
Trust in the Sangha

Kusen by Eveline Kogen Pascual – Grube Louise, January 2019

Zazen is sometimes painful. We have pain in our knees, or in our back, or in our shoulders and it is difficult to stay relaxed. If you are in pain, breathe in and out deeply and during the exhalation, send your energy into the painful areas and consciously relax them. Often this helps to ease the pain and we can hold on a little longer. But there is no need to torture yourself. If it is no longer bearable, do *gasshō* and change legs for example, or unfold your knees for a few minutes.

Originally, in Buddha's time and even later, the Sangha was reserved for ordained monks and nuns. But in reality, the Sangha is the community of all disciples of the Buddha, of all those who sincerely practice the Way, whether they are ordained or not. The Sangha includes all those with whom we do zazen. Together, we make efforts to integrate and realize the teachings of the Buddha. Expressing confidence in the Sangha also means awakening to interdependence with all beings.

We are all different and each of us has his own character. I know people who don't go to sesshin because there are too many people there who are different from them and it bothers them. But in the Sangha, we all have the same basis on which we rely. We don't need to explain things very much, even though we all have different habits. So, when the Sangha meets, either at home in our dojo or in large numbers during a sesshin, we can relax in this atmosphere. We are inspired, but also challenged. And we generally feel safe enough to explore and overcome our own vulnerability when we engage in deeper practice.

The Sangha is a self-developing network. If misunderstandings and discord occur, we must make an effort and learn how to care for and preserve the Sangha. For a community does not remain harmonious without constant care and attention.

Through our relationships with others, we learn to know ourselves. Others become supporters, teachers, friends and also a mirror. They help us to see our own behaviour, our dispositions, and this concerns not only the disciples among themselves, but also the relationship between masters and disciples. In Zen, it is said that training in monasteries is like a kneading machine in which we mix up angular stones until they are polished and smooth.

We are constantly confronted with each other. And we live this practice together, on the zafu, during ceremonies, cutting vegetables, cleaning toilets or exchanging with a cup of coffee in hand. We are always focused on what we are doing. Our own experience is always questioned. Did I act correctly or carelessly? Did I answer correctly or was it just my pride talking? Have I really understood things deeply or am I imagining it only because I read it in Master Dogen?

In the Sangha we check our realization, because we share a common effort and we have a common language to describe our practice. We "rub" against each other, so to speak, and we gradually polish up the inequalities, neglects and inadequacies of our practice, until our mind becomes more and more receptive, clear and open.

We take refuge in the Sangha because we need it. Thanks to it, the Dharma is kept alive, so that the Three Treasures, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, can continue to exist and become strong.