I read your letter. I know your karma. You are not the only person with this kind of karma. Many students like practicing alone. This is not good, not bad — better than nothing. But if you practice alone, your practice does not grow. Zen means not holding onto anything. If you are holding something, or making something, or attached to something, you are not practicing Zen. If you try to practice Zen this way you cannot get Enlightenment and cannot understand your true self, even if you try for your whole life. So it is very important to put down your ideas and your feelings. What are you? If you don't know, only go straight — don't-know.

You are always checking, checking, checking — "my feelings," "somebody's feelings," "somebody's mind," "my mind," "somebody's understanding." So you make your problems. You say you cannot help other people, that you are a burden to them. Don't worry about other people. If you do together action, your good and bad actions already help other people.

It's like washing potatoes. When people wash potatoes in Korea, instead of washing them one at a time, they put them all in a tub full of water. Then someone puts a stick in the tub and pushes it up and down, up and down. This makes the potatoes rub against each other; as they bump into each other, the hard crusty dirt falls off. If you wash potatoes one at a time, it takes a long time to clean each one, and only one potato gets clean at a time. If they are all together, many potatoes clean each other.

'Our practice of bowing, chanting, and sitting together, and everyone living together, is like having many potatoes bumping into each other, cleaning each other. Sometimes you are too tired and you do not want to get out of bed, or after work you only want to watch television. But when you live at a Zen Center you must practice with everyone; you must put down your own feelings and do together action. This action means not being controlled by your bad karma of desire, anger, or ignorance.

Sometimes you bump into other people: "I don't want to bow!" or "I'm too tired to do the dishes!" But soon you see you are only bumping into your bad karma. If you are alone, it's easy to hold your own ideas: "Only my way!" Then you are separate from other people, and your thinking and opinions grow stronger and stronger. Then your mind becomes narrow and tight; it has many walls.

Zen means inside and outside become one. This means any time you and your correct situation become one. When you practice with other people, everyone helps you see your correct situation. Then your life becomes simple and clear. Then your thinking-walls become weaker and weaker, and soon they

disappear. Then you can see, you can hear; all just-like-this is truth. When someone is happy, you are happy with them. When someone is sad, you can see this and help them. That is called freedom. It is also called Great Love, Great Compassion, and the Great Bodhisattva Way.

Gail, you only make your own walls. When will you get out of your small walls? This universe is very wide, infinite in time and space. So don't make "my space;" don't make "my time." Put down I-my-me. Only try, try, try. This is very important. The first time is very difficult, but if you don't check your mind, don't check your feelings, don't check your understanding, then no problem. Thinking comes and goes — let it be.

When you practice correctly and become strong, your demons can also become strong. When together action is difficult, this means your Dharma and your karma are both very strong. At that time, you must only go straight — persevere. Then you will win, O.K.? Then no problem. So you must try, try, try. If you keep try-mind, you will become a great woman.

So don't check your mind or your feelings or your understanding. Put it all down. Only go straight for 10,000 years, nonstop.

Yours in the Dharma,

S.S.

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