

The Original Spirit of Together Action

Zen Master Dae Bong

Zen Master Seung Sahn used many teaching words to show us the way to practice Zen. What made his teaching so powerful and inspiring is that his speech and his actions were one. He was a living example of someone who was living what he taught.

A student once asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, “You often say our practice has two parts, meditation and wisdom. I understand meditation. How do we get wisdom?” The Zen master answered, “Don’t-know mind, together action, and correct kong-an practice.”

Together action! One of his favorite teachings was together action. Is that even a normal English phrase?

The Zen master’s early American students used to say

other as possible. Dae Soen Sa Nim was on the US West Coast at the time. When he returned to Providence and saw how his students were living, he said, “Eating together is more important than practicing together.” That is, living a human life together, doing things that we all do every day.

In October 1977, Linc Rhodes and George Bowman, two of Zen Master Seung Sahn’s senior students, decided to work together. They formed a small construction company and asked me to join. Our idea was to be able to control our work schedule so we could take time off to sit three-day retreats every month and seven-day retreats at the Zen center three times a year, whenever Dae Soen Sa Nim visited Providence Zen Center. At one point we were given a job painting the outside of one of eight houses a builder was building. This company had its own carpenters, but they hired other companies like ours to paint, install the electricity and plumbing, do the concrete work, and so on. Linc suggested we follow our Zen master’s teaching and do together action with the company that hired us—start work, take lunch breaks, and end work at the same times they did.

We did that and soon they liked us very much. We all ate lunch together every day. They joked with us about our living in a Zen center and about our being vegetarian. But they gave us all eight houses to paint, which was work for over a year. And they let us take off time whenever we wanted. Together action.

This is how we make connections with others, appreciate others, and learn how to live well with others.

The big hindrances for humans nowadays are our opinions, our greed, hatred, and ignorance. Today people only make friends with others who think the same and have the same opinions, whether they are religious, political, or economic, and so on. But when we act together with others with a don’t-know mind, we have to put down our opinions, our condition, our situation. Then we can begin to understand ourselves and others more clearly and appreciate that they are also human. We can see what causes suffering, and our empathy, compassion, and wisdom can grow. And the natural human connections between people grow.

These days it is evident to everyone that human beings cannot live harmoniously with others. We cannot even live harmoniously with our natural environment to the point that, not only are countless beings suffering, but we ourselves may not be able to survive as a species. But we can always learn how to live with and connect with others, if we try.

By the way, these days how is together action going with your own eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind?

Try, try, try- ◆



Photo: Kwan Um School of Zen Archive

of him, only half-joking, “One of the worst things he did to us is together action.” We all know that doing things together with others can be annoying and difficult. Yet this is one of the greatest and most far-reaching teachings.

Together action doesn’t mean only bowing, sitting, chanting, eating, and working together in the Zen center and on retreats. It means all the time. When you are with family, when you are at work, when you go shopping or to restaurants, when you are driving on the roads, when you are flying in airplanes. Our whole life is together action with others and with nature. Every moment is an opportunity to understand ourselves and others better and to get wisdom. And yet we often don’t like it or do it unskillfully, creating suffering for ourselves and others.

I heard that when the first eight Zen students who were living with Zen Master Seung Sahn in Providence moved into an old building the group had bought, they all headed to the corners of the building to get as far away from each