

# Are You Kind? A Story from a Solo Retreat

Zen Master Gu Ja

From a dharma talk held at the Berlin Zen Center after evening practice in October, 2021.

## Editor's Note

Edgar Degas, a French Impressionist painter famous for his pastel drawings and oil paintings, once said that "Painting is easy when you don't know how, but very difficult when you do." His assertion rings familiar to a Zen practitioner as it points to that liminal space often regarded in Zen as the "Beginner's Mind"—a mind that is endowed with limitless possibilities and an attitude of openness, untainted by existing preconceptions and ideas. What you are holding in your hands is a culmination of such a process manifesting in a *Primary Point* that, in addition to featuring teachings from our European Zen masters, teachers, and sunims, also offers various art forms—from poems and personal storytelling to drawings and photographs, all the way to the art of wild animal tracking. It is, to borrow from a note by Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN, an "infinite canvas" of dharma, expressed and refracted through the idiosyncrasy of the colorful talents of our European sangha members. We hope you enjoy the exhibition. —*European Editing Team*

This evening on our way here to the Zen center, Roland asked me if I would like to tell you something after the evening practice about my solo retreat. I said, "As you already know, there is nothing to tell." And in fact, there is nothing to report about a solo retreat that words can describe adequately.

You sit on the cushion most of the day and follow the same routine every day, so that you soon lose track of time. Sometimes it feels like you've been there forever, and sometimes you don't even know how long or short the day is.

I find silence to be the most powerful of all forms of practice. The silence enables you to perceive the inner ongoing self-dialog and to perceive the movements of thinking that slosh over you like the waves on the sea, sometimes more or less, sometimes wildly or gently. You sit in stillness, without any sense of time, and watch the inner landscape that is changing. Thoughts come and go, emotions are constantly changing, and the person you thought you are is nowhere to be held and nowhere to be found. At some point you don't know who you are or whether there is even a you. So, you just sit there like a house, the gate and window of which are wide open and through which the wind blows, birds flutter through, the moon and stars shine through.

When I describe a retreat like that, it all sounds harmonious and wholesome, but how would we learn if we had no challenges, no mistakes, and no misery? Didn't Zen Master Seung Sahn say that a good situation is a bad situation and a bad situation is a good one? Without much effort on your part, you will have enough painful experiences about yourself that you'll wish to avoid. But such direct experiences are invaluable because they give you strength and push you to live the insight of the practice in your everyday life. Today I want to share with you one of my experiences of this kind.

My solo retreat location in the mountains of Sierra Nevada in southern Spain belongs to the Tibetan tradition of the Dalai Lama. When I got there, at the entrance of the place I saw a quote from the Dalai Lama, "Kindness is my religion." I thought, "OK. That's easy. I like that." Just like

many of my fellow men think of themselves, I thought of myself that I was a kind person and that kindness as a religion would be an easy form of practice for me. But very soon I had experiences that taught me otherwise.

My hut was located on the upper part of a mountain peak and stood all by itself, snuggled into a rock wall and surrounded by low-growing trees and vegetation. A basket with the daily ration of food was placed under a tree a short walk from my hut. I picked up this basket each day at lunchtime and brought it back the next day with empty containers. That way I didn't have to interact with anyone for the entire three months. My friends and companions were only the wild goats, foxes, lizards, and geckos. I loved seeing these animals and have always been happy to be close with them. Then one day, I met a rat.

I had a so-called dry toilet outside, a little above the hut. That means, after I pooped, I sprinkled a handful of wood shavings over it. The toilet has a raised wooden box that I could sit on to poop, and above it is a simple canopy. But the toilet has no door. Like an empress, I could sit enthroned on my toilet seat and, in the most relaxed way, see the wide, mostly blue sky above me, far below a village with whitewashed houses, and in the far distance many mountain ridges and peaks.

One day while I was sitting so relaxed on the toilet, I discovered that a rat had quickly slipped out of a small hole in a big rock right next to the toilet and disappeared into it again. Then I saw it sitting in the hole near its entrance, a pretty and cute rat straight out of a picture book: shiny fur, black button eyes, pale pink ears. I then saw her frequently, mostly sitting in the hole in question. I thought, "Oh, a polite rat. Before she continues on her way, she wants to wait for me to finish my business." She became even more sympathetic to me.

Then one day, while I was still on my "throne," I heard noises below me where a pile of shit lay. Some rats ran under me with squeaking noises. Suddenly it dawned on me. The

likeable rat was waiting in its hole for its meal, which I was just delivering at body temperature. A feeling of disgust at the rat shook me. The rat, which until then had been cute and lovable, turned into an extremely disgusting animal. In fact, nothing at all about the rat had changed. She looked the same, and she eats what she always ate, including maybe my shit. The only thing that changed was my opinion of her. That, in turn, changed everything about the rat for me.

A few days later I almost freaked out when I was sitting on the terrace and saw a rat come through a rain runoff from the low stone wall that safely protects the terrace from the steep mountainside. “No, you don’t come here!” I screamed inside. I then quickly collected large and small stones with which I blocked both of the two rain drains in the wall. I worked carefully and took a long time to hermetically seal the holes, knowing full well that this would not prevent the rats from coming and going at will. They could climb the whole wall or make other detours. But my strong resentment urged me to make life as difficult for the rats as possible. I wanted to build obstacles for them and see them suffer. But why?

In fact, it’s absurd that I should be disgusted with the rat for eating my feces. What is my poop? It was my nutritious and delicious meal at the end of the process of change. If the rat wants to ingest this as food, it is quite natural. In nature, without exception, all are sources of nourishment or growth for others.

Only my judgment of my feces, that it is dirty and that the rat that ingests my feces for food is automatically disgusting, has generated this aversion and aggression that led me to take action against the rat.

After some time, I completely forgot about this incident. Then one morning it rained after over two months of dry heat. It was pouring hard. I enjoyed hearing the rain patter and feeling the humid air during the morning meditation session with all my heart. But then, when I opened the hut door after meditation, my heart almost stopped. The terrace was flooded knee-deep with water. Two of the three stairs to the hut entrance were under water and the water level threatened to rise even more. All of the rainwater on the mountain slope above the hut was dammed up by the stone wall. After a brief moment of incomprehension and panic, I hurried to the rain drains and started to blindly pull the stones out of the holes under the water. Soaked from the rain and trembling with shock, I had to painfully admit that I was mean. I had a strong dislike for the rats, held on to my feelings, and wanted to harm the rats. I wasn’t kind. Certainly not. And the damage I was trying to do to the rats hit me nearly in full. I almost flooded the hut and, in that case, I would have had to break off the retreat.

Real kindness is not a sentiment that arises depending on the situation and the people we are dealing with. Nor is it a reciprocity with which we show our affection to those who are sympathetic to us. Nor is it a mood that is sometimes there and sometimes not there. Kindness is

a fundamental attitude in life that is based on letting go. That means, even if I have opinions, judgments, and feelings, I do not hold on to them. The truth is, whenever this I-my-me loses its focus, the connection with all beings that is already there is expressed in kindness.

The first vow of the four great vows in Zen reads: “Sentient beings are numberless, we vow to save them all.” Oddly enough, we often need to save innumerable living beings from our own ideas, opinions, and judgments rather than from their own misery. Seen in this way, the work of saving sentient beings begins with becoming aware of our own delusions.

Retreats help us to become aware of the cause of our inadequacy in this world, which is rooted in our self-centered belief that we are separate. In a retreat, all alone in seclusion from the world and undisturbed by everyday life, we have the opportunity to touch the deeply hidden layer of our being, which we call “don’t know.” This don’t know reveals the fundamental unity of all beings in every moment of what is. And so, it unveils the hidden wonder and the mystery of being alive in this world.

“Don’t know” is kindness, and from “don’t know” the loving-kindness of the bodhisattva is born: “How can I help you?” ♦

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**Editor’s note:** *We often perceive those around us through the lens of their role or the function they perform. But the roles we adopt are only a partial account of our being. Sharing the dharma with Kwan Um teachers exposes us to their role as spiritual guides, which oftentimes carries a note of seriousness (and rightfully so). However, our editorial curiosity prompted us to explore whether we could offer a somewhat more personal glimpse into our teachers’ lives and history, if not for the chance to relate with them on that level, then for a dash of relaxing humor. We hope you enjoy these small nuggets of wisdom served in the form of a teacher’s Dharma Spotlight. —European Editing Team*

#### **Dharma Spotlight**

1. Childhood talent or dream: to become a magician
2. Favorite book: *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness*, by Sy Montgomery
3. What inspires you: your question now
4. Fun fact about you: my deadly seriousness
5. Mountains or beach: sky
6. Favorite dish (to cook and to eat): munch munch...
7. First retreat: still ongoing
8. Most embarrassing dharma moment: this moment when I answer your questions
9. Special (or favorite) chant: Hakuna Matata
10. Special (or favorite) Zen quote: “Human life has no meaning, ... we can change no meaning to Great Meaning, which means Great Love.” —Zen Master Seung Sahn