

## PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

# Practicing in Our Situation

*Do Mun Sunim*



One of the most famous stories in our Zen tradition is about a little girl in ancient China named Sul. She and her family lived about a thousand years ago near the temple of the famous Zen Master Ma-jo. Her father was a student of Ma-jo, and he often went to the temple with Sul to visit and have personal interviews. One time when they were visiting, Ma-jo told Sul, "You're a very good little girl, so I'd like to give you a present. My present to you is the words, 'Kwan Seum Bosal.' You just repeat her name all the time and that will give you happiness." In Buddhism

Kwan Seum Bosal is the name of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Sul began to chant "Kwan Seum Bosal" on her way to school and while she was doing her chores and even while playing with her friends. Eventually she was always doing chanting in her mind, regardless of what she was doing. About three years later she was down by the river washing clothes, beating them with a stick on a rock and chanting to herself. It was evening, and like we do at our Zen Centers, the monks would ring the temple bell to begin practice. So while she was chanting and beating the clothes, the temple bell rang. The sound of the stick, the bell, and her chanting all became one, and her mind opened.

Ma-jo recognized Sul's understanding while she was still a child, and as she grew up, married, and reared children she became very well known as a Zen Master. Many people came to her, and she helped many people. Then when she was old, her granddaughter died. She loved this granddaughter very much, and she cried and cried in front of the people who came to offer condolences. Everyone wondered and whispered to each other, "Sul's enlightened. She's already gone beyond birth and death. Why is she crying? Why is her granddaughter's death a hindrance to her mind?" Finally someone gathered enough courage to ask her. She immediately stopped crying and said, "My tears are the best ceremony, better than chanting for my granddaughter. When she hears my tears, she will enter nirvana. Does anyone understand?" And no one understood.

I've always loved that story. In the beginning I liked what it says about practicing. The Zen Master gives this young girl something to do, and she just does it devotedly, all the time, not separating it from her life. She has such simple faith, and eventually she gets enlightenment. That's always been an inspiring story for me.

Later I became interested in the last part of the story. Sul is crying and crying for her granddaughter, then someone asks her a question and she immediately stops crying. Usually our emotions tend to linger, so we often don't do justice to one situation because we're bringing our emotion from something that happened before. Maybe you have something difficult going on with your spouse, then you're driving to work and someone cuts you off slightly, and you give them all the anger that you have built up for your spouse. People actually get out of their cars and shoot each other. Or something is difficult at work, and you go home and ignore your kids or get angry at them. So I was very impressed that Sul didn't linger in her feelings or let them affect the situation. In fact, she used them to teach other people.

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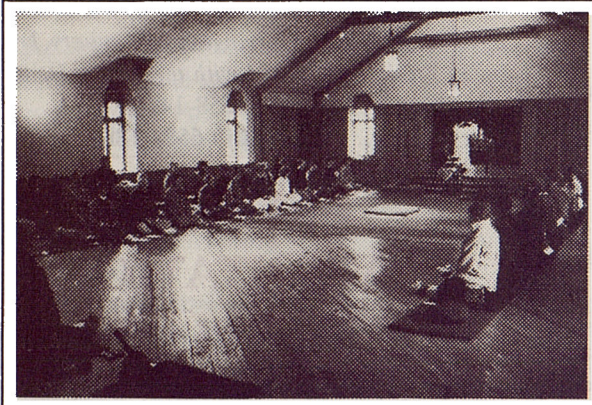
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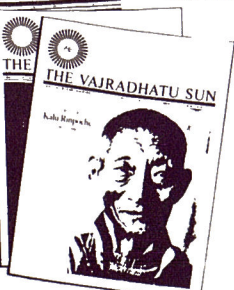
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## Practicing in Our Situation

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Lately, I've been wondering about something they don't talk about in the story: What did she do in her life when she grew up? It just says she grew up, married, had a family, and everybody came to her and found her very helpful. Then you get this story about when she's a grandmother. She's already enlightened, so I wonder what she did all the time. What was it like? How was it different from what I do or what other people do in their lives?

Before it moved to Cumberland, the Providence Zen Center was in a house in Providence. Everybody had jobs taking care of the house, and the woman who was housemaster did the laundry in a little room on the second floor. At that time I was working as a welder in town. I was removed from my former social life, and in some ways I felt alone. I was really trying to push myself in practice. It was very hard for me to get up in the morning and stay alert, and when we'd read the chants I couldn't even focus. I was very tired, and there wasn't much chance to get involved in something satisfying socially. But I would come home and run into the housemaster on the second floor. She would have just come home from her job, and would be hanging out the laundry. We would talk about something or other, and usually I would end up helping hang out the laundry. I remember a lot of people would end up there with their problems, their despair or their unhappiness, and everyone would get a certain amount of air time. Then they would end up hanging out the laundry and talking about something else.

There was something very affecting and helpful about that for me. When I think about what Sul did, I imagine it was like that — just hanging out the laundry. She lived her life without any resentment towards it. That's a very simple thing, but actually it's very rare for people to live their lives without a lot of resentment either toward their relationships or toward their work.

We talk about practicing in our everyday life. There's a great saying: "Zen mind is everyday mind." I know that I haven't been willing to look at my everyday life really seriously, moment to moment, and face the way I behave. That is what our practice is about. The meditation room is one situation, but every moment is most important. It's painful to look at our lives because we can see our reactions, and they may not match our understanding of things and the ideas we have. I noticed when I was a new student that if I was really trying hard — getting up before the wake-up bell, really trying to do mantra, doing all the chants, eating formal meals, working all day, not goofing around at night — when I really tried to do that, my mind was like shit. I could do it, but all this garbage thinking was going on all the time. If I decided one day not to go to work, to just go someplace and read a book I might feel great. But if I looked at my life, I wasn't doing my job. It's very difficult sometimes to just do what you have to do without resentment. If you can do that, you give other



people such a tremendous gift: you relieve their suffering automatically. That's the heart of our practice. If we can really do it, really digest the anger, ignorance and greed that keep us from living our lives without resentment, we will produce tremendous energy.

There is a very beautiful forest at Providence Zen Center. I think there are more trees on those fifty acres than in many cities. It's a deciduous forest, a very high-class, ecologically advanced forest. In a deciduous forest about seventy to eighty percent of the energy comes from its own dead matter — the leaves and trees that fall and rot over a period of years. More than the sunlight and the nutrients it picks up from the air, the forest gets energy from its own dead matter. We can be the same. Often we feel like we have no energy or the situation is overwhelming us. But it's very rarely the situation. It's just that we're keeping seventy percent of our energy locked in our own dead karma, so practicing is very important. If you practice correctly, you'll digest your own dead karma, and you'll have lots of energy.

Why is it difficult to practice? We face a lot of pressure in this world to go fast, and we've become very complicated. We have to make our minds simple, present, attentive. If we don't make our minds simple, it's very difficult to pay attention to what we're doing.

I read about an experiment that was done on dogs. I hesitate to talk about it because we want to protect animals from research, but it leads to an interesting point you may have discovered in your own practice. They kept young dogs in cages until they were very, very hungry, then put some food on one end of a special cage. Between the dogs and the food was a metal grid. When the dogs tried to reach the food they received a fairly strong electrical shock. After a couple of times the dogs would not cross the grid even when there was no electricity. Even if the dogs were starving they wouldn't try it, and they would jump off if the researchers put them on the grid.

Then the researchers went a step further and found the only way to get rid of that conditioning was to hold the dogs on the grid when there was no shock. The dogs didn't learn very quickly. Each dog went through everything it went through when it was shocked — trembling, screeching, urinating, completely losing control. But after it had gone through this whole reaction the dog would realize there was no more shock, and then it could cross the grid.

This has relevance to us because our karmic conditioning is the same. We've conditioned ourselves to react to certain situations. To get free of that conditioning we have to put ourselves into the situation and stay there while we go through all the trembling and sweating and urination in our pants, until we realize there is no shock in the grid. Nothing is really going on there. In my experience the tendrils of karma are very deep. Dharma Master Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim says, "Your karma seems really heavy. But when you finally take it off, it's just like a thin piece of paper." You have to be willing to practice with your whole body and mind to digest it, to

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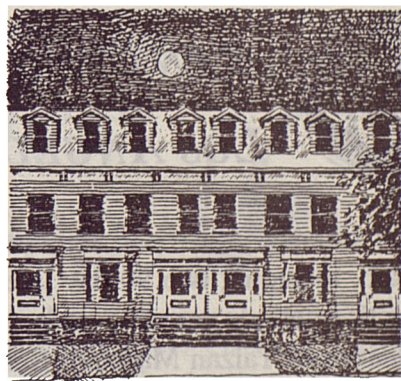


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## Zen in Hungary

Since 1980 there has been a great deal of interest in Zen in Hungary. Small groups have formed to meet regularly, talk among themselves, and translate books about Zen. Thus, *Iron Flute*, *Gateless Gate*, *Blue Cliff Record*, the history of Ch'an Buddhism, and writings of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and D.T. Suzuki have been translated and published in Hungarian. Members of these pioneering groups have been giving weekly lectures on Zen history, literature and practice at the Alexander Csoma de Koros Institute for Buddhology in Budapest.

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decondition it, and to see very clearly what is there and what isn't there. Then even a shock won't affect you. But it doesn't come automatically; you have to do it on your own. In a retreat the structure is set up to hold you over the grid. If we are really devoted to our everyday life situation, it is also like holding ourselves over the grid until we digest our reactions. Then we can see clearly what to do. Some creative solution will appear on its own, with a tremendous amount of energy.

In China around the ninth century a Zen Master was walking in the woods with one of his top students. They were having a metaphysical conversation about the true way, about Dharma, about enlightenment. Finally they were passing a waterfall, and the student asked, "What is the True Way Gate?" The Zen Master said, "Do you hear that waterfall?" The student said, "Yes." The Zen Master said, "Enter here." And BOOM! he got enlightenment. About three hundred years later there was a layman scholar named Mr. Chang. He was a Zen student, and he was always testing his teacher, trying to trip him up. One day they were sitting in the Zen Master's room. Mr. Chang told the Zen Master this story about the waterfall, then he asked the Zen Master, "If you had been there, but there was no waterfall, what would you have done?" The Zen Master shouted, "Mr. Chang!" and Chang said "Yes?" The Zen Master said, "Enter here." And BOOM! Chang got enlightenment.

Everything is like that. If you can wash the dishes, drive to work, do your job, and take care of your family with that same kind of awareness, then everything is your gate. Everything is your way in, and every action can be saving ourselves and saving others. □

*Do Mun Sunim is Abbot of Empty Gate Zen Center in Berkeley. This article is adapted from a talk given at Providence Zen Center in September, 1988.*

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