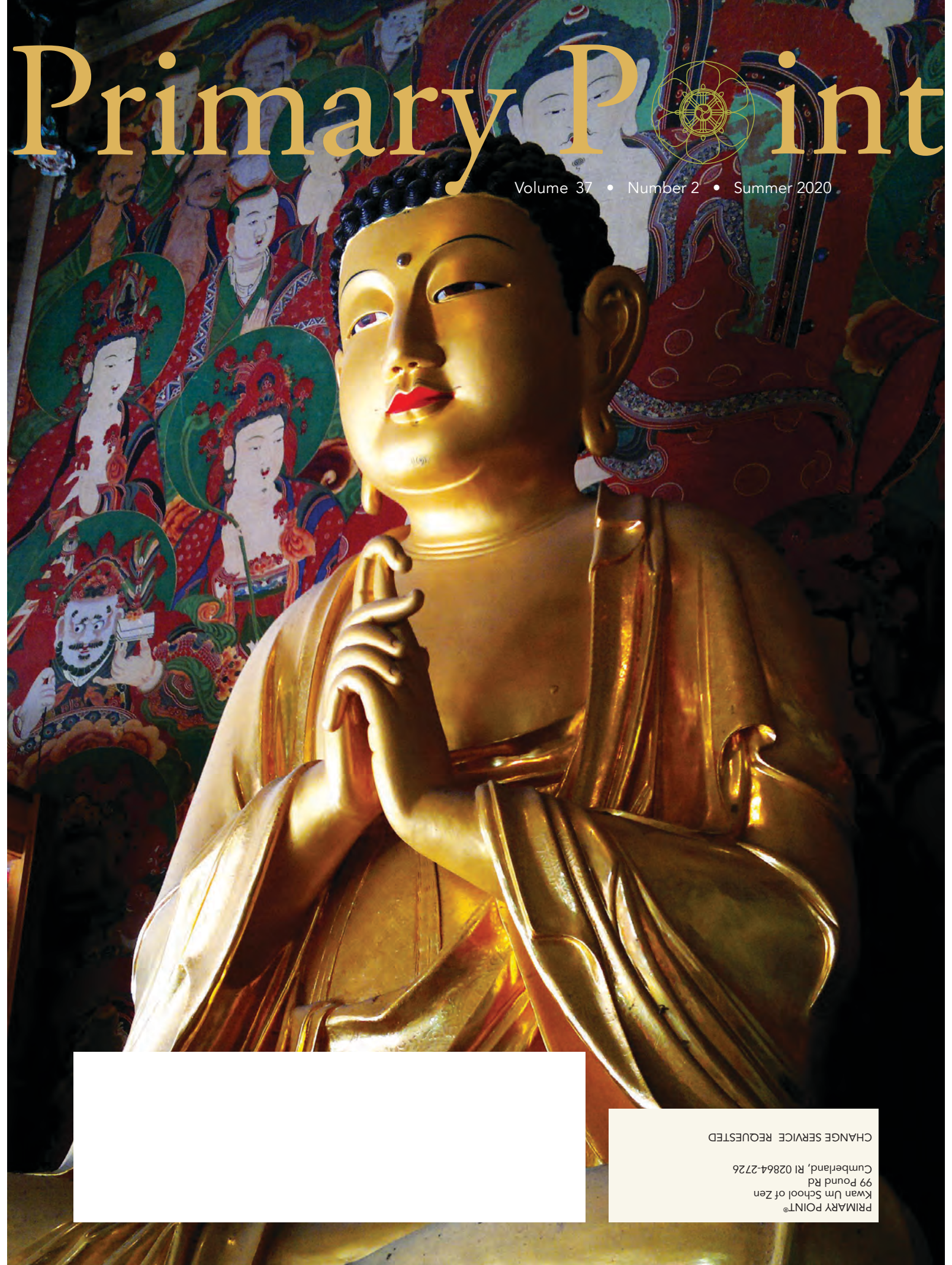


Primary Point



Volume 37 • Number 2 • Summer 2020



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2020 - 2021 Musangsa 90-day Kyol Che

Winter Kyol Che November 29, 2020 - February 26, 2021

Summer Kyol Che May 26, 2021 - August 22, 2021

Led by Zen Master Dae Bong, Guiding Zen Master
Hye Tong Sunim JDPS, Guiding Teacher
& Visiting Teachers from the Kwan Um School of Zen



For information* & registration visit <https://www.musangsa.org/english/kyol-che/> *Kyol Che guidelines may be subject to change according to Covid19 regulations.
For online teaching program updates, visit <https://www.musangsa.org> <https://www.facebook.com/musangsa/> https://www.instagram.com/temple_musangsa/

Providence Zen Center

Flowers in spring
Cool wind in summer
Leaves in autumn
Snow in winter.
If you dont keep anything
in your mind
for you it's always a good
season.

- zen master Seung Sahn

Summer Kyol Che
2021

July 5th - August 6th

Winter Kyol Che
2021

January 4th - April 2nd





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The Kwan Um School of Zen supports the worldwide teaching schedule of the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sas, assists the member Zen centers and groups in their growth, issues publications on contemporary Zen practice, and supports dialogue among religions. If you would like to become a member of the School and receive Primary Point, see page 31. The circulation is 1,800 copies.

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Cover: *Vairocana Buddha (Buddha of the Cosmic Universe)*, with the mudra symbolizing “not two” teaching, in the main Buddha hall of Ma Gok Sa Temple in South Korea. Ma Gok Sa is the temple where Zen Master Seung Sahn became ordained and served as housemaster with Zen Master Ko Bong as his teacher. Photo by Gerry Botha.

Editor's Note: Two major events occurred since our last issue. The first was the global pandemic. *Primary Point* solicited brief reflections from our worldwide sangha about practicing in the pandemic. The response was so rich that we are printing only about half of it here. The other essays can be found at <https://kwanumzen.org/primary-point/covid19>.

The other event happened after the previous issue had started to go to press. The murder of George Floyd has consumed the United States—and the world—as never before with the flames of racism. Our statement about that is at <https://americas.kwanumzen.org/on-racism>.

On another note, we would like to thank Zen Master Ji Kwang (Roland Wöhrle-Chon) for his years of service as European editor of *Primary Point*. He will be turning over these responsibilities to Barbara Pardo JDPSN. We welcome her to our team and look forward to her participation and contributions.

The Song of Zen

Zen Master Kyong Ho

Suddenly, I realize that everything is but a dream;
Countless heroic leaders now all in their graves,
Words of honour without any use
For how can death ever be escaped?
Ah, this body is but a single dewdrop hanging on a blade
of grass,
A flame fluttering in the wind.

The words of Buddha, the great teacher of the Three
Realms,
Are thus transmitted through the Eighty Thousand
Sutras:

Upon seeing our true mind, become
Buddha.
Cutting off the cycle of samsara
Each of us are able to dwell in the land beyond life and
death
Functioning in non-action.

If you cannot attain this right now as a
human being,
Chances are bleaker than ever, so make haste!
There are many ways to attain one's true self,

But in short, here it is:
When sitting, standing, seeing, hearing,
Dressed, eating or in conversation

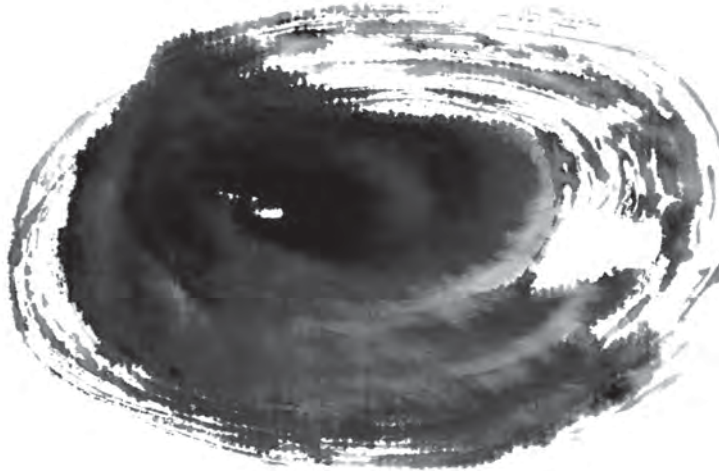
At any place, any time, what is this that brightly
perceives?

The body is a corpse, all thoughts
originally empty.
My true face, already Buddha:
Seeing, hearing,
Sitting or lying down,
Sleeping or working,
Within the blink of an eye, coming and going
Ten thousand miles and back in an instant.
This mind, in all its mysterious functioning
What is its form?

Questioning and still questioning,
Like a cat stalking a mouse,
Like a starving beggar searching for food,
Like a thirsty wanderer seeking only water,
Like an old widow awaiting her only lost son,
Without eating or sleeping—
Never letting go,
Looking deeply into this One Question
For 10,000 years nonstop.
Then Great Enlightenment is right before you.

Attaining enlightenment at once,
Finding that Buddha is already within,
Isn't this already Amitabul and Shakyamuni?
Neither young nor old,
Big nor small,
One's own true light from within
Is the whole universe.....

Heaven and hell are both originally empty.
Life, death and rebirth never existed.
Find an enlightened teacher, get inka
And do away with any doubt once and for all.



Not touching any worldly
concerns,
Cutting off all attachments,
Be an empty vessel floating along
Saving all beings that appear
before you.

What better virtue is there than
this to repay Buddha?

Keep precepts steadfast and
heaven grants merit.

Make a great vow, always study
the Buddhadharma.

Have mind of Great Compassion
Never making distinction between
the poor, sick or homeless.

When the five skandas appear,
recognize them as empty like
foam bubbles.

With any outside appearances,
perceive them as a dream,

Not following like or dislike

Looking deeply into mind, empty as space.

Not moved by the eight winds or five desires

Use this mind like a great big mountain.

Wasting day after day with idle talk,

Letting so many years go by, how is practicing possible
now?

Upon great suffering at the moment of death, how
pointless is regret then?

When limbs are torn off, the skull crushed and all organs
ripped out,

At that moment in total darkness and
utter suffering

Who could have imagined such a fate?

Hell and animal rebirth are truly
unfathomable.

Having wasted eons of chances and now
too old,

Getting a human body again is not easy

The Person of the Way who practices
Zen diligently

Lives long and chooses life and death accordingly,
Able to change this mysterious form as often as the
grains of sand by the sea.

Always using happiness or sadness as needed,
Regardless, let us practice diligently now with all our
attention.

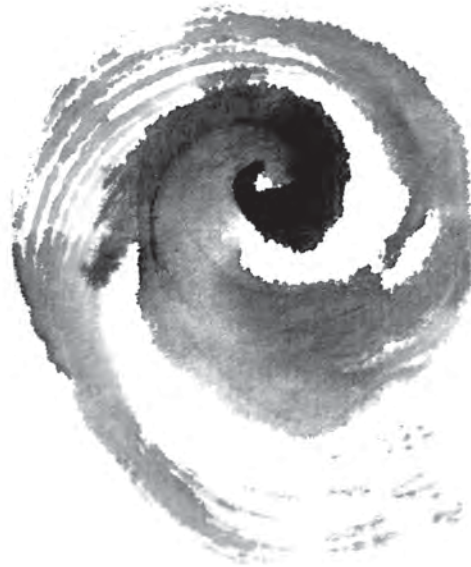
Any day now, death appears

Just as it does for the reluctant cow,

Hooves dragging towards the slaughterhouse.

The practitioner of old did not lose even a single mo-
ment to rest;

How idly I have wasted!



The practitioner of old stabbed himself
with an awl to stay awake;

How idly I have wasted!

The practitioner of old, down on all
fours and crying at sunset,

Lamented another day lost;

How idly I have wasted!

Having attained not a single thing,

This fleeting mind evaporates like a whiff
of spirit;

Ah, how truly sad it is!

Ignoring reproaches,

Heedless to warnings,

Carelessly passing by, how can this
clouded mind be led?

Following useless desires and provoking
anger for no reason,

Raising discrimination daily,

My wisdom is laughable; whom can I
blame?

Like a moth flying to the flame unknowingly rushes to
death,

Without practicing to attain one's mind, keeping
precepts avails no merit at all.

Ah, how pitiful!

Study these words closely and practice diligently.

Trust this song deeply.

Place it open at your desk and read it from time to time.

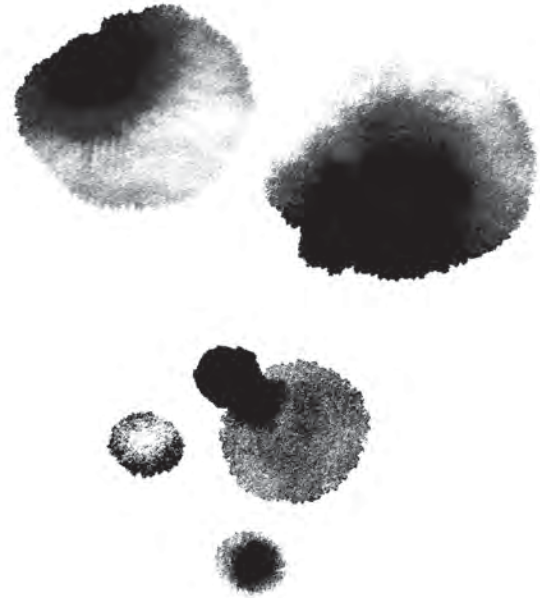
To say all I wish to say, even the oceans are not enough

To wet the ink needed to write all the words.

I stop now, so please attend to this earnestly,

For I will speak again when the stone god has a baby. ♦

*From Song of Zen (Hong Kong: Kwan Um Zen Translation
Group, 2014).*



Something Is Going to Get You!

Zen Master Dae Kwang

From a dharma talk given at Kwan Yin Chan Lin Zen Centre, Singapore, April 18, 2020

Hello everybody. Greetings from Singapore! It's evening here, but we have people from all over the world, so it's just "Hello." Usually we aren't quite this high-tech in our oral presentations at the Zen center. But we've been forced by circumstances and the Singapore government to shut down the Zen center. So, since people can't come anymore, we're going online to do teaching. Just as people are experiencing this coronavirus all around the world, we're also experiencing it in Singapore. One of the effects of this is that people everywhere are experiencing illness and even death, all the way from China to Alaska. I was looking at a map today of the United States, and all the different states that have it and how many people have died. Unlike many catastrophes, this one affects us moment to moment in our daily life, almost everywhere. And everyone throughout the world is doing things to ameliorate the effects of this new virus on us. How can we protect ourselves?

That's natural. When something bad happens, you want to get away. Maybe you run or hide. Or, maybe you try to attack

to preserve yourself, your family, your business, or your country. One time a monk came to Zen Master Un Mun and said, "When pain and suffering come, how can we avoid them?" That's a natural question that any human being might have.

When you feel the pain and suffering that comes from daily life experiences, you naturally want to know how you can get away. So the monk asked Un Mun, how can we avoid them? And Un Mun answers, "Welcome."

Un Mun is famous for his one-word answers, but this was kind of shocking. Welcome? Hello, I'm trying to get away!

This *welcome* is very interesting. Usually we don't *welcome* pain and suffering. Certainly the Buddha didn't when he got his manservant to sneak him out of the palace to go look around and see what the world was

really like. He didn't go out with the idea of welcome. The Buddha's father had created a nice situation for him in the palace. In fact, you might think of his situation as kind of like our situation, before we encountered this new coronavirus. Then he left the palace and had a direct experience of three things that I'm sure he knew about, had read about, but had never directly experienced: He had a direct encounter with an old person, a sick person, and a dead corpse lying beside the road. These direct experiences profoundly affected him. He asked his manservant, "Will this happen to me?" The servant says, "Of course! Everybody gets sick or gets



old. For sure you're going to die." That answer from the manservant brings up a big question for the Buddha.

The question isn't "How do I avoid old age, sickness and death?" The question is instead "What are we?" "Why do we suffer?" So this circumstance of directly experiencing old age, sickness, and death was actually a teacher for the Buddha, because these three things point directly to what we, in Buddhism, call the great question of life and death: What is a human being? Why are we here? Why are we born? Of course, this is a kind of teaching that you will not be able to avoid. I can avoid studying math in college by dropping out of the course, but in the end I can't drop out of this one. So, the coronavirus is one of many experiences we have, moment to moment in our life, which are teaching us something, pointing to something, if we pay attention.

Our founding teacher here at Kwan Yin Chan Lin, Zen Master Seung Sahn, was always saying "A good situ-

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ation is a bad situation, and a bad situation is a good situation.” That’s shocking, because it’s just exactly the opposite of what you think is going on. This bad situation is actually teaching you something about the way life really is. When the monk says “When pain and suffering come, how can we avoid them?” and Un Mun says “Welcome,” the behind-meaning of this *welcome* is: Yeah, this is a bad situation that’s going to teach you something.

After this encounter, the Buddha left his good situation and went to find the answer to the great question. He didn’t know the answer! They say the fourth thing that he saw was a seeker after truth, a *sadhu*. So, the Buddha also became a seeker after truth. Why do we suffer so much? What’s the truth behind our existence? So, you can study about this coronavirus; there are many coronaviruses running around. The common cold is a coronavirus. You can practice social distancing; you can wear a mask; you can do all kinds of things, but what the Buddha saw in the world, and what we can see too if we look closely, is that even if you avoid this particular coronavirus, something is going to get you in the end!

The bad situation that every human being will be presented with is not based on one’s religious, philosophical, or cultural beliefs. Everybody faces it. It’s actually pointing toward something. It’s pushing us toward searching for the great answer of life and death. What are we, really? If you look at what we usually use to describe what we are, those things are all taken away by old age, sickness, and death. So what’s back behind those? The Buddha did a very simple thing. He didn’t go to a library, and he definitely didn’t go online to Wikipedia. He went and started looking inside. He looked inside himself to find the answer. Then one morning, he looked up and saw the morning star—Venus—and boom! He had a direct experience of the answer to the question. Nobody was telling him the answer; he wasn’t reading the answer in a book. He had the answer through a direct experience. It’s very interesting, what he said. “Wow this is amazing! Everybody already has it. Everybody already has the answer, which is your own Buddha nature. But human beings don’t know that, and because they don’t know, they suffer.”

That means the suffering we experience as human beings is created by a misunderstanding. We think we’re one thing, and we’re actually another. That’s what we call in Zen your original Buddha nature or your original nature or your true nature. There are many words for it. So when Zen Master Seung Sahn said a bad situation is a good situation and a good situation is a bad situation, this bad situation pushes you until you seek the answer to this question. The reason a good situation is not so good is—and almost all human beings are the same in this regard—a good situation will make you lazy. When Un Mun says *welcome*, the

behind-meaning is “Wow! You’re lucky, because this is going to push you toward finding out what you really are,” which is the true solution of the great question of life and death.

I was thinking today, “Wow, what about big catastrophes?” The last one we had was the 2008 economic collapse that was all over the world. That was pretty dramatic. When I was a young person, my country was involved in a war with Vietnam. That didn’t turn out so well. I had friends dying. But in the end, whether it’s big things like the coronavirus or the economic collapse of 2008 or a war somewhere, or small little things just in your daily life, all of these things are pointing toward what you truly are. Somebody will die. You’ll get sick. For sure, you’ll get old, if you don’t die first. And while you wouldn’t wish any of these things on anybody—you don’t want anybody to get this coronavirus, and if they do get it you want them to get well—in the end, in the big picture, no human being is going to be able to avoid those things. So the big meaning behind all of those bad experiences you don’t want anybody to have is this big question: what are we?

Just before the Buddha died, he said a very interesting thing: “Life is short. Investigate it closely.” This phrase “Life is short” is very interesting to me. Because to me, it almost seems meaningless. You can say it, but you don’t really know how short life is. I’m old enough to know that I’m probably past middle age. But nobody knows how short their life actually is. [Breathes in and out.] That may have been the last one. I don’t know. So this “Life is short; investigate it closely” means wake up now! Because right here, right now is where you’re going to find your true self.

Zen Master Seung Sahn’s take on this phrase in the *Diamond Sutra* points directly to this experience: “Past mind can’t get enlightenment, future mind can’t get enlightenment, and even present mind also can’t get enlightenment because it just went by.” The only place you’re going to connect with your true self is right here, right now. This is it. There’s no place else to go. This is the way things are. There’s no running away. Except you can run away in your mind, and we do it all the time. The Buddha taught that the way to find your true self is to let go of your thinking, and just this moment let go. Then it’s possible to wake up just now and use this just-now mind to help the world. There’s suffering going on all the time, and the coronavirus is just pointing toward that. While it seems kind of special that we would have a worldwide pandemic like this pointing at something, actually our daily life is pointing toward the same thing all the time: Find your true self, wake up, and help the world, because there is plenty of suffering. Most important is doing some practicing, so you too can find your true self and use that to help the world. Kwan Seum Bosal! ♦

Suffering, Grief, Choice

Zen Master Wu Kwang

From a dharma talk given at the Chogye International Zen Center of New York, September 2018

[In answer to a question about suffering, grief, and choice:]

I don't know that I would say that suffering is a choice. To use a simple illustration: you are on a long hike and have been walking quite a few miles. You come to a steep incline and you're not sure if you have enough energy and stamina to go up the steep hill or mountain, come down the other side, and continue your journey. The way I see it, that in and of itself is not suffering. It is difficulty and uncertainty. Something arises that is going to test your resolve. Do you have the courage and the will or willingness to encounter it in that moment, the belief in yourself that you can do it?

Then there is difficulty. In that situation, suffering would be what you bring to the situation emotionally and psychologically. How much can you accept the difficulty and work with it, versus how much you start complaining to yourself and fighting against the effort. You are creating another emotion. Suffering in that sense is something we do psychologically and add to a situation. In something as intense as grief, there is the question of the degree to which we can accept our sense of loss, our sense of pain, and even our sense of helplessness. If you have lost someone or something that has been extremely valuable to you, it is not the easiest thing to accept the loss or to recover from the sense of helplessness.

Fundamentally, we are absolutely incapable of recapturing anything. Moment by moment, everything is changing. To use a classic image, you can never step in the same river twice. In reality there is no entity there called "river." We watch a process of water flowing directed by two banks and we say, "That's a river." But there is no permanent thing there that actually is a river. There is no permanent thing in any of our experiences, moment by moment, that stands on its own. That includes what we refer to as ourselves. Every-

thing is a process of interaction and, like a kaleidoscope, it never occurs in the same configuration twice. To be able to accept that everything is transitory and changing moment by moment by moment is to see how things actually are—to see clearly. In Buddhist terminology that clear seeing is sometimes called wisdom. Thus, wisdom is not so much an intellectual process as the experience of seeing clearly.

The earlier questioner said, "But tomorrow morning, it will be the same!" That is already entangling yourself in an idea. Who knows what tomorrow morning is going to be?

There is an old Zen story. A monk approached Zen Master Ji Jang and said, "The sun came up a little late this morning, Zen Master." Ji Jang said, "Just on time."

To the degree we can accept everything just as it is, just on time, just at that moment, then we are not adding anything to it. Most of the time, we are constructing a world of our own making and fabricating stories to support this image-world we generate. It's not a complete illusion. We are not totally psychotic. If we were totally creating something that didn't exist at all, then that would be one thing. But we have enough of something

to hang our hat on, so to speak. We then start making it into something that is more or less than what it is, and we create story lines to support it. A lot of our suffering relates to that process of making and creating and constructing and fabricating and losing touch with just what is.

Q: The recognition that the world of our making and our constructed self are not the truth could feel terrifying. We might feel like we are losing everything, and so then we do everything we can to get away from that feeling.

A: Yes, it could be terrifying. A student once told me, "I'm practicing meditation using the big ques-



Illustration: James Gouijn-Stook

tion, ‘What am I? What is my true self?’ and when I sincerely enter into the questioning process, I get to the point where I’m not sure what I am. Just at that moment, I feel a sense of terror about losing myself.” But if you get comfortable in practicing that point, then there is a transitional moment from the existent world, in which we think we are entities that are totally independent of everything else, as we realize that our idea of ourselves is not ourselves. It requires a certain kind of courage to keep coming back and face that realization, because it may feel that there is nothing to hold on to. It may feel as if you are standing on a seesaw with one foot on one side, and the other foot on the other side. That may sound a little scary, but in Zen practice, we like to be adventurous in order to see, to look, and to flow with our process and the process of the world around us—to realize that ultimately there are not two separate processes.

Q: When Nick quoted the Serenity Prayer he consciously removed the word *God* in “God grant me the serenity and the courage, etc. . . .” Practicing here as a Zen Buddhist, we don’t really use the word *God*, but when I hear that, even as a Zen student, it feels useful in the sense that asking God to grant you something is like having humility, it feels like you are setting something down, opening yourself up to something that is bigger than you. Could you speak a little bit about that?

A: I agree with you about its usefulness. If you are asking “God grant me . . .” that means: I, on my own, do not feel that I have the resources to be able to effect change. Left to my own devices, I do not believe I can effect change or have the courage to enact change, the ability to accept those things I cannot change, and the clarity or wisdom to see the difference. That’s the notion of surrender or supplication of asking for something.

My first teacher liked to play with words. He would sometimes say, “Practice is ego-pendectomy.” However you effect ego-pendectomy, then self-centeredness, ego-centeredness loosen their grip on you. Asking God is a skillful means. If you believe in God, and with sincerity ask for something like that—you are not asking for some material benefit—you are asking for qualities that would be relevant to your life.

Let’s look at our version of that prayer: One thing you see in many Buddhist traditions is the making of prostrations, of bowing. You put your head on the floor; you turn your palms up. The attitude that is embodied in that activity is not fundamentally different from “God grant me . . .” It’s saying “let me put down my egocentricity, the way I’m putting limitations on myself, and become one with something greater than myself.” Most spiritual traditions have some version of that. One uses an image of an external deity. The other uses the notion that, in bowing to my true self, or to my innate wisdom, my innate loving-kindness, my innate compassion, I am

inviting these to please come forward.

I would say the difference is, if you think that God is totally outside yourself, then you are setting up a dualism, a two-ism: God is over there; I’m over here. Whereas in most mystical traditions that still use a term like God, there is a belief that God is within me, and God and I are not ultimately two totally discrete things. Those kinds of practices are helpful.

I remember when members of my family with whom I was very close died, I took to doing prostrations. Bowing helped me to accept my helplessness in that I could not change the fact that they were gone.

Q: What’s the difference between clear mind and not-moving mind?

A: Ultimately, there is no difference. Clear mind has not-moving mind within it, and not-moving mind has the capacity for clarity. But sometimes people get attached to concentration or wanting a deep sense of quietude, which would, to some degree, be in the category of not-moving mind. If you become attached to wanting deep concentration and stillness and its good feeling, that attachment has the potential to interfere with clear seeing.

You could say that meditation practice, Zen practice, is akin to what you see at a railroad crossing: “Stop. Look. Listen.” That’s meditation. Stop: stop going all over the place. Look: see what’s clear. Listen to the inner message that has always been there all along.

Often on a Buddhist altar there will be a statue of the Buddha in the center; to his sides there will be statues of bodhisattvas. *Bodhisattva* means enlightened being. One way to describe an altar like that is that the Buddha represents the not-moving mind, the zero point, the center. But that zero point is not just empty; it’s also full of many positive qualities: wisdom, compassion, clear action, and so on. Thus, the bodhisattvas on the sides of the not-moving Buddha represent the activity of the not-moving mind reaching out to the world. If you only have not-moving mind, and become attached to that, then you can sit like a rock, but if someone is hungry you don’t see him or her. If you become attached to that kind of sitting it becomes a Zen sickness.

Ultimately, our original, natural mind has many qualities: not-moving, steadiness, at-rest, quiescence, quietude, clear-seeing, and compassionate activity. That is why the Bodhisattva of Compassion on the side of the Buddha is sometimes pictured as having a thousand hands. If you look closely at her statue you will see that at the center of each of her hands is an eye. This means that the quality of emptiness and stillness functions by reaching out with helping hands everywhere. You can’t be skillfully helpful unless you can clearly see. That is the way the principle of Zen is represented within Buddhist temples. ♦

Anxiety and Repose at Diamond Hill Monastery

Richard Kahn

Diamond Hill Monastery sits serene above a pond on a small hill. Inside its walls during Kyol Che serenity rises and sinks away. Calm, vast vistas captivate after steep climbs and also deep descents.

My first Kyol Che week years ago at Diamond Hill included a deep anxiety attack. My anxiety at Diamond Hill Monastery concerned the blue tile roof. It might fall in. To ensure my anxiety was grounded in reality, I sincerely fantasized that each blue ceramic roof tile weighed eight pounds. (In fact, the tiles weigh around five pounds by heft measurement.) Next, I counted the tiles with equal rigor while sitting on a cushion. I fantasized that there were at least a thousand or so ceramic roofing tiles. That made eight thousand imaginary pounds, or four tons, of illusion. The piles of white snow blanketed the blue tiles, weighing down the roof even more and further weighting down my worry. I had no faith in the twelve-by-twelve upright posts in the dharma room and others holding up the roof along the walls. The walls, too, ceased being strong and sturdy. After a while, I took confidence in the strength of the posts and walls holding up the roof's actual tonnage. The snow's sliding off the roof from time to time calmed me, perhaps, as I heard it swoosh down the blue eaves, thumping on the ground just beyond the covered walkway that surrounds the building. With my head intact, I've been to a few more Kyol Che weeks. The posts and walls remain upright. The blue roof persists.

To understand my return to calm, I read a book about Chinese architecture when I returned home. One goal of traditional Chinese architecture, I read, is to inspire repose. To inspire repose, the horizontal aspect of buildings is emphasized over the vertical highs and lows. Honoring the level engenders tranquility in the eye. This realization of only looking straight, not looking up or down, might have led to my calmness as I plumbed my own depths. One way to consider recumbent tranquility is to consider the statues of Buddha's parinirvana, his restful, reclining posture upon death. Wordsworth also leads us to the level view in his poem, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." While reclining, he recalls his joy on a hike:

*For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.*

In discussing my anxiety, a longtime student and dharma friend told me that the upright beams supporting the roof were set in place by a shipwright. The boat builder and Zen student at that time, Bill Highsmith, was available to the architect, Linc Rhodes, now a JDPSN. No available East Asian builders familiar with the necessary techniques were available. Care was taken in construction. We sit in safety based on architectural skills and traditions, East and West.

Back home in New York City, I contentedly ride through the subway's horizontal tunnels. I've never worried even though my stop, 181 St on the A line, is the second deepest station in the system. Eleven flights of stairs, escalators, and elevators aid commuters down to and up from tracks buried under tons and tons of indomitable mica schist. Mica schist, the metamorphic rock that supports Manhattan's skyscraper forest, starts out as easily shattered shale and mica. Shale starts out as microscopic clay particles that get compressed over time. Mica is a flaky, shiny mineral often used in makeup to add a finishing glow. Over time, shale crystalizes and strengthens while the mica remains flaky, adding layered sparkle to schist's power. Commuters worry little about the schist crashing down on the daily trips in the over century-old subway. That tough schist is the bedrock of New York City's skyscrapers. I often think that the subway tunneling through the schist is New York City's adamantite dharma room where some New Yorkers spend time in prayer and silent contemplation.

Schist vibrates in spite of its hard nature. Anyone can hear this geological truth. One day I taught the Hebrew schoolchildren basic meditation techniques at Hebrew Tabernacle, a synagogue atop the station's deepest section. One technique was simply to be quiet and listen. As the kids quieted down, the rumbling of trains entering and leaving the station percolated up. The children were surprised, but I had planned for it. I had been teaching adults meditation in that building for a while and heard the subway cars many times. I also knew because the same sound traveled through my pillow six stories above the station entrance, like the deep, silly, lucky, or troubling voices that may rise into consciousness while meditating. Will Johnson, a somatically oriented meditation teacher, puts the process of the arising of thoughts through inner rock this way in *Breathing Through the Whole Body*:

The restrictive holding patterns in the body and mind unravel their secrets the same way the

potter frees the pot from the clay—through accepting, feeling into, allowing, coaxing, never by forcing. (p. 78)

From the Zen perspective, the subway sounds rumbling up through the earth's crust are like what rumbles up from our deeper and usually restricted consciousness. The feelings have been there all along; we have not been quiet enough to hear them talk to us. According to Johnson:

The purpose of Buddhist practice isn't to perfect breath. It's to find out who you are and who you become when you pay attention to it. (p. 79)

Paying attention, or, rather, not avoiding, can be difficult, in part because what we uncover may be unpleasant, afflictive and, sometimes, overwhelming. Perhaps our understanding of the interview room needs some exploration. For me, I began to see that sitting was practice alone to attain enlightenment but to help others required a combination of teachers and my fellows. The interview room is where we learn the dharma in dialogue. That room is one place where the teacher gets to help all beings. Ta-Hui, a Chinese ancestor and root teacher of Korean Zen, says:

Zen practice in the midst of activity is a million times superior to that pursued in silence.

What kind of options do Zen practitioners have when overwhelming feelings become active? Case 2 in the *Mumonkan*, "Pai-Chang's Fox," can be seen as an exemplar of how Zen students can manage their "big problem," or karma. Case 2 contains the story of a monk who was condemned to many cycles of reincarnation as a fox, because of a spiritual teaching error. After listening to many dharma talks by Zen Master Pai-Chang, the monk finally summons the courage to ask the Zen master about his recurring problem. Pai-Chang, known for setting the basic rules of Zen monasteries, gives the monk an interview right there in the dharma hall after the monks filed out. In the interview dialogue, the man gets enlightened and released from his big problem. His reincarnating self dies. Zen Master Wu Kwang (Richard Shrobe) takes up this theme in his book *Elegant Failure* by pointing to a classical view of the *Diamond Sutra*:

The basic teaching of the sutra is that all things are originally empty and all signs or characteristics that we see temporarily are essentially delusion. That means your karma is originally empty. An illusory cause produces an illusory result. If you watch a film strip and believe the act to be total reality that is called missing the real and clinging to the illusory. You are missing the fact that essentially there is no action, only a series of

frames, one following the next. The sutra's advice is not to get caught up by signs, to not cling to concepts. (p. 218)

Wu Kwang talks about magical thinking about karma:

If you were born with one arm, and there is some primary cause in your past life that generated your being born in this life with only one arm, you can sit in meditation till the cows come, but you are never going to gain that original arm. You are not going to change your karma in that way. But what you can change is how you respond to that situation. How you respond can be based on staying in the present moment. (p. 218)

In other words, like the reincarnating fox-monk, we can talk about our reiterating inner suffering.

Wu Kwang talks about difficult sitting periods by exploring dharma combat between Zen Master Joshu and Bunon. (p. 216) As they busily insult themselves in dharma combat, Bunon says, "I am the worm in the donkey's dung." Wu Kwang comments:

Sitting retreat as a worm in the donkey's dung is the condition of our practice and our life. Our practice is not to find some exalted state somewhere else, free of any kind of impurity and pain. Our practice is to pursue something and find our true way right in the middle of the crap of life. (p. 217)

We experience big problems, like the monk in Pai-Chang's assembly. For better or worse, we have to sit with our own crap for a while to know about it. For years, my reincarnating suffering entailed hours of despair. I am not alone. A friend, a woman without rank, suffers through fear of death on weeks-long retreats. She told me to make sure that I have signed up for some extra chores during a retreat to minimize the hold of big problems. I asked Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel) about bringing up personal or emotional matters during interviews. His simple answer on the phone is no different from Pai-Chang's action in ancient China: students can bring any matter into the interview room and even the robe room. We might have to pull the teacher aside out of necessity.

We *don't know*, but we can learn, as Wu Kwang says. One day you will see yourself while tunneling inwardly, on the cushion or on the train, sooner or later. You can also know that there is safety nearby. ♦

Richard has practiced in the Kwan Um School for twenty-eight years after a few years of Japanese Rinzai training. He is married with two adult children and works as a pediatric dietitian for low-income families in a public clinic and in private practice. Along with short hikes, he likes to bake for a hobby.

Wired for Enlightenment

Kathy Park JDPSN

A student once asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, “How do you do all this nonstop work of teaching, traveling, making Zen centers, and organizing the worldwide Kwan Um School of Zen?” Zen Master Seung Sahn replied, “I only make a hole so all my students can pass through.” For us on the Buddha path, we have the great privilege of being able to step through that hole, which our founding teacher had made his whole life’s mission to generously open up for us.

A few years ago, I was asked by Zen Master Soeng Hyang to initiate a proposal for the Kwan Um School of Zen to spread our teaching more widely through the internet. A slow learner and clunky when it comes to technology, I don’t have much administrative skill either. I’d much prefer doing something in the moment, be carefree, far from any job looking at the computer for long hours. If anyone had asked me to recommend someone for that job, I’d be the last person to name. However, Zen Master Soeng Hyang’s ask was not so much a request to do a job for the school as coming from a teacher’s encouragement. That really meant, “. . . you must do it!” We all check ourselves. Am I good enough? Can I really do it? Am I able to deliver? Or, how can I possibly get enlightenment? Can I really become Buddha?

As we practice for some time, we wake up. We also begin to recognize that we are fully capable of a singular purpose that we did not know was even possible: becoming Buddha and helping all beings be free of suffering. As the Buddha and all eminent teachers reveal to us, it becomes our vow. The moment that vow clicks in our entire being, we also connect to every other person’s very same

capacity for great love, great compassion, great wisdom, and great function. As the vow sets root deeply in our core, we are unstoppable. It becomes the source of our courage and delivers us to be what we really are. Full of energy, full of zeal, we keep going, and try, try, try nonstop. We give our life to it. We don’t care about reward or recognition. Enlightenment, no enlightenment, doesn’t matter. We just keep practicing and any job appears, the courage to just do it for others swells out of that well. There is no self. Just doing it makes us complete. No choice is freedom.

As many of us may experience by now, including myself, we prefer being on the cushion in the dharma room over being in front of a computer facing a flat Zoom screen. I long to sit together with dharma friends and breathe the same air in a retreat, and rub like potatoes to burn off our karma together, even if a while back, I may have complained about some of that potato rubbing. Nowadays, as much as solo practice is useful, at times it pains me not to have that precious together-action practice in silence in a dharma room with worn-out floors. Our current bad situation is the perfect situation to realize our own true nature and humbly have sincere gratitude for this don’t-know teaching and for our sangha.

Out of sheer necessity, more people from all over the globe are now entering the dharma gate via the internet. With each growing online participation, the practice is alive and well despite the circumstances. We are grateful for the opportunity that began with Zen Master Soeng Hyang’s request to develop the online sangha program three years ago, so that we could be of service when COVID-19 hit this year. Zen centers globally are adjusting quickly, providing activities both online and offline. There will be more challenges coming as our world is faced with new changes on all levels. As Zen practitioners, honing our skills to adapt and swiftly learn new ways to train and deliver on our bodhisattva vow is upon us now more than ever as we isolate, quarantine, keep social distancing, and face more uncertainty due to the pandemic, plus all the economic, political, and social changes in the days ahead. With a strong bodhisattva vow and diligent practice, nothing can stop us from being connected mind to mind and continuing to practice together as a sangha in whatever format we will need to adjust to in the future. Together, we keep that hole wide open, more inclusively, so that as many people as possible can enter into the path. Stay safe, and take care of your true self and all those around you. ♦

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Photo: Sven Mahr

Freedom from Life and Death

Eduardo del Valle Pérez

Far apart from any special or esoteric interpretation of the well-known Zen teaching, “Freedom from life and death,” we can *intimately* meet life when a baby is born and intimately meet death when a loved one passes away. This intimately is in the sense of experiencing how our true self manifests, when our hearts and our ears are open, helping us to act with wisdom and compassion. This is possible if we are practicing with consistency and a clear direction; or if we are not a practicing person but we have a compassionate heart and a strong try-mind. If we do so then, when the moment arrives, the correct function of life and death appears by itself, bringing harmony to the death or birth situation, opening the doors to the possibility of digesting and closing the unfinished karma that hinders our lives, bringing joy and peace to our hearts and those who leave this world or come into it. It is in these moments, as we will see in the following three true cases, when we can paraphrase “Freedom from life and death” as “In death, harmony and peace; in birth, harmony and joy.”

First Case: Cinderella

My dear mother, Francisca, was born in 1936 in special circumstances, just one month before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Her father, Philip, was living at that time with his wife, Seraphina, and their two sons in a small village in the mountains of the Andalucía region, in the south of Spain, but he used to spend several months each year working in Valencia, a city at the east of the country. One day, when Philip came back home from Valencia, he carried with him a newborn baby wrapped in blankets to protect her from the winter cold. Philip confessed to his wife that the baby was his daughter, fruit of an infidelity with a young lover in Valencia. In those years, getting pregnant out of wedlock was considered a disgrace to the family of the mother, a dishonor enhanced by the fact that Philip, the father, was a married man. The family of the biological mother concealed the pregnancy, and at birth the baby was delivered to Philip with the order not to see his lover again. When hearing her husband’s confession, Seraphina’s heart was completely broken, but looking at the innocent baby, who years later became my mother, she accepted her into the family and took care of her as her own daughter. But a spark of deep anger toward Philip and a strong jealousy toward his lover was born in Seraphina’s mind. Shortly afterward, Philip and Seraphina moved with their children to the city of Albacete, where they presented Francisca to acquaintances and neighbors as Seraphina’s own

biological daughter, hiding the fact that she was an illegitimate child.

A few months later, Philip was incarcerated for eleven years for defending his democratic ideals against the conservative elements within the country who supported the military revolt against the Republican government of Spain, which led to the beginning of the Civil War. During the difficult years of the war and its aftermath, as Francisca grew up and became a child, her face began to closely resemble that of Philip’s lover, and Seraphina’s rage and jealousy swelled like fire whipped by the wind. Soon she projected those feelings onto Francisca who, without the protection of her father in prison, started to live a life similar to that of Cinderella.

Francisca, being around seven years old, was forced every day by Seraphina to get up early at six in the morning to scrub the entire house on her knees every day, even though the floors were already clean. Later, Seraphina would send her to sell, door to door, the bread she had prepared at home to earn money to support the family in Philip’s absence. That winter was hard and cold, and my mother was sent to sell the bread walking on snow-covered roads with oversized and broken shoes that had been worn out already by her siblings, who had received new shoes. On days when my mother could not sell all the loaves, Seraphina would hit her hard on the head with her fists, or sometimes with one of her shoes.

My mother liked to read a lot, a skill she learned during the eleven months that Seraphina allowed her to go to school, and she used to pick up all the flyers and newspapers she found on the street. Seraphina soon forbade Francisca to read, so she hid every night under her bed with a lit candle to read them, along with the children’s stories and folktales that Seraphina’s clients sometimes gave her.

One day, while Francisca was being beaten, she looked up at Seraphina and said, “You don’t behave like you’re my mother.” Seraphina was surprised and stopped the beating. Nonetheless Seraphina continued to beat and mistreat my mother until she got married, when she was twenty-one years old. All that time, Seraphina never told her that she was not her biological mother. Francisca always treated her mother with respect, love, and obedience.

Soon after Francisca was married with Joseph, my father, Seraphina contracted lung cancer. Francisca took care of her for ten years with tenderness and care, until the day of Seraphina’s death. Shortly before Seraphina

passed away, my mother, Francisca, was holding her mother's hands in her own. Then Seraphina opened her eyes, looked at Francisca and began to cry softly.

"Mom, why are you crying?"

"My daughter . . . because now I realize I love you with all my heart. Please forgive me for all the bad things I've done to you." Francisca and Seraphina embraced each other lovingly and cried together, and then Seraphina passed away in my mother's arms.

This case exemplifies how patience, a compassionate heart, and try-mind can transform the worst karma into a clear and compassionate situation when death is close.

As Zen Master Seung Sahn wrote:

*Very soft is true strength
With harmony comes luck
Goodness brings you virtue
Follow situation then get happiness
Forbearance will make you a great [wo]man*

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Years later, when Philip was about to pass away, he confessed with sadness to Joseph that Seraphina was not the biological mother of Francisca and that he was very sorry for the suffering this caused her. After the death of Philip, Joseph told that to Francisca, who said "Seraphina was indeed my true mother. She raised and took care of me in very difficult circumstances."

Second Case: "I'm Going to Kill Myself"

When my father retired, my mother fell very ill from an aneurysm. After six months of hospital convalescence, she recovered, but she would still need to use a wheelchair for years, and when she eventually managed to walk again using crutches, she could do so only with difficulty and with the help of my father. Those were difficult years for both of them, confronting sickness when, after raising four children and a hard and long life of work, they had hoped to spend their last years at peace and with joy. In addition, a sad family situation related to a certain heavy karma emerged at that time, a situation too hard to be digested by my mother, who soon started to fall into desperation and depression.

Then, one day while I was sitting in meditation at home, I felt I should start chanting the Great Dharani for one hour every day. I chanted for six months, and then my mother, in desperation, tried to commit suicide without success by drinking bleach. Fortunately, she was taken to the hospital in time to save her life and not



suffer any permanent physical effects. The second time she tried to commit suicide, my father arrived at home just in time and stopped her from trying to drink a glassful of bleach again.

During her third attempt, I was present. I arrived at my parents' house shortly after finishing my daily Great Dharani chanting. I found my mother very anxious, accusing my father of not spending enough time with her. Then suddenly, full of despair, as if carried by the devil and with an unusual energy, she got up from her chair without using her crutches and started running toward the balcony to launch herself into the void. I immediately jumped from my own chair and, running behind her, I managed to stop her before she killed herself. I embraced her and she started to cry. Then she told me "When I am alone, I am

going to kill myself."

I don't know from where these words appeared in my mouth: "Mom, that is OK. If you kill yourself, I will kill myself too." My mother looked at me very surprised, seeing that my words were serious ones.

"Why would you do that?" she asked.

"I love you so much that I will follow you wherever you go to take care of you."

My mother then opened her mouth, closed it again and after a few moments of silence said, "Please, my son, don't worry. I promise not to try to kill myself again."

When we entered the house again, my father was in shock, and my mother made the same promise to him. Then I spent some time with my mother and helped her remember how a few years before, Zen Master Seung Sahn advised her to chant Kwan Seum Bosal three thousand times every day to take away the primary cause of the heavy family karma that was hindering her. Then I gave her my own mala. From that day on, my mother kept Kwan Seum Bosal with such an intense devotion that even my father ended up practicing and carrying a mala in his hand wherever he went. Both of them kept practicing until the end of their lives.

This case exemplifies again how, when we walk on the fine line between life and death, our true self can help us to respond with compassion and wisdom if we are practicing with determination. As Zen Master Seung Sahn told me once: "If you practice hard, your energy will help all your family."

Third Case: Let It Go before It Is Too Late

At the end of 2018, my wife, Mercedes, and I were blessed with a long-awaited pregnancy, a baby who would change and give deep meaning to our lives.

During the previous three years, though, I had put much energy, with great determination, to prepare myself to participate in a very interesting project proposed by one person who has always been, for me, an example to follow and a *master of life*. In order to preserve their privacy, I will name that person Sam.

At the beginning of 2019, Sam told me the project would be led by another person. That moment, I understood Sam's decision, and I acknowledged that the new leader of the project was the right one. But slowly, my checking mind grew in a subtle but constant way until, shortly before our baby was born, I woke up every morning thinking "Why not me? I was ready to lead the project. Where is my mistake?" Each night, before closing my eyes, my mind was clouded by the same thoughts. At the same time, an intense anger toward Sam arose in my heart, so strong that it soon became hatred. I began to worry about that, because I perceived that I was not able to control those feelings.

I sat in meditation looking for the inner wisdom of my true self and the answer became clear: I needed to do a special practice to take away that heavy karma before our baby, Julia Alba, was born. So, forty-nine days before our baby was born, I began my special practice.

Early in the morning of September 2 we entered the hospital. My wife's contractions had already begun, and our baby was expected to be born the next day. The problem was, I could not be present: my checking mind and the anger in my heart were stronger than ever. At the same time an urgent feeling came to me: "Wake up! Your daughter is coming." I tried to put it all down by keeping the mantra I was reciting during my special practice, without much success. Then, just before sunset, and after going to have a coffee to try to clarify my mind, I entered the hospital room where my wife was. She was looking through the window, keeping a relaxed and quiet attitude. I sat on a chair, and when I looked at her belly, where our baby was waiting to be born, a clear thought came up from my center: "Don't let your karma cloud your heart when your baby is born!" Suddenly my mind became clear, I went out of the room, and phoned Sam to



Photo: Eduardo del Valle

confess with sincerity my feelings and thoughts. I told him that I didn't want to pass such a great anger and hate to my baby and that I would support the project team and its new leader with all my heart. Sam was deeply touched by my words and, as we talked, we opened our hearts to each other. I started to cry, feeling how all the mass of thoughts and the hate of my heart was being dissolved in the harmony and deep appreciation we had for each other. When I hung up the phone I saw, as if for the first time, the green pine trees and the golden evening light permeating the whole garden in front of the hospital.

When I entered the room again my wife looked at me and said, "What happened? Your face shines with peace!" A few hours later, with my wife's hands in

mine, we received our beloved Julia Alba with love and joy. I was able to be present during the delivery of the baby, my heart was completely open to her, and my mind was light and clear.



Zen Master Seung Sahn taught us "Put it all down." In this sense, if we practice persistently, or maybe we have a strong try-mind, and keep a clear vow to help other beings, then it is possible that, at the most important moments of our lives, our small I vanishes and our true self manifests itself naturally through our actions and speech, permeating with its wisdom and compassion those around us, transforming the worst situations and relationships into clear and harmonious ones.

Our true nature, being able to help us to digest our lingering karma before it is too late, gives us freedom from an unclear life, if we take the responsibility to look inside, listen carefully, and wake up intimately to our present situation. Our true self, being able to make true life shine before the last breath, gives us freedom from death if in our life we have opened our hearts and sincerely take responsibility to help all beings. The last decision is on us. ♦

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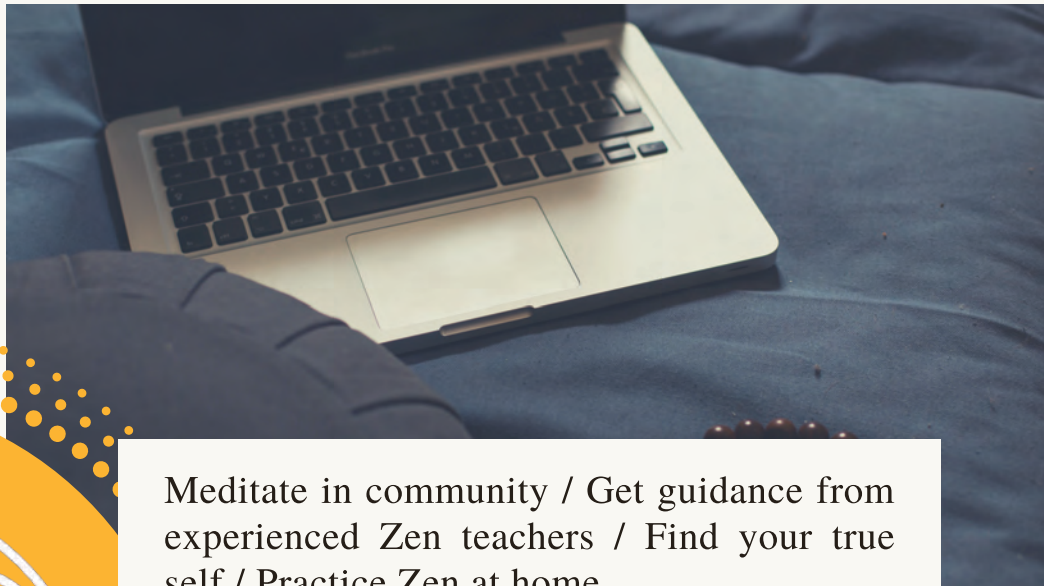
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Zen and Nonviolent Communication

Jirka Lněnička

At the end of September, I attended one of many events happening nowadays at the Vrážné Zen Center, the main temple of the Czech Sangha, called “Zen and Nonviolent Communication.” For those of you who haven’t been to Vrážné yet, it is a great place to practice Zen and experience a lot of together action in a peaceful rural environment, a small village surrounded by forests and hills. The Czech sangha members, as well as practitioners from neighboring countries, love to come here to enjoy a break from the hustle and bustle of city life. They can meet up with their dharma friends, sit short or long retreats, listen to dharma talks, or take part in our sangha weekends, events for families with children, and weekends for dharma teachers—or just apply a little elbow grease, as this place is still growing and any kind of help is much appreciated. Usually, there are several “work weekends” around the year too that are fun and a great opportunity for the sangha to get to know each other better while working in the beautiful garden, getting the wood ready for winter, or helping with the reconstruction of the building.

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The Zen center is residential and there is a teacher living there, our great bodhisattva Jiří (George) Hazlbauer JDPSN. So people can visit most times of the year, including outside the major scheduled events, and enjoy everything this practicing place and its surroundings have to offer. Also, in 2020 the first three-month winter Kyol Che took place in Vrážné.

As a growing community place it is now attracting more and more people from outside of the Kwan Um School, who come to practice Zen, help with whatever is needed, but also to inspire and be inspired. In the past few years, new types of events have been held in Vrážné as well, and this is a brief report on one of them.

In September 2019 there was a weekend workshop, “Zen and Nonviolent Communication,” which was a combination of Zen practice (sitting, chanting, work practice, and kong-an interviews with Jiří Hazlbauer JDPSN), workshops on Nonviolent Communication (led by experienced NVC trainer and longtime Zen student Ondráš Přibyla), and three sessions of yoga (with a professional yoga instructor). For “NVC people” it was an introduction to Zen; for the Kwan Um sangha it was a wonderful opportunity to learn communication skills that they can use in their everyday lives. Both Zen and NVC, each in their own way, explore what is beyond words, and emphasize the need to see and hear clearly, without attachment to our ideas of what is happening—if we want to be able to function well moment to moment. Through role playing, sharing in pairs but also during walks, working in the garden, or simply chatting over a cup of coffee, we learned so much from each other—and about ourselves. As our trainer explained, Nonviolent Communication is often perceived as a set of techniques, but on a deeper level it actually boils down to the question *What am I?*, but

asked from a different perspective than we’re used to. Look inside, understand who you really are, and then say or do whatever it is that needs to be said or done. That clicked just right.

Historically speaking, Nonviolent Communication was developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s. It is based on the assumption that all people have the capacity for compassion and empathy, and we resort to harmful behavior or violence only when we cannot find more effective strategies to meet our needs. According to NVC, human needs are universal and not in conflict. Instead, it is at the level of strategy where we usually get stuck. For example, a parent and a teenager have the same need



for respect, but the behavior that they believe will help them meet this need may be quite different. The NVC approach is not just interpersonal, though; it also deals with social groups and systems. That is why it is often applied today in conflict mediation, education, psychotherapy, and other areas. But the premise remains the same: a change (at any level, personal or beyond) can occur only if we can get back to our and others' human needs, unattached to our preferred, often habitual, strategies and behaviors. This practice is quite similar, as I understand it, to "put down like and dislike" and "become one," but with more analytical language and a more humanist approach than Zen, which talks more about all sentient beings. (A very good book about Nonviolent Communication and its principles is Miki Kashtan's *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness: Transcending the Legacy of Separation in Our Individual Lives*.)

The weekend in Vrážné was a precious time for me and I am grateful I had the chance to attend. Like other participants, I appreciated the balance between the silent and speaking times, which enabled me to digest what I had learned from the interactions and let it sink in. As a teacher and therapist by profession, I often see clarity to be of the utmost importance, but sometimes I lack the skill to express myself clearly. So I find NVC very useful because it helps me to train in this skill.

Some of the NVC practitioners who joined us for the weekend, on the other hand, seemed to be looking for some kind of practice to help them develop a stronger center for dealing with difficult situations and conflicts—training not included in their NVC training and practice.

And all of us can certainly use more bodywork, since we sit in cars and on chairs for many hours every day. The yoga was fun (particularly the part that we did in pairs) and helped us relax and become more aware of what our (and other people's) bodies need, here and now.

In addition to the above mentioned gifts, the weekend highlighted another interesting thing for me, which I'd call cultural differences. Many aspects of our practice related to Korean Buddhism, which, as a longtime practitioner I no longer find unusual or hard to understand, are nevertheless often confusing or even discouraging to modern Europeans. I am always grateful when this happens, as it helps me grasp a little better what some people living in the twenty-first century and beginning with the Kwan Um style of Zen are struggling with. It allows me to look at our practice forms through the eyes of a beginner. It is a bit like hiring a new person to your company who has a lot of questions and makes you reconsider how much of what you do is actually helpful and how some of it is unnecessary, and what things might be due for a few changes. Even though it is tempting to smash this beginner's perspective with some kind of traditional argument, I always try to see it as a unique chance to reflect on questions such as What is the essence of our teaching?

What is the correct situation, relationship, and function? That is when these questions suddenly become very much alive in me.

Furthermore, the Zen and Nonviolent Communication weekend was a marvelous opportunity for me to once again realize some of the treasures of our teaching, and the one that stands out for me most is together action. From helping in the kitchen with meal preparation and cleanup to supporting each other during a challenging part of our walk with many trees and branches on the ground, it was much more than just a workshop weekend where people take part in what they paid for and then relax or party in their free time. (Don't get me wrong—I love parties!) But here we were the ones who made it happen, together, with all the fun and learning included. Once again I realized how important this form of learning and doing is, particularly when integrated with the spiritual teachings—and how rare this practice is in the world today, with so much suffering coming from thinking and acting as if people we are dealing with were our enemies. It is truly one of the greatest gifts our school can offer to this world.

My thanks to everyone who participated in this event, and a warm invitation to all of you to come to Vrážné Zen Center and join us for retreats and other events in which we can be, learn, and do things together. ♦

Jirka Lněnička started practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen in 2005. He lived in Zen centers in the Czech Republic and Canada for a couple of years, and became a dharma teacher in 2017. He now lives in a small town near Brno, Czech Republic, and works as a certified Zen shiatsu practitioner. He also teaches English as a second language and translates—including translating or editing several books by KUSZ teachers into the Czech language. He is openly gay and hopes to use this karma for the benefit of all beings, including the LGBT+ community and the Kwan Um Sangha.

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Like Magic on Television

Robert Lockridge

In evening practice,
Like magic on television,
My dryness soaks in the liquid essence of your heart.
Later, bowing,
I pour it on the earth like rain.
The grass grows, moist and grateful.

Before retirement, Robert Lockridge worked in government finance as both a public employee and private sector consultant. He came to Zen through Alcoholics Anonymous in 2000, and is now a senior dharma teacher and vice abbot at the Orlando Zen Center.

COVID-19 Reflections

Additional essays can be found at:
<https://kwanumzen.org/primary-point/covid19>

Practicing during this pandemic has emphasized the fragility of the present moment and how we need to be there to help others. I have had a number of my former students who have either landed in the hospital because of COVID-19 or have had family members who have died because of this illness. The immense suffering COVID-19 has brought about has driven home for me the need to keep a clear mind and to know what my correct function is in this period of time. Also, this illness has highlighted our teachings on impermanence and how we only have here and now to make a difference. So, I hope everyone stays well and that we continue to practice for every sentient being who is enduring this present moment and beyond.

Joshua Lewis
The Three Jewels Zen Center
Binghamton, New York



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It seems these days that the future is one seething mass of indeterminable crises: whether they come from the present pandemic, or economic collapse proceeding from it, or mass extinction caused by climate change; to many it seems as if we are stuck, trapped on some out-of-control train speeding toward doom. A brief inquiry into the etymology of that word, crisis, can show us the brakes.

It is originally a Greek word. Hippocrates and Galen, early doctors, used it in a medical sense. The *krisis* was the point at which a disease would become fatal or not; it was the point at which a patient would be determined to live or to die. In this original sense, *krisis* means a moment of decision. It comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *krei-*, meaning to “sieve,” suggesting distinguishing, or discriminating. As such it is connected to the words *ascertain*, *certain*, and *discern*. The crisis is the moment we cut through our delusions, perceive reality just as it is, and act.

What can you do?

Aaron Ivsin



A New Friend

Day One

At the beginning of COVID-19, I sit for hours in my at-home seven-day retreat in front of my second-story window and greet a leaf—a lonely, rust colored, oak leaf on a bare branch of a bare tree. Through wind, rain, snow, sunshine we sit together, the leaf and I.

Day Seven

As the retreat comes to an end, while still seeing your rust color, I ask, “Do you hear, out of winter’s silence, the spring song of the chick-a-dee?”

Day Fifty-Five

When I see you this morning still there holding on to the bare branch on the bare tree, I feel a warm tug pulling on my heart.

I bow to you, my old friend.

Nancy Hathaway
Seven-day at-home retreat
COVID-19

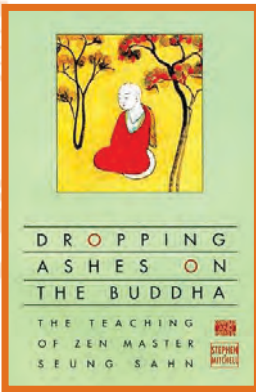


Before the pandemic, I had been struggling with some physical issues and thought it might be advisable to learn to sit in a different posture (from kneeling to lotus). I began studying Yin Yoga in order to help me sit in a more sustainable manner. Once everybody began exercising social distancing measures, I had to make some changes. My current practice now involves a blend of brief meditation while kneeling, followed by an hour to an hour and a half of practicing Yin Yoga. While practicing yoga, I have been focusing on mindfulness and also compassion for our world. I have been holding those loved ones who have passed away, as well as their families, in my thoughts and close to my heart. I have also taken on an almost prayerful approach to my current worldview.



Illustrations: Willy Garver

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Open Mouth Already a Mistake: Talks by Zen Master Wu Kwang. Teaching of a Zen Master who is also a husband, father, practicing Gestalt therapist and musician. 238 pages.
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The Whole World is a Single Flower: 365 Kong-ans for Everyday Life. Zen Master Seung Sahn. The first kong-an collection to appear in many years; Christian, Taoist, and Buddhist sources. 267 pages.
Reprinted by Primary Point Press 2015. ISBN 978-0-942795-17-2. \$17.95

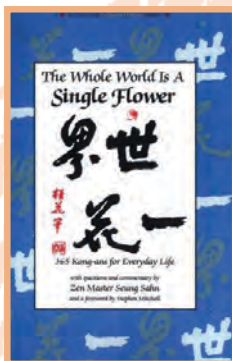
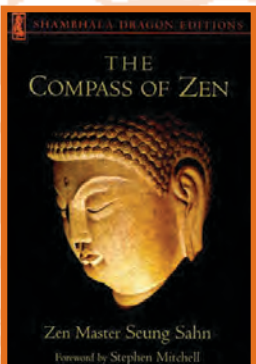
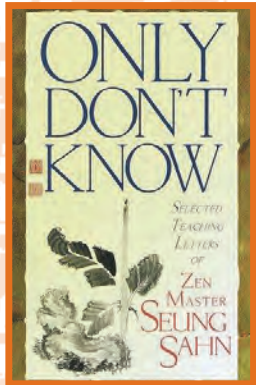
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As a father and a husband, my concern is often with my family during these times. My wife is a NICU nurse and I am very proud of the person that she is and the work that she does. I am very worried about her and *all* those who are put in harm's way on a regular basis. Each day, I try to reach out to at least one person and simply make their day just a little bit brighter. It helps me and I hope that it helps them as well. I find it very challenging to be helpful and "safe" at the same time, but I am trying . . .

"Only go straight . . ."

John M. Boye (Kwan Jok)
Chogye International Zen Center



I have a four-word entry:
 Effort is the attainment.

William A. Remas



Look inside and tell me dear.
 Are you cluttered?
 Or are you clear?

Jim Mizkewitsch (Jung Bul)
Australia



"Alive or dead?" I ask as I awake each day. And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought, with many recognitions dim and faint, and somewhat of a sad perplexity, while washing my hands, I hope that every person will have pure hands to receive reality. With deep bows to Chien Yuan, William Wordsworth, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

John Holland



"Why do you wear a mask?" Zen Master Dae Kwan asked me in a kong-an interview on April 29, 2020. How

my answer would have been so different a few months ago!

I live in Hong Kong, a city that is still traumatized from the 2003 SARS outbreak. As soon as we heard of the Wuhan novel coronavirus in January 2020, the locals immediately bought every mask they could, and masks became the norm in public. If you didn't wear a mask, others would avoid you like the plague. The foreigners living in Hong Kong—myself included—looked down on the locals because we were told by the World Health Organization and other Western medical experts (including the American Centers for Disease Control) that masks were useless. We were *so confident* that we were in the right because our best epidemiologists told us so.

A few months later, when COVID-19 broke out in Western countries, our Western experts changed their minds. Masks are indeed helpful for hampering the spread of the disease, especially from asymptomatic carriers. This was an incredibly humbling experience. I have learned not to trust my ego so much, even if it's based on "science," and that I should always follow the situation, especially when locals have acquired such wisdom from a previous epidemic. I hope we all continue to practice hard, put it all down, and find the answer to "Why do you wear a mask?" In that answer we will find the direction for our practice and our life.

Minh Tran



The new opportunity of online morning practice before telework intensifies my formal practice. It gives me a stronger, clearer and grateful start of the day. Therefore I wrote these poems as a present.

Online Practice

After night, morning comes.
 Chanting in the spare room with a muted voice,
 I meet you without moving.
 Who is host, who is guest?
 Very close by, the vibration of a bell,
 The pulse in a wire.
 Connection never falls out.

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Illustrations: Willy Garver

Online Companion

As leaves we sit under a tree.
An arm we cannot touch anymore.
Fingers and words spread in the air,
Pushed into the ground, we breathe at most
Together. Oxygen forms the chant,
Full and warm, a companion
Traveling with us, one, two
Pairs of eyes.
We bow
Unseen
Close by.

Leen Pil



Five in the morning the alarm goes off, into sweatpants and sweater, down the stairs, feed the cat and light the candles on the altar. The gradual building of the morning bell's ringing grows to its final hit. This slowed and tranquil chant flows clear into the brightening morning light and out into the world. Neither windows nor distance nor time can keep the sounds from permeating into the world and there is nothing unconnected. The morning sun's shadows crawl across the room, time is movement, and the silence becomes even more muted. The day flows by.

When the dimming light returns, the candles are lit again and are present for the thousand eyes, for the compassionate cries, and for the hell that is left behind. The chants deliver another day of life on this planet. The incense drifts up silently while darkness crawls across the floor, night settles over the quiet new world.

Harold Rail



Together Action: The Power of Sharing

One evening during an informal talk at the Providence Zen Center, a student said to Zen Master Seung Sahn: "Zen Master, you always teach about 'together action.' But suppose two people were hungry and had some food, but it wasn't enough for both of them. What should they do?"

ZMSS: "Divide the food."

Student: "No, they don't have enough to divide it and keep them both alive. Then what should they do?"

ZMSS: "Divide the food and together die."

This is a beautiful teaching. How does this dialogue inspire you? How can we apply this spirit of sharing to our current pandemic crisis? It is not just about food, but anything that we need to survive, such as masks, face shields, and other medical supplies and gear to treat patients with COVID-19. We can all do our part. If you are a boss, you can protect your staff's jobs but perhaps with less pay. If you are a developer or a landlord, you can help your tenants with lower rent. If you are the owner of a grocery store or supermarket, don't mark up prices, earn less and share more. If you have any resources that can help those in need, this is a good time to practice the power of sharing. Even if you have nothing to share, please share your smile and words of loving-kindness.

This is a time for us to wake up to the power of sharing. One day we will all die. But before we die, let us die gracefully with appreciation and gratitude. This is a way for us to reconnect with our true nature, which is filled with compassion and wisdom.

Zen Master Dae Kwan

May 2020



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A Bad Situation Is a Good Situation

Our York Zen group formed a year ago and had started to become a strong and committed sangha, but apart from Roger and myself, the group had no interaction with the wider Kwan Um School of Zen until the COVID-19 lockdown. We held our last in-person practice on March 17, and then we moved to Zoom meetings and Skype kong-an interviews. This situation has provided a great opportunity for people to explore the wealth of KUSZ resources online and meet other teachers and practitioners from other sanghas. The sangha is flourishing; generosity and gratitude abound.

In gratitude,

Lizzie Coombs JDPSN

May 21, 2020



Illustrations: Willy Garver



My practice feeds my work as a physician in many ways, before and after the outbreak of the coronavirus. A direct example comes from when I saw my first patient with COVID-19, layered in personal protective equipment, N95 tight on the face, uncertain of the risk as it was so early in our experience with the virus. Many of my colleagues find our masks suffocating and uncomfortable. Sometimes I do too. Sometimes I think of our practice, following the breath—*what I am . . . don't know*—and use that to be present in the moment, to address the need in front of me right now.

James Hudspeth



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian government has imposed a movement control order in the country. A lot of our Zen students say, “Luckily, I practice Zen!” Zen Master Seung Sahn often reminded us that a bad situation is good situation. Our students really feel it this time.

Recently, I started giving teachings online. The topic was “Bodhidharma’s Teaching *Two Entrances and Four Practices*: How to Have Rest-Mind During This COVID-19 Situation.” Many students were able to better connect with KUSZ teachings. They understand how to use our karma to help all beings, and why we need to do hard practice. Furthermore, they are willing to try, try, try, try for ten thousand years.

Chuan Wen Sunim JDPS



Pandemic Musings

A few weeks ago Zen Master Jok Um was in the Zoom room with Ten Directions during our weekly practice. I heard him use the phrase “life force looking for opportunity.” No idea what the context was but it caught my ear and I wrote it down. As I kept looking at the words, streams of biology movies flooded my mind. Pea shoots growing toward the light, thousands of sperm frantically

surrounding one egg, a hawk dropping out of the sky to snatch up a mouse. The phrase seemed to capture perfectly the extent to which the energy of endless craving is wired into my nervous system. And the way that my mind is always on the move, looking around for something, anything.

Sometimes “looking for opportunity” for me goes no further than looking for chocolate, but more often than not, life force in me is in fact looking for certainty. Many times in the course of these pandemic days some dreadful scientific or political words will make me first frantically fearful and then grasping for certainty. Tell me how this will end. I am willing to embrace the idea of an awful future to overcome the anxiety of not knowing. Appreciating how deeply this craving for solid ground is wired into me has made it easier to say “oh, opportunistic life force, it’s you again” and look outside at the peonies instead.

Margaret McKenzie



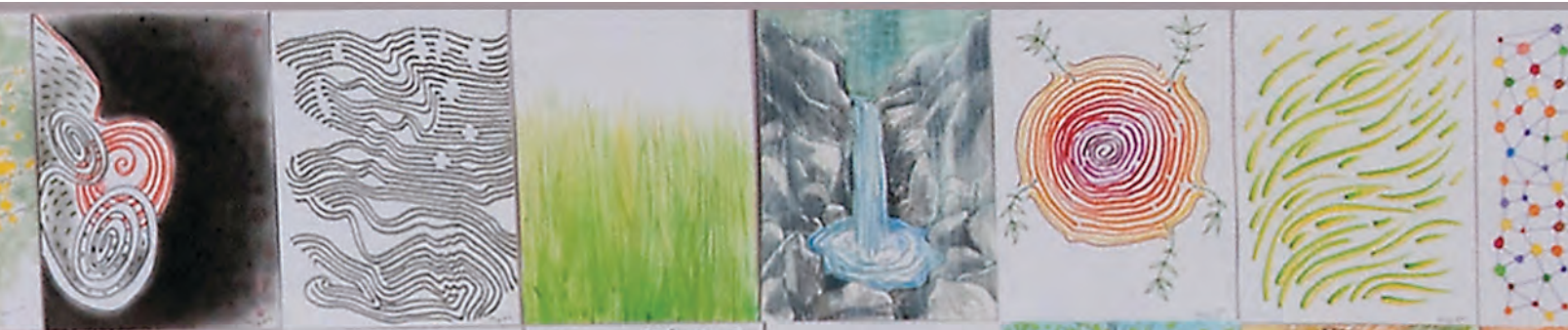
Daily Drawing as a Practice

In mid-March when we got the order to shelter in place, I realized that my home would become a monastery of sorts. Soon our sangha, Open Meadow Zen, scheduled all our practice times on Zoom. I decided to offer the idea of a daily drawing, done on a small format every day for as long as the pandemic lasts. It’s a lot to ask, especially of people who don’t think of themselves as artists. Calling it a “perfection free zone” didn’t make it less intimidating. Talking about drawing before thinking only made matters more opaque. But several gave it a try, and a couple of them are sticking with it.

For me, doing a daily drawing has been a grounding. (Hey, I’m already grounded anyway.) So many days have already passed. So many drawings, yet each morning brings another surprise. Some of them are less than stellar, but I include every one of them. We sometimes share them in our Zoom meeting and email them to each other. It is inspiring how the arts are flourishing and connecting people everywhere.

Willy Garver

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Illustrations: Willy Garver

The Gdańsk Zen Nomads Have Settled

Jarosław Marzec

My personal odyssey with the Kwan Um School of Zen started on December 15, 1992, when I attended a dharma talk by Jane McLaughlin JDPSN (now Zen Master Bon Yeon). It was at Żak, a student club in Gdańsk. Maybe a week earlier, I had seen a poster about the event on a pillar while I was crossing the street near the club. Fittingly, it was a pillar of the rail system.

I was already interested in Buddhism—I had listened to a lecture in the Japanese tradition in Stockholm two years earlier. But what was important this time was that I left the dharma talk at the student club with the address of the Gdańsk Zen Center typed on a little sheet of paper. A week later, I started practicing there. I was twenty-two years old.

Now, everything has changed because activities can be found so easily on the internet. But having a permanent place for practice is crucial. In our impermanent social circumstances, a Zen center provides stabilization for practice. It guarantees the continuity for our common efforts. If I hadn't obtained the address at that first meeting, it would have been hard to start practice.

In my twenty-seven years with the Gdańsk Zen Center, conditions have not been easy. Our location changed at least seven times. We often shared a space with a friendly Soto Zen sangha, an experience that strengthened our motivation for together-efforts on the path. Together with the Japanese sangha we have regularly organized a Vesak (Buddha's birth-

day) celebration. And we support any event with a friendly sangha.

I would like to describe the most crucial event in the forty-year history of the Gdańsk Zen Center: we finally settled into our own place. At the close of our last practice at Żabianka, prior to moving, our senior dharma teacher said that the Zen center is created by practitioners, not by having a concrete place to practice. In the style of the middle way, I would rather say that all of the elements must be in place: we need sangha members as well as a stable location where we can comfortably carry out our daily practice.

The life of the sangha and our common efforts have brought something precious to the history of the Gdańsk Zen Center. Even without a permanent home, we still came together for all of those years. On October 18, 2019, we hosted Zen Master Joeng Hye and celebrated the opening of the new Gdańsk Zen Center.

Jarosław Marzec is a dharma teacher and practices in the Gdańsk Zen Center. He has a PhD in pedagogy and is an independent researcher and writer. He has published three books: Discourse, Text, and Narrative: Essays on the Postmodern Culture (2002); The Pedagogical Discourse of Humanistic Psychology (2018); and Waves of Existence: My Encounters with Ken Wilber (2019). His next book, Spirituality, Identity, and Education: Peregrinations on Instant Culture, was published in February 2020.

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Poetry

Chris Hoffman

The Eye of the Universe

When you truly perceive beauty
you find yourself
looking into the eye of the universe

which, you discover,
is looking directly
back at you.

Its pupil widens,
seeing
that something has changed.

It has been watching you
your entire life,
perceiving the marrow of your being.

Everything is different now—
more real
though still the same.

26] You glimpse the exquisite lacework
linking all things
at their cores.

Seeing deeply
through this eye
unties the obstinate knot.

The one who wears your name
emerges, like everything else,
from the hub of the turning wheel.

It's a Funny Thing

The quieter you become
the more clearly the path shines.
The noise of the mind
obscures the path.
The mind is useful to a point
like a rowboat with its oars.
You arrive at the middle of the lake.
When the ripples subside
the image of the moon
floats on the water.

Chris Hoffman has been a Zen student since meeting Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1974. He has published his poetry in various publications and is currently working to stop climate change. The twentieth-anniversary edition, revised and expanded, of his classic eco-psychology book, The Hoop and the Tree, will be released in 2021. For more information, visit www.hoopandtree.org.



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