

What Is It You Are Going to Do There?

Pavel Kryl

It is shortly after the middle of August and a working week finishes. Before leaving I make a classical farewell round and I walk around to see my colleagues. One of them has been ready to ask me a question. He smiles slyly and asks me his prepared question: “What is it you are going to do this weekend?” I pleased him greatly by answering: “Sit against the wall.” He laughs.

Another colleague turns away from the monitor while looking up something on the Internet and looks at me incredulously. And so I add to my previous reply these words: “We are not going to sit all the time. One of us will look after the children while the other practices—sitting, having an interview with a teacher, and singing Buddhist chants. Sometimes we both sit, letting the children look after each other. And other times another parent is willing to babysit them.” The second colleague still looks at me incredulously but he calms down, as a father of small kids, glad to hear that the kids are well looked after. He says goodbye and returns to his monitor. The first one manages to add with a gleam in his eyes, “Enjoy it.”

Yes, we shall enjoy it. We pack our things and travel for three hours to the end of the world, to a Zen monastery where you generally sleep in a worse bed than at home or in a hotel, where you can't do what you want, where you are sometimes hungry and where it is often not possible to speak normally. Perfect. Furthermore, I learn that someone else will be staying in “our” house, where we have enjoyed privacy on our previous four retreats. We don't have the smallest children anymore, so we can stay with others. Super. I am really glad. So we set off on our journey. After a short while of traveling, the kids fall asleep, and we parents have a moment to talk to each other. That's our precious and favorite moment. This is the first calm from the usual savage rhythm.

Our conversation and the flat countryside pass along as the telephone rings. Who the hell wants something now again? What? Whether we want to stay in the same place, as usual? Yes, of course! Hurray! We stay in the same place, as usual! I am a little ashamed for this joy, as someone has gotten ill and cannot attend the retreat. But this news has improved my mood. I accelerate.

We reach the place after some time. The usual scenery awaits us—plenty of shoes behind the gate before the entrance to the monastery. Obviously we are not the only ones who have gone nuts. Then the broad smile of the local abbot appears. And then the faces I used to be afraid of (as who normally would travel here?) and today I am glad to see them. I and the abbot go around the monastery to see how it has grown successfully. I and the abbot go around the monastery to see how it has grown successfully, as well as the big family around this special retreat, which has also grown slowly. We are simply at the retreat. I drink the tea and arrange with my wife that I will go to chant the evening chants and she will read to the kids until they go to sleep. Morning practice will be hers. I don't know whether the desire not to read to the kids or get up early drives me. Anyway, shortly afterward, I sit on the cushion and chant the chants I don't understand. I marvel at how anyone could remember the foreign words. I am in the middle of the chants themselves. Our combined voices drown out the wild monkeys' voices inside my head, at least for a while. Bowing, a quick glance at the sky full of stars, and bed. It is necessary to get up early.

I can't help going to practice in the morning as well. My wife and I get dressed quietly and we step past our sleeping kids as we both head toward practice. The kids will manage. At worst, they will come to us.

Sitting and talking with a teacher is my favorite part of the weekend. And it is not spoiled even by the fact that I have been trying to solve the same kong-an for four years. When we get to it, I and my teacher start laughing. So what?

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Nothing again, but it doesn't matter. I leave with a bit of disappointment in my imperfection, but in fact, I really don't mind so much. I return to the meditation room and sit. Our kids can be heard outside. They ask where their mom is. Mom sits for a while and tries to continue sitting. Our daughter opens the door of the meditation room carefully, and my wife can't help but stand up and leave the room. Phew! Can I stay? Other kids who dare to enter the room will disturb the sitting. Some of them even try doing practice for a while. Their wiggly dance doesn't resemble sitting very much. However, they make all of us happy. They leave after a while and play with others in front of the monastery. I try to listen carefully to the noises of their game. I get used to them after a while and continue sitting. Many masters say that one can do the best practice even in the middle of a busy New York avenue. Fortunately, it is not so busy here.

A common dinner is a challenge, especially for children. Despite the fact that it is not as formal this year as it used to be, it is still a challenge. Children partly succeed and partly fail in controlling their voices and their desire to move. Then they sit next to their parents as they are told to, cuddle, and whisper whether they can eat a piece of cake. Parents will eat a couple of spoons of rice, but then they give way to their kids' wishes. Hurrah! Pss! But not totally. After years of practice by both parents with kids—from toddlers to adolescents—it has been shown that it is not possible to obey too many

rules, especially those concerning the ban on speaking. It is sufficient if you try to cut down on chatter. From time to time, there is a person who doesn't like the occasional noise made by kids during practice. Most participants perceive unusual conditions in a positive way. It is because this environment is much more similar to real life. I am thinking about all of this as I empty my rice bowl and watch the kids that are running to play another game holding a piece of cake. Even though I am actually an outsider here (I am not a formal member of the Zen school), I feel at home here. That is why, every year, I get over the unpleasant Friday that usually starts the retreat. After a few days spent in this peculiar community where kids even like working, and I am willing to clean the toilets and bathrooms despite my personal habits, and where I don't spend evenings searching through the Internet wasteland in vain, there comes a reward: silence on the drive back home afterward. And especially the feeling that all of it makes sense. I don't want to understand it and explain it. It's not even possible. Experiencing the retreat with kids is an experience of another kind that's simply worth it. ♦

Pavel Kryl has been a friend and outside supporter of the Kwan Um School of Zen since 2017, when he visited the Vrážné Zen Center for the first family retreat. He lives in Prague with his two small children and his wife, Noemi, who is a member of the Kwan Um School of Zen. Pavel works as an attorney and an actor.