

Who is Singing in Chinese?

Notes from a 100-Day Lay Practice Period
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Ten years ago, when the Madison sangha was getting its start, our director urged us to participate in the “Heart Kyol Che,” a personal commitment to additional practice done in support of Kyol Che, the traditional three-month winter and summer practice periods. She would distribute colored paper forms on which we could record our practice intention, pass pencils or pens around, and then wait. There was some pressure there. I felt resentful at this exercise, telling myself, “I’m already doing as much as I can!” I would dutifully jot something on the form, tuck it away, and then pitch it into the trash when I got home. I have to smile when I recall that our very demanding group practice in those days consisted of chanting the Heart Sutra and ten minutes of sitting meditation—that was it!

Ten years later, our group hosts an annual seven-day retreat. And yet, until recently, I had never considered doing a 30, 90 or 100-day Kyol Che or retreat. Such exertions, I figured, were the province of monks and nuns, or spiritual athletes—or at least, practitioners younger than me. Besides, I had a wife, a 20-year career, a mortgage and a car payment, and ran a Zen center. When was I going to have the opportunity to get away for a hundred days? Probably not until retirement, if even then.

But then, my dharma sister, mentor, and friend Margaret McKenzie of the Ten Directions Zen Community undertook a traditional 100-day solo retreat in the north woods of Wisconsin. There was something deeply empowering about her efforts, and it didn’t hurt that she was a few years older than me. A small photograph of her retreat cabin became a source of inspiration. At intervals during her 100 days, I would sit down on my mat and cushion and think, “I am practicing with Margaret.”

So when our guiding teacher, Thom Pastor JDPSN, gave me instructions for a 100-day practice period, to be done within the context of a layperson’s life of family, job, and Zen center, I thought, “Okay, this is possible. If Margaret can do it, then so can I.”

The practice elements for this “retreat” were—what else?—daily vows, bowing, sitting, chanting, mantra practice, and perhaps a little reading from the works of Zen Master Seung Sahn. Although the elements and amounts were prescribed, their scheduling was left up to me, subject to a single rule: “Every day get up at the same time—no vacations!” Because preparing for work, commuting, and work itself already accounted for the hours from 6:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., the first practice session would run from 4:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m., with wake-up at 3:45 a.m. With minor adjustments for

family obligations after work, the second practice session would run from about 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. During the “intensive week” beginning on day fifty of the retreat, a fifth hour of daily practice would be added, from midnight to 1:00 a.m.

While all of this seemed a bit daunting, Pastor PSN offered simple, clear encouragement: “Just do the practice one day at a time. You’ll soon settle into a rhythm.”

The retreat began on a Wednesday at 3:45 a.m. By Saturday morning, I was reeling with exhaustion, wondering how I could carry on. I laid down for a mid-morning nap, and instead of sleep, some special energy appeared. Although not the point of our practice, this experience seemed to offer some encouragement, and after that, fatigue was much less of a problem. By the end of the first week, the retreat had settled, as Pastor PSN had predicted, into a very steady rhythm.

For the most part, the retreat was uneventful. My wife, Marilyn, shouldered many additional responsibilities without complaint, and cheerfully followed the retreat schedule in her own way, more than once nudging me in the ribs at midnight or 3:45 a.m. so I would not oversleep. When we took our walks together, she would ask me how things were going. Bowing, chanting, sitting, mantra... there wasn’t much to say! Some days were marked by sleepiness, and other days not.

And yet, some interesting things happened during the hundred days. One practice element that I particularly valued was special chanting. When the retreat began, my father had been in a Florida nursing home for three months, dying of cancer and a dozen other ailments. During special chanting each evening, I would visualize Dad, dedicate the Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra and Kwan Seum Bosal chanting to him, and offer an intention for relief of his suffering. Any initial self-consciousness over chanting within earshot of Marilyn had long since been dispelled, and I would practice very strongly for Dad, banging away on the moktak and singing at the top of my lungs. Of course, Dad knew nothing of this, but I hoped that it might somehow be helpful to him and others.

Thirty-three days into the practice period, Marilyn and I were called down to Florida to see Dad one last time before he died. All of his life, Dad had been known for his strong, clear mind and photographic memory, which had hardly diminished, even at the age of 99. When we entered his room at the nursing home, he recognized us and warmly greeted us by name. Although still clear, his consciousness was moving in and out of the room, one moment with us, and in another moment, engaged elsewhere.

We had only been seated a minute or two when he called loudly from the bed, “*Will there be singing, after?*” The conversation with my mother flagged, and in the next moment Dad stunned us all into silence by

calling out clearly, “*Who is singing in Chinese?*” It was then that I explained to Mom, and later to my brothers and their wives, that for the past 33 days I had been chanting in Sino-Korean for Dad’s benefit. Friends later suggested that this Kwan Seum Bosal practice had accompanied me into the room. Of course, none of these “explanations” really explain anything. As I found myself later telling a dharma friend to whom I recounted this story, if we think we understand this life, then we are not keeping a sufficiently broad view.

Not long after returning home from Florida, the retreat “intensive week” began. This “special energy” practice from midnight to one a.m. had been an object of both anticipation and dread for me. When I described it to my twin brother, Darrell, a longtime practitioner and teacher in the Karma Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism, he joked, “Isn’t that just like Asian people to call it ‘special energy practice,’ when what they *really* mean is ‘low energy practice!’”

But in fact, this practice was anything but low energy. From the first night, the amount of energy and focus available was remarkable: no effort was required. On the second night I was slowly walking and doing mantra practice. Pastor PSN had instructed me to do five repetitions of the mantra for each bead on the mala. It soon appeared that something was “sticking” to the fourth and fifth repetitions of the mantra. When I “turned” my attention to look at this, several things happened at once: a wave passed through me, every hair on my body stood up, sweat broke out, and water came out of my eyes; in the mind’s eye there appeared a postage-stamp-sized image, as if in the corner of an enormous empty page: a boy trapped in a cage.

One of the verses we study says, “Just seeing is Buddha-nature.” In the act of just seeing this image and experiencing the energy that accompanied it, the image dissolved, and in its wake arose feelings of surprise, gratitude, freedom. As I continued to walk and do mantra, it was then possible to clearly “just see” the door to my meditation room, the desk, the chair, the bookcase, and so on.

This 100-day practice period was a wonderful gift. What began as an apparent exercise in willpower soon became an opportunity to set aside all superficial notions of willpower, difficulty or ease, likes or dislikes, to simply engage the practice one day at a time, one mantra at a time, one moment at a time. In approaching the cushion twice a day, what should have seemed incredibly repetitious soon became surprisingly fresh and untouched by habit. And in trying, again and again, to relate to a seemingly impersonal and impenetrable mantra, it became possible to penetrate deeply into the most personal and intimate of experiences, to make this practice truly my own. For that I am grateful to Thom Pastor JDPSN, to my wife Marilyn, and to all our teachers. 