

Zen Master Bon Yeon (Jane Dobisz)
Practicing with Zen Koans in Your Everyday Life
Week Three: “Why Do We Eat Every Day?”
June 18, 2018



Welcome to the third week of our course for Tricycle’s online teaching. This week’s topic is on koan practices’ direction, and the title of this week's course is “Why Do We Eat Every Day?” This was the question that my teacher Zen master Seung Sahn asked us more than any other question. He was not so concerned with the techniques of practice. In all the 30 years I practiced with him he never ever once said, “You must sit this way. You must hold your head this way. You must breathe this way.” He wasn’t concerned about those things. The one thing he always talked about was *Why, Why, Why?* The way he liked to put it was, “Why do you eat every day?” This question is all about the *direction* of why we're practicing; it’s about the *motivation* you bring to practice.

There’s a story I have told so many times but I never tire of because I learned so much from it, the story of my actual first koan interview with Zen master Sung San. It was at the beginning of a 90-day meditation retreat. I was a beginner and I was sitting in the room with lots of folks who had sat for a long time. I was feeling very shy and intimidated by this whole process of going into an interview room and having a koan interview.

All kinds of sound effects were coming out of the interview room from the people that were going in there before me; I heard these famous Zen shouts that you hear like “*Katsu!*” and deep belly laughs. I was sitting and waiting for my own turn, pretty petrified and knowing that I was going to go in there and be revealed for the idiot that I was. It just was all very embarrassing and intimidating. I went in for my first interview and Zen master Sung San was sitting there. He was very smiley and strong, he had a very alive presence, he was very present. His eyes were bright and there was a twinkle in his eye. He had a great sense of humor. He asked me in his booming voice, “Do you have a question?”

Even if I did have had a question, I wouldn’t have even been able to remember it at that moment, I was so nervous. I just faltered and said, “No.” He bellowed, “I have a question for you.” In this

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moment, I really thought I was going to get one of those weird questions, like “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” or maybe, “If the tree falls in the forest, does anybody hear it?” That kind of stuff. I was really nervous. So, I'm waiting to hear his question.

He asked, “Why do you come and sit 90 days of *kyol che*?” That's what they call the long retreats in our school. I thought, *That's an easy question*. So I said, “Because I want to.” Then he burst out laughing and said, “That's a number one bad answer!” He said, “You ask me the same question!” Now he's just insulted me, but I don't care, I'm laughing with him because the way he insulted me was bodhisattva insulting so it was okay. I asked him, “Why do you come sit 90 days of *kyol che*?” He looked into my eyes, he got more serious and he said, “For you.” If you stop and think about that for a second, I came in there and said my motivation to practice was because *I* wanted to. *I, my, me*. Because *I* want something. *I* want peace. *I* want clarity. *I* want enlightenment.

His intention was the absolute opposite: “For you.” I went back to my cushion and I sat down. I thought, *You know, that's pretty amazing, the difference there*. But really, I was telling the truth. I wasn't at that level of a high bodhisattva where I could say in all honesty, “I'm here to save all beings from suffering.” I was there because I was looking for myself and for what I thought was enlightenment.

The day progressed and I went in for an interview the next day, and I'm thinking, *Now comes the ten thousand dollar question. Now he's going to ask me about the sound of one hand clapping, or something like that. Yesterday was probably just a warm-up*. I go in and bow. I'm a little less scared this time. Master Sung San asks, “Do you have a question?” I say, “No.” And again he said, “I have a question for you.” I said, “Okay,” and I'm waiting for the big question. Again he asks, “Why do you come and sit 90 days of *kyol che*?” I looked at him and I sort of stuttered and said, “F-f-for you.” He bursts out laughing and he says, “Wonderful! That's correct! Correct!” We're both smiling and I'm feeling so awesome and so great about myself. I'm thinking, *That's*

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great, I got it! I go and I sit back down in the meditation hall after that and think, *Yes, but that's not true. I didn't come and sit only for you. What do I do with that?*

Master Sung San left and another teacher led the rest of the 90-day retreat. Something happens during the course of sitting quietly with other people for 90 days. You realize that when it's time to get up, everybody's tired. When it's dinner time, everybody's hungry. When it's cold out during work period, you're chopping the wood, and everybody's cold. When it's meal time, everybody's happy. This sense of “I”, and “other”, and “for me”, and “for you” just starts to rest, it starts to dissipate. It starts to settle down and you have many more moments where the distinction between “me” and “other” disappears. This is all about what the direction of our practice is, what our intention is.

If you were to try to sum that lesson up in a modern day koan, every time you meet someone you could look at the person and ask yourself, “You and me, are we the same or are we different?” If we asked ourselves that question about everyone we met, that would be a very interesting way to relate to other people, wouldn't it? You and me, are we the same or different? Again, “same” and “different” are opposites, and practicing means to transcend opposites. It's not meant to be a trick question, but shrow away “same” and “different”, and perceive the correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function. Then *boom*, you and the universe connect. You and this person connect. This is all about the direction, the intention, of why we practice.

Master Sung San came back after 90 days. We had been doing koans the whole time, I had been sitting for a while, now I had a little more experience, and I thought he's definitely going to ask me the ten thousand dollar question when I have my interview. Sure enough, the bell rung. I went in. He said, “Very good face. Very clear.” He had a way of making you feel great, even if you didn't have the answer. Even if you were a complete mess, he had this way of making you believe in your true self. He asked, “Do you have a question?” I said, “No.” He said, “I have a question for you.” What do you think he asked? You can guess. He asked, “Why did you sit 90

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days of *kyol che*?” I looked at him and said, “For you.” He said, “Thank you.” That time, that answer was a little bit more mine. Not 100 percent mine, but maybe 10 percent mine, maybe 15 percent mine. Because I had started to grow into this. I had started to grow into the truth and had some experience at that point about self and other not being separate.

There’s a famous koan that we use for “why do you eat every day,” it’s a direction koan, it’s called the great love koan. It’s the famous koan of Zen master Nanchuan [koan 14 in *The Gateless Gate*]. This koan just appeals universally to everybody; kids, people who aren’t Zen students, everybody loves this story.

A long time ago in China, Zen master Nanchuan looked out in the courtyard—I always imagine him on the second floor looking down—and he sees the monks of the eastern and the western halls fighting. There’s this big to-do in the courtyard. He’s thought, *What is going on?* The monks are all fighting over a cat. The monks of the eastern hall were all saying, “That’s our cat!” The monks from the western hall were all saying, “No, no, no, that’s *our* cat!” If you’ve ever lived in a monastery, you know that not a lot goes on, so you can see how this would have happened. I can imagine this little cat was hanging around the eastern side and the monks probably named it, they probably fed it and thought of it as their own. Then the cat probably went right over to the western hall and got the same treatment and the same experience. These monks were really invested in this as “their cat.”

So all the monks are out in the courtyard, two hundred fifty people are fighting on each side, with both sides saying, “That’s our cat.” They were literally pulling this cat apart. Master Nanchuan saw this altercation and he couldn’t believe his eyes. These five hundred people came to the monastery to find their true self and save all beings from suffering, to go beyond life and death, and now they’re attached to a cat? He reached into his robe. Monks used to shave their head with a straight edge razor and they always had it attached to the side of their robe, or so they say. He reached over and got this razor-sharp knife. He grabbed the cat, held it up by the

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scruff of its neck, and he put the knife up to the cat’s neck. He shouted to all the monks and he said, “You love this cat? Give me one good word [or “one expression of Dharma”] and I’ll save him. If you cannot, I’ll kill him.” The five hundred monks could not answer. They all just stood there, completely shocked. So Master Nanchuan cut the cat in half.

The koan or the question for us is, *If you had been there, how would you save this cat?* We call this the great love koan, the great compassion koan. It’s an amazing koan to sit and work with because when you first hear this story, of course you can’t imagine what you would have done. You think, *What would I do? How would I save the cat?* You try all these different answers and every time you’re told, “Nope. Cut the cat in half.”

What happens is when we sit with this our “don’t-know mind” grows and grows. Again, you’re putting the question into your head and you’re just letting your don’t-know mind digest this story, to climb into this story. What appears from it is this great love. The beautiful thing about working with the koan is you don’t have to have the answer. It’s one of those koans when you supposedly “get” the answer it’s almost a disappointment that you’ve finished it.

Another important thing about this koan is that you think even if you do get the answer one day, maybe one day you pass it, how do you apply it to your life? Maybe you pass this koan in an interview or in your own mind you think you’ve passed it. This situation is presented to us again and again and again. If you are in that situation, how do you save the cat, the *fill in the blank?* How do you save this person from suffering? How do you help this person? How do you make your practice come out of you and connect to the situation? How do you use that? For me this koan illustrates very clearly and concretely what’s so beautiful about koan practice.

In meditation we sit, we get quiet, and we have experiences of no self and no other. Maybe we have *sadamdhi* [absorption, mental discipline]. Maybe we get enlightenment experiences. But if nobody knows and we don’t know how to share that, and we don’t know how to use those

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experiences—again, going back to correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function—then what good is it? What good is it if you stand there and you can’t do anything at the moment of truth? This is what’s so beautiful about the koan practices, is that we actually practice on our little postage stamp-sized cushion. We practice in this “not real” environment but then when push comes to shove in our life, hopefully our direction is clear. And that direction, that intention is “Not only for me, but for all beings.”

That goes back to that first interview I told you about. It’s not about “Because *I* want to.” But it’s all about, “For you.” Then that becomes your direction. That becomes your vow. That’s what we call the great bodhisattva way.

Hopefully these two examples of Zen koans gave you a sense of how applicable and how relevant they are. That’s why I love it so much, because it’s relevant to your everyday life and to your practice. Not only to make the question grow—that “don’t-know” mind that you have—let it grow, get comfortable with it, and by itself then it’s able to demonstrate great love, great compassion, and the great bodhisattva way. Thank you.