

Chanting with Crows and Eagles

Sergio Romero

Our dharma room in Granada, Spain, is located on the border of La Zubia in the Sierra Nevadas. We have been open for three years. During these years of practice, and now most especially through the pandemic, I have noticed that every moment starts from scratch. Every circumstance is a new and changing circumstance. Before COVID-19 there was no COVID-19. Before I broke my ankle, my ankle was in great shape. COVID-19 appeared and afterward we protected ourselves against the virus by staying at home. We got vaccinated when there were vaccines, and we took extreme precautionary and sanitary measures to avoid contagion.

When we think we have a situation under control, it changes again and becomes another situation. The same? Different? Does it matter? We do it! We chant with our masks on in face-to-face practice; we keep our safe social distance; we practice online, but we do it because there is something more important beyond the concrete details of each specific historical moment. Our direction of “How can I help you?” comes alive. We make the great effort of keeping connected with our center; we struggle to recognize and keep our correct direction and function. Ultimately it depends on each one of us, on our motivation and our faith to be convinced that what we do is the right thing to do, even if we sometimes find no peace of mind, no immediate profit or benefit from it.

When the pandemic emerged in Granada and we entered mandatory confinement, I decided to initiate an intensive chanting practice outside. I began to ascend a mountain every morning and every afternoon called El Frailecillo, which is located in the Cerro de Las Pipas range at a height of 1,429 meters. I discovered seven caves on the way to the Puente de los Siete Ojos, and the largest of these caves was spectacular for chanting. One day I turned around to look back and realized that this imposing massif of the mountain was a huge dragon that had always been stationed there, majestically hidden.

I did chanting in this place for over a year in rain, snow, and sunshine. I still do it. Mountain goats, squirrels, nightingales, mystery caves, eagles and crows, rock-roses and other flowers, mist in the ravines. I experienced a wonderful freedom, being in the middle of a pandemic, experiencing the teaching that “a bad situation is a good situation, and a good situation is a bad situation.”

Then one day I broke my ankle. Very bad situation. So, I couldn't go up the mountain anymore, I couldn't sit on the floor, and of course walking was out of the question. If I was only a blank page, empty of trust and direction, I don't think I would have been able to do it, but finally my intention took over and I managed to continue my prac-

tice again. I would sit in a chair and keep chanting. You don't have a working ankle—great! But you have lungs and a throat, and a chanting book, and you can hit the moktak! I kept the question: “What is this and what am I?” and discovered the next question: “What more is needed?”

The sangha in Palma, along with other sanghas worldwide, continued from the beginning of the pandemic with online practice: How good that was! Another strong life-saving rope. I participated in the online practice together with the mountain chanting. Little by little, the ankle was steadily following its healing path. First, I could support the foot with the help of a cane, then take a few small steps, then walk. Wow: walking! We don't know what we have until we lose it. I received immense help through my chanting: the universal sangha working for my ankle to get better. I have heard that all buddhas work for each one of us. So true.

It is not always easy, but it is possible to just do things without expecting to receive anything in return—to just do it. I have a developing faith that finally everything has a reward even if we can't figure out how it works or who the reward is for. I have continued steadily with my personal practice and chanting both online and with the crows and the eagles—keeping great faith, great courage, and the great question, with the dragon mountain accompanying me throughout the pandemic. ♦

Sergio Romero has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen since 2016 at the Vienna Zen Center, where he took the first five precepts. Upon his return to Spain he requested to open a dharma hall in La Zubia (Granada), where he resides, doing five retreats in Borisa Temple and the Palma Zen Center, where he has taken the ten precepts under the guidance of Tolo Cantarellas JDPSN and Zen Master Hyon Ja.



Photo: Sergio Romero

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