

SOLO PRACTICE, GROUP PRACTICE, AND PRACTICE WITH A MASTER

From *Zen Wisdom* by Master Sheng Yen page 17

QUESTION:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of practicing on one's own, with a group and with a master?

SHIH-FU:

Practice can occur in various settings: individual practice, group practice, short-term practice, long-term practice, daily practice, and intensive, periodic practice. Individual practice can be relaxed, periodically intensive, short-term or long-term; the same is true for group practice. One can also look at these forms of practice from the point of view of lay persons vs. home-leavers. I will try to address all of these situations.

In all cases, whether alone or with a group, whether as a householder or home-leaver, it is better to practice under a qualified master. Practice without the guidance of a master will probably not be too fruitful. Practicing with a master can save you time. A master's understanding and experience can help you firmly grasp the essentials of practice and cultivate a correct view of **Buddhadharma**. This enables you to more quickly free yourself from the vexations of body and mind. With a master, time otherwise spent studying sutras and worrying about following the right path, can be devoted single-mindedly to practice.

There are people, however, whose karmic roots are sharp and deep; that is, they have practiced well for many lifetimes. Such people will make speedy progress whether they have the guidance of a master or not. They will understand **Buddhadharma** and will not stray from the path. For example, **Sakyamuni** practiced with many masters before becoming completely enlightened, but, as he was not satisfied with their teachings, he practiced on his own for six years. He did not attain enlightenment until he put down everything. **Sakyamuni** did have teachers, but his was a case of self-enlightenment. The **Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng (638-713)**, also got enlightened without

the guidance of a master. In his case, hearing one line of the *Diamond Sutra* was enough. Later, the Fifth Patriarch confirmed his attainment. In essence, the *Diamond Sutra* was his teacher.

As you can see, such people are rare. Unless practitioners feel they are on a par with people such as the Buddha and the Sixth Patriarch, I would suggest that they seek the guidance of a good master. If practitioners have mental obstructions or difficulty with their practice, masters can help them resolve their problems. Also, if practitioners have some type of experience, a master can determine whether it is genuine or not. Left alone, practitioners may deceive themselves, thinking that an illusory experience is enlightenment. That would be harmful to their practice.

As a practitioner, you should have a method, and you should understand the goal of your practice. You should set aside a period of time each day to practice. In addition to daily sittings, every so often you should devote a longer period of time exclusively to practice: one full day per week, one entire weekend per month, et cetera.

If you want to conduct a solitary retreat for a month, a year, or even several years, then certain criteria must be met. You should have a sound grasp of **Buddhadharma** and your practice. Your physical and psychological health must be strong enough to endure the rigors of an extended solitary retreat. Be familiar and smooth with your method; in other words, be able to cope with any mental or physical phenomena that arise, and be able to correct and refine your understanding of the **Dharma** as your practice develops. In most cases, experiences will be illusions if you are unable to determine if an experience is genuine. The best attitude is to ignore all unusual phenomena, sensations, ideas and feelings that arise. It is important to have a detached, non-seeking, calm attitude. Remember, I am talking about experiences that arise during practice. If you get sick or hurt yourself, it would be foolish to ignore it. If all these criteria are not met, you will develop serious physical and mental obstructions, and will not know how to deal with the rigors of solitary retreat.

Therefore, beginners should not attempt a solitary retreat. In fact, I would not recommend it for most people. It is very demanding. Most people are better off

practicing in a group — preferably of five people or more — with or without a master. Again, having a master is always better, but group practice without a master is preferable to solo practice without a master. If one member has problems, the others can help.

STUDENT:

But how do the others know that they are saying or doing the right thing? They may be harming rather than helping the person with the problem.

SHIH-FU:

If they have a question, and you answer them, that is helping. It is better that there be at least one experienced member in the group.

STUDENT:

Is the best policy to tell them to ignore what they have experienced?

SHIH-FU:

Not always. If they experience a typical physiological or psychological sensation, it is okay to tell them to ignore it; but if they have a question about the method or the Dharma, then someone with more experience should try to answer them. If you do not know the answer, then tell them so. If you think you do know the answer, then answer the question. You may qualify the answer to reflect your level of experience. Furthermore, if a person is tired or frustrated, or is suffering from a headache or other body pains, then you must give them a method to help them deal with their problem. Sometimes the best answer is to tell them to relax or rest a while.

Group practice is also better than solo practice because the schedule is more regular. On your own, it is easy to get lazy and miss a sitting here or there; but in a group, you will feel obligated to attend sittings and practice well. Seeing other people practicing usually sparks your own desire to practice.

As householders, you should make an effort to set up a group practice. If you live near a meditation center, then it is easier, because the setting and

schedule are already established. You can show up in the morning or evening, on weekdays or weekends. If you do not live near a center, then you must improvise. It is difficult to find a place where several people can sit on a daily basis, but the more often and regularly a group meets, the better it is for everyone's practice.

The group should also try to set aside one day per week or one weekend per month for more rigorous practice. It would also be alright to spend longer periods of time — four to seven days — practicing energetically.

STUDENTS:

Is there a certain, safe time limit for retreats held without a master?

SHIH-FU:

It is not good to practice intensely for too long without a master. Problems might arise. Participating in a several day retreat without a master is already energetic. You should not follow to a "T" the stringent rules of an intensive seven-day retreat. It is better to have a more relaxed atmosphere. For instance, if you are holding a seven-day retreat without a master, then you might allow people to talk during rest periods, or to come and go as they please.

There are other forms of practice that are not as intense as meditation, such as chanting or reciting sutras. It is alright to hold such retreats without a master. People at my temple in Taiwan sometimes hold seven-day recitations when I am not present. In all situations I have described, it is easier and better to sit in groups. It is difficult to hold personal retreats and keep to the schedule. Any number of distractions or vexations might interrupt your practice. To practice well on your own takes great will power.

In regard to short-term vs. long-term practice, results and progress will depend on your level of experience, your karma, and causes and conditions. Practicing for a long time does not guarantee more enduring experiences, just as practicing for a short time does not preclude having an experience. So long as you practice, that is good. Focus all your energies on the present sitting. If you can maintain this attitude every time you meditate, you will make progress.

I always stress the importance of daily practice. It is important to have a regular sitting schedule. But practice does not end when you get up from the cushion. You should be mindful in all situations. Whether you are doing something you like or dislike, whether it is to your advantage or disadvantage, you don't put yourself at center stage. Put aside self-centeredness; cultivate compassion. Be helpful to others in everything you do; this will help decrease self-centeredness. Most importantly: Whenever you do something, just do it with focused awareness. Do not be lazy and allow your mind to wander. This is daily practice. This is mindfulness.

For most people, this type of lifestyle is impossible. In order to practice in this way, it is important to meditate every day, and to periodically attend more intensive retreats.

Most householders cannot practice steadily and energetically for a long time because of responsibilities and obligations. However, if you are single, and have a flexible job, you can devote yourself to long-term practice — one or more years. In most cases, such people live in monasteries or retreat centers, where the environment is conducive to practice. Many householders do so on a temporary basis. They practice intensely, leave to work a while, and afterward return to practice. Although beneficial, this is not genuine long-term practice. The best way is to live in a monastery or center and practice continuously for several years.

Until now I have been talking about lay practitioners. The correct attitude of a home-leaver is fundamentally different from that of a householder. In taking vows, monks and nuns should leave behind self-centeredness and devote all their time and effort to the practice of **Buddhadharma**. Home-leavers do not have a family, a home, a career, or possessions. They have no worldly responsibilities and obligations. The

true meaning of leaving home is to leave everything behind — intellect, emotions, ego, desire, body and mind. In effect, abandoning everything except the vows and Buddhadharmā.

Many people say that the Ch'an Center belongs to me — Shih-fu Sheng-yen. They are mistaken. I live here and work here, but it is not my place. Nor does it belong to the monks and nuns who live here. A person who has left home has nothing. If a monk or nun thinks, "This is my home," he or she should immediately remember what it means to have left home. People who have truly left home have nothing except practice; no cares, no worries, no goals. To an outsider, it may seem that they are working and acting like lay people, but to monastics, everything is practice. It would be difficult for householders to have this kind of attitude.

STUDENT:

I have to disagree with you, Shih-fu. Sure, monks and nuns take vows and leave home, but that is a ritual, and it is purely an intellectual conception. Most monks and nuns are pretty much the same as lay practitioners. I see the monks who live and work here. They have responsibilities just as I do. In fact, it seems they have more responsibilities and work than I do. They have bills to pay, legal matters to deal with, visitors to greet and take care of, and a very hectic social schedule. It seems that they have replaced one home with another.

On the other hand, why can't I, as a lay practitioner, have the attitude of a monk or nun? Yes, I must go to work and earn money, but it is something I must do to survive. But in all things I do, whether it be work or being with my family, I try to see it as practice. I try to be mindful in all that I do. I try to live by the precepts and put Buddhist principles into practice. If some lay practitioners have this attitude, why should they be any different from monastics?

SHIH-FU:

The difference is that the responsibilities of home-leavers are just responsibilities, and nothing more. Monastics should not be emotionally involved with and attached to

what they do. Let me rephrase that. Monks and nuns should not be emotionally attached to anything, and they live in an environment with rules that constantly remind them of that. On the other hand, most householders cannot help but be emotionally attached to their families, their work, their possessions. But, if you can practice with the attitude of a home-leaver, and detach yourself from things, then you are correct, there would be no difference. A fine example is Layman P'ang, who was a highly-attained lay practitioner of the Tang dynasty. Monastics should be able to leave behind their worldly selves. This does not happen instantly. They do not take the vows, shave their heads, put on robes, and immediately master such an attitude. It is a gradual, life-long process. One cannot win or inherit such an attitude. One must cultivate it.
