



## Right Livelihood

*Koen Vermeulen JDPSN*

Since it involves an important part of our life, our job has an effect on the mental habits we create. Let's have a closer look at this.

Our ego is always screaming: I want this! I want that! It never stops and it is very convincing. If our mind is not clear, we follow those impulses—our karma—like mechanical puppies, and we become their slaves. It works like this. First I want something. Because of cause and effect, I get something, but I also get a good (or bad) feeling. Our attachment or aversion to this feeling fires off the next search for a good feeling. This never stops, because our wanting mind is never satisfied. And every time we don't get what we want, we suffer. That's how we program ourselves for a ride into the neverending cycle of samsara.

A few years ago I met somebody with a special professional experience that could only result in a specific mental habit: violence. He contacted me as a prisoner to get advice about Buddhist training. He used to be an elite soldier, often engaged in extremely dangerous situations in the hottest places on earth. He believed so strongly in the values that he was asked to protect that he was ready to die for them. He was truly convinced that every time he received an order to do a special intervention, he helped many people to avoid a lot of suffering. He was ready to die any moment. Death was always so close to him that life and death became the same thing. He was not afraid

to die because somehow he was already dead. Indeed, the terrible side of his job was that, little by little, his compassion and empathy for others disappeared. Almost.

There was something that remained: the shadow of a doubt. Although he believed in the value of his job, often this question appeared: Is it correct what we are doing? Does it really make sense? This put a heavy weight on his heart. And when he went out with friends during his free time, he didn't feel any joy. He lived in a world of extreme violence, and he relied on violence to survive. When somebody would come to him and slap him on his shoulder to say hello, without thinking his first reaction would be to put this guy on the ground. Violence became second nature, difficult to take away.

One day a secret mission left some traces behind, and that's how he ended up in jail. Of course he was very, very angry for a long time. After all, he only did his job and felt betrayed to be left alone by his military hierarchy! So, his mind became dark as night. There was only hate and anger. Being outside of his familiar military environment, he started to suspect everybody. Whenever he met somebody, he saw an enemy. Now he understands that he suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder, but at that time he felt more like an animal than a human being.

One day, an old priest told him, "You know, you cannot go on like that." He realized that was true and decided to change. Because he came from a Buddhist background, he contacted me to get advice and started his Zen training with a lot of energy. He doesn't know how many years he will still be in jail, so he concluded that the only useful thing for him to do is to practice hard, get rid of his heavy karma and try to attain enlightenment. For several years now he has done a thousand bows a day along with daily

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*Photo: Nick Gersberg*

sitting meditation. He has found a new job! And slowly, slowly he opened his heart and his eyes came back to life.

However, during meditation he realized that his whole life was only a big illusion. Although he built strong relationships with some friends, he could lose them any day. It happened several times that he was transferred to another prison without even being able to say goodbye. He has nothing and nobody to rely on. His whole life is like sand slipping through his fingers. So he had this idea: Everything is an illusion, and prison is an illusion too.

This gave him inspiration to practice stronger and attain freedom by breaking through the walls of his mind. However, after a while he found out that the more he tried to break out, the more solid the walls became around him. He could feel them physically pushing him down. The more he wanted to get rid of the chains of samsara, the stronger the underlying wheel of cause and effect was pulling him back. There is an interesting kong-an about this.

### *Pai Chang's Fox*

Pai Chang (720–814) was a Chinese Zen master during the Tang Dynasty. He received transmission from Matsu. His students included Huang Po and Lin Chi.

An old man said to Zen Master Pai Chang, “I am not really a human being. During the time of Mahakashyapa I was the master of this mountain. At that time somebody asked me: ‘Is an enlightened person subject to samsara, the wheel of cause and effect?’ I said, No. Because of that mistake I was reborn as a fox for 500 generations. Please, Master, give me a turning word to be free from my fox’s body.”

“Cause and effect are clear,” Pai Chang said. Upon hearing these words, the old man got enlightenment and said, “I am already liberated from my fox’s body, which can be found in the cave on the other side of the mountain. Would you please bury it as you would a dead monk?”

This kong-an is about trying to escape from samsara, our suffering world. But if I want to avoid suffering, this is already desire. In other words, saying that I step out of samsara, I actually step into it. Whatever position I take, inside samsara, outside samsara, dependent on it or not, I make two things: samsara and I. And when you have I, you have attachment and suffering. That was the reason why the ancient master of the mountain lost his human body. It seems to be a magic tale, but it is very close to our own life. It happens every time we blindly follow our karma and make I-my-me, creating ignorance, desire and anger, and losing our love, compassion and humanity.

Being born a fox is very dangerous. Avoiding being born a fox is also very dangerous. If you are not born a fox, what will you do? If you are born a fox, what will

you do? Keeping a clear mind moment to moment, the matter is already resolved. The sky is blue, the grass is green, a dog is barking, woof! Woof! But if we are not careful, this just becomes another dream. We understand that Zen is a good idea and it becomes our lifestyle, following it as a prisoner in a golden Zen cage. So, be careful and don’t hold your ideas too strongly! That’s why Zen Master Kyong Ho said, “Always keep the mind that doesn’t know and you will soon attain enlightenment.” His student, Man Gong Sunim, understood what a great gift this teaching was. For the next three years, he did very hard training and always kept don’t-know mind. One day he heard the great bell ring and his mind exploded. He returned to Kyong Ho, bowed, and said, “Now I know why the bodhisattva faces away: because sugar is sweet and salt is salty.”

If you don’t know what this means, only try, try, try for 10,000 years nonstop—like Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say—attain enlightenment and save all beings from suffering. Not a bad job after all.



## **Right Effort: Direction + Try Mind = Enlightenment**

*Kathy Park JDPSN*

In the *Compass of Zen*, Zen Master Seung Sahn says, “Only try, try, try for ten thousand years nonstop.”

We have the experience as a beginner in anything new that a concerted effort is made when we want to learn to do something for the first time. Then the newly learned thing becomes a habit and it becomes easier to do it. For those of us who practice Zen, we may experience that, although we have a habit of practicing after some time, it still doesn’t feel easier. The legs still hurt, the backache doesn’t go away, the breath is still shallow, and the mind still goes round and round in circles. Still, we keep trying for some time and the habit of practice becomes stronger. Then some good feeling can appear, our mind can be more still, more clear, and even if the body still hurts, we can experience it without too much attached negativity. This cycle keeps repeating as we continue, sometimes getting much easier, or at other times, even after many years of practice, we hit a brick wall, or some even quit.

Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say that there are three kinds of Zen students. Low-class students are those who practice only when they suffer, middle-class students practice when they have a good situation, and high-class students are those who practice all the time, not attached to any condition. Correct effort in Zen has two aspects. The first is direction: What is the direction of our effort? Why do we practice? What do you want? A clear direction sets the path and becomes the fuel. The second is trying