

Questions and Answers with Zen Master Jok Um: What Is Your Root Community?

Question: I'm interested in residential training, but I can't live in New Haven or Cambridge or Providence. I have to remain in Connecticut. Any ideas?

Zen Master Jok Um: What is your root community?

Q: Just regular everyday family life.

ZMJU: Yes. That's also Kwan Um community. Living in a residential Zen center means taking upon yourself the rhythms of the community to strengthen your practice and deepen your wisdom. If we could do it only in a Kwan Um Zen center, the world would be in even worse shape than it is. Because we have a relatively finite number of Zen centers with a relatively finite number of rooms, people who have the opportunity to live their lives in a place like that are relatively rare.

They are relatively rare for two reasons. One reason is, in the flow of a person's life, it's not often that you have the time to live that way. Maybe right after college, maybe during graduate school, maybe when you get your first job, but as you mature as a layperson, and start to do other kinds of things, then you have requirements or circumstances that can't be met in that kind of environment, because we don't have the kind of environment that accommodates those circumstances. But the intention to use the place where you're living to deepen your practice and strengthen your wisdom—you can take that anyplace.

In his talk a moment ago, Garrett said the original mala is the earth, so part of the question is, "Where do you find sangha?" One kind of sangha means the community of Zen Buddhists who practice in your tradition, right? That's a very useful kind of thing. People who practice together are called *do-ban* in Korean. *Do-ban* just means dharma friend, and you can find a dharma friend anyplace. Miles (the questioner's son) is a very good dharma friend. Garrett's daughter, he and his other Buddhist friends used to call her the *tulku* (reincarnate lama), so Miles is a little bit like that. When they say your true teacher is right in front of you, they don't necessary mean your six-year-old, but in your case your true teacher won't let go of your pants legs.

Buddha taught there are four rare things in this world. One is being born human. Second is encountering the dharma. The third is finding a keen-eyed teacher. And the fourth is getting enlightenment yourself. Those four rare things have two strings to them. One is in terms of formal intentional Zen practice that has that form, and the second is in terms of how that relates to our daily circumstances. They are rare not only because they are statistically rare, but also because people don't take the opportunity to take

advantage of them, even though they are before us all the time.

Being born human has two parts. One is this kind of mammal, because there are more kinds of mammals than this kind of mammal, and there are more kinds of living animals than this kind of an animal, and there are more kinds of living organisms than this kind of organism, and there are more kinds of sentient beings than sentient beings that take this form. So statistically there are relatively few people compared to other kinds of things that live and breathe, and so it's rare to be born human, in that most things that are born are not human. And if you look at the way that Buddhist cosmology looks at things, it's a certain kind of achievement. If you have accumulated certain merit, then you get to be born human, and if you lose it then you're born as something else. So it's rare in the sense that it's the current appearance of something that took a long time to produce. Even if you are not thinking in terms of the accumulation of merit, it took a long time to produce this species, and of course every particle of dust took a long time to produce, and every particle of dust simultaneously has been around for a long time.

Even if we have this form, to really be born human is unusual, because it's very easy to be distracted from the heart of our humanity. So it's good to have the kind of reminders that Garrett was so clearly talking about: this moment, this moment, this moment, this space, this shape. To perceive "Oh, original sound appears"—it's rare to have that concern. We have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind, color, sound, smell, taste, touch, object of mind, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, feeling, thinking—so eighteen perceptual realms, which means that we have a very large number of things that can seduce us. Visually, or something that has a nice odor, or something that has a nice taste or something that creates a pleasant sensation. We want more of that, and it is very tempting, very easy, and may be easier nowadays to guide our life toward getting more of those things that are pleasant and acting to avoid unpleasant things. When we don't look very deeply at what that entails there is a certain blindness that follows along. Nonetheless, without our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind, we cannot make any contact with the world. So if we use sensation as our teacher, then we participate with the six gates; if we don't, then we cultivate the six poisons. So to have some intention to let sensations be our teacher is to start to be born human. People don't recognize the suffering that comes from doing things the other way, so that's rare to see it, and it's rare to

want to sustain it. So being born as human is difficult.

The second rare thing is hearing the dharma. In the narrow sense, it means something that can happen in a place like this—words that are used to help clarify the purpose of life, whether they are Buddhist words or words from another tradition. It's rare in that sense since most of our conversations and most of what we hear isn't intentionally about that. However, again, as Garrett pointed out, the sound of a hawk flying over your car, if you can actually hear that, maybe the noise the hawk makes, or the creak of the stairs in the Zen center as you go up and down, or the truck going down the street, or the sound of the match when the incense is lit, or Miles asking for one extra cookie please, no, two extra cookies, no, that whole bag of extra cookies—that's the dharma. The shape of things that appear before us just this moment is truth. How can it be anything else? To intentionally encounter the color, and the luster, and the weight, and the texture, and the balance, and the shape, and the smell of every moment is to hear the dharma moment by moment by moment, and to take that as your teacher—that's rare. And that somebody would even want to do that, and then to really do it requires a certain amount of effort. That's also rare.

The third element, to meet a keen-eyed teacher, is also rare. In the narrow sense, this means somebody who is a lineage holder in some tradition: statistically there aren't that many of those. And you'd have to find them, and then they would have to be a good match for your needs, so that narrows it down too, if you're looking at it that particular way. We want to find somebody with that talent, who would have the ability to engage with you in a way that quiets the mind, to engage with you in a way that helps you perceive things more clearly. In a broader sense, the plant is a keen-eyed teacher, the clouds are keen-eyed teachers, polluted water is a keen-eyed teacher, pain in your knees as you sit is a keen-eyed teacher, so if your eyes see that, then you take the shape of your life as your keen-eyed teacher.

And then finally to get enlightenment yourself. It's rare to have an experience that opens your heart to the fullness of what we are and transforms you right then and there. It's rare to have a guide to help you know what to do with this experience. In the broader sense of things, to wake up means to wake up to this moment. "Two cookies, Miles, not eleven. I know, you want eleven cookies, but Mommy says two, because she is older and she knows that when you have eleven, you get sick. So we'll put aside eleven and you can have two today and two tomorrow and two the next day maybe if we do that, on the last day you can have three, maybe, we'll see how the other days go . . ." Something like that.

We want to learn to see other people's mind light, because if we learn to see other people's mind light, they

become our teachers, and if we let that light become our teacher, the mind of a student is receptive, curious, grateful, kind, generous, engaged. Then your circumstances become your Zen center.

This Zen center is set up on purpose to support all those things. In your life's flow, take advantage of a place like this. In your life's flow, do something in your own residence that's a formal practice. Zen Master Seung Sahn would say that's very low class practice. If you do those two things, then you can start to see that you have a residential Zen center everywhere, because you're living and you're breathing and you're walking and you're eating and you're engaging. The purpose of this physical space is to help us learn to use the whole world as our Zen center. If you engage to use the whole world as your Zen center, he might call that a very high class practice. See your circumstances clearly, and do something intentional to make that support practice. Look at the opportunities you have, as opposed to what



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you're lacking, OK? Other questions?

Question: When I practice at home I have to do lying-down practice, because it's such a stressful time for me. But then I get caught up in thinking "right now you need to be sitting" or "you need to be doing something else." I get stuck in this idea of "this is practice and that is not." So it doesn't seem like I have the right conditions at home for practice.

ZMJU: How do things arise from conditions? Look into that. If you look at how things arise from conditions, then you can create conditions that support your wish to see that clearly. If you become the victim of conditions, then you're constantly fighting to make things better, which would include "I want to make my practice better but conditions aren't letting me." That's not so unusual. "My conditions aren't giving me what I want, and if my conditions were better I'd get what I want, but I can't make my conditions better because my conditions are prohibiting me from

making my conditions better, so now I'm really stuck."

We look for ways to soothe ourselves. Sometimes these are neutral, in the sense that when we're done, we feel better, and then we can go on and do something else. And then we find "Oh that's soothing to lie down for a while" or "That's soothing to pray" or "It might be soothing to have a jelly donut." Then it might be more soothing to have 15 jelly donuts, but it might not be so soothing when you're done. Sometimes the things we use to soothe ourselves become toxic, and then we end up liking the flavor of it and forgetting why we did it in the first place. We end up with this hungry-ghost kind of craving. That means that all I want to do is find stuff to soothe myself, and then you're never sufficiently soothed.

One way to use practice is to make a space where things quiet down, so that you have more energy. Then after things quiet down some, you can better enter into circumstances that may be difficult. Now, practicing that way is better than not practicing at all. At least, instead of going up and down all the time and never finding quiet, you find some quiet space. But since circumstances change, if circumstances are difficult for you, you'll always end up craving quiet and needing more soothing.

A practice that allows us to engage intimately with circumstances can help us stop seeing circumstances as the things in our lives that victimize us. We can then allow our circumstances to become our teachers. One way to do that is to engage with precepts. Precepts affect our thoughts, behaviors and feelings. They are guides to behavior that supports our intentions. If we understand that doing certain things supports our intentions better than doing other kinds of things, then we take precepts as our guide and use them to shape our lives that way. So having something to shape our behavior allows us to start to engage our life in a more kind, compassionate and wise way. It's a strong external support, which we gradually internalize.

Another way to practice is to do something that shapes our consciousness. Shaping our consciousness means if I see things more clearly, then I'm more likely to move toward things that are nurturing for myself and others, and less likely to engage in things that are toxic for myself and others. Looking at the paramitas, for instance, or having interviews, are ways of doing that. We use a supportive circumstance to take care of a difficult circumstance. That's also better than not doing it, and better than just looking for soothing.

Zen practice means my circumstances become my support, which includes formal practice, because you start to see, "Oh I really need this." Normally you eat, even though you're really busy. Maybe you skip a meal periodically, if you're *really* busy, but at some point your metabolism tells you that you'd better eat something.

If you have a practice intention, it's the same way. If you recognize how that feeds you, you'll do it, even if sometimes the circumstances mean you have to do it a little differently. There is something that moves it along because you recognize the value of it, and when you really recognize

that value for yourself, you find a way to do it—not because somebody told you, and not because you think you should, but because you know that's what you do. So that's a more helpful way to engage with practice: "That's what I do." I breathe, I eat, I clean the house, I use sangha to support my practice, I recognize the wisdom in others—those things become natural.

Q: You have a new name. It means Serene Sound?

ZMJU: Yes.

Q: To me you sound more serene and sound than before. I wonder if you feel differently?

ZMJU: It's a little bit like this: There's this big ceremony you get, and all this energy comes this way, right? [*points toward himself*] Afterward people were talking about me publicly, and also my two sons were there, so they were telling my children things about me, or they were hearing it. When I got home, I remembered that when my father died, people started telling me things about him. Nothing that they said seemed deeply out of character, but I didn't know it. "Oh he did that, oh really?" It didn't surprise me, but they were things I didn't know. Then, I thought, "Oh, how fortunate, my children got to hear these stories before I died." It's a little bit like being at your own funeral.

Maybe *Zen Master* means something dies so something else can appear. Somebody came for an interview with me, a little while ago, who had just taken five precepts. They were trying to figure out what it did for them, but they asked the question by asking whether becoming a Zen Master did something for me. I said it's like you have a little voice in your head, that says, "OK, so now how about *your* practice?" I feel I must be in good company, because So-eng Am Eon used to wake up every day and say "Master!" "Yes!" "You must keep clear!" "Yes!" "Never be deceived by others." "Yes! Yes!"

When Zen Master Wu Kwang got transmission, the first letter he got from the Kwan Um School of Zen office was addressed: "Zen Master Wu Kwang, care of Richard Shrobe." So he is looking at it saying to himself, "Zen Master Wu Kwang, care of Richard Shrobe . . . so Richard Shrobe has to take care of Zen Master Wu Kwang. He must be his attendant." So it's a little bit like that for me too. Now maybe that's available every moment, like Garrett said, [*mimes counting mala*] but doing something that emphasizes the seriousness of what you are undertaking periodically is not such a bad thing.

So thank you all. Sangha is the fruit of practice. Without sangha, your own Buddha nature has nothing to do, and without sangha, dharma has no particular function. I'll tell a story that Rusty Hicks once told. He used to be both the abbot and the only resident here for years. He said that there was a Catholic monastery where the brothers were constantly in conflict over minor things—somebody left a bread crumb in the kitchen, or the sanctuary wasn't properly cleaned. It was endless; they couldn't solve it, and they couldn't find anybody who knew how to help them solve it.

But one day they heard there was a famous rabbi who was passing through town to meet with his congregation. They thought maybe they should ask him to visit. So they invited him to stay there for a while to see what their life was like, and hopefully to tell them what they ought to do. He came to stay, but didn't say anything. As he was leaving, they said, "Wait, wait, wait, you know you haven't told us anything." He said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I don't know what to do about your circumstances. But one thing is really clear to me: one among you is the next messiah." And then he leaves.

Everybody starts thinking, "Hmm, Brother George—he is lazy, but he is unflaggingly kind all the time. Is it Brother George?" "Well, Brother William never helps with anything, but he is really bright, and if you need to solve something, he will dig into it for you. So maybe it's Brother William." "Brother Andrew is always working, and he never rests. Maybe . . ." So they start to look at each other, like, "maybe that's the one," and somehow everything gets very quiet, and some kind of harmony appears. When you only look at everybody else's mind light, that happens for you.

There's a story about Ikkyu, a monk poet, a Zen master from a long time ago in Japan. He had a brother, and the brother had a son who was unkind and disrespectful and very irresponsible. The brother asked Ikkyu, "Can you come live with me? Maybe you can straighten out my son." He goes and he lives there for a week or so, but he and the son never say anything to each other, and Ikkyu doesn't give the brother any advice. When it's time to leave, Ikkyu stands at the doorway, and the son, irresponsible as he is, at least knows what he's supposed to do then. He gets Ikkyu's shoes for him, washes the shoes and holds them so Ikkyu can put his feet in his shoes. Then the boy feels this water on his head, and he looks up, and Ikkyu is crying, and then he leaves. The son gets this strong feeling of remorse; and from then, something changes.

Typically, we don't recognize that we have all these rare things: being born human, hearing the dharma, meeting a keen-eyed teacher and attaining enlightenment yourself. The stories that we tell to emphasize that are about particular moments that feel like they're rare, but that's just to inspire us, to open up the possibility of seeing that ordinary moments are like that too. If all we talked about were ordinary moments, people would wonder, "Who's this crazy guy?" So you have to tell a better story than that.

But I'll tell one ordinary story and then I'll stop. My day job is as a mental health consultant in federal Head Start preschools. In one classroom, two boys are at a table. One of them is sitting at the table like this, hunched with his arms around a pile of bristle blocks. The boy

on the other side only has six or seven blocks, and he's trying to grab more from the first boy, who responds by closing himself more around the blocks. I say to the first one, "You have a lot of bristle blocks, you want to have them all, and you want to use them all by yourself." Then I turned to the other boy. "You only have a few bristle blocks. You want to make something, and you don't have enough. You want more. He has a lot more, and he wants to use them all by himself. He wants all that he has, and you want more than you have."

They look at me funny, as if to say, "What's wrong with this guy, he didn't yell at us and tell us that we're supposed to share. Who is this crazy adult?" So the boy with a lot of them looks at me, and I say, "You have a lot of bristle blocks. You want to make something." "Yeah I want to make a boat."

So I said to the boy who has fewer, "He wants to make a boat." Then, this other boy says, "I'm making animals."

"Oh so you're making a boat, and you're making animals, so maybe when he makes the boat, your animals can go on the boat." The boy with the animals gets a look as if to say, "Yeah that's a great idea—we can do that." So the boat boy get this look like, "Hmm, that's kind of interesting." And I look at him and say, "You want some help to make your boat?" "Yeah." "Maybe he can help you make your boat." So they look at each other, like that's a really interesting idea. Then, that's it. Then they just start working together on their own, without any direction from me.

Grownups always tell children *share*, but what we want them to share is attention on something that is interesting to both of them, because then they'll figure out how to share the objects of their attention. If they're sharing a project together, it's a little bit easier. So that's my ordinary story. Nobody got enlightenment; nobody bowed to anybody; nobody said anything profound. I just said what I saw, and that made sense to them, so they took care of it. We can all look at the world that way. Practicing helps that, so thank you everybody for practicing together. ♦

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