

If We Stay Awake

Zen Master Wu Bong

One time when I was small child, I thought I would drown because I physically started to drown. At that time, I remember, I was intensely curious. What is it like? Well, I will die. What is it going to be like? I wasn't in a panic. I was actually feeling quite peaceful. And I had no inkling of practicing then at all. But to me it was like when I was a child reading about some exotic places, and I wanted to see them. It's like that.



When I was a young man, always at that time I was chasing after happiness. But no matter how fast I ran after happiness, always it was ahead of me—I could never reach it. Then I met my teacher, and my life changed. As part of my training, as part of my practice, since that time I have always been running away from happiness. But the problem is, no matter how fast I run, it is always catching up to me!

I looked at books: philosophy books, also religion books and psychology books, and among these books I found some books about Buddha's teaching. And Buddha's teaching made a big impression on me, because his teaching was not asking anybody to believe in anything special; in fact, I remember specifically one quotation where he was admonishing people not to believe something only because some great person said it, not to believe something only because some great book said it, not to believe something only because most people in society believe it, but he asked people to take anything—any of this stated or written or believed truth—and test it in their life. And only when one tests it in one's life, to one's own experience, only then if it really works, if one finds it to be really true, then one can believe it, accept it and say that it is the truth.

My friend Michael also told me, "You know? Just a couple of days ago I was in a supermarket and I met this Korean Buddhist monk." So he asked me, "Well, I have his address, do you want to go visit him tonight?" I said, "Not tonight, I cannot, but let's go tomorrow." The next day we got together and we went over to this address, which was in a ghetto area of Providence. That's how I met my Zen teacher with whom I have stayed since.

There was nothing special. He just looked like a nice monk, a nice man, very friendly, smiling, a little fat. He had these round glasses. But then, the first time we met, he sat

both Michael and me on the floor in the dharma room, and right then and there he explained the Zen circle to us. And it was great. It was wonderful teaching. I said, wow, that is great. This guy is really good.

Yes, I wanted to be a teacher. But at some point this wanting to be a teacher disappeared. And then I became a teacher. By the time he gave me inka I really didn't care. He asked me. I didn't push for it. I didn't ask

for it. It didn't seem to be important.

I have great confidence in my students' true self. That's correct. But mostly, I think what it means is that I try not to treat people like children. I don't look at them as children. They are adults. Adults are responsible for their own lives. And even when they make mistakes, when they do something wrong, that's their life, that's their practice, that's their experience.

I love my brother, but he made many mistakes in his life and he also got much suffering, and somebody once said to me, "Oh, your brother has so much suffering!" And I said, "Not enough. More necessary." This person was really angry at me: "Why did you say this? He is a nice man! Don't you like your brother?" I said, "No, quite the opposite: I said that because I love my brother. For him more suffering is necessary. So far the suffering he got is not enough: he still hasn't woken up."

I really believe in the power of practice. If you do it, that means someday you can really do it. And if you really do it, that is what the practice is about. It comes from experience. I have seen how it works, in working with people. I'm not so old, but you have to understand that I've been teaching in a formal way since 1984, so it's already 27 years, a nice chunk of experience! So that's where this confidence in practice comes from. I have seen how it changes people.

At university I came to the conclusion (this was my great "intellectual enlightenment") that we live in order to die properly. In a way, our life is a preparation for our death. I still think this is not a bad conclusion. There will come a culmination of this vehicle when we have to put it aside. If we want something or are attached to something, this process can be very painful. If we can stay awake, this process can be very wonderful. ♦

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Tomorrow Is Too Late

Zen Master Wu Bong

Nobody guarantees our life. So if there is anything that you think may be useful, just now is the time to use it. In our life, past mind cannot be attained. Present mind cannot be attained. If you say “present,” it is already not present, already gone. If you lose this moment, you can never regain it.

We follow Buddha’s example. Buddha means awakened. If you are going to awaken, tomorrow is too late. One hour from now is also too late. Even one second from now is too late. Just this moment, wake up. I hope each of you will make correct practice in your life and attain this wake-up. Then one more step is most important: use this wake-up to help all beings.

The only thing, the only true thing, that we ever have is this moment. The past we cannot touch. The future we cannot grasp. And if we try to catch the present, it’s already gone.

We do not need something special, some great teaching from someone. What we need to do is cultivate the question, the fire, that we all have within, and not let it go out. All the wisdom is already there.

Try, try, try. Do not check your feelings. Do not check your understanding. Can you swim? Yes, that is good. Could you swim the first time you entered water? So what happened in between not being able to swim and swimming? That’s right: practice. It is the same with saving all beings. Decide this, then try, try, try, and one day you will completely attain it.

Each time you are faced with this kong-an situation, it’s new. It’s just now. So it doesn’t matter if you answered before, or didn’t answer before. Even if you start thinking, “How did I answer before?” that’s already a mistake. It’s this moment. It’s new. Even if you had this question a hundred times, and you answered a hundred times, and you remember the answer, answer this moment. This moment is very important.

What is important is not small don’t know, what is important is big don’t know. If you have this great question, then this big don’t know will appear. This big don’t know means your mind becomes more clear, and when this mind becomes clear then everything becomes clear. Then correct action, correct speech, all can appear.

If you continue to return to this don’t know, then this don’t know will start to grow up. Then slowly, slowly your desire, anger and ignorance will become less and less and less. Then continue to practice, which means to continue to return to this don’t know, then one day—boom—infinite in time and infinite in space! Then you can say “Aha!” Everybody is getting older every moment; maybe soon this body will die. Before this body dies, one time this “Aha!” is necessary.



Everybody wants peace, but everybody wants my idea of peace. Then you cannot have peace. But when I take away my idea, then already the whole world is at peace.

You look at this wall, then you and the wall become one. You look at the sky, then the sky and you become one. That means: nothing in between. No I, my, me in between. That is very important, because in this world we have many problems. If we look at these problems, what causes them? If you go deeper and

deeper, then finally you find three things that are causing these problems: I, my, me.

I wish for you to make correct practicing in your life. Then moment by moment become more clear, and finally one day become completely clear, attain enlightenment and save all beings from suffering. And do it quickly!

Keeping a don’t know mind means cutting off all thinking. Cutting off all discursive thoughts takes us to the wellspring of our true nature and brings us to the present moment. What are you doing just now? Paying attention to this moment is what Zen practice is all about.

You take anything that you cannot do, then you try, try, try, and then you can do it. So today you cannot do this moment-to-moment, then you try, try, try, then you can do it. Actually already you can do it! Because you can do it for a few seconds, right? Can you do it for a few seconds? Just try. There you go. But even two seconds is not necessary. Even one second is too long. It is enough to keep clear just for one moment. Everybody can. One moment and then again one moment and then again one moment. Then many moments, then a whole day. This practice is very easy.

While there are many approaches to practicing, practicing with a sangha—together action—is the most powerful. It forces us to confront our limitations, which in turn helps us to overcome our limitations. In the Heart Sutra it says, “The Bodhisattva depends on Prajna Paramita and the mind is no hindrance; without any hindrance no fears exist.” This no fear is our human heritage. If you like this, then throw away all thinking; throw away all liking and disliking; throw away even the most profound understanding.

These words are just expedient means to help our life, to help our practice. The next step is to leave these words behind, and simply to do it.