

# Sesshin in Daily Life: Interview with Zen Master Dae Kwang

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*Editor's note: Sesshin is the Japanese term for what in the Kwan Um school is called a Yong Maeng Jong Jin—that is, a short, intensive Zen retreat.*

The world is upside-down today—it's always about *I, me* and *myself*, and that's not real practice. Zen is to find your true self, to help others.  
—Zen Master Dae Kwang

*Sesshin*, which means “to touch the essence” or “touching the heart-mind” in Japanese, is a type of meditative training to help individuals to nurture their buddha nature. These are often intensive meditation retreats—typically with a daily routine where individuals devote time to almost exclusive zazen (meditation) practice with numerous 30- to 50-minute-long sessions of meditation (interwoven with short rests, meals, work, dharma teachings and meetings with a Zen master). With the numerous types of retreats available, many are practically spoiled with choices. So *For You Information* finds out more on the true meaning behind sesshin and how should one approach it from Zen Master Dae Kwang.

## SESSHIN IN MODERN LIFE

**For You Information:** Based on today's modern living and people's busy schedules, how practical is sesshin?

**Zen Master Dae Kwang:** Well, how practical is birth, old age, sickness and death—human suffering? So, it's not about being “practical.” If the Buddha was going to be practical, he would have stayed back at the palace. There are things people do and there's always the motivation, the *why* to it. And there's always a reason why they do certain things. So, I wouldn't use the word *practical*. There are many practitioners and lay teachers who lead a busy life and they definitely find time to practice. Actually, practicing within everyday life is the most powerful way to practice. It's kind of like a tree raised inside a greenhouse: if the greenhouse ever goes away, that tree can be easily blown down. If that tree is raised outside, it will be strong and not so easily moved. So actually, the practice within daily life is the strongest.

**FYI:** So how do you recommend we do it, the practice within daily life?

**ZMDK:** I recommend you do it 24 hours a day. It means to remain aware and return to your true self all

the time, regardless of circumstances. The true self is not based on circumstances—it's always there, just that you don't know it. The Buddha said everybody already has it, just that they don't know that they have it. It never gets bigger, it never gets smaller, it never comes—it's always there. It's like the sun, always shining.

**FYI:** Does it become clearer when we take time off to do it? For example, some people would say they feel better after a meditation retreat . . .

**ZMDK:** It's not about feeling better, it's about finding out what you truly are. Everyone wants to feel better, but that's not getting an answer to the question of what we truly are. The Buddha did not want to feel better when he left home. So, the question goes back to birth, old age, sickness and death.

**FYI:** Today, where efficiency and inclination toward instant gratification govern our lives, we constantly ask “How does practice help me in the immediate circumstances?” People want to see results immediately. How do we make them see the need to see beyond—beyond practicality as an entry point to start practice?

**ZMDK:** That's ignorance—always wanting to have immediate results or needing to make it practical and efficient. It can be seen as “How does it help me?” Zen means find your true self, help the world. It's not about you. When it's about you, human beings suffer, because it always becomes about *me—I, my, mine* and *myself*. The world is upside down. It's always about “me” today, and everyone's concerned about themselves. For example, people are concerned about careers, cars, credit cards, condos, country club memberships . . . but these things will soon go away. And that's what the Buddha saw. The Buddha had all that stuff, but he left. He had the intuitive wisdom that soon these things are going to go away. So the question is, what do we really want and need?

In Zen, we call it the great question of life and death. What the Buddha faced, what the six patriarchs faced, what you and I face are all the same. All human beings are the same, irrespective of their possessions; it doesn't make any difference if you are extremely wealthy or poor, just like how the six patriarchs were very poor compared to the Buddha, who was very rich. But one



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thing that is the same, is this question of what is life and death.

**FYI:** It seems that it is easier to approach this big question of “What is life and death?” with the older generation. So, how do we approach this question with the younger generation?

**ZMDK:** I don’t know. Someday, it will just hit you. Like a child who doesn’t know about fire. You can tell him or her what fire is, what it means and about how it is hot when touched. But they wouldn’t know until they touch it, to have that hot and that *ouch!* feeling. You can say, “No, it’s hot! Don’t touch that!” But the child will never really know until he or she touches it. So likewise, someday, the younger generation will get it, someday when they “touch” that stove, match or fire, then they will get it—the inner wisdom before the thinking wisdom.

Sometimes, mothers intentionally allow the child to touch something hot—not hot enough to burn but hot enough to teach them the pain. So, every human being is like that: we need to experience it. But today, we are all raised as if we were in a cocoon—and Buddhists are raised in a Buddhist palace—because parents want their kids to be raised in good circumstances or have good and controlled situations to learn things or important lessons. But if you think about it for a second, it’s not possible in the end.

**FYI:** And this (controlled situation) is not ideal?

**ZMDK:** That’s right. It’s not ideal because your personal wisdom does not grow. You don’t know what that (hot) really means, and someday, you could get into

real trouble.

**FYI:** So, we should allow the time and experience to unfold naturally, for things and situations to unravel on their own?

**ZMDK:** Yes. As you can see, Buddha lived in this cocoon, and then he looked out from his cocoon. And this is the same for all human beings; someday, at some point in time, we would look out from the cocoon.

**FYI:** If that’s the case, then we all have our own path—our own fate or destiny. There’s a popular attitude toward this: the Chinese would say “Let’s *sui yuan*.” (随缘: a Chinese expression for letting nature take its own course).

**ZMDK:** Right, but this (breaking the cocoon) can come in all different forms; it can be reading a book, watching a television program, falling off the golf cart, breaking a leg . . . all kinds of things. Because old age, sickness and death is there. You might avoid old age by dying young, you may be pretty healthy and not get sick, but you cannot avoid the third thing—death. Circumstances of life are different for everybody because everyone has different karma, but all of the different circumstances would be teaching you. My teacher always said, “If you watch closely, life is always teaching you. But who’s paying attention?” So, go back to the practice of finding your true self.

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