

WITHOUT WORK IS

WITHOUT EATING

*At the retreat for dharma teachers last year, Jess Row presented his translation of a section of Zen Master Baek Jang's temple rules. What follows emerges from a dharma talk that I gave later at the Chogye International Zen Center of New York about Jess's translation.*

*Zen Master Wu Kwang*

Baek Jang (Baizhang), 720-814, is well known for a story about work practice. Until his edict, Chinese monks and their monasteries were supported mostly by a patronage system relying on donors or by begging. Baek Jang established work in the fields as part of the monastic practice. It is said that everyday when the signal was given for the work period, Baek Jang was the first to run into the fields with his tools, leading the charge, so to speak. When he became old his attendants thought he shouldn't work anymore; they hid his tools from him because they knew that he wouldn't stop voluntarily. When Baek Jang saw that his tools were gone, he sat down and refused to eat. After a few days the attendants realized that the old boy was going to starve himself to death so they returned his tools to him. This story gave rise to the Zen maxim attributed to Baek Jang, "A day without work is a day without eating."

Our temple rules posit that there are two kinds of work: inside work and outside work. Inside work is keeping clear mind; outside work is cutting off desires and helping others.

Baek Jang's rules include what is believed to be the first formal presentation on sitting Zen. Because this section is very short, you might zip through it and miss a lot of what is being alluded to.

I would like to group the stanzas into sections. It seems to me that the first two stanzas go together: They say, "Now, to study the Prajna-paramita means to take up the great heart of compassion and expand our vows and intentions. This is the precious practice of samadhi we vow to undertake for all beings." You could say that these two sentences are an overview to explain why we practice Zen meditation.

In Mahayana Buddhism the Bodhisattva path is comprised of six paramitas. The word paramita usually connotes transcendental acts, but transcendental here doesn't mean something otherworldly or above it all. If you are practicing correctly, what is transcended is the notion of a separate subject and object or practitioner and practice.

The first of the paramitas is called dana paramita, which is the practice of generosity—generosity of spirit or giving. The last of these six is prajna paramita. *Prajna* literally means wisdom. When Baek Jang says, "Now, to study the prajna paramita," by "study" he doesn't mean, "We'll take a look in

the Heart Sutra and study it intellectually line by line." That is not his intent. From a Zen standpoint to study means to become one with something.

Some people say that all six paramitas are really only one but that six are mentioned because they are different aspects of one unified practice.

Sometimes the paramita of generosity is said to be the main one. Others say the wisdom paramita, the prajna paramita, is the main one. But actually the two go together. For example prajna, wisdom, means to see into things as they are. As we say in the Heart Sutra, "Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva when practicing deeply the Prajna-paramita perceives that all five skandhas are empty and is saved from all suffering and distress." "Five skandhas" refer to the ways we usually conceive of ourselves as being individuals. In practicing deeply, looking into, investigating, Avalokitesvara (Kwan Seum Bosal) perceives that there is really nothing that we can call a solid self, a substantial individual. Because of that, later in the sutra we recite, "no fears exist." If you perceive that what you usually hold on to tightly—your conception of yourself as an individual—does not really exist the way we tend to think it does, then you have nothing to lose and nothing to guard. If you have nothing to lose and nothing to guard, then generosity of spirit manifests itself. So prajna paramita and the great heart of compassion are really two aspects of the same thing. Baek Jang says, "to study the Prajna-paramita means to take up the great heart of compassion and expand our vows and intentions." Then what are our vows and intentions? They are to realize our true self and to do something to help—the heart of compassion and seeing clearly.

Baek Jang then says, "This is the precious practice of samadhi we vow to undertake for all beings." Samadhi is interpreted differently in various traditions. The usual connotation of samadhi is a kind of deep, deep concentration. According to some traditions, if you are in that deep state of concentration you wouldn't hear that [*points outside where there is a siren in the street*]; you wouldn't see this [*points to the floor*]; you wouldn't know anything.

Once, I remember Zen Master Seung Sahn saying, "Zen is not so much interested in samadhi." What he meant is that our practice is not really focused on developing a deep, deep state of absorption and interiorization. In *The Compass of Zen*, Zen Master Seung Sahn says:

*True beauty comes from our not-moving mind. In Sanskrit, it is called samadhi. . . . Samadhi is simply our pure, original nature. If your mind is not moving, everything is beautiful, just as it is. . . . When you keep a strong not-moving mind in any activity, you can perceive the true beauty of this ordinary world because you can see things exactly as they are. You can digest your understanding so that it becomes wisdom.*

The most important thing, according to Zen Master Seung Sahn, is to keep a not-moving mind, from moment to moment. Actually, that is the true meaning of samadhi.

At the recent Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference held in Singapore, a Theravadan monk was invited to be a guest speaker. In one of his talks he described the various levels of absorption that are delineated in his scriptures: "You go

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deeper and deeper into your mind; you don't hear anything; you don't see anything; the sense of an individual self dissolves . . ." and on and on until, "in the end there is just the sense of contentment." At that point in his talk, Zen Master Soeng Hyang leaned over to me and said, "Is that all?"

Baek Jang says, "This is the precious practice of samadhi we vow to undertake for all beings." That is the direction of our practice as he sets out here.

In the next three sentences he says, "Don't conceive of the body only as a way to seek to solve or alleviate problems, or as a means to escape. Abandon all reasons of wanting to rest; let go of your ten thousand thoughts. Use the body and mind together as a means of paying attention, in an undivided way, without quantifying, even while drinking and eating; pay close attention even while sleeping."

In his first sentence he says, "Don't conceive of the body only as a way to seek to solve or alleviate problems, or as a means of escape." In our temple rules it is said, "Though you may eat good food all your life, your body will die." How is the body related to spiritual practice? From this vantage point the body is viewed as a raft, as something that helps us cross over the ocean of life and death.

Then Baek Jang says, "Abandon all reasons of wanting to rest; let go of your ten thousand thoughts."

"Abandon all reasons of wanting to rest." In the evening before going to sleep, you made the intention to practice samadhi for all beings, but early in the morning as the alarm clock goes off, you have several reasons why you need more rest. Here he says abandon them.

An alternate translation of this line would be, "Abandon all reasons of wanting to put the ten thousand thoughts to rest." If you hold on to an idea such as, "I should put my mind to rest," you taint or color the purity of your practice. You have to let go of any conceptual reason for practicing.

At their first kong-an interview, we often have beginning students read a short paragraph from the Hua-yen (Avatamsaka) Sutra. The paragraph is printed in *The Compass of Zen*. It says, "If you want to understand the realm of Buddhas, keep a mind that is clear like space. Let all thinking and external desires fall far away. Let your mind go anyplace with no hindrance." If you abandon all reasons of wanting to put the ten thousand thoughts to rest, then the ten thousand thoughts are no hindrance. This is a very important point.

The third sentence about the body says, "Use the body and mind together as a means of paying attention in an undivided way, without quantifying, even while drinking and eating; pay close attention even while sleeping."

To "Use the body and mind together" means that, from the point of Zen practice, body and mind are not two separate things. In some spiritual traditions the body is viewed as your enemy, but here Baek Jang says, "Use body and mind together."

The full sentence is "Use body and mind together as a means of paying attention in an undivided way." Jess writes in a footnote that the word he translates here as "to pay attention" may also be read as "to investigate." Paying attention means to really look into, to investigate, to mobilize your curiosity. You should try to do that in an undivided way without quantifying. That means don't make good and bad. Don't make better and worse. As Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, "Don't check your practice." The usual

tendency is to think, "Oh, today my meditation was not so good. Yesterday it was better. Maybe tomorrow . . ." Don't quantify or qualify. The Sixth Patriarch said to the monk Hae Myung, "Don't make good and bad." At that time what is Hae Myung's original face?

Here Baek Jang says that this practice of paying attention or investigating, looking into, is not only done while sitting. Do it "even while drinking and eating; pay close attention [investigate] even while sleeping." Some Zen schools, like the later generations of the Linji tradition, make a big deal about this: "Can you keep your kong-an even while dreaming or when you are in deep sleep?" Some people become rather obsessive about this: "Can I do that? Has my practice matured that much yet?" Don't make a big deal out of it. Essentially, what Baek Jang is saying here is that if you practice something over and over again for a long time—paying attention, investigating, and looking into things—then little by little that practice permeates your consciousness on deeper and deeper levels. (After a while, something of that practice is going on even while you are asleep.) This happens no matter whether you practice trying to be present and aware, working on a kong-an, or repeating a mantra. You may observe this phenomena in a fellow-practitioner who has done mantra practice for a long time. When your conversation with him or her ends, his or her lips begin to move silently. It's not that they have purposely picked up the mantra. It's that they have been doing it for so long that when their mind isn't doing anything else—pchhht!—the mantra reappears. It's the same with kong-an practice or questioning. So don't make a big deal about "Can I keep my kong-an while I'm asleep?"

We now come to the part about the actual form of sitting. There are several sentences here that go together: "When you are sitting, seek a point of tranquil, thoughtful attention over all present phenomena. Sit cross-legged or half cross-legged. Put your left palm over the right. Put the two thumbs together. Sit with your body upright. Square your ears with the tops of your shoulders. Align your nose with your navel. Your tongue should be propped on your teeth. Your eyes should be slightly open. Avoid falling asleep. If you attain Zen practice your strength will increase to the utmost. The great practicing monks of old always kept their eyes open. Zen Master Faxu laughed at people who closed their eyes while sitting Zen. He called this a black mountain spirit cave. Heed this deep and profound statement."

The first sentence says, "When you are sitting, seek a point of tranquil, thoughtful attention over all present phenomena." Baek Jang is emphasizing two things: Find some degree of tranquility, calmness, and stability, but also there has to be thoughtful attention. By "thoughtful" he doesn't mean thinking about things. He means that while on the one hand you should seek to calm down and become tranquil, you ought at the same time to pay attention and look into all present phenomena carefully. "All present phenomena" refers to whatever is occurring moment by moment by moment. Just let that appear with a certain sense of tranquility and openness. Be awake. Pay attention.

The advice offered about this by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, is, "To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him." So give your thoughts some space, allow yourself to calm down, attend, perceive.

Then Baek Jang enjoins us to, “Sit cross-legged or half cross-legged. Put the left palm over the right. Put the two thumbs together.” You could say this is as much yoga as you are going to get in Zen practice. He is essentially talking about what in Sanskrit is called asana: how to assume the correct posture for sitting. He tells us, “Sit cross-legged or half cross-legged.” That probably means sit in the full lotus pose or the half-lotus pose.

“Place the left palm over the right and the two thumbs together.” Some people emphasize exactly where your hands should rest but he doesn’t specify that here. If you were sitting in the full lotus pose your hands would rest on your heels so they would probably be touching your lower abdomen. This hand position is sometimes referred to as the cosmic mudra. It represents a kind of round completeness. From a yoga standpoint mudra has to do with mind and energy. Whatever part of your body you place the *mudra* on receives energy and mind-attention from it. Baek Jang may be implying that your attention rests in your lower belly, but he doesn’t state that overtly.

In the next sentence he says, “Sit with your body upright.” This is probably the main point. Whether you can achieve the full lotus pose or the half-lotus pose or no lotus pose at all or you have to sit in a chair, the main thing is to keep your body upright, take charge of yourself. Sit as if you were a big mountain that is solid and not moving.

He continues, “Square your ears with the tops of your shoulders.” Some people even say tuck your chin in slightly, but he doesn’t say that here.

“Square the ears with the tops of your shoulders. Align your nose with your navel.” It is all very obvious; if you are sitting upright these things happen naturally. You don’t have to make a big deal about them.

“Your tongue should be propped on your teeth. Your eyes should be slightly open.” Tongue propped on your teeth means that the tip of your tongue touches the place where the roof of your mouth and the teeth come together. If you are sitting still and paying attention with your mouth closed, your tongue will pretty much find that place naturally. You will see this mentioned both in instructions for Indian yoga and in Chinese Taoist yoga. It has something to do with connecting energy circuits in your body. But even if your tongue is not touching the inside of your teeth and your mouth is hanging wide open, if you are paying attention your energy will be unified. So really these are aids more than the heart of the matter. But we can use all the help we can get.

Baek Jang informs us, “If you attain Zen practice your strength will increase to the utmost.” Here he does not mean that you will become King Kong. By “strength” he probably means that if your practice of Zen meditation matures you will have a sense of patience and confidence and, as it says in the Vimalakirti Sutra, you will attain tolerance of the inconceivable. What is tolerance of the inconceivable? When you resolutely keep “Don’t know,” you have to have a certain inner support to be with not knowing, to be with uncertainty, and to exercise curiosity towards that. A certain kind of strength of character develops from that.

In his last directive about sitting it wasn’t enough for him to say, “Your eyes should be slightly open.” Instead he says, “The great practicing monks of old always kept their

eyes open. Zen Master Faxu laughed at people who closed their eyes while sitting. He called this a black mountain spirit cave. Heed this deep and profound statement.” I think he is again emphasizing the point that Zen practice is not particularly interested in cultivating an obsessive, indrawn tranquility that loses touch with the actuality of things. What we are more interested in is that somehow [*hits floor with stick*] inside and outside are recognized not to be two, not to be separate.

Sitting Zen is sometimes referred to as keeping a not-moving mind. At the end of the Platform Sutra the Sixth Patriarch mentions this business about not-moving mind:

*Sentient beings can move;  
Inanimate objects are stationary.  
If you want to find true “not-moving”  
It’s a non-moving mind in our everyday life.*

...

*If we don’t practice this way we are like an inanimate  
object and cannot become Buddha.  
Those who can distinguish all forms without at-  
tachment have attained the highest form of not-  
moving.*

The Sixth Patriarch is making the point that Zen is not just about attaining something in the meditation posture. True “not moving” is actualized in every activity of daily life.

He says the highest form of this “not-moving” is to distinguish all forms without attachment. If you think about what is meant by distinguish, you might find that there a number of aspects to it. The first would be that if you [*hits floor*] attain this mind then “Sky is sky; ground is ground.” That’s a wide kind of seeing or distinguishing. But if you go further, then sky is not just sky and ground is not just ground—sky is blue; ground is brown. There is another aspect of distinguishing which the Japanese teacher Dogen emphasized. He said, “That we like flowers and don’t like weeds is also Buddha’s activity.” What he means is that to have preferences is not unnatural. Human beings have preferences. So to like flowers and not to like weeds is also Buddha’s activity. But then he says something else, “Even though we like flowers, still they will fall. Even though we don’t like weeds, still they will spring up.” If you can distinguish in that way, then that is the highest form of not-moving mind. Rather than grasping and tightly creating suffering, you accept everything as it is: changing, changing, changing.

After Baek Jang has made his statement about not closing your eyes and entering into the dark cave, he says, “Don’t concern yourself with good and evil. Set out to achieve attainment just now. Lasting attainment has no taste, does not fall away, does not scatter. Ten thousand years with one intention: not short, not long. This is the only technique needed for sitting Zen.”

“Don’t concern yourself with good and evil. Set out to achieve attainment just now.” “Just now” means moment mind. Don’t add anything to it. We all have this tendency. Something emerges in the moment and then we begin to

add something to it. As soon as we begin to add something to it, we start making a sense of before and after, better and worse, or inside and outside. Then we are no longer just in the moment experiencing things as they are. Baek Jang urges us to set out to achieve attainment just now, without making comparisons.

“Lasting attainment has no taste, does not fall away, does not scatter.” This sentence is very interesting: Some forty years ago a friend of mine was studying martial arts when, one day, the Sensei took his students to an Asian restaurant. At that time the students were unfamiliar with Asian food, so when the Sensei ordered tofu they asked, “What does it taste like?” The Sensei answered by saying, “Taste it and see.” Someone tasted it and said, “Sensei, it has no taste!” “No,” replied the Sensei, “It has ten thousand tastes.” As Baek Jang says, “Lasting attainment has no taste.” That means it is like clear water. But it can mix with everything and anything.

I think what he is emphasizing here is that practicing is not about having a particular experience. A particular experience will have taste: blissful taste, calm taste, peaceful taste, exciting taste, some kind of taste. If you are just practicing then you are not interested so much in any particular experience as compared with any other particular experience. You are cultivating a way of being, a way of relating to yourself and to the world you find yourself embedded in, moment by moment by moment. He says this kind of attainment has no taste, does not fall away, and does not scatter. “Does not fall away and does not scatter” is a way of saying it is reliable.

Now Baek Jang makes another very interesting statement: “Ten thousand years with one intention: not short, not long. This is the only technique needed for sitting Zen.”

Ten thousand years is [*hits the floor with stick*] this moment just now. And this moment [*hits floor again*] is ten thousand years. Not short; not long. As soon as you start relating to practice as, “It will take a long time to get somewhere,” you are not keeping one intention anymore. You are making something else. “Ten thousand years with one intention,” is similar to Zen Master Seung Sahn’s short but famous maxim: “Try try try for ten thousand years nonstop—why not?!”

The next three lines go together: “Sitting Zen is the dharma entrance to peace and joy. There are many who fall ill and fail to realize their intention. To realize your intention and self-nature is the fourth great serenity. It is to have a brilliant spirit, clear and hopeful.” This is a brief advertisement from our sponsor: “Sitting Zen is the dharma entrance to peace and joy.” But “there are many who fall ill,” go off somehow, and don’t “realize their intention.” If you stick to your intention and realize your intention and self-nature, this is the fourth great serenity. In his footnote Jess opines, “‘Fourth great serenity’ can also be read as ‘four great serenities.’ In either case, it is not clear what Baek Jang is referring to.” There must have been some classification of serenities, but it has been lost. In any case, if you practice you will find a certain kind of serenity; your spirit will be bright and clear; there will be a certain kind of hopefulness, because if you are not holding onto anything there is nothing to be despairing about.

Toward the end Baek Jang says, “The flavor of the dharma is natural stillness and constant illumination of the spirit. It is to awaken from a deep sleep and realize that life and death are exactly the same.” The point that he is emphasizing is that in original mind there is already the quality of natural stillness and brightness or illumination or clarity. The aim of any practice we take on is not to create some kind of stillness or illumination or clarity. Our practice is really just to reconnect us, to recollect what we already have, which is natural stillness and a continuous clarity or perception or illumination. To recognize that is to wake up from a deep sleep and realize that appearing and disappearing, coming and going, life and death, are all of the same fabric.

He concludes: “But you must control your mind without the intention of gaining anything. Otherwise I fear that along the Way great devils will distract even the strongest practitioner.” The most important part is to practice with an attitude of non-gaining, to practice with a not-gaining mind. If you set up an idea of something you want to gain through practice, then you will miss what is already emerging moment by moment by moment. You must control your mind but without the intention of gaining anything. You could add here, maybe, “of gaining anything in particular.” “If you keep these thoughts foremost in your mind, nothing will detain you.”

Does anyone have a question?

Question: When you said, “You must control your mind but without the intention of gaining anything,” and that one can add “gaining anything in particular,” are you saying that a bit of a feeling of wanting to gain something in general wouldn’t be contradictory to the spirit of what Baek Jang is saying?

A: What is it you want to gain?

Q: [*hits floor*]

A: Then you already have it.

Q: Well, that and some other things too!

A: Yes. No doubt. [*Laughter*]

Question: I think that she wants to gain a clearer understanding of what Baek Jang is saying.

A: Yes. He starts with “Now, to study the Prajnaparamita [which would be a clear understanding means to take up the great heart of compassion and expand our vows. This is the precious practice of samadhi we undertake for all beings.” That is what we want to gain. And maybe, secondarily, a good job and a good relationship and, you know, the rest of it. But what is foremost is “I want to understand myself and realize my connection to everything else.” If you attain that over and over again, then many other things fall into place. But if you try to gain something in particular, especially if you keep what you are trying to gain in mind as you are practicing, you will be deterred from clear and pure practice. You won’t have the “no taste.” You will have a particular thing you want. On the other hand, with this point [*hits floor*] there is nothing to gain, nothing to lose. Gaining and losing are concepts, opposites. If you [*hits floor*] return here, then you perceive that you already have what you need. ☸