

## Together Practice Never Stops

Hye Tong Sunim JDPS

The summer three-month-long intensive Zen meditation retreat (Kyo Che) will be finished in two weeks. The culmination of practice at the end of Kyo Che (called Hae Jae) coincides with another important event in the Buddhist calendar called *Baek-jung*. On this day, Buddhist temples all over Korea hold a special chanting practice (kido), including a prayer ceremony for the deceased. Participants pray for a blissful rebirth in Buddha's Pure Land for family members and all other spirits.

The origin of the day is quite interesting. Among the ten main disciples of the Buddha Shakyamuni, Moggallana was said to be the most accomplished in terms of transcendent

monks on the day they finish their long retreat would be of greater benefit to his suffering mother. Buddhist monks and nuns practice diligently on the great matter of life and death. Through supporting this practice and dedicating the merit to his mother, Moggallana could free her from the consequences of her deeds.

Today, Korean temples celebrate Baek-jung day with special practices on the fifteenth day of a summer lunar month. Monks and nuns chant Ji Jang Bosal during the kido because he is the bodhisattva who vowed to save all beings from the hell realms. At their local temples, many Buddhists write the names of their deceased family members on mortuary tablets.

Monks and nuns enshrine these tablets in the Ji Jang Bosal hall or the Amita Buddha hall.

At Musangsa Temple, every year we hold a forty-nine-day Ji Jang Bosal kido, ending on Baek-jung day. This is also the start of Hae Je for the summer Kyo Che retreatants. At Musangsa, we place the mortuary tablets in front of the Amita Buddha painting in the Buddha hall. These days, our international sangha members can also send in names of their deceased loved ones to be written on a mortuary tablet.

When I see so many mortuary tablets, I used to think, "After all the struggle and exhilaration we experience, life culminates in three black Chinese characters on a piece of white paper." (Korean people's names usually consist of only three syllables). When they were alive, all of these people had different bodies, faces,

names, honors, joys, and sorrows. However, when we part from this life, we leave letters in black ink on white paper.

In fact, even the paper, ink and their names cannot be said to have been left behind by each person. No matter what kind of life they lived, the place all of them originally come from and return to are the same. The mortuary tablets seem to teach us that we can do the best together practice when we are tablets all lined up in a row without our human bodies—or any notion of "I" whatsoever!

Funeral ceremonies have many similar teachings. The prominent Zen master Ui Sang (625–702 CE) wrote a gatha (a Buddhist verse) called the *Song of Dharma Nature* (*Beop-seong-ge* in Korean). He compressed the meaning of the vast Avatamsaka Sutra (written in about 600,000 Chinese characters) into only 210 Chinese characters. Now, monks and nuns recite these verses at the end of the funeral ceremony as



Photo: Musangsa Archive

tal powers. One day, Moggallana used his powers to connect with his recently deceased mother. He saw her suffering torment as a hungry ghost in hell. According to Buddhism, those people who cannot control their greed in this lifetime will suffer as a being with a tiny mouth and neck—making eating challenging—yet they have huge bellies, causing them inexhaustible hunger.

Moggallana was understandably distressed. The woman who had given birth to him in this life was currently suffering in her next life. So, he decided to rescue her from hell using his transcendental powers. When he asked the Buddha if it was a good idea, however, he was surprised by the answer. The Buddha Shakyamuni told him that his transcendental power might help her for now, but the law of cause and effect (karma) dictated that one day she would suffer from her greed. The Buddha told him that offering food to the

a dedication to the spirits. The first few lines, from a translation that appeared in *Primary Point* in 2014, are as follows:

*The nature of all dharmas is perfect.*

*It does not have two different aspects.*

*All the various dharmas are unmoving  
and fundamentally still.*

*They are without name and form, cut off from all things.*

*This is understood by enlightened wisdom, and not by any  
other sphere.*

*The one is in the many, the many are within the one.*

*The one is many, the many are one.*

*Numberless kalpas are the same as  
one moment.*

*One moment is the same as  
numberless kalpas.*

Before the pandemic came, we often emphasized together action or together practice in our sangha. Since then, we can't always join each other in person, and the way we see together practice has changed. In a situation where we can gather and practice together, we can support each other to find our true nature more effectively. That means together practice gives us the power to see our true nature, which all of us and everything share. But if we cannot gather to practice together, what will be our together practice?

18] Remember that "The one is in the many, the many are within the one. / The one is many, the many are one." Every-

thing is originally not separate if our mind returns to don't know—the primary point, our true nature. The sun doesn't think about together practice. The sun just shines every day for millions of years. Our sun, and others like it, harmonizes and illuminates our galaxy. A river doesn't think about together practice. It just flows and nourishes our world. They both just attain their true nature without thinking.

Our true nature is no different from that of the sun and river. We practice together to return to our true nature. In fact, living as a human, this life is already a type of together practice. What is important is whether we can return to our true nature wherever we are and in whatever situation we find ourselves in. Even though our bodies are in different places, we become one if we all practice only don't know. This means we have already attained together practice. Keeping this only don't know overcomes any barrier to together practice, whether it be space and time, or life and death.

I miss our international sangha members even more than ever, since it has become so difficult for us to travel overseas. But I'm sure that the best thing I can do is try to live with our simple and clear way, "Only go straight, don't know!" moment to moment, and the hope of seeing everyone again soon grows stronger.

What are you doing right now?

The manuscript has just been finished.

Outside the window, the sky is blue and cicadas are buzzing loudly. ♦

**KWAN UM  
ZEN  
ONLINE**

We're here to support you in your Zen journey!

[kwanumzenonline.org](http://kwanumzenonline.org)

Kong-an Interviews  
Sutra Study  
21-Day Challenges

Q&A Sessions  
Community Forum

Online Retreats  
Livestream Meditation