

Ten Thousand Demons and Ten Thousand Buddhas

Zen Master Wu Bong

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Years ago, in 1973, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked me to do a 100-day retreat. That was kind of a big thing. I had never done anything longer than one week in my life in terms of retreats. It was kind of like jumping into a swimming pool without having a swimming lesson. Just to make it more interesting, he told me, “One of three things will happen. Either you will die—that’s the worst thing that can happen. Or you become crazy. Maybe that’s not so bad. Or, you get your wish!”

So I said, “Oh? It’s like some kind of magic? I can have a wish and I get my wish?”

He said, “Yes, you get your wish. Practice means you can get anything.”

I said, “OK, that sounds good.” So I went to do the retreat.

During the retreat, many things were happening. Actually, looking back on it, I clearly got the second thing out of three. I think if there are any psychologists here they would certainly say it was pretty psychotic if I told them about my experiences at that time. Then the middle of the retreat came, which is actually—I understand much better about these things now—is the worst time. The worst time. I was completely bonkers by then. This was a solo retreat, so no contact with anybody, no smart phones in those days, no computer, no internet, no newspapers, no radio, no television. I had a window in the little retreat house and the window looked toward a temple that was a little bit

below. What I did, just so I wouldn’t be tempted to go and look at the people and so on, I covered up the window. So I was kind of cut off from everything.

But in the middle of the retreat, I got a letter. Somebody slipped a letter under the door. I opened it, and it was a letter from Zen Master Seung Sahn. He sent me a poem.

The beginning was very nice. It said:

Great man goes on a hundred-day retreat. (I thought, OK, so far very good!)

Then he continued:

He makes ten thousand demons and ten thousand Buddhas.

I thought wow, he really understands what this retreat is about. Because I saw so many really crazy things for most of the time, I was just terrified. It was so strange, what was happening. It was scary.

And then it went on, and at the end he asked me a kong-an. He ended this thing with the “dropping ashes on the Buddha” kong-an.

So I was thinking about this today because I wanted to talk a little bit about practice and encourage people to do as much

formal practice as possible. As Zen students, we understand everything can be our practice, and we try to do that. Especially most of my life I was practicing as a layperson. In fact, all the monks that you see here were laypeople at one point or another. So I understand well. I had a family, I had several businesses. I understand how difficult it is and



how complicated and how messy things can become. In the midst of this, we're supposed to be clear. Sometimes it's not so easy. What I notice, especially with older students who actually sooner or later get some ability to deal with all these complications in life, this idea appears: "Everything's practicing! So no matter what I do I'm already practicing! I don't need retreat. I don't need to go to Providence Zen Center for a one-week retreat. I don't need more kong-ans, I already understand many kong-ans. I got the idea, I don't need kong-an practice, I don't need sitting. Just continue as I'm doing. My family life, that's very high-class practice."

The problem with that is it's really true in a way. This kind of thinking is not bad. Ultimately, that's the ideal, that's the true way. But thinking like that or talking like that and actually really 100 percent *doing* like that is not the same thing. As we say, the tongue has no bone. It is easy to say but very difficult to do.

The reason I told this retreat story is that it was a crucial moment in my own practice. Just like the story we heard about Zen Master Seung Sahn: he went to do this retreat when he was very young, and several times he packed, he was ready to leave, and then he didn't leave. I had exactly same experience. I didn't pack, but several times I decided, "Tomorrow I'm gonna go." But then tomorrow came, and "OK, today I stay, but tomorrow I will leave!"

I remember clearly one incident. There was an airplane flying very low. This is kind of shameful, but I admit to this: I really thought, "Wouldn't it be cool if he just hit this little house, just did enough damage that I would have to leave! And I could leave with a clear conscience! No choice, yah?" But the airplane, I guess he was circling around looking at some views, and then went on and—"well, there's always tomorrow. Tomorrow I will leave."

I did this long practice and, it wasn't right away, I didn't know immediately, but eventually I realized this had completely turned my practice around in some ways. Because I always had many, many obstacles. From the beginning, I liked Zen very much. On an intellectual level, it was great. When I met Seung Sahn Sunim it was like a dream come true. This was the kind of teaching that suited me very well, but I couldn't do Zen practice at all. I wasn't able to practice. So I was in the Zen center, and he used some skillful means in the sense that he was teaching me in a dif-

ferent way, not classical Zen teaching. Not sitting, keeping don't-know, or walking and keeping don't-know, or whatever. I came from Tibetan Buddhism, so he used that and let me practice using some special kinds of practice, which were more yogic in nature, maybe just to keep me going, not to discourage me. I think if I had tried Zen practice the way we teach it nowadays, I wouldn't have lasted very long. But this retreat changed it all.

Then, slowly, as I went on, I noticed that practicing is not really a chore. It's not something hard. I can't remember when it happened, but at some point it really happened: practicing was great! It's joyful! It's fun! I discovered what I called the joy of practice. I don't think I'm unique, because I see around me, with practicing people, they have this kind of joy of practice. They may not call it that, may not talk about it, but they have it and they project it. That's why it's so nice, it's so comfortable, it doesn't matter if they're from the Zen tradition or another tradition. When you meet practicing people you can feel this inner joy.

So now the final thing. We talked a little bit about practice, so why is this important? Because this is the Whole World Is A Single Flower conference. I think when Zen Master Man Gong took a flower and dipped it in ink and then made this beautiful calligraphy which has inspired our meetings, this calligraphy, this statement, "The whole world is a single flower," points to something very wonderful. But it's not something that can happen without us taking part in it, without us realizing this single flower inside of ourselves.

So I'd like to quote something that a dear friend of our school used to like to say. His name was Maha Ghosananda. He was a Cambodian monk, a Theravadin monk. I think his statement was very wonderful. He said, "A man is practicing and practicing and practicing and finally gets a peaceful heart. He becomes a peaceful man, a man of peace. Then this man can make his family a peaceful family, a family of peace. All it takes is one person, then the whole family can become a peace family. Then one peace family can make a

peace community. Then a peace community can make the whole city become a peace city. Then the peace city can make the whole country become a peace country. Then this one country can make the world become a peace world." Amen. I'm quoting him, that's not original.

That's all I have to say, thank you very much. ♦

