

The Wave of Together Action

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Student: What is the difference between our practice together and our individual practice later on at home?

Zen Master Joeng Hye: This time of practicing together is something special. You can say this time is like potatoes banging against one another in water. Everyone who practices in this school knows this teaching of potatoes. We are all like potatoes in a pot. When we practice it is like a stick stirring the potatoes and then the potatoes start to work on one another and the cleaning goes faster. So when we are here we learn from one another. Individual practice is not enough. We are too young for individual practice—of course I am only joking a bit, because individual practice is important too. But when we only practice individually, it is difficult to see our limitations and our karma, the karma of our mind. The sangha is like a mirror, in which you can easily see your limitations, the limits of your actions and your opinions.

To awaken our original mind we have to go beyond our likes and dislikes, because our mind is always looking around and sniffing out what it likes and dislikes, but the things we like are not necessarily good for us, and the things we dislike are not necessarily bad for us. When you are here you have no choice—then your mind of likes and dislikes appears. It is easy to see—many people have problems with it. I'm sure you have found many things that you don't like here. Do you like to get up at half past four?

Student: I like getting up early because sleeping here is very uncomfortable! [*Much laughter.*]

ZMJH: You don't like the sleeping conditions here—so you have one dislike. “I like getting up early because I don't like the sleeping conditions.” That's a like and a dislike. So you have both of these, but you also have a third thing—you have no choice. Whether you like it or not, you don't have a choice.

Together action is like a wave that carries you away and you cannot resist it. Your small self, your ego, is too weak to resist that wave. This wave of together action is the wave of your true mind, of your true self. The name of it is [*hits the floor*] just do it! You have no choice, that's why this wave of together practice is so important. If you submerge yourself in this wave from time to time, your individual practice will become stronger and you will see more clearly in your everyday life the just-do-it mind. This is the intuitive mind of prajna, our primary wisdom. Instead of losing yourself in likes and dislikes, just see the situation, let it be mirrored in your mind, see your relationship to this situation, and then you can act correctly.

That insight comes from beyond thinking, beyond the realm controlled by likes and dislikes. Zen Master Seung

Sahn called this “following the big situation.” He said that in life we have two kinds of situation: big situation and small situation. The small situation is your life controlled by likes and dislikes. Following the big situation is following the bodhisattva way, following your true mind, the way of freedom and enlightenment.

So here the sangha is your big teacher. It's not necessarily the teacher at a kong-an interview, though they might help a bit, but you see them only every couple of days, so your real teacher is sangha and together action—this wave you cannot resist, because ultimately our true self is all other beings and our small self cannot withstand this pressure. Every single one of us is himself, but at the same time we are all one. Zen Master Huang Po compared us to mercury. If you break one droplet, [*hits floor*] it makes a lot of droplets and each one of them is separate and individual. Every one of them seems to have its individual being, yet they are all elements of one big droplet of mercury. If you don't believe it then try to get them together—they will connect—become one. So we are all one and everyone individually is complete, and this is the mystery of our practice.

Student: But when we go home and become the little droplet of mercury alone, without the wave, what then?

ZMJH: Well, you have to come back. Yes, you have to come more times.

Student: It means that I become addicted to it.

ZMJH: Yes, there is an addiction which is pathology and there is an addiction that is a real relationship. We are all interconnected and we are all related to one another. In Buddhism this metaphor was once depicted as Indra's Net. The god Indra wanted to give a beautiful present to Buddha. So he wove a net that was infinite in time and space and encompassed all possible worlds, and at each intersection of this net he placed a little jewel. The effect was astounding. All jewels were mirrored in every one of them and each of these jewels was reflected in the rest. This is real dependence and real relationships, and we are these jewels.

From the point of view of I-me-myself, freedom means “I can do what I want.” This is the freedom of self. But real freedom, as understood in the buddhadharma, is the freedom from self—from the self that wants freedom for itself, because the self is the prison . . .

Once someone asked Zen Master Seung Sahn how to develop wisdom. He answered: “Only together action.”

“—but Zen Master, there are a lot of hermits in the mountains who have been practicing for many years and they have very clear minds.”

“Yes, clear minds, but no wisdom.” ♦