

19.01.25 Dharma Talk: The Place of Sangha in Post-Monastic Zen Practice by Sono

Welcome back. Today is Sunday the 19th of January, our first Dharma talk discussion for the new year. In Dogen's recommending zazen to all people, he talks about certain preconditions for zazen practice to be effective. He talks about very basic things like having a quiet room, eating and drinking in moderation. He talks about not thinking good or bad or not getting into judgmental thoughts of right and wrong. In other words, don't get caught up in evaluating your zazen practice. He talks about not trying to seek to become a Buddha and he also talks about basic things like mats and sitting posture. Of course, in those days you had two choices, the full lotus or the half lotus. Today we say keep your back relatively straight and maintain relative stillness. And if you can do that, you're doing well. He talked about eyes open and breathing through the nose. Then he said we simply sit beyond thinking.

So, what's missing from Dogen's preconditions here? Something which I think is central and core to our practice and preconditions for zazen. So, what's missing from this is *sangha*. And given that this year is our 10th anniversary of the founding of the OzZen Sangha, I thought the topic for today would be sangha. So I'd like us to explore together what sangha means to us in the context of what we could describe as a lay practice or a post monastic practice in our contemporary western culture.

It took quite a long time for me to really understand the importance of sangha. I went in search of a teacher from a very early phase in my practice and didn't really connect in any serious way with the teacher for quite a long time. I would sit sometimes with the Sydney Zen Center but didn't really get involved in the sangha very much. And I think this is quite normal and quite typical for young people, say late 20s early 30s and beyond, in terms of our early years of exploring spiritual practice and particularly Buddhist practice. We often are wary of and not really wanting to get involved in the sangha. Even when I was down in Adelaide and I attended the Zen group in Adelaide, I still didn't really connect with the teacher or connect with the sangha. It was only really when I met, when I started my relationship with Barry in the early 2000s, which was as you know by simply by email, but it was the first time where I think I finally found myself with somebody I could, felt I could trust. I mean that took, that

takes a little while to develop that trust. But I think often it's the connection, connecting with a teacher which leads us into deepening our relationship with the sangha. And when I first started working with Barry there was no sangha where I was living in Northern Queensland. Then I had three years in New Zealand and I visited the United States once or twice during that time and met with Barry's sangha but I still didn't have my own sangha. I had one friend in New Zealand I used to sit with. Then when I finally sort of found myself in Bellingen in 2006, I still didn't have a sangha but I had, I knew Geoff Dawson who was an ordinary mind teacher in Sydney and I got in touch with Geoff and asked if he knew anybody in Bellingen and he told me about a guy called Vince Jensen. Vince was an American who had come from San Diego as a young man. He'd attended sessions with Joko and he was living in Bellingen. Vince is about, I don't know, he's about 10 or 15 years younger than me. So I got in touch with Vince and we started sitting together, just the two of us and that went on for a year or so. And then finally there was a Zen teacher in Bellingen called Sexton who hadn't been very well and when he started teaching again we sat with Sexton and a little small Bellingen sangha grew from that little kernel of a handful of people. And as most of you know I sat with the Bellingen sangha and continued working with Barry. Sexton died in about 2010 and eventually when Barry encouraged me to teach I then had to find, build a sangha from scratch. And that was very daunting and very anxiety provoking and wasn't sure if I could do it. Fortunately, I had a therapy practice. But my first advertised sitting in the Sawtell Zendo in 2015, I turned up and there was nobody there. So I sat the whole period on my own. And then eventually I had a couple of young men who were interested in sort of, had some interest in Buddhism from my therapy practice. And I think they took pity on me and came along a couple of times. And then a couple of other people supported me and very slowly we, a number of people started to come along till we had a big enough group to meet in Sawtell. And then eventually I designed a website, well not me, but my friend Steve designed the website and the rest is history.

So let us explore what is, what's post-monastic sangha? What, and why is it important to us? I think one of the things which I'll come to a bit later on is that in traditional Buddhist sangha, the whole notion of sangha revolved around this idea of home leaving. That was the traditional way in which a Buddhist sangha was set up. People would literally leave their home, leave their family, as in the traditional story, and go and join a Buddhist monastic order. And traditionally to

really be a, to take your Buddhism seriously in many ways, you needed to become a monastic. And the monastics would provide education and the opportunity for lay people to practice. But it was always seen as if that the main sangha was the monastic sangha. And the lay people were kind of like supportive of the monastic sangha.

Well, fast forward to the 1960s and the 1970s when, only 50 years ago, there was no teachers, no Western teachers at all. It's amazing how rapidly things have changed. Of course, Zen Buddhism in the West takes off in a primarily lay practice. Most of the Westerners didn't really want to go and join a monastic order. There were a few who tried monasticism. They maybe lasted for a year, maybe three years, but would eventually return back to the community again. There were very few Western Zen Buddhist practitioners who stayed in a monastic order in the West. There are some who did, and some who still do. But even then, even when people became priests, even in Japan back at the turn of the century, priests were able to marry and have children. So even the Japanese priests were family members. So we've had to, part of the ongoing conversation we're having in the West is how we redefine home. And we're no longer home leavers. We are actually people who are committed to being attached to a home and attached to a family. And our notion of non-attachment is not about leaving home and leaving our houses. Our notion of non-attachment is more about being able to be with those emotions we experience through attachment, through attachment to our homes, through attachment to our intimate partners, our family and our friends. So we don't reject that kind of attachment. We actually accept it. And we actually buy into the notions of attachment theory about the importance of having a secure home base and creating a sense of safety and trust. And again, that's where for me Sangha becomes very much about creating a home base of safety and trust for us to practice.

When we think of the three treasures, the first one, be Buddha. In Buddha, being Buddha, I think of Zazen. I think of reenacting the Buddha's realization when I'm sitting in Zazen. When I think of be Dharma, I think of life as the teacher. and I think of the teachings of Buddhism, whether they're the written teachings, the sutras, the Dharma talks we listen to, and so on. When I think be Sangha, I think that Sangha usually seems to come in third in importance. But actually, I think Sangha is probably the most important of the three treasures. Because when you think about it, being Buddha and being Dharma is not really possible

without a Sangha. There's no Zen without Zen practitioners. So Sangha really, I think is the most important of the three treasures. And it takes a while, I think to get the importance of that. It's Sangha which makes Zazen and teaching possible.

I think because in the West, we have a certain, more of an individualistic culture, it's sometimes harder for people to get the importance of Sangha and get the importance that Zen is a communal practice. And sometimes I think there's a lot of barriers and ways of avoiding that for practitioners in the West.

So let's just summarize the gifts of Sangha. Sangha makes teaching possible. Sangha makes Zazen possible. Sure, we could sit at home and never make contact with other people and do our Zazen every day. But that's very difficult. And I wouldn't really recommend becoming a hermit. But even hermits are in contact with some sense of monastic order back in the old days in China. And even, I think, Zoom has been a great benefit in the sense in which we can be sitting in different geographical locations. Like we're doing this morning, sitting half a day, it's sometimes really difficult to get motivated to do that if you're just doing it on your own. So knowing that you're going to have some friends practicing can be really helpful in doing those longer extended sits.

The other important thing about Sangha, the other gift of Sangha, is it encourages us to extend our sense of our caregiving system beyond our immediate family and friends. It encourages us to identify with Sangha as a place in which we can care for each other. And also as Sangha members, we think of how we go out into the world and practice service. If we are workers, as in we're still getting paid employment, that could be, as we've talked about a lot, it could be service as a teacher. It could be service as a hospice worker, social worker. It could be service as someone who's working in an environmental department. Or if we're no longer in full paid work, there are lots of voluntary ways of offering service, including the service that we offer when we take on these leadership roles in the Sangha as well. And these are all of the ways, doing the committee work, doing those boring things like treasury jobs, organizing retreats, organizing food for retreats. All these jobs which are sometimes, you know, we tend to avoid are all ways in which we express our care for each other. And how that extends out from beyond our immediate

family. I think this is really important when it comes to the notion of compassion.

Because Buddhism is all about caring, all about compassion. And compassion is often defined as sensitivity to suffering with the desire to alleviate suffering. In our tradition, we also say being just this moment, compassion's way. We align ourselves with the reality of life as it is. And that includes aligning ourselves with the reality of impermanence and interdependence, which includes acknowledging our basic human needs for shelter and our emotional and social needs. So we seek to also find ways of fulfilling those needs through our practice, even though that can often be difficult.

The interesting thing about compassion, when you think about it, is that care and compassion really has taken many millions of years to manifest in ourselves as human beings. It's really about the evolution of mammals on this planet. And mammals apparently began living on this planet about 200 million years ago. So we are the product of that 200 million years of evolution. And it was that mammalian, the way in which we evolved as mammals to care for our young, is where the origins of compassion lie. And not only human beings, but other animals also, other mammals also obviously care for their young, but sometimes they also care for their sick, which is something that human beings did. They would care for sick human beings. They would develop funeral rites. And of course, along with that came the sense of affiliation, belonging to a tribe, belonging to a particular language and belonging to a particular place.

So this is how we evolved, and our sangha extends, is built on that foundation. But of course, what is the problem though, for human species, is this is all really beautiful, the love we have for each other, for our families, our sense of belonging to tribe. But where we, the pitfall in all of this, where we fall into the pit, this also creates the "them and us" situation between human beings. And unfortunately, when different tribes turn upon each other, and we experience our loved ones being killed and massacred by another tribe, then we can actually participate in massacre against the other tribe. So as human beings, we're capable of this wonderful love for our own, but also we're capable of this tremendous sense of being able to inflict harm on other human beings. So around about, you know, a couple of thousand years ago in the axial age, we have in the Christian teachings of Jesus, love thy enemy, the teachings of

Buddhism, where we're trying to extend that sense of attachment love, based on, I mean, there is a certain altruism that we can experience as humans, where we can. And there's also that culture of hospitality, hospitality to strangers, that we've had for many thousands of years. And I think sangha practice is about building on that. It's so like, attachment love, our basic human love, which we all need to flourish and survive, is discriminatory. We love our children. We invest so much in our children. And we know that there are thousands and thousands of children dying every day, either through war or through lack of food. But as mammals, we invest in our children. That's perfectly, that's what we do. But as Buddhist practitioners, we're seeking to cultivate, we don't have to necessarily cultivate our attachment love. Our attachment love is already there, assuming we've had a reasonably good enough childhood. But we're seeking to extend from, to be, compassion is non-discriminatory. And we're seeking to cultivate that sense of non-discriminatory care for others in our Buddhist practice. And that's when Avalokiteshvara manifests in us. Because Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, does not discriminate. And the archetypal image of Avalokiteshvara is that many thousands of arms with the eyes and the ears, she sees the suffering of the world. So this is always present as a possibility in our practice.

So coming back to our basic Zazen practice. Zazen practice, when you think about it, does need a basic sense of safety to take place. If we are in a situation where the bomb is falling all around us, it's impossible to relax and to practice Zazen. We have to, we are creatures of our nervous systems. We are not separate from our ANS or Autonomic Nervous System. And that has basically three different settings. There's the setting of safety, where we can be relaxed and we can digest our food. We can engage in exploration and play and curiosity. And that's the kind of base in which we want to be at when we're practicing our Zazen. In some ways, when we're sitting together, it's a form of play in a way. We're doing our rituals. And we're both self-regulating through our actual sitting and relaxing in our physical posture. It's influencing our nervous system. And we're also at the same time when we sit together, we're co-regulating. We're sitting with other people. And through that sitting, especially when we meet together on retreats as well. But when we meet together regularly, we're trying to create that sense of safety and trust in each other, so that we can come together and relax and open our hearts.

The ventral vagal system connects the heart to the face. And it's where we are open to engaging in social connection. And we're connecting with ourselves and others. But if there's some sense of threat in the environment, then we go into the fight or flight arousal system, the sympathetic nervous system. And that takes us out of our calm place. And in the worst-case scenario, if there is a actual threat, and we sometimes go into the third dorsal vagal system, which is immobilization, collapse, where we can't move.

And so these kinds of people who come into our Sangha can come into our Sangha from different backgrounds, different histories. And sometimes I think of one of the roles of our Sangha is providing a kind of a place for post-traumatic recovery. We want to be able to welcome people into our Sangha, and to encourage them to connect. A lot of people find it difficult to connect with a teacher, for example, because people have been let down in the past. There's a lot of trust that goes when people have been hurt in authority relationships. And so all these are opportunities within our Sangha for practicing these different kinds of relationships, and creating trust, and giving people a new experience of what a group can be like. Because a lot of our shame often comes from being shamed in a group context, often socially at school, sometimes in the family. And there are all kinds of challenges in Sangha practice. You know, we can even be afraid of making a mistake when we're doing the leading in the kinhin, or something like that. We can certainly feel anxiety when giving the talk or guided meditation. And so these are all opportunities for us to practice creating this safe place for each other. And Sangha is a co-creation. We're co-creating it together. We all have our different experiences of practice. We also all have our different histories of spirituality. We're trying to bring some inclusiveness into that within the context of that particular lineage we choose to be in.