

The first official Dharma talk that I ever gave was on the sangha, the third Noble Treasure. Since then I have revisited this essential part of Buddhism, from time to time, most recently a couple of weeks ago when a new person attended our Monday group. I'll describe her for those of you who weren't here. She was an older woman who had been interested in meditating for some time but confessed that whenever she tried to sit down and just relax, her mind became over active. After our sitting and service, I asked her how she felt. She said she was amazed how easy it was for her. I told her that I too felt it was much easier to sit with our group than it is for me when I sit alone in the morning.

I was very thankful for this woman's comment, and was disappointed when she wrote to me, saying that the group was too far away from her house to come each week. Thinking about what she said during our meeting and her letter a few days later has brought me to appreciate, more than ever, the efforts all of us have taken to leave the activities of our lives and gather together every Monday evening.

For me, the primary part of the experience of being in our group is appreciating the work that everyone is doing. I am very thankful to all of you for making the effort to be here and for making efforts to make the Dharma an essential part of your lives. When we are together I am aware of how much of my own work depends on everyone's efforts. It is much easier for me to sit when I can feel the silence of everyone's work. I want to thank you for all your continuing efforts.

During our sitting I occasionally look around the room to get an impression of each person's presence, sometimes by how they hold their posture in zazen, sometimes in how they walk in kinhin, and sometimes by the tone of their voice when they read a passage from Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. When a person to my left or right moves a little, I have great empathy for the effort they are making to stay still and I feel that we are in this together.

Gradually I have become able to recognize someone by the sound of their footsteps in the outer hall before they reach the chapel. Each person has a unique "sound." This is especially true in the Zendo. In Zen practice we spend a lot of time doing things in unison—sitting down and getting up, standing, walking, and eating, if we are in a longer retreat. In this way we get an impression of one another from parts of our bodies that are not as directly influenced by our personalities as our faces are. Our hands and feet do not have a mind of their own, at least not in the ordinary way of

thinking about “mind,” and so they are only expressions of our state of mind and heart.

There’s a story about how we communicate with each other with other parts of our bodies, other parts of ourselves. *Longtan made rice cakes for a living. But when he met the priest Tianhuang, he left home to follow him. Tianhuang said, “Be my attendant. From now on I will teach you the essential dharma gate.” After a year, Longtan said, “When I arrived, you said you would teach me. But so far nothing has happened.” Tianhuang said, “I’ve been teaching you all along.” Longtan said, “What have you been teaching me?” Tianhuang said, “When you greet me, I bow. When I sit, you stand beside me. When you bring tea, I receive it from you.”* I remember reading a similar account from another tradition in which a student recounts that he learned what enlightenment was just by walking behind his teacher and watching how he moved.

The Chinese symbol for “za” in “zazen” has two figures sitting. The literal meaning of “za,” according to Katagiri Roshi, is “two persons sitting in the universe.” He goes on to say that “you cannot sit alone, in your own egoistic, selfish territory.” We need the help of others. When we sit, I feel the dedicated silence of all of our efforts inside my own body as deep compassion. It’s not an exaggeration to say that when I look around I see not individual practitioners, but the practice itself.

Help comes not only from the person sitting next to you, but also from everything around you—the entire universe is sitting with you. Katagiri continues: “You must open yourself and sit in the universe, with all sentient beings. That sitting is zen, tranquility. The universe, the earth, all beings and all circumstances are sitting with you.” In Zen we understand sangha to include not only all practitioners, but also all beings, mountains, rivers, rocks, and wild grasses—everything. To embrace all life as our own life, and not to see our life as separate, is to take refuge in sangha. There is an iPhone app that tells you how many users of the app are meditating at any given moment throughout the world. But the truth is much more powerful than that. My own experience is all of you and all of the Buddhas and ancestors across the centuries are sitting with me when I take my seat.

A useful metaphor for the Sangha is the Net of Indra from the Flower Garland Sutra, which describes a vast net that reaches infinitely in all directions. In the net are an infinite number of jewels. Each individual jewel reflects all of the other jewels, and the reflected jewels also reflect all of the other jewels. Each jewel is intimately interconnected with every other jewel throughout time and space. Everything contains everything else. At the same time, each individual knot is an individual person, altogether his or her own jewel, unlike any other.

I'd like to close with the Upaddha Sutta:

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Sakyans. Now there is a Sakyan town named Sakkara. There Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, "This is half of the holy life, lord: having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues."

"Don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. Having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path.

"And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, develop and pursue the noble eightfold path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. He develops right resolve... right speech... right action... right livelihood... right effort... right mindfulness... right concentration dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. This is how a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, develops and pursues the noble eightfold path.

"And through this line of reasoning one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life: It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to birth have gained release from birth, that beings subject to aging have gained release from aging, that

beings subject to death have gained release from death, that beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair have gained release from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. It is through this line of reasoning that one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, is actually the whole of the holy life."