

Why Do You Believe in Buddhism?

Barbara Pardo JDSPN, Gasper Sopi, and Veronique Struis interview
Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN in January 2021

Question: Before we jump straight into difficult topics, let's just start with a simple question. How have you been?

Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN: I'm fine, thank you. As you know, I had some body-changing issues, but I feel OK now.

Q: You've been practicing since 1995 after meeting Zen Master Seung Sahn. What attracted you to his teachings?

KR PSN: At that time, I was searching for something, maybe similar to many twenty-year-olds. So I asked Zen Master Seung Sahn during a retreat, after he commented on one of the kong-ans, "Why do you believe in Buddhism?" I thought at that time this would sum up all my questions. He simply said: "Me? I don't believe in Buddhism. I ask you 'Who are you?'" I answered "I don't know." Then he said "Only keep don't-know. That is Buddhism." That's what attracted me to his teaching.

Q: Were you already attracted to Buddhism before meeting Zen Master Seung Sahn?

KR PSN: I didn't know much about Buddhism and Zen before meeting Zen Master Seung Sahn. At that time, I was traveling through Korea and Asia, and it felt more like a coincidence that I met him and his teaching.

Q: What was the most challenging part in your journey with Zen?

KR PSN: At the beginning when I started practicing was the most challenging time. Lots of checking and judging.

Q: Have you ever pondered a monastic life? Why or why not?

KR PSN: Yes, that thought did pop up. However, for me it didn't ripen in a way that my whole body and heart would go along with it.

Q: In your experience, what has your practice added to your life?

KR PSN: Your question! Well, that's what practice does. It doesn't add anything, but we do. We create life and death, work, family, wealth, and health. We sometimes may create a good feeling when we practice, a feeling of freedom, a feeling of lightness, and so on. But in reality practice only takes things away. All the way down. Then, what remains?

Q: Has anything fundamentally shifted this past year* in the way you approach life, for example has dealing with personal uncertainty led you to insights that were previously obscured? For example, has the poem "The Human Route" taken on a greater meaning?

KR PSN: I love that poem. It points to the core. What is most important? What is it really? For some people it is the love for this and that. Maybe their family, their job, their car, their partner. But soon all this

will be gone. Everything is always changing. Can we live with this change without holding

or making anything on top of it? When

I got my medical diagnosis, it felt like

medical reports were making life and

death. But in truth they don't—they

are just reports. Usually they're

printed on white paper with black ink. It is our thinking that

makes life and death. Sometimes

we don't see that, because we

are too occupied with other

things that we like or dislike. And we may or may

not want these things to distract us. So taking a

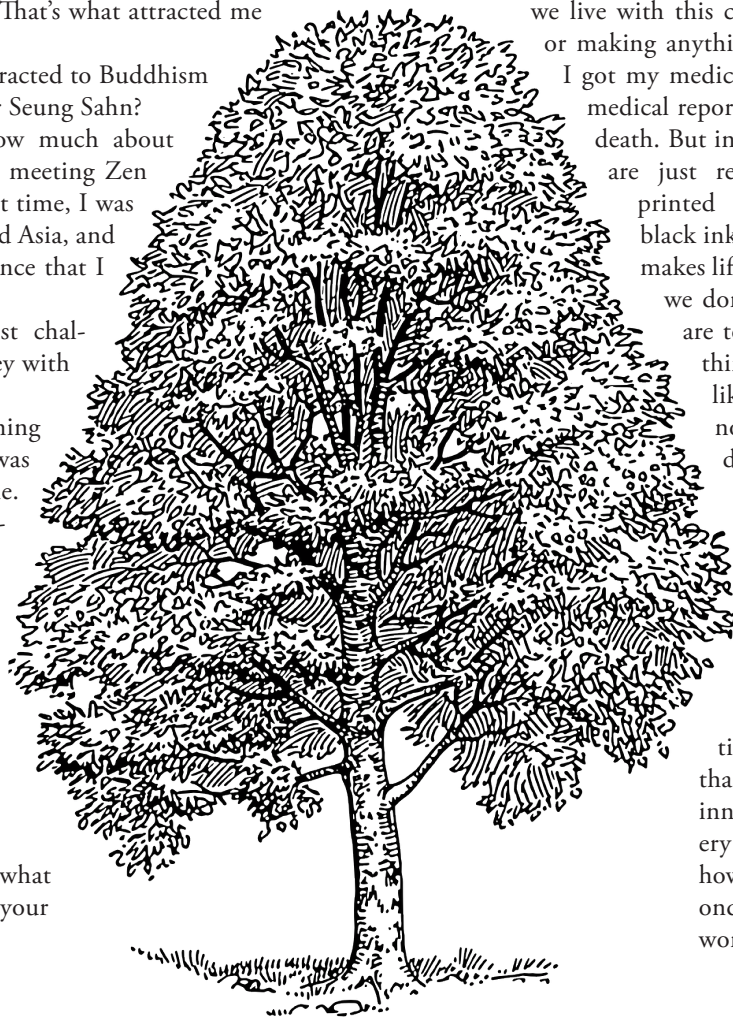
pause and truly looking

and listening can reveal a lot of our hidden

making. Sometimes we call that

practice.

Q: In one of your dharma talks you mentioned the three pictures that we usually put on an inner altar and worship every day. The first picture is how I want to be. The second picture shows how my world should be. The third



picture is how this “me” should be seen by others. How do we practice with these three pictures?

KR PSN: Put it all down! That’s how we practice with them. We usually put these three pictures—how I want to be, how my world should be, and how I should be seen by others—on an altar, an inner altar. It may be a Buddhist altar, a Christian altar, a Muslim altar, or an atheist altar. We may practice meditation or not, but no matter what we do, every day we bow to these pictures on our inner altar. In fact we give our whole life to our I-my-me altar. We would literally die for these pictures. Can we live without constantly worshipping these I-my-me pictures? Can we do that? I’m not saying to condemn these pictures either. That’s putting them on another inner altar. But could we maybe not hang them anywhere? Just leave them. Notice them when they appear, neither putting them on an altar nor hiding them in the basement. Maybe they will end up side by side with many other pictures connected by the same wall.

Q: This year has been extremely challenging in so many ways. The world continues to face fundamental questions of life and death. On top of that, both you personally and the Kwan Um sangha have been facing a lot of uncertainty. A lot of coming and going. Could you share your views in this context?

KR PSN: That’s good. Now we can wake up! Not making anything. Only wake up and help this world. If we feel that we are facing a challenge, that means we can learn. For me this last year has been a very good learning experience. Don’t know about the world, but I hope all of us have learned something this past year. When we truly learn something, then we meet our true teacher.

Q: Considering everything that is going on, is there a silver lining to all of this? Are you hopeful for the future of humanity? Or, is it that, to use a phrase from Zen Master Seung Sahn, “more suffering is necessary” before something will really change, and this world will awaken?

KR PSN: Don’t know. Hope is an interesting concept—hope always makes despair. You can’t have the one without the other. If we make hope, we inevitably also make desperation. When the news about the new vaccine against the coronavirus came out, the mood of many people suddenly changed. It’s the same as when a doctor tells us about a positive change that may happen. Energy comes up and we feel the effect on our body and mind. That is not good or bad—it is the same coin, just two sides. We usually prefer one side, and when the other one appears we want to turn it as soon as possible, thinking that the turning is progress.

Q: How can our Zen practice help us in times like these?

KR PSN: Teachers keep saying the future is just a dream, the past is already gone, and the only thing that we have is this [*bits the floor*]. But no one really believes

this teaching. It seems to go in one ear and out the other. That’s why practice is so important. In the hospital, I had the privilege to meet many cancer patients as roommates. There was a plumber, an electrician, a CEO, and others I spent some time with. Talking to them, it seemed there was always that underlying question. How long? How much time? Will I be able to see my kids grow up? And so on. That is a good question for everyone: how much time do you have?

Q: Looking back, is there any advice you would give the younger Knud?

KR PSN: It feels hard to relate to the idea of a younger Knud, not to mention giving that idea advice. What are the younger or older forms of ourselves? Sometimes we may ask ourselves whether we would do something different or make a different decision if we had the chance to do it again. If that is the case, everything would be new and different to begin with.

Q: What is your advice in the approach to kong-an practice and its role in the process of awakening?

KR PSN: Kong-an practice can be a very useful tool when we let it work. That means letting it bring us back to don’t-know. Often we don’t like that, because we don’t want to be confronted with don’t-know. Can we trust this don’t-know and its way of working? Then we are already there.

Q: Do you have (or have had) a personal kong-an? What is your favorite one and why?

KR PSN: The one you just asked is my favorite. Tough one! It only comes alive in the moment you ask it. Any kong-an has to be looked at anew.

Q: What is the last book you read and what did you think about it?

KR PSN: *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. He is a German forester who talks about trees and the way they communicate. Very good book. We can learn a lot from trees.

Q: What’s a fun fact about you that the sangha doesn’t know yet?

KR PSN: Sitting here answering your question. Maybe my wife would have a different answer to your question.

Q: What would be your message to the world in general, and the global Kwan Um sangha in particular?

KR PSN: I was reading about the beech trees in a forest recently. In a beech forest, the trees help feed each other exchanging nutrients. So when a tree gets sick or old, the surrounding trees help that tree. These trees in the forest understand that they are all connected. I would like to thank the Kwan Um sangha for their great support—this is incredibly helpful. To come back to your question: what can I do for you?

* In 2020 Knud Rosenmayr was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer