

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. ◆

Migle Simanaviciute (Do Kwang), has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen since 2014 at the Vilnius Zen Center in Lithuania under the guidance of Zen Master Joeng Hye. Migle took ten precepts in 2016 to become a dharma-teacher-in-training. In 2018 she practiced in South Korea at Musangsa Temple’s haengwon program—work-practice for laypeople and a required course for monastic aspirants. She has also attended several Kyol Che retreats in Poland. She works as an English translator and public health specialist.

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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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