

What's Your Question?

Kathy Park JDPSN

The Kwan Um School of Zen's global online presence, the Kwan Um Online Sangha (KUOS), provides teaching, support and community practice opportunities for members who have limited access to local Zen centers. The following are taken from question-and-answer sessions with Kathy Park JDPSN from online exchanges.

Question: I think the desire to do good things and help others can have its dangers—it can easily be shadowed by thoughts of “I feel good because I’m a virtuous person now” or “I’m helping them more than other people are.” We’ll always try and add our little egos into the equation!

Kathy Park JDPSN: Yes, very true. A human being is made of desire; otherwise we would not be born! But if we use this precious human life to practice and see our true nature, we also see that ourselves and all beings’ true nature are one. There, natural compassion arises. That’s our original human nature. But because of our habitual thinking and conditioning, our “I, my, me” creates opinions. So as you said, our ego gets in the way! That’s why practicing is important, so that our view becomes more clear, less derived from “I, my, me.” Then we transform our desires (based on “I”) into an aspiration (for all beings). If we direct our practice and life’s purpose to more than just ourselves, we call that making a vow with the seed of bodhi mind, that is, bodhicitta. Then we are already on the bodhisattva path, and everything we do is already saving all beings, moment to moment.



Question: When I sit on the cushion I’m starting to recognize how my mind is full of a huge variety of ego-based delusions. I’m learning to fully see them, and gently let them go. But occasionally I think something during meditation which is actually useful or creative—which brings me to ask: How should we look at these thoughts? If we value some of these thoughts and we want to remem-

ber them and use them in our lives, are we then clinging to them and being attached to them?

Park PSN: It’s a good question. If you don’t cling or attach to them, you can use any good idea as necessary. Good idea, bad idea—they come and go. Sometimes a brilliant idea appears during sitting, but later it doesn’t always work out in life. Sometimes we don’t keep any thinking and just go about our day, but if our mind is truly clear—what we call don’t-know—suddenly our wisdom functions in that moment and we are creative and decisive. It’s all about how clear we are when we practice, and moment to moment in our daily life. Yeah, any idea appears, no problem. See it for what it is. Might be useful later. But if you keep clear and your mind is like a mirror, just reflecting the truth, the idea may help you when really necessary—or maybe an even better thing appears! But if you attach to “my creative idea” then it may hinder you, so pay attention!



Question: Since the last check-in I am chanting Kwan Seum Bosal 5,000 times a day, as you suggested to me. For the first two days it helped me a lot: much clearer. But now I see that the mantra and my mind are separate. I mean, I am doing mantra but thinking something else. Do you have any good advice for me?

Park PSN: As many dharma friends have said, it is good that you can see your mind is thinking and doing mantra at the same time. It is normal that both Kwan Seum Bosal and thinking happens simultaneously after a while. That’s because in the beginning, your mind is doing something new and you really pay attention to doing it, so it works well. But soon your mind has already gotten used to doing the mantra and it becomes a habit, like a groove in our consciousness already replacing our usual habits. That’s good news. So one more step is necessary. When you catch yourself doing both, ask, “Who is repeating Kwan Seum Bosal?” And just return to this moment, become clear, only don’t know. Then see clear, hear clear. And back to Kwan Seum Bosal and whatever is in front of you—just do it. If you don’t attach to them, thinking is not a problem. If you make your thinking important, then it becomes a problem. Great job so far, so keep going. Most important is to keep going. Then you can experience fruit in your practice.



Question: Does one attain their vow and direction during a precepts ceremony?

Park PSN: What are you doing right now?

If this moment is clear, you attain your vow and direc-

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Photo: Won Il Sunim

tion. If you are not clear, even during a precepts ceremony, you'll be lost.



Question: I am in pain and trying to rest to recover from a viral infection. What is my correct job here?

Park PSN: Be in pain and recover by resting. Do some Kwan Seum Bosal while breathing. Sick time, be sick. Rest time, only rest. That's all.



Question: I know our intention is always to help others. I know this can be in any way, according to what's needed in the moment. But I was wondering, are there any social projects that the Kwan Um School has set up anywhere in the world? If so, I'd like to learn from them. There is suffering in my hometown that I see every day and I really want to help. I'm specifically thinking of the problem of people sleeping on the streets. I want so much to help. I can occasionally buy a homeless person a coffee or a sandwich. But I would love to be involved in a more sustained action, with other Buddhists. There are Buddhists where I live but no one from the Kwan Um School.

Park PSN: This is a good question. We all want to help. There are many kinds of help.

22] One way is to provide charity and give to others. It is giving our generosity to those in need. That is wonderful and is a very important practice. For example, at every holiday our temple, Musangsa in Korea, provides offerings of rice, foods and supplies for single elderly people who are homebound in rural communities nearby. When we collect donations for such events, many people give generously for it. Thus we practice generosity as a community. Generosity is the foundation of our human nature. We are a species of community.

Another way to help is by giving service. We can give our time and energy, for example, as a hospice caregiver, which some of our members do. It means giving solace, giving our attention. At the Cambridge Zen Center, we also used to provide service at local canteens for the homeless by cooking and serving food. That is giving of our time, effort and support for those in need, as individuals or as a community.

Currently some KUSZ members are working hard together on actions for climate change as a global community. Education, sharing wisdom and inspiring each other to take action are other ways to become socially engaged in making changes.

Another way is by giving dharma. An example in the Kwan Um School is the ongoing prison program. For more than 30 years, Zen students in the United States go regularly to teach meditation to prisoners, and this is a powerful way of helping society. By sharing the dharma, we give the precious gift of teaching and the opportunity for others to liberate themselves by attaining their true selves

so that changing their own lives is possible. The KUSZ is a school that builds sangha, a community of practitioners globally—not only in prisons. We help as many people as possible to wake up.

In the *Compass of Zen* (Shambhala, 1997), under the chapter “The Purpose of Buddhism” is written, “First attain enlightenment, then instruct all beings.” As practitioners, we are exploring more clearly, “How can I really help?” All different ways are wonderful, and all are very much needed. While we try to help, at the same time by continuing to practice and wake up, we can tell the difference between enabling or being a bodhisattva. We can find our true calling when we become more and more clear in our own direction and purpose. We can help materially and also help with wisdom. Providing food or a coffee for a homeless person may work once in a while, but we also need to understand, what's the best way to help. Do they even want my help?

So do what you aspire to from your heart, and at the same time continue to practice looking inside. As we grow in our spiritual journey, we become more skillful in being of true benefit to others, and eventually everything you do is already saving all beings, moment to moment, no matter how big or small. No need to wait for enlightenment before we help, but along the way become more and more clear, then you can really help this world effectively. Then you are fulfilling your very own life's true purpose.

Here is a link to an article by Zen Master Seung Sahn that hits the heart of this subject:

<https://kwanumzen.org/teaching-library/1985/03/01/how-can-sitting-save-this-hungry-world>

I don't know of a specific program currently that is being organized for supporting the homeless, but you can try to connect with the Cambridge Zen Center to find out more: <https://cambridgezen.org>



Question: Thank you so much for all of this teaching. And I feel inspired by the examples you give. I suppose I've been feeling a little depressed by this whole issue—“How can I possibly change anything?” But your reply is encouraging me—I don't *have* to solve anything. That's probably my big ego stepping in! But I can do simple things—even listening or saying something to a homeless person that is respectful and friendly could have some good effect—and I can continue practicing so that little by little I'll see what I can do more clearly.

Park PSN: Yes, we can get discouraged with the idea that we have to save all beings, but we don't have to do it all by ourselves. And the greatest gift you can give is the gift of your practice. Each moment you return to your original nature, you and the whole universe become one. Then when you bow, you bow with all beings. When you chant, you chant with them. When you sit, you sit with all. So you and this universe are never separate. That way, you are always helping. Always together. ♦