

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

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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

mind. Trying mind is the mind that Zen Master Seung Sahn would say does not hesitate to “put energy into.” Having a clear direction gives us the power to work through one moment after the next, as we use our body, breath and mind to become clear. Our trying mind is the engine that develops the habit of repeating relentlessly and continues to not give up until the engine can run itself effortlessly.

When we don't have a clear direction why we practice it is more difficult to gather the energy to do it. Instead, our energy gets dispersed into other activities that eventually take away our motivation for practice. Having correct effort in our practice means waking up moment to moment, reminding ourselves of our direction by the act of doing the practice itself. As we return to our before-thinking mind in each moment, we repeat the habit of functioning from don't-know. The more we repeatedly return to the moment when body, breath and mind become one, the more quickly we become one with the universe. Sincerely doing it is already correct effort, correct direction and enlightenment. Then we get universal energy. That's what we call “Just do it.” That means when we walk, we just walk 100 percent. When we eat, just eat 100 percent. When we sit, we just sit 100 percent. It is a complete, fulfilled action, and because it has a clear direction it benefits all beings.

Making correct effort in our practice means making the habit of practice stronger by doing it, but also seeing when it becomes routine, whether that's on or off the cushion. A clear habit is not necessarily a dead, routine activity. Making a strong effort does not mean practice hard to break yourself, but to put a sincere effort of attention into each moment to wake up. When you lose it, return immediately. Leave no gap. Consider each moment as the last because in our life there is only this moment. Put effort into just this moment—that's all. Then try again. Then practice is not routine no matter what is our activity. We don't fall asleep, and being clear and awake, already our true self is functioning with innate wisdom and compassion in whatever we do. Not only that, but we also become one with the universe, so even as we are on the wave of the ebbs and flows of the changing world, we can be in harmony with it.

Some years ago, a student began practicing at our Zen center. She was quite diligent about trying to do it in her daily life and had a strong beginner's mind. While at work, she would try to keep Kwan Seum Bosal when at her desk and she didn't have to talk, when taking a walk, or whatever she was doing. Sometimes in the midst of her day this question would appear, “What am I?” One day as she was driving back home from work there was heavy traffic and many cars were inching their way forward very slowly. Next to her car, a man was trying to push his car in front of her in a bullying manner. She quickly realized he was not going to give in, and right away, her own fight-

ing mind appeared—“I won't let you!”—and she inched ahead with her car, too, trying not to give him any room to butt into her lane. This kept going for a few minutes between them, and the man knew she was not going to give up too, which made him even more competitive. Although growingly frustrated with the traffic and this bullying man, she was trying to quietly keep Kwan Seum Bosal. At one moment as her car moved forward, she stepped on the brake and this question appeared in her mind: “What am I?” Then suddenly she looked to the side and saw the man in the car next to her staring back at her. When she saw his face, she smiled and gestured with her hand for him to go first. The man was shocked and did not know what to do for a few seconds. He just looked back at her a bit flustered, tried to ignore it, then a little abashed, and finally drove off ahead. The student was also surprised at herself because letting him go first was the kind of thing she would never have done before. She experienced being able to change her karma for the first time. This made her very happy.

When we keep our practice moment to moment and just try over and over and never let go, that is our trying mind. Having a great question—“What am I?” is our direction. As Zen Master Seung Sahn said, correct direction + try mind = enlightenment. He also said that getting enlightenment is easy, but keeping it is very difficult. So moment to moment, try, try, try for ten thousand years nonstop. That is correct effort.



Photo: Nick Gersberg