

Just Do It for All Beings!

Hundred-Day Solo Retreat

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Wild blueberries, nettle, dead mouse, stars at midnight, lentil soup . . . these are conjured up when I look back at my hundred-day solo retreat in the Wisla mountains in Poland this past summer. I'm compelled to write a few words, hoping it can be useful for the next person who aspires to do a solo retreat.

Why did I decide to do a hundred-day solo retreat? If I ask myself again, initially the reason was not so clear. I'm already in my late 40s and have been living a monk's life for 23 years. I gained some weight and got a belly, but more than that, I felt my mind also became overweight. When I had to teach, sometimes I had to face some part of myself that lacked a power of conviction, and that was most uncomfortable. However, even up to the day before I started my retreat, my reason for doing it was not entirely clear. That day, I wrote an email to Zen Master Dae Bong saying, "Sunim, I start my retreat tomorrow and will end on August 27. I cannot be reached until then." Within five minutes, Dae Bong Sunim replied with just one line all the way from Korea, "Just do it for all beings!" My mind opened up with a bang. We have heard this teaching from Zen Master Seung Sahn and in the Kwan Um School of Zen countless times, over and over, and I myself have repeated it endlessly to students, but in that moment, it rang with such clarity, liberating me as if hearing it for the very first time. In fact, there is actually no other reason than that for me to do a hundred-day solo retreat. During those hundred days there were many hindrances, but whenever I would say to myself, "Just do it for all beings!" everything was fine. I decided to do a thousand bows in five sets of 200 daily. At the beginning of each set, I would start by saying, "Just do it for all beings!" and my body would move by itself. During midnight practice, or when I woke up in the morning, dazed and confused, I'd ask myself, "What am I doing right now?" and then immediately cry, "Just do it for all beings!" and it was as if I was immediately jolted with a double espresso shot. It was a deeply powerful reminder that whether it's a solo retreat, or any other kind of practice, or whatever it is we do in life, one's direction has to be clear.

After about two or three weeks, I thought a lot about death and the cycle of rebirth. Suddenly, I became very curious. I thought I had crushed this one countless times during Dharma talks and kong-an interviews, but there was definitely something deeply unresolved inside. Then I'd reach the same conclusion . . . damn! The one that drags this question around—don't-know—almost lost it again! When I started to see my ribs showing and my steps getting wobbly, the fear of death started following me. Then I remembered, "You already gave your life!" and could feel the power of "no life,

no death." Coming into this life in a human body, we really have to live without regrets. Not live by squeezing, forcing ourselves incessantly to some unknown end, but to live a life of truly no regrets. Practicing utterly all alone, I was grateful to the Polish sangha—to the Unsu Foundation, Krakow Zen Center, Katowice Zen Center; to all our Dharma family back in Musangsa Temple in Korea, who assured me to go and practice and not to worry about anything; and to my parents who gave me this body so I can practice. There's not enough space to write how truly grateful I am. Ironically, people I disliked appeared very often in my mind. I really don't like having this dislike mind, and it appeared often. So every time they would appear, I would say to myself, "Stop hating," almost like a mantra. After some time, when those dislike thoughts would appear, they became laughable. Happy mind, unhappy mind, loving mind, hating mind—which one is the true mind? In our kong-an book, there are many questions like this. We are truly fortunate to be able to practice with this as our foundation!

I did a couple of short solo retreats previously, and I remember that what was most difficult was the sense of loneliness. So this time, I made a very tight and meticulous schedule, posted it on the wall and used it like a robot. Based on our Kwan Um School of Zen Kyol Che practice schedule, I added 1,000 bows, chanting the Great Dharani and midnight practice. I just followed the schedule until I could do it automatically. Just do it, just do it, keep going, then even with the most difficult or tight schedule, we just do it, and we get the power to believe in ourselves. Believe in our true selves. Originally there is no such thing as true self. Only, the sky is blue; bowing time, only sweat; cooking rice, then just "bubble, bubble, bubble . . ." That's all. Even if we gather all the powers of the universe and try to destroy one of those things, it's not possible. It is also what Zen Master Man Gong said: "The place beyond life and death includes both the sentient and the nonsentient. Therefore, all the weapons of the universe cannot destroy the true nature of even a single blade of grass." It's the same for our everyday life. When we just do it, just do it and only go straight, we can believe in ourselves. Then every moment is the truth, and everything we do is bodhisattva action.

Every day, I read from the kong-an book. There is a commentary from Dae Soen Sa Nim: "If you want something then you lose everything. If you don't want anything then you already have everything. But you must hear the stone lion roaring. Then the whole world is in your hand. You can be free and can do anything."

This was very refreshing. Do you hear the stone lion's roar?◆