

The Eightfold Path, Part 4: Right View & Right Intention

Excerpts from a Dharma Talk given by Maylie Scott July 13, 1997; from the August '97 AZG newsletter

Taking part in sesshin is a wonderful opportunity--even to come in for part of the day to get a feeling of what's going on. It's an opportunity to give your practice a tune-up, a larger feeling about what you're doing on the cushion, a stronger, deeper feeling of the group. As Rose said, together we have circled Lloyd's living room and kitchen and dining room, how many times in the kinhin line? That kind of repetition--the same thing over and over and done with freshness--makes sangha into a really wonderful container. I encourage you to try out sesshin. I assure you that this is the easiest possible group to enter sesshin with.

I want to talk about the following poem in terms of both our personal practice and of our sangha life. This poem, written down by an American poet but dictated by a Native American elder, is an instruction to young tribal people about how to meet the world. The name of the poem is "Lost," but could also be "Found."

Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers.
I have made this place around you;
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

Quoted in David Whyte's The Heart Aroused pp 259-60

We can take these lines as zazen instruction. Where is the forest? In meditation, we are in the forest of our inner being with all the growth and entanglement and spaces that are there. We often start out with expectations of what the forest is like and how we're going to move in it. We do this since it's pretty difficult to start without any idea about what you're doing; we always have ideas about proceeding. But the forest teaches us, little by little. Particularly in the longer sittings, we have to give up the idea about our practice because it gets worn out. When we do this, we begin to hear the breath of the forest and enter more into it and with the images, sensations, pains, and joys that arise. Our breath joins with the forest breath. Zazen brings us deeply into contact with ourselves and with all the mysterious elements arising and falling with each breath. We then understand more the strangeness of our life--this powerful stranger we are not different from.

The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,

I have made this place around you,
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.

This is the wonderful thing about the practice--it is immediately available at every moment. Again and again we are wandering off; again and again coming back. Harry Roberts, a Native American who lived for some years at Green Gulch, wrote an essay about knowing he needed to enter the forest to go on a vision quest and sit silently. He started up a path, but then stopped, because he realized the path was lonesome, that he was walking along the path just thinking his own selfish thoughts. He turned around, and went back and started up again. We can always do that.

We talked about the power of stopping.

No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.

Suzuki Roshi calls it the spirit of repetition, coming back again and again to the same point, the same place, and if you are awake, it's fresh.

If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

How we drop our customary position of bringing ourselves forward. Dogen says, "To carry the self forward is delusion. To allow the myriad things to express themselves is awakening." We forget, again and again, to respect, to allow, to watch, and to listen to the many things and what they have to say. As we forget that watching and listening, we are lost. We drop into the soap operas, the tangles, the confusions, the troubles of our life, and then we remember.

Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.

We have the forest of the mind, and we have the forest of our inter-being which, in this very local sense, is our local sangha. The sangha was originally known as the community of arhants, the community of saints, of those with pure aspirations. We are not saints and arhants. But we do all have our bodhisattva aspirations and our bodhisattva intentions, and, from that point of view, we are sangha. Our common aspiration draws us together. Gael reminded us of the storey in Kosho Uchiyama's *Opening the Hand of Thought* about the field of quarreling pumpkins and the farmer who comes and finds this disarray of angry armored beings. He says to them, "Stop, stop! Put your hands to your heads and feel the common root." That is our basic sangha instruction: "Feel the common root."

This is a small sangha. How important it is in its own life and also as part of the historic event of the Buddha's teaching coming from Asia and finding its intimate way throughout the West, with so many vehicles--groups like this one working it out. Home life has a way of feeling very familiar and enclosed, but we have to remember that this particular home life is part of a world-web and the basis of tremendously significant work. Arnold Toynbee is frequently quoted as saying that the coming of Buddhism to the West is the most important thing that happened in the twentieth century.

What do we, who are identified with Soto Zen, get from our Japanese forebears? We get some wonderful things. We get form as a way of mindfulness--the form of zazen, of bowing, of walking slowly together (kinhin), and chanting. These forms are an expression of our one-body togetherness. The Japanese are brought up in a one-body tradition from the time they are infants. You see little children going to nursery school dressed identically--same hats, same socks. They have begun learning about the one-body.

It's different for us as we come from the other side; there is a lot of resistance to form. Bowing? When Suzuki Roshi heard about this resistance to bowing, he said, "Well, in Japan we bow three times before service, but in America we'll bow nine times." It's difficult for Americans, but the forms and traditions of the one-body practice are a rich offering.

Another aspect of the Japanese tradition which I think is very useful for us comes from the Japanese monastic tradition. There is a sharp sense of hierarchy as well as appreciation for the horizontal. For instance, the cook (tenzo) is traditionally one of the most well-developed people in the sangha, doing work accurately, devotedly, and generously. Another "horizontal" aspect is the fact that the positions in the hierarchy rotate, with perhaps the exception of the abbot or abbess. The emphasis is not on the particular people on top but rather on the jobs that need to be done. An important part of a priest's training is moving through all the positions and learning them.

On the other hand, there is a limit to how well we lay Americans can follow the traditional Japanese monastic tradition. I thumbed through Suzuki Roshi's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* but there is very little there about sangha. I think the Japanese had a very limited understanding of American sanghas because Americans come to sangha in a different way. Originally our sanghas were organized as a kind of extension of the teacher. Those were the first years, and now almost all of the original teachers have died. We are on second and third generation teachers, and most of them are American-born. The sanghas have become much more horizontal and process-oriented. Part of what is happening is that women are finding their voices. In addition, psychologically-based inter-personal process has become a valuable ally.

So we have a valuable diversity in our sanghas; each person comes in with the amount of time they have practiced, their particular bundle of views and positions, and we are all together. This being together, rubbing against one another, and mirroring one another--the best and the worst--is a very powerful, transforming process. Buddha--Dharma--Sangha. When you start, you want a teacher, and you look around for the best teacher. Then, as you continue, if you have the fortune to enter a group, you understand how the sangha teaching is exactly as important as the first two. One's personal development depends on sangha mirroring. So we appreciate the diversity, we appreciate one another's aspirations, and we remember we're in this forest--"The forest breathes. Listen. It answers."

We remember that we carry our views, our judgments, and our positions and that we can also just drop them. We can just drop what we are carrying, and that's very important. That is really the most important aspect of a Buddhist sangha. Whatever you carry in, you hold tentatively, and you listen. And you are very respectful of the trees and the bushes and the people around you. Your effort is to realize harmony.

Some people enjoy having a pretty good fight, while that amount of conflict just tears other people apart. Some people need to talk frequently and others are fairly happy with just watching. So it's just different; again and again, it is just different. What we need to do is to be with the powerful stranger in the midst of sangha life.

We need to find the rules of our sangha--and it takes a long time. I received some distressed phone calls after the last sangha meeting, and the same day a friend who has a large sangha (about 100 people now) in Palo Alto called me. I said, "Oh, Gil, Arcata is really having trouble." He said, "Oh, well, it took us two years to get to where we are now and we're just beginning to look for property."

We need to remember that the process is hard work. Certainly it took Berkeley a long time. It is not work to be discouraged about; it's large and mysterious and it takes time to fashion the particular container out of the particular people in the particular spot. What a long root this group has; I think no one here perhaps knows the length of the root. Nobody knows when the sitting group began or where. But something is going on, and it needs encouragement, enthusiasm, and patience.

Rita Gross, a Buddhist feminist, suggests mandala as a shape for Sangha. Often we think of hierarchy as a pyramid shape. And I think this group abhors pyramids. But in the mandala, one can think of authority lying in the center, with different concentric circles of commitment around. Everybody is related to the center and the center depends on their relatedness. This somewhat goes along with the Japanese model in which positions change all the time. If enough trust is generated in the larger group, a small group can be delegated to be in the middle. The middle group can keep changing and can be called different things--sometimes it's called Practice Committee, Abbot's Council, or Elder's Council, and there can be other names, too. This group depends upon the whole group for support, so it's a nice model to think about. It is a trust container.

I have just one final thought before closing--the model of sangha as good family, where we really cultivate each other's aspirations and where we know we all make mistakes. We forgive our own mistakes, the mistakes of others, and see mistakes as learning attempts. They are valuable because you don't find your voice and you don't find your way without making mistakes.