

joining in

THE CRIES OF THE UNIVERSE

*Zen Master Soeng Hyang
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In January 2003, I began a hundred-day solitary retreat. It was my third such retreat and I had waited seventeen years for the opportunity to practice this way again.

The silence and the retreat schedule were the two pillars that supported me for the hundred days. My cabin sat among evergreens and oaks and they generously sheltered me. I felt grateful for the silence, a silence which included sounds such as the ticking from the wood stove, the hoots of owls, a squeaking pump, the crunch of footsteps, and the wind. These types of sounds were all I heard for one hundred days. The schedule was divided into five sessions. Each session included 108 prostrations, hatha yoga, chanting and meditation.

Another vital support was the simple diet I ate every day—seaweed, squash, beans and rice, fruit, nuts, spice tea. These foods were much more than enough and reminded me again how unnecessary and burdening is excess.

Before entering this retreat, many people asked me, “Why?” To my Zen friends I would say, “To strengthen my practice.” If I was speaking

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to one of my coworkers at the hospice, I would say, “I need to pull off the road and rest” (nurses understand that metaphor). For myself, I completely trusted the practice handed down to me by Zen Master Seung Sahn.

The first twenty-one days were the most difficult physically. I started out with thirty extra pounds of body weight and was not in a condition to do all those prostrations and the hours of sitting, cutting and chopping wood, cleaning and washing clothes, hauling water and cooking. (Those are the activities that make up my version of pulling off the road.)

But after twenty-one days, my legs stopped aching and my effort felt like it started to carry me, instead of my carrying it. The hardest thing for me—it always has been—was the sitting. I wanted to get up and do something: wash the floor, do more yoga, find another dead oak to saw down. I knew one of the reasons I sent myself to the cabin was to learn to sit quietly and let go of the restlessness.

One of the five sessions started at midnight. The alarm would go off in the dark silence. I'd put on socks and pants, stoke the fire and start bowing. All warmed up, I'd then do yoga. A single candle lit up the entire cabin. At midnight, it seemed to take less effort to sit than during the other sessions, probably because I thought there was nothing else to do. My practice was to ask, “What am I?”—to relax and allow the “not knowing” to be enough. The key to awakening is just allowing and resting. Just this.

So practicing in that way every day allowed this tired, overweight, middle-aged woman to remember to have gratitude for it all.

During the third week, I had what seems to have been my last menstrual period. I experienced the most severe contractions and abundant bleeding I'd ever had, except for the time my first baby miscarried at six months.

At 2 a.m., forty-nine days into the retreat, I read this quote from the mystic poet Rumi: “This rain-weeping and sun-burning twine together to help us grow. Keep your intelligence white-hot and your grief glistening, so your life will stay fresh.” I climbed into my sleeping bag, and with a warm brick on my stomach, I cried. Away from all my family and responsibilities, away from schedules, expectations and distractions, I felt a depth of grief I have never felt before. There was something about being cradled in the sleeping bag, the cabin, the woods, and this Buddhist practice that allowed me to cry until my heart ached. But because of the tremendous support of the retreat, I didn't need to protect myself or anyone else—there was no self.

We have all heard the directive to “go with it”—to go with whatever feelings come up for us in our lives. Well, that night I went with it with no brakes applied until I very naturally coasted into Kwan Seum Bosal, the ancient chant that simply means, “Listen to the cries of the universe.” Just listen. There is no “my grief” or “your grief.” Grief becomes just grief. Grief brings us to awakening, brings us to our vow, our vow to wake up and listen. That night I finally forgave myself for not being able to hold my baby until she was old enough to breathe on her own. I realized her breathing has really never started or stopped. Here was white-hot intelligence and glistening grief. Here was Kwan Seum Bosal. How may I help?

We can't “make” these moments of recognition or resolution in our lives. But we can practice with the difficulties. And we can take some time out of our entrenched, habit-forced life to sit with silence and let it bring us home to our wisdom. ☸

