

I Don't Know What You Are Doing, but Stop It!

Talk given by Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) during a seven-day Yong Maeng Jong Jin at the Providence Zen Center in December 2015

Question: Do you think that dying could be even harder when people are attached to their karma?

Zen Master Soeng Hyang: Much harder. When I worked as a hospice nurse I was amazed at all the various mental states that people would have as they died.

When I first began living at the Zen center I was working for an agency doing private duty care. One of my first cases was caring for a patient in the hospital on the night shift. The nurses informed me that this patient was a famous Mafia boss. He was in a coma and approaching the end of his life. The first night I stayed with him it was very hard for me to stay awake all night. My body was conditioned to be awake early in the morning and to go to sleep at night. When I got home after that first shift I asked Zen Master Seung Sahn how I could make myself stay awake the next night.

He suggested I sit up straight in the chair and recite the Great Dharani silently in my head. So I did just that. I used my beads, sat up straight and repeated the mantra over and over again. After about an hour this man, who had been mostly unconscious for several days, suddenly sat up in his bed and said, "I don't know what you are doing, but *stop it!*" So I stopped it and he went back into his coma. When I got home I told Zen Master Seung Sahn what had happened and he said, "Good! Demons hate the Great Dharani! His bad karma made you stop, but the mantra helped him." For me, as a very new student, to experience his consciousness pick up on "my" mantra practice let me see that we really are all connected. Nurse / Zen student = Mafia Boss! So a coma is not a coma, any time and any place our practicing effort will affect and help others.

After going to countless ceremonies, much out of a sense of obligation, I have come to a point of realizing that the ceremonies are a bodhisattva arena. We invite everyone to come to these ceremonies, whether they are in the building or somewhere else in the universe. Our very intentional chanting pervades the universe! I mean, this is just an amazing universe. We're not separate! It isn't like bodies coming into the ceremony; it is love, it is effort, it is wisdom and grace. As our practice widens and our faith, courage and effort prevail, we will be more and more aware of the unbroken connec-

tion we have with our vows. So as difficult as this YMJJ may feel at times, there is an extremely intelligent reason for the forms and discipline.

Q: What did the patient do after he said that?

ZMSH: He only said, "I don't know what you're doing but stop it!" Who actually said that? Zen Master Seung Sahn told me it was his demons. All we need to know is that whoever was hearing the mantra was woken up, perhaps pulled out of a very bad dream.

Q: What was the mantra that you did?

ZMSH: The Great Dharani, but that is not important. You need to know how to keep your moment-to-moment mind. For me, this long mantra is very helpful. I don't practice with it all of the time. I pick it up when it just comes into my consciousness and do my best to stay with it. During sitting I often need it or I find my mind drifting into uncreative, somewhat dead spaces. My teacher told me to practice with this mantra and also stressed keeping a great question such as "What is this?" at all times. So, rather than attached, habit-enforced thinking, we displace this with the mantra and our great question. We just gently move the dualistic delusional thinking over and replace it with pure awareness. It's as simple as that! Only ask someone who has smoked for years how easy it is to stop smoking: many will say it is almost impossible. Well, our self-identified opposites thinking is more addictive than nicotine. At the beginning of this retreat one of you said, "I want to go home!" Now today that same person told me, "I don't want to leave!" This is the mind that we are all working with. It responds positively to practice if this practice is consistent and strong. After a while we stop saying, "I should come to a retreat, I should be more disciplined." We begin to just feel gratitude for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and know how to integrate them into each breath.



Question: I have a question; it's about what you said. Using a mantra, you mentioned in the other talk about seamlessness? So that after a while, it's not like you have gaps. Can you talk a little bit about keeping practice or changing practice and what happens when you have gaps?

Zen Master Soeng Hyang: Well, as soon as we think, “Oh, now I’m practicing,” or, for example, with sitting meditation, “Now I’m sitting,” then the bell rings, the chugpi hits and its time to go out in the hallway, then we often drop our clear mind and start our habitual thought patterns. “I am wondering what we’re having for lunch? Only two and a half days left until I get to go home and have whatever I want to eat.” The same thing can happen with walking meditation. People will leave walking meditation all of a sudden when they don’t really have to: “Oh, good, I can get out of here!” But we need to learn there is no “getting out of here”! The discipline of a YMJJ can help us to drop that discriminating consciousness and become absolutely unconditional. We can learn to lean into our everyday life with a simple don’t-know mind. So we can really have a clear sitting practice that will get up off the cushion with you and go to lunch with you. It’s not checking, it’s just being with, being with, being with. It’s harder to do when we’re on the move, but it’s a beautiful thing to integrate it into everything you do—everything. Again, how many times have we heard that? “Everything is practice!” You have to see how that works and how you can sustain that.

The mantra practice helped me tremendously with hospice work. Like most professions that require working with people who are in some kind of distress, hospice caregivers are exposed to very complicated challenges. When I felt my mind getting frightened or feeling like it needed protection, I would start doing the mantra (in my head, not out loud). It would calm me down and, rather than reacting to perhaps one of the family member’s verbal abuse, I would be able to respond helpfully to their obvious fear or anger. In primary point, there is no self and other; there is only correct situation, relationship and function. So, it’s not helpful to react like, “Hey, it’s not my fault your wife is dying!” Instead, the mantra would bring me back to primary point, to the point that just sees, just hears and is able to intuit the situation. What is so amazing about practice is that my mouth would open and I would say something that would help. Something like, “It must be so hard to watch your wife in this condition. It must be so frightening to not know how to help her, how to get her out of this discomfort.” The husband would begin to relax and respond to this nurse, who is trained to find ways to help comfort not just his wife, but him as well. It might not sound like much, but for me, learning to trust primary point in myriad situations is a priceless gift.

So, the point is not to be defensive, but to feel and respond to what someone is going through. The thing is, we are that person, and that person is us. Sometimes we’re sitting and we’re that angry scared person that’s accusing. We call it checking, but it’s just—it’s tough to be born. So can you just kick into the mantra and feel and respond! Our center is like an incubator; it can keep everything warm. It’s an unconditional incubator. It’s not going to pick and choose: “Oh, I’ll take this but I won’t take that.” It takes all the eggs and keeps them just the right temperature. And it’s not going to tell your karma. Incubators don’t tell the eggs when it is time to hatch. Some of our kong-ans and lessons take a while to work out. Can we be patient? Can we be generous? Can we be warm? Can we just go even beyond accepting? When you give birth and they wrap the baby in the blanket and say, “Here’s your baby,” you don’t say, “Oh, I accept that.” No! You go, “Woah!” And you take the baby in your arms. So that’s the thing: Can we do that with our pain and confusion? Can we not accept our pain but, keep it warm in our incubator? Allow it, don’t check. It’s not easy; that’s why we have sangha, and that’s why we have teachers and practice. Let’s bow to the process! Thank you very much. ♦

