

A Zen Flower

Chee Hoyyee

I feel that I have been riding a roller coaster my whole life; thrown up, down and sideways with no warning. Some days my life is like a peaceful, still lake, but on other days it feels like a raging storm and I have no way to handle it. My mind then just flips from a still lake to the storm and I feel like I am getting nowhere.

When I first learned about Buddhism, I clearly remember everyone was always saying that life is suffering. I thought, “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, I know!” So then why live with all this suffering? The reason I live on is because they also said that if you kill yourself you will go to hell and you will stay there forever! Practicing Buddhism and meditation is a way out of hell—freedom from suffering. This is what I was told but I couldn’t understand how or why.

As my life progressed, I managed to find a way to make it through the stormy days. After that, things seemed to get better. Then, my partner, Pop, and I decided to go into the jungle and stay there for some time. My life changed dramatically at that point and I realized how stupid I was because I didn’t even know where to get food, how to get water or what to do. Basically, there was nothing I could do and slowly I began to see my fear; I saw what had happened to me in my life; that what I had been chasing after did not help me to survive in the jungle.

Luckily, one of the older women who lived close to the forest was friendly and taught me how to look for food and get clean water. It was then that I realized that my life was being supported by all of nature around me, which was the source my daily meals. Fresh air from the trees; clean water from the river, underground streams and bamboo thickets. What else did I need to survive? I had to learn this important lesson or lose it.

After some months, I returned to my hometown in Penang with my idea of happiness: that nature is heaven and the city is hell. Soon, a strong feeling of separation arose within me, which caused me more suffering. It was a bad time and it really shook me up. I thought of the practice that I had done.

I wondered if the meditation I had been practicing was meant to bring peace and happiness. If I believed that nature is good and is our life’s teacher, then why did I have so much of suffering now while living in the city with my family? Did the practice work? Or was I understanding it wrongly? What was important for me? Questions leapt into my mind nonstop. Eventually I remembered a teaching about bringing peace in our mind, that is, bringing peace to wherever we go. So, Pop and I decided to try to create a kind of heaven on earth.

By then, I had an insight into how the human world worked, how greed led to heedless development that ruined nature. It takes away our ecological gold—the good, rich soil that nutritious food grows from, the clean air and water that we breathe and drink. It takes away almost all the freedoms that we used to have and take for granted.

We started our journey by growing food organically in my parents’ home, regenerating the degraded city soil. We reused whatever natural resources we found and turned them back into the land. The moment I reconnected with the reality of nature and life, I began to understand better how the natural world supports us and how can we support it in return. Life began to get better, but one drama after another caused havoc within my family, sending me straight back into the storm. Fortunately, my connection with nature helped me through. I saw our plants survive in the hot sun and through storms. I could too, through having faith in nature and myself.

Somehow, my journey led me to an encounter Myong An Sunim, my first Zen teacher. Practicing don’t-know mind was something new for me and gave me a different perspective about Buddhism. As I was practicing meditation and keeping a don’t-know mind, it felt like my mind was starting to get clearer. How? I really didn’t know. But there were fewer stormy days, and life felt like it had improved. I could see better my emotions arising and my own actions. My emotions did not stay in my mind as

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example, in one season a lot of lalang weed will appear. This means the soil needs deep tap roots to break it up. After that it could be mimosa that becomes the dominant variety, which tells us that the soil needs nitrogen. Each season brings with it a different weed variety. We call this the succession of ecology; when one type of grass finishes taking care of what the soil needs, another type will take over. This is the cycle of nature.

We didn't even have to buy organic fertilizer for our fruit trees. Nature provides a built-in abundance to regenerate the soil. Many times through farming, I learned that to do less is doing more. When we do less or pause, we get less involved with what is happening in our head. We will get to see how rich life is. There's more in life than what we think there is. And that realization comes from doing less.

I first met Myong An Sunim at a monthly organic farmers market. Every time he saw me, he would invite me to practice meditation. He invited me for a year but I never went. I knew that Hoyyee, a farmer friend in Penang, went weekly to practice meditation at the Zen center.



Photo: Haeng Won Zen Centre

When I started to give healing massages at her home, she said, "Let's go together to practice with Sunim." I didn't hesitate about going. After practicing for many times, I experienced an improvement in my life. Most of the time at the farm, I have to take care of people, plants, income and everything else related to the farm. My mind becomes busy easily and it's often difficult to settle down. I'm always thinking of how to finish everything.

When I started to practice meditation, I realized that if we just pay attention, it's easy to do things one by one. I attend to one thing at a time. Only after one thing is done do I move on to another. Meditation helps me in paying attention and breathing so that I am able

to enjoy things from moment to moment. Nowadays, when I visit my mother, she often comments that I look brighter and healthier. I believe that it stems from "less is more." ♦

Xin Tong founded and lives on Serukam Organic Farm in Sungai Petani, Malaysia.

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long as they used to. When I was able to see them, they went away quicker than before. I guess that it was one indicator for me to know that my life was getting better and clearer.

We moved out of my parents' home to an urban home farm. It became a place for us to practice and train, learning to work with nature within the environment of the city and society. Bit by bit, without realizing it, we had begun turning a piece of abandoned land into an urban educational farm.

One day, like a bombshell, some incidents involving my family and life blew up in my face at the same time. I didn't know what to do. Then, ahhh, I recognized that it was the same challenge again. I thought I had practiced well and could handle things, but like a really bad storm, it blew me back to square one again. I began to lose faith in myself and my practice; my emotions were churning up and down even though I was trying my best to keep practicing.

I started to walk out the door, legs heavy with despair. Just as I came out into the sun, I saw a yellow flower blooming in my garden; it was from a seed that I planted some time ago. I couldn't believe it still bloomed even though I had put it in a tiny container. At that moment, I suddenly became present with the flower. In that same moment, I was able to return to my breath and my body and a feeling of hope came flowing back. I realized that the seed grows, the flower blooms, I just breathe and life just goes on.

As a farmer, it's easy to see that the climate is changing for

the worse and the news is telling us that many living beings are suffering. Like them I have suffering too. I remembered one of the Facebook posts sharing a conversation that Zen Master Seung Sahn had with his students, "Seeing all this coming, what can we do? Where can we hide?"

Zen Master Seung Sahn replied, "Hide under the path."

This teaching keeps reminding me, moment to moment, to take refuge in the path.

What will happen next? Don't know. The seeds of Zen have been planted, so I just keep on going, keep on living. What is the purpose of life? I thought I knew before, but now, I just don't know. I have learned that life is often unpredictable, just as in nature; the sun shines one moment and rain falls the next. After it stops, a rainbow appears, a breeze blows the clouds away and the sun shines again. Through it all, the trees keep growing, dropping their seeds onto the soil, continuing the cycle of life of the mother tree. Trees, vegetables, fruits, flower, weeds, seeds, chickens, ducks, dogs, cats, sky, earth, people; all things around us are our teachers.

I try to keep faith in myself to grow with nature and to practice, practice, practice. To me, it is the only way to learn how to dance in the rain. Supporting ourselves with practice is also a way of supporting our friends, family and nature. ♦

Hoyyee and her partner, Pop, founded an urban educational farm and teahouse on the island of Penang, Malaysia.