

Just Show Up

Zen Master Soeng Hyang

Where does the inspiration and strength to do an extended retreat come from? How do we arrange our life so it can accommodate time spent nurturing our commitment to deepening our practice? Perhaps the first barrier will be thinking we don't have the time or the money. (I'm not a monk, I don't have a sponsor.) Before even looking at the practicalities of time and money, it is far more important to look at the tremendous pain and confusion going on all around us, and perhaps even in our own family. How do we break through the walls of our ignorance? How do we begin to see our habits and fears as mere illusions, ego formations that we can let go of? How do we open up to compassion and wisdom so we can begin to perceive how to help others?

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Most of us already have quite a bit of faith, courage and questions. We wouldn't be reading these Kyol Che pep talks if we didn't. I wouldn't have met my teacher if I didn't already have respect for the Buddhist teaching pointing out that human beings are already buddhas, just waiting to hatch out of our thin shells of delusion. Zen Master Seung Sahn gave me the instructions on how to question and showed me the potential for the courage needed to enter long retreats. He was a walking and talking advertisement for what we in the Kwan Um school like to call "Just Do It" mind. He also gave me the encouragement and instruction that I needed to go into my first long retreat. The fact that he had done this kind of training and strongly advocated it was what I needed to have enough trust to try it myself.

Whenever I have set time aside to do a retreat, there is a part of me—the checking, holding and making backseat driver—that says, "Wouldn't you rather stay home? It's going to be hard! I'm not even sure this practice actually works." I mean, every time there is at least a little of that kind of thinking! One would guess that after over 40 years of doing retreats my "faith" mind would rule, but no, it still gets slightly stuck with little pieces of that thin and tenacious ego shell. It's all so very interesting!

The process of committing to and showing up for a retreat is a glorious and marvelous feat! From the perspective of

the *big* picture, it is the ultimate manifestation of believing in one's self. Once the retreat has started, all we have to do is follow the schedule. Following the schedule is the most important thing, whether it's a solo retreat or Kyol Che. The second most important thing is to diligently let go of all thoughts that are not of this moment. Now that is of course difficult, but because you have already done the hardest thing, which was showing up for the retreat in the first place, of course you can chip away at letting go of uncreative mind formations. Just keep following the schedule and making an effort to continuously drop into this moment.

It's pretty easy to understand how prostrations and chanting help replace the egocentric mind habits, and that is why every time I've done a 100-day solo retreat I have scheduled these two activities for the majority of the practice. We

have the opportunity to tailor a solo retreat to meet our specific strengths and needs. How does gazing at the floor for periods of 30 to 40 minutes help bring us to clarity? How can we manage to stay on the cushion when we're bored, frustrated, falling asleep, in physical and mental anguish after perhaps only 10 minutes? If our vow and direction are clear, we will manage to unconditionally keep showing up.



Photo: Sven Mahr

As I write this I am fresh out of doing two weeks of Providence Zen Center's winter Kyol Che. I entered with my usual trepidations and left feeling more open, more intuitive, more grateful, more patient with myself and others, and of course more compassionate. These are the huge benefits received after surrendering myself—that thin tenacious shell—to the schedule, the chants, the prostrations, the floor and the simple soups and oatmeal. The Buddha and all teachers who followed after him are our inspiration and our great teachers. Let us thank them by embracing the practice. Let us have the courage and wisdom to find ways to find the time and support needed to do extended retreats. We are all sentient beings and all sentient beings are us. Liberation is in the doing; the doing is in just this moment. Never underestimate the tremendous gift that is this moment. Respect our need to rein in our everyday habits and arrive at the place of diligent training. ♦