

Painting Inside

Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN

In these days of the pandemic, there is a strong connection between us humans that can be felt. Of course, on one side we may notice it on a superficial level, but also deep down there is a close bond. We hear that the coronavirus doesn't stay within any kind of borders. Politicians, family, and friends say, act, and do things that have a palpable effect on every one of us. However, there is also a connection that is beyond our opposites-thinking abilities. What is that? Humans have been living on this planet for many years. What have we learned? Why don't we live together in peace?

SOCIAL CREATURES

Recently, I watched the movie *Into the Wild*. The film is based on a true story of a young man who escaped humanity in his later years to live alone in the wild. Before he died, he wrote something interesting in his notebook: "Happiness is only real when shared." Don't know if this really happened, but it doesn't matter. Humans seem to be social creatures that have a strong urge to connect, relate, and share.

However, when we meet, when we live together in our countries, cities, and homes, every so often it doesn't work out. Why is that? The other day, I asked my six-year-old nephew to draw a picture of his family. He drew a tall house with many windows, the sky, the ground, his mother, his father, and himself. He drew himself a bit smaller than his parents. One window had a different shape than all the others. He explained that this is the window in the cellar. After he finished drawing, he showed the drawing to the whole family.

PAINTING ON AN INSIDE CANVAS

Are we drawing our world the same way? Maybe a bit more sophisticated, but in general is it similar? It seems like we are painting on an inside canvas and taking the picture for reality. We paint a husband, a wife, a family, a vaccinated person, an unvaccinated person, a king, a queen—and soon an entire kingdom appears. We paint some things bigger than others, give them roles, point out specific shapes, compare and judge them, making them good and bad, right and wrong, better and worse.

At some point, the drawing becomes our drawing, our picture, and we hurt each other and ourselves, get angry, upset, or depressed. We are in love or hate and protect our picture. Through spending a lot of time together, we accumulate an enormous amount of shared history in our relationships. This may pile up like layers of colors, which can be felt like thick glass walls between us. All those layers of past joys and hurts, pain and pleasure. We are usually so much closer to our picture than to anything else.

RELATING TO

How do we relate to this world? Not only with people, but with the "world." Is there a chance that we meet like it was for the first time? Whether it's a tree in the garden, a politician on TV, a family member, or a friend. Our clever or ignorant thoughts may still come up, but can we see them and not necessarily follow their lead at that very moment? Maybe that is the last thing that we would like to do at that moment. It feels like our opposites thinking is in fear of dying out and wants to prevail under all circumstances.

On the cushion this is what we are doing during sitting: thoughts come up, we see them without judging, and we come back to our breathing, mantra, or *hwadu* (a short phrase or question, often from a kong-an). At times, we call this coming-back "practice," and we do it over and over again. In retreats, sometimes people who start intensive practicing experience a fear of dying. They report a feeling of tightness, an urge to leave, and a strong question arises: "What am I doing here?"

What is it that feels that? Can this be seen like watching a painting? Every little detail of it, without suppressing or denying it or being swept away? Noticing all the nuances without hindrance?

NO HINDRANCE

Speaking of no hindrance, once a nun asked Zen Master Song Sahn (*A seventh-century Zen master, not to be confused with our founding teacher, Seung Sahn. —Ed.*): "What does 'no hindrance' mean?" Song Sahn replied, "Why do you wear clothes?" At this, the nun stripped naked and walked to the door.

I remember when I first read this kong-an, case 13 in *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*, a thought came up: "That's a pretty cool nun." I remember during a precepts ceremony, Zen Master Wu Bong once said, "I will tell you two stories, one about keeping the precepts strongly and one about breaking them." Then he added, "most people prefer the stories about breaking the precepts." Why is that? Do we admire that particular kind of no-hindrancel energy?

What is Zen Master Song Sahn's job here? If he doesn't do anything, he is similar to that nun in the story, and that would have a big effect on the whole monastery. When we see this kind of pattern in our everyday life, what should we do? No hindrance doesn't hold any kind of energy; there is no attachment to any kind of no hindrance. If we are attached to a particular energy then we are in trouble, and so is our society. We may like it or not, find it less exciting or colorful, but it's necessary to see that. How do we do that?

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When I Hear the Siren of an Ambulance, I Practice Mantra

Zen reflections on working with Lithuanian COVID-19 patients

Migle Simanaviciute

“Wish you health,” says a COVID-19 patient, coughing, breathing with difficulty, trying to answer my epidemiological investigation questions. “Sorry for coughing,” says the patient for me, a meditation school student who should be a living example of compassion.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started around the globe, I remembered a retreat two years prior at Musangsa Temple in South Korea. “Put on a mask, please,” said the housemaster before work period, because that day I had felt cold symptoms. So in 2018 I tried a medical face mask for the first time. And I even bought a Korean face mask for my mother, who is a doctor, after seeing ten kinds of masks in the pharmacy.

The housemaster’s job is to instruct Zen students; the student’s job is to comply with the temple rules. Our Zen teachings tell us that the direction that the rules point to is compassion for all living beings.

When I listen to patients, I have to apply our moment-to-moment teaching. It means staying attentive and not being distracted by my own thinking. If I lose attention for one moment, the epidemiological investigation could be incorrect. So I have to listen carefully, just writing down the answers, and only after the conversation do I analyze what is necessary. Compassion here means not only empathy, but also focusing on the exact moment.

“I am her daughter; she died an hour before in the hospital,” she says to me. I have to write dead. These moments I try not to cry. And I cannot cry, because the daughter is crying, and I am trying to stay strong and answer epidemiological questions. In this situation my work is to kindly listen to her. And to silently think, “Thank you for your teaching.”

Zen practice this way reminds me of our correct path as living beings, with its direction for all sentient beings. I repeat *Kwan Seum Bosal*, the mantra of compassion. While walking, while sitting during evening and morning

meditation, before and after work with patients, after my lunch hour. It’s almost the same as in a meditation retreat.

Our guiding Zen master, Joeng Hye, says two days are the most important in our life—the day when we are born, and the day we find out why. Every day we should try to answer this question inside us.

After a recent online and live meditation retreat, I did an epidemiological investigation in our Zen community. And this situation confirmed our direction strongly. Participants tried to coordinate their efforts for common health purposes.

Zen teaching is based on our sincerely taken precepts. Because of precepts and daily individual practice, our search for compassion seems more real.

When patients ask why they should answer epidemiological questions, I have to explain in a strictly legal “to protect yourself and others” manner. After a calm and attentive explanation, most of them answer correctly. If people try to answer sincerely, the result of their actions is more helpful to all of society.

In our school, individual daily commitment practice is called Heart Kyol Che. So maybe we could try to apply stronger individual practice in these extreme times. For some minutes, with our heart, for all sentient beings.

Kwan Seum Bosal. ♦

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INFINITE CANVAS

Can the canvas be so big so that the painting can include everything? The trees, the mountains, the CO₂ emissions, our favorite drink, our hurts and fears and our opinions on politics and society. Can it be so big so that it will display everything, all sentient beings? If we find that canvas inside, that infinite canvas, then true peace and

freedom are possible.

Right now, it’s already dark outside; the monitor is bright, illuminating the desk and the keyboard. There is a subtle humming coming from the ventilation. Breathing remains. ♦

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