

Staying at Home and Practicing the Way

By Randal Daigu Pride

I was asked by Teijo (Rev. Teijo Munnich) to talk on the subject of a home-remainer (as contrasted to home-leaver). In other words, someone who has ordained as a lay monk but stopped short of ordaining as a priest to remain living and working within secular society while still practicing and nurturing the Buddha Dharma; so, not exactly a householder nor a monastic priest either, somewhere in the middle.

All Buddhists—laity, monks and priests—share the taking refuge in the three treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, observing of the precepts, and practicing the Eightfold Path but their settings of monastery, dharma center, home and workplace differ as well as their practice structures and opportunities. The monastery, of course, offers the practice structure within an immersive, resident 24/7, dharmic experience whereas lay practitioners and monks must self-schedule zazen and dharma study amidst the constraints and responsibilities of family, community and workplace while also not excluding them from the practice, especially the practice of mindfulness and observing of the precepts.

Generalities aside, not all monastics are the same nor are all lay practitioners the same in either commitment or accomplishment, skillful means or compassion, or ethics. Eihei Dogen, our Japanese Soto Zen founder, sought further instruction in China because he felt that Japan's 13th century monastics were lacking in those attributes. And as history shows, his intuition was not in vain.

Originally in India, the lay community offered material support (dana) to wandering aesthetes and later monastics in return for merit and instruction in the Dharma. For them, the Buddha emphasized morality and generosity in order to live in harmony within family and community. That symbiotic relationship continues in the modern era with the rise of dharma centers led by ordained priests or lay teachers.

Our non-resident Zen Center of Asheville, for example, provides our sangha a space for morning zazen and a weekly evening dharma talk preceded by a period of zazen. In pre-pandemic time we offered a monthly all-day Saturday sit and will resume that in the near future if possible. Though no longer resident, our founding teacher, Rev. Teijo Munnich, still comes in to give a monthly dharma talk from nearby Alexander where she has her Great Tree Zen Women's Temple. Several of us were ordained by her as lay teachers and we give the other weekly talks as well as maintain the center with other members. Any dana received from our talks is given to the center to help pay the rent and offer a stipend to Rev. Munnich.

Though a women's residential temple, Great Tree offers sesshins and retreats open to men as well as children and families. Southern Dharma Retreat Center in Hot Springs also offers sesshins year-round from various Buddhist traditions, one of which is led by Teijo and Meredith Myoun McIntosh in a combined Zen/Alexander Technique retreat. In this Western North Carolina area in general, there are numerous small groups from other Buddhist traditions and many of us come together annually to celebrate WESAK.

As I understand it, Soto Zen has three precept receiving ceremonies: Jukai is for lay practitioners who also sew the small rakasu. Zaiko Tokudo is for lay monk ordination, and Shukke Tokudo is for priest ordination, and both sew the full okesa. I have received the Jukai and Zaiko Tokudo, though not the Shukke Tokudo as I am not interested in becoming a priest. Over the years, I have attended many zen sesshins and retreats with Rev. Munnich, Rev. Shohaku Okumura, and others in various locations. Part of that experience, other than all day zazen, was learning various rituals and chants as well as participating in the formal oryoki style of taking meals. I continue to maintain a daily zazen practice either at home or at our zen center. When not giving a dharma talk Tuesday evenings, I am often the doan for others' talks, and am doan for our Saturday morning two periods of zazen where we also chant the Robe Verse and Heart Sutra afterwards. As a volunteer, I taught Buddhism and led zazen at Craggy Correctional Center in Woodfin, NC for ten years and occasionally counseled inmates in other WNC facilities.

Though retired from my corporate job, I continue to freelance remotely from home to pay off my mortgage and generate savings for when I am no longer able to work. A couple times a year I visit my children and grandchildren, and my sister in other cities. Some of my spare time is spent enjoying hobbies such as poetry, photography, gardening, tennis, hiking and swimming. I keep abreast of environmental and political issues and sometimes include them in a dharma talk to shine a little Buddha light on them. Ever since the Vietnam War, I have been participating in non-violent street protests for anti-war, civil rights and environmental causes and donate money to NGOs who specialize in them.

So, that is what it is like for this particular home remainer practicing the Middle Way. My self-appointed role is to encourage the practice of shikan-taza zazen and the study of Buddhist teachings as well as to continue deepening my own understanding and compassion.

When one of Buddha's followers complained to him that bad stuff kept happening even though he had taken refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, Buddha replied that he never said that delusion wouldn't keep arising but that one could change how they responded to it through the practice of the Eightfold Path. That is what both home leavers and remainers do to the best of their abilities. It is up to the individual to stay committed and sincere, regardless of whatever weather the karmic winds blow in.

ADDENDUM:

Though I've not experienced the intensive, immersive training of a priest in a Buddhist monastery, I do have the experience of home leaving as I gave up all possessions to live for 10 years in an intentional spiritual community indirectly associated with San Francisco's Soto Zen Center and Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. It was called The Farm and considered by its critics to be a hippie cult of Stephen Gaskin, its spiritual teacher, and there was some truth to that claim. However, we dedicated our first publication to Suzuki Roshi. In magazine format, it set out our vision of an egalitarian society and included many photographs of our early years of building, farming, cooking, and midwifery. Its title was *Hey Beatnik!* because Stephen said he was too old to be a hippie and it also acknowledged the close affinity with Beat Culture writers Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Diane Di Prima, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder and others who were influenced by Buddhism.

After my discharge from the Navy in 1968, I finished my previously interrupted undergraduate degree, got married, had a baby, and worked while my wife pursued her masters degree. We soon separated however, and I became, I think, the Farm's first single father in the summer of 1973 with my three-year old daughter in tow. Completely disillusioned with consumerist society, I can attest to the visceral freeing sensation of the home leaver, when I gave it all up to live in a quasi-monastic environment where fame and gain was mutually renounced (except for Stephen's attraction to the spotlight, beyond just getting the word out). Though the whole community only sat zazen together once a week, we practiced a form of daily mindfulness where we agreed to call out each other's disharmonious speech and actions in an effort to make our subconscious conditioning transparent. It was a work in progress and often abused, though when done with compassion and clarity was effective as intended.

The Farm changed from being an economic collective to a land trust shortly after I left in 1983. Stephen continued to live there until his death in 2014 though no longer as its spiritual leader. Other than my stint in the Navy on an aircraft carrier, my time on The Farm has been my only communal living experience.

CONCLUSION:

There is the suffering of birth and death, illness and injury, and there's the suffering of human contention arising out of our ego-centric ignorance, our greed, hatred, and delusion. Since we evidently can't escape suffering, we have to dismantle it, to de-construct it, to let go of its tools. That is what the Buddha taught and is our practice as sangha and as individuals both lay and monastic.