

has enough. In fact, desire for fame usually means, “I am, and I want to be better than others.” Or, “I want to be great and admired.” This kind of attitude is easily ascribed to people who have high social position: artists, actors, athletes, politicians, celebrities and the like. But it doesn’t only refer to those kinds of people. Desire for fame often becomes a companion of every human being. It can be secretly hidden even in our spiritual path. Let me share with you a funny and ridiculous story.

Somewhere there was a monastery inhabited by many monks and guided by a highly respected abbot. He was really special: the pure embodiment of wisdom, compassion, humility and all noble virtues. At least it looked like this. He was the first one to help others, the last one to expect any profits, always ready to shoulder the hardest task and silently serve his fellows. Although he didn’t look like a sinner, he always liked doing repentance practices, apologizing often to everybody for everything. All monks loved and admired him and were happy to have such a teacher. In fact, he became famous not only in his monastery, but in the whole country. They thought he was a saint: a holy, fully enlightened man. The energy of inspiration radiated from him like the light from the sun.

But one day something strange happened. During the sermon, while preaching about the holy life, he said, “Please look at me! As far as humility is concerned, nobody can surpass me.”

And what happened? Kind of an earthquake, yes? In one moment, everything was turned upside down! They felt cheated, like buying a nice box of food and discovering that it is completely rotten. Even one drop of poison can make a whole pot of nutritious soup inedible.

Our practice and teaching always puts the essential question in front of us: “Why do you eat every day?” “When you do something, why do you do this?” “What kind of intention is your activity rooted in?” The problem of “I, my, me” mind is that it looks for happiness but finds only temporary satisfaction. It is unstable, weak and easy to destroy by external, impermanent circumstances. Fame easily becomes infamy. Success easily becomes defeat. Attachment to and constant desire for them make our minds crazy, never satisfied and always hurting others. That’s why Buddhism instructs us to meditate correctly and get insight into this old “I, my, me” habit. It is originally empty and doesn’t exist outside the deluded mind. When we realize its emptiness and delusion, desire for fame—and all other desires as well—loses its power and control over our lives. Dissatisfaction turns into complete mind. Our true self doesn’t need any acclaim or applause. It is always here and now, present and ready to help and love others. Then all beings reflect and return our love, and we are already bodhisattva celebrities without even knowing or being concerned about it. That’s correct fame!

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The Wheel of Food: Together Eat, Together Die

Namhee Chon JDPSN



Not long ago, I asked one young resident woman at the Zen Center Berlin, Sophie Vandenkercove, to give an introductory dharma talk. Since we both share a passion for making kefir, I suggested she talk about the fermentation process. She happily agreed and gave a beautiful speech about bodhisattva bacteria:

Since my wish to keep a pet at the Zen center could not be met, I am happy now to own kefir grains to raise. A kefir grain is a mixture of yeast and bacteria. It is white in color and has the shape of a mini-walnut. It needs to be fed with milk and must be kept in a warm place to feel well and to grow. So I take care of them. While they are growing, a process of fermentation takes place. At the same time, something

good happens to me: I get this delicious and nutritious kefir drink! These kefir grains most probably don’t think, “We want to keep clear mind and help other beings.” They are just naturally helpful, while they are doing what they do. And they do it without wanting to be someone or something else. Through them I realize the meaning of Zen Master Seung Sahn’s teaching: “If you are clear, you help the whole universe.” And thanks to them, I hear Zen Master Seung Sahn asking me strongly the question: “Why do you eat every day?”

Kefir grains are complete as they are and in what they do. We are the same, so long as we do not make anything special. So at this point everything is just simple and clear: If you are hungry, what do you do? Eat. If someone is hungry, then what? Give food to this person. Thus, eating food is dharma, and giving someone food is dharma.

So why is food considered one of the obstacles that

binds us to suffering?

We certainly all need food to sustain our body and mind. This is neither good nor bad. But humans unfortunately become attached to many things, and thus some follow the wheel of food instead of turning the wheel of dharma. What does following the wheel of food mean? It means: I am hungry—I don't eat. I am not hungry—I eat. If someone is hungry—I keep my food for myself.

We call this attachment not only to food, but also to the idea of an independent being called "I": I want this food; I don't want that food. Food for my health, for my body, and everything for me! The whole universe becomes our stomach. The more we eat, the hungrier we get, hungry not only for food but also for love, appreciation, satisfaction and so on. Here we run wild like a gerbil in a wheel, and there is no stopping, and there is never enough.

How big is the pile of shit we produce in our lifetime? It is indeed our choice whether we ferment and transform our food into humus—from which flowers of insight and compassion can grow—or whether we make only a stinking pile of pollution.

This choice starts with why and with what mind we eat food. A chant that monks and nuns sing in some Zen halls in Korea before each meal, makes this point clear: "As we

receive this food, may all sentient beings including ourselves come to realize our true nourishment, which is the happiness of meditation, and to be filled with dharma . . . Food is a medicine for curing the decay of the body. Let us take it for the purpose of perfecting our practice."¹ The food we eat helps us to return to our original true nature. Our practice to find our true nature does not seek to live well and die well, since our true nature is not dependent on life and death. Rather, our practice goes beyond life and death.

Once a student asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, "Sir, let's say there are several shipwrecked people in a small boat in the vast ocean. They are all starving and only a little food and water is left. What should they do? Who should take the food?" As fast as an arrow Zen Master Seung Sahn answered, "Together eat, together die!"

What is this thing that remains always clear during all times of together eating and together dying? If you attain this point, the whole universe says, "Thank you! Please enjoy your meal!"

Notes

1. From Martine Batchelor and Son'gyong Sunim, *Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

"Why did you come here? To sleep?"

Zen Master Bon Shim



Rather than resting the body, rest the mind. If you completely attain mind, the body has no problems. If both mind and body become clear, For the God-man, a high class job is not necessary.¹

Zen Master Seung Sahn said that sleep is the most powerful demon. I had been struggling with it on the cushion for a long time, until its power started to loosen. Every time when we are daydreaming on the cushion or any other place, we are dreaming; we are separated; we are losing connection. In that moment we don't know what is going on and where we are. If that happens, no big deal, next moment we may be awakened and in tune with no-mind again.

Zen Master Seung Sahn told an interesting story about a monk who couldn't help himself. Every time he sat on the cushion, he would fall asleep. It bothered him a lot, because he was a sincere practitioner, so one day he went to Zen Master Seung Sahn and asked him for advice. He was told to put a roll of toilet paper on his head while he was sitting, so every

time he moved, the paper would fall down and wake him up. Not only would it wake the monk up, but the whole room would hear it and laugh at him. It continued for some time, but since he truly wanted to stay awake, he tried very hard and never gave up. Finally there was no noise from the side where the paper monk (as he was named) sat. Thanks to his determination he managed to develop strong concentration, and finally, he became a great monk.

Sleep is a close cousin of laziness. They belong to the same family. According to Buddha's teaching, sleep and laziness are one of the five deeply rooted hindrances on our Path.

When I went to Korea to sit Kyol Che, it was very hard to get up at three in the morning. I had to motivate myself: "Why did you come here? To sleep?" I used this medicine each time when I started to fall asleep during the rest of the Kyol Che. This experience taught me how to work with my hindrances, gently and with patience.

We are very lucky: with the tools we have, we can truly do everything. The only question is if we can wake up from this self-centered dream.

Notes

1. Mu Mun Kwan, Case 9. Translation by Zen Master Seung Sahn.