

*Without obstacles, there'd be no point to effort and diligence. Without effort and diligence, there'd be no value to obstacles.*

*Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel)*

### 1. Response to a Letter from Prison

ZMJU: Thanks for your letter. You mention that prison is nerve-racking, and that you're out of your element. If you didn't feel that way, you wouldn't be paying attention. Everyone I've met who's been in prison feels that too. Everything you have is taken from you, so you feel that nothing belongs to you anymore. And so naturally, you feel that you don't belong there, because nothing is yours. People often either go into survival mode, or they start to look for something more meaningful. You're using this circumstance to find something more meaningful, and so you will.

You're asking a fundamental question, but I don't know if you know you're asking it. If they take everything away from me, what is it that belongs to me that can't be taken away? This is the same question that all Zen practitioners encounter, regardless of their circumstances. People depend on their circumstances to take care of their feelings and needs. But when their circumstances change, their feelings also change, and they suffer for this. But what is it that is more fundamental than circumstances?

Buddhism talks about the human mind in terms of six realms of existence. This is just a map of the mind, not a real place somewhere outside of you.

- In the god realm, there is unlimited ability to satisfy whatever you want. But if you lose this ability, what then?
- In the asura or demigod realm, there is great power. Asuras spend all their time fighting and scheming. But if they lose their power, what then?
- In the human realm, there is the ability to see your fundamental nature and to understand cause and effect. But if you don't do that, what then?
- In the animal realm, there is just the wish to satisfy sensory needs. But if sensory needs can't be met, what then?
- In the hungry ghost realm, there is unlimited craving that can never be satisfied. The image is of someone with a mouth the size of a cavern, a belly the size of the ocean, and a throat the size of a pinhole. Endless unquenchable desire; only suffering forever.
- In the hell realm, below the hungry ghost realm, it is indescribable. More suffering than suffering. Everybody goes through all of these realms one way or an-

other throughout life, even throughout the day. These realms all have this in common: I want something, but I can't get it, so I'm suffering. It is not possible to not want, so what is this thing that wants? What are you? This question belongs completely to you. If you see into that, then you find something that can't be damaged by circumstances. Prison can take away your eyes, ears, heart and voice. Finding your true self can restore your eyes, ears, heart and voice.

There are four circumstances that you can use as practice. First, if you have a practice space, then you can practice with your body in that space. Sitting meditation regularly brings you to a place where you see and remember what is most fundamental. That's *body-practice*.

Seeing what is most fundamental doesn't depend solely, though, on what you're doing with your body. When you get up from your meditation space, your activity changes, so your metabolism changes, and your feelings change. Trying to keep the feeling you had when you were meditating is like trying to chase after the toothpaste after you spit it down the drain. Your teeth are already clean, so why mourn the toothpaste?

Next, then, is *mind-practice*. Mind practice allows you to find anchor points in simple routine daily activities and use them as practice. Folding laundry, cleaning, even walking—when you do these, do them wholeheartedly and completely. Then you learn to see your true nature in your daily ordinary activities.

Next is *life-practice*. All phenomena have their own particular shape, their own particular color, weight, light, sound, scent, texture, length. If you see your mind in all these phenomena, then that's life practice. Everyday mind is Zen mind. You will discover this as you apply yourself. You find your wisdom in the shape of things around you.

*Student-practice* is learning to see all sentient beings as our teachers. All beings have mind-light. If you see that in all beings, then you become their student. The mind of a student is diligent, concerned, caring, connected, generous, grateful and so on. This also belongs completely to you.

These are not four practices, just four circumstances you can use for practice. The more you apply yourself in each of them, the more you find your heart everywhere. Nobody can take that from you.

Please use these difficult circumstances as motivation to apply yourself. Scott has offered to remain in touch with you and to send you materials, and you can also write to me through him.

In the dharma,  
Zen Master Jok Um, Ken Kessel

### Response to a Letter after a Solo Retreat

**ZMJU:** Thanks for your efforts, diligence, and your obstacles. Without obstacles, there'd be no point to effort and diligence. Without effort and diligence, there'd be no value to obstacles. Naturally, your retreat did not align with your suspicions. How can you say you had no insight or transformations, just because they weren't what you'd thought they'd be. If you'd only learned what you thought you were going to learn, would you have learned anything? Where is the hindrance to encountering fully the ordinary?

Diligent effort makes you create bodhisattvas all around you. Please listen carefully to their teaching.

Take care,  
Ken

### 3. Letter Forwarded from a Zen Center

**Q:** Is awareness like a flashlight, or a glowing ball of energy? Is the mind like a tree? Why does the mind not look or feel like a tree? I don't see a tree at all. The mind feels like a big empty ball. Where is the root of the tree? When I imagine the mind, I feel inside the skull, and move the awareness around inside my skull. By holding awareness on different parts of the brain, different feelings emerge over time: Happiness, Sadness, Sound, Music, Peace, Body, Heart Beat, Space, Wonder, etc. So, where is the root? Is the root a place or location? Does one cut the root or get under the root? Or merely watch the root? Does the tree contain energy? Is there a relation between emptiness and the tree?

**ZMJU:** You make an important point in your questions.

When you ask one question, it only generates more questions. That kind of questioning means looking for something. But there is no such something. If you look in that way, it cultivates the kind of suffering involved with looking for something that doesn't exist. That is why a central element of practice is Great Doubt. It's the doubt of not believing an idea or a person. It's doubt that recognizes that there is no thing to hold on to. So if you find yourself grasping something, doubt that. Then you find the freedom of not grasping. Then you see the nature of the questions you've been asking, and beyond that, you can see for yourself. So what do you see when you see for yourself? Please, come to our retreat and investigate this continuously and thoroughly.

### 4. Letter from a Student

Hey Ken,

How are you? I have a question about seeing ones Karma...I have been trading "only don't know" and Seung Sahn talks a lot about seeing your Karma and then being able to use it to help others. I also listened to Carlos podcast on sit, breathe, bow and he discusses the same thing. It all makes me want to move to a zen center to practice but this is not my Karma at this time. Being my children's father is my Karma and I guess I've always known being a dad was my Karma. I'm pulled in both directions though. How do I see my Karma when I don't have a practice group that I attend regularly?

About the compass of zen homework you gave me...don't know what I'm doing when I look at it as a painting. Fingers typing on an iPhone, email is a convenient way to say

Also, answer for homework, what did it mean when Joju put his sandals on his head and walk away? My sandals are in my head, goodbye Ken.

**ZMJU:** Thanks for writing. We just returned from out of state, so I'm getting to your e-mail now.

You have some typos in your e-mail. How did they

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happen to appear? What can you do about them? If you see that, then you understand seeing your karma. It's not a special thing, and karma is not hidden or mysterious. It's also not a thing. It's a way of talking about your tendencies, habits, character, affinities, thoughts, feelings, relationships and actions. How could this be hidden from your view? Setting up the right external circumstances is also not required to see your own karma. Wanting special circumstances to help you see your karma is a kind of karma to see through. If you want to honor your karma as a father, then learn to see your children's mind-light. That will be your best guide. They are most intimate with you. Because of that, you have the most opportunity to practice with them. Are they not your home sangha?

If you're not sure how to look at the *Compass of Zen* as you'd look at a painting or a landscape, then spend a week first looking at paintings and landscapes. Then you'll see more easily what this means. You're already very good at looking at the ocean, so you have something to go on.

Regarding Joju—please take your sandals out of your head. There's a place where they do more good.

Take care,  
Ken

## 5. Correspondence with a Student with Questions for a College Paper

**Q:** What is peace?

**ZMJU:** What are you? If you find your true self, then you find peace.

**Q:** What is forgiveness?

**ZMJU:** Don't eat toxic mind food. Greed, hate and delusion poison the mind.

**Q:** What is compassion?

**ZMJU:** All sentient beings are your teachers. Perceive their mind-light and be guided by it.

**Q:** What is the importance of compassion and forgiveness concerning oneself and others around them?

**ZMJU:** Don't make self and others. Then you see your true nature everywhere.

**Q:** What methods do you use to teach people to implement these qualities in their lives?

**ZMJU:** These qualities only come to life when you find that they already reside in you. Meditation practice is body-practice—intentionally making a time and space to be fully with your own nature without being seduced by mind-hindrances helps you anchor in the mind-ground. Finding this mind-ground in simple activities—grooming, folding laundry, cleaning, walking; things that don't require figuring out—can be used as practice anchors throughout the course of the day. This is mind-practice. Recognizing the shape of circumstances around you and following its flow is life-practice. Eat when hungry; sleep when tired; know how to give and how to receive. Then seeing that all sentient beings are your teachers is student practice. The mind of a student is generous, grateful, curi-

ous, engaged, kind, receptive and responsive. Finding a guide for this is very important.

**Q:** What is the process one goes through to accept forgiveness?

**ZMJU:** Why would someone reject forgiveness?

**Q:** How does a community prosper when its citizens have a compassionate and forgiving nature?

**ZMJU:** Buddha taught that a peaceful heart makes a peaceful person. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family. A peaceful family makes a peaceful village. A peaceful village makes a peaceful country. A peaceful country makes a peaceful world.

**Q:** Thank you again for your time and consideration

**ZMJU:** You're welcome. Please, if you have time and interest, come and experience practice with us.

## 6. Question about Becoming a Dharma Teacher

Hi Ken,

We are planning to have a precepts ceremony here soon and I have some comments and questions about making the commitment to transition from dharma-teacher-in-training (DTIT) to an official dharma teacher (DT). Lots of thinking! Here we go . . .

1. I have been a DTIT for some five years. Originally I thought that, well, "I already teach formally and informally and with sincerity, to the best of my ability. Why do I need a special robe or hierarchical position to confirm this? How will you give me what I already have?" And so I did not pursue acquiring a dharma teacher's long robes.

2. Later I thought, "becoming a DT is a valuable credential, and since I have completed many of the required steps already, I have earned this credential and I WANT IT." So I stated my intention to pursue acquiring it.

3. Now, I am of a different mind, and the path is not clear. You gave instructions to study the Platform Sutra in detail, and to look at and perceive the original *Compass of Zen* as one would with a piece of art. While I have made some strong effort, I have not been 100 percent diligent with either since our last communication. And I have not been in close contact with you regarding my progress.

You said in your last dharma talk in Gainesville (paraphrasing here) that we have a choice: either "Don't make anything!" or "Make everything, but pay very close attention!" Thank you for that teaching.

**ZMJU:** Thanks for sharing your reflections. I have a brief response.

At the end of your letter, you said, "We have a choice: either 'Don't make anything!' or 'Make everything, but pay very close attention!'"

That belongs to you. If you see how that applies to your questions, you see how long robes support your life, your direction, your practice and all beings. If you don't see that, then even the finest clothes and the best situation won't be a path out of suffering. I encourage you to look at this carefully. ♦