

Motivation for Practice

by Tim Colohan

My name is Tim Colohan. I'm 40 years old and I live in Los Angeles. I am an artist and an art director in the film and TV industry. I am queer and have just recently "divorced" my husband of thirteen years. My life changes a great deal. To penetrate these changes and understand myself, I practice Zen, Tai Chi and Chi Kung. My effort is to be as vital as possible so as to vitalize the people around me and to respond to the world with compassion and give people what they want. So why practice?

In 1971 I married Sharon, my high school "steady." I was nineteen. She was pregnant with our first child, Hesper. In 1974 my son Aaron was born. My children were the first people I ever fell in love with—the first that I loved in a dynamic way, albeit with all of my shortcomings as a young father. It was a technicolor experience, lush, textured, scary, rich.

One day I asked Sharon, "My life is so black and white except for my experience with the children. Why? I want that same technicolor quality in all areas. With my wife, friends, co-workers. What am I doing wrong?"

I was not freely, emotionally and spiritually invested in anything but my children. About a year later—a grieving, tortured, self-examining year later—I divorced Sharon and moved out. I planned to co-parent my five- and seven-year old and let myself be open to falling in love with a man.

Sharon was very angry and very hurt; she had been true and was now betrayed. She told me that I could not participate in an ongoing way with my children, that I had abandoned them and their cause for the sake of my sick and intrinsically disordered behavior. This was the most painful event in my life to date. I spent days in a fetal position in bed, crying, paralyzed with grief. I also became very angry. My source family had not allowed me to be angry most of my life. Now I had a good reason. Sharon and I did not speak more than a few angry words in the following seven years. I was able to speak to Hesper and Aaron in a limited, ongoing way. I stayed very angry.

In 1988, after practicing for three years, I was listening to Zen Master Seung Sahn give a dharma talk and answer questions. I asked him if I should continue sending money to my ex-wife for child support. In my opinion she used the money mostly for bad teaching and I was helping her. I explained my emotions to Zen Master Seung Sahn and asked him "What should I do?"

Zen Master Seung Sahn's reply was this: sending money or not made no difference, my job as a father was for my children to know my mind. I must do that. My ex-wife and I shared much karma, lots of ex-sex, emotions, betrayals, love and anger. If I bowed 500 times a day for 100 days and chanted Kwan Seum Bosal 3,000 times a day, my ex-wife would bow to me and ask, "What can I do for you?" No problem.

My mind and Zen Master Seung Sahn's mind became the same. I said OK and started to do this. The next day I could hardly walk. In an interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn I explained I could not do this special practice. He said, "You are a young man! (36 years old.) I am old! I bow 500 times a day, so can you." He shamed me into doing it. Gradually, in about three weeks, I was able to bow and chant this special practice. Soon my "I don't want to chant" karma appeared, so I stopped chanting but continued to bow. It took 123 days to complete the practice.

As the days passed, I became less and less angry. I was clearer with my husband, Simon. I perceived my children more clearly and they listened more to me. I had regular conversations with Sharon about important issues. I felt calmer. My direction began to appear. I sent money, no problem. A few weeks after the practice was over I began working in my studio on a painting that became a breakthrough piece. I experienced a calm freedom and courage in the studio that I never had before.

Sharon met someone and in a year was engaged. She was friendly and understanding towards me. She remarried. I became more realistic and aware of my painting career and possible alternatives in my life. In short, Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching changed my life in a fundamental way. I cannot go back regardless of how difficult the practice becomes. ☉