
Zazen without Sangha?

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A person who has been coming occasionally to the dojo for a year sent us a message to say that he/she would no longer be coming. At the end of the message, this member said: "If the practice of zazen and the philosophy of Zen speak to me, the rituals and the community aspects are not really for me".

Can we practice zazen without the rituals and community aspects?

The community aspects are the Sangha.

When we come to the dojo, when we do a sesshin or a summer camp, we are one practitioner among other practitioners. With the other practitioners, we form a Sangha, a community of practitioners who follow the teachings of a master. It is taught that Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are three Treasures. Practicing in connection with a Sangha is therefore a Treasure for the practice. How is it a Treasure?

Is the Sangha a Treasure? Does it mean that we are always like a benevolent family behaving as friends, brothers, sisters? No, there is not always benevolence. Other practitioners are like us, human beings with their limits and faults: they can annoy us, there can be crises.

So why is the Sangha a Treasure? Why would a practice solitary only not be the practice of the Way? There are many answers, but the first one that we have all experienced in zazen that being together in the dojo is a support. It helps us not to move. This person next to us has a beautiful posture, full of an energy that we feel and it influences us. Another person has a determination, a motivation that challenges us, that draws us in. Another has a wobbly posture and this shows us that perfection is not in itself a goal, is not "the" goal of the Way: it is right to practice just as we are.

Another important aspect of the Sangha is that, as practitioner, we know that zazen helps us to observe how we are functioning, how our ego is the result of our conditioning, an illusion created by our desires for permanence, for continuity. We observe the thoughts that run through our mind and we learn how these thoughts act and create suffering. Practicing together helps us to put our ego in its proper place.

Someone who practices alone all the time can end up developing a certain narcissism of his "self", a false inner peace never disturbed by others. To practice within a Sangha, with samu (the shared activities), offers opportunities to rub one's ego, to confront it, to observe how our preconceived ideas - and in particular the idea we have of ourselves - generate difficulties and suffering. Of course, this can also be found in any human society, but in a Sangha, we know that this observation of our own minds traps allows us to try to overcome our conflicts and to approach them straightforwardly. As practitioners, we all agree to try to deal with these our mental traps with patience and kindness.

So, if the Sangha disturbs us, we are on the wrong track in our practice. Practicing together side by side, despite the tensions, despite our pettiness, makes us together touch something bigger than ourselves, to have confidence in a reality beyond ourselves. It allows us to find ourselves together in the practice of zazen beyond words.

And without this overcoming of the limits of our small ego, there can be no liberation. The practice of zazen is not a practice of well-being, but a practice of liberation. We liberate ourselves next to others and with others.

Zazen practice without the Sangha is no longer the practice of the Way.

For the ritual aspects, it is a bit different...

One can practice fully the Way without any rituals.

What are the rituals? The altar, the Buddha, doing gassho, the ceremonies.... All this is neither necessary nor obligatory: it represents a certain form of protocol which could also be different.

It is not necessary, but it helps. It helps to harmonize the Sangha. It is sometimes difficult, subtle, to feel the energy of the group of Sangha practitioners during the practice of zazen facing the wall. It is much easier to feel it, to let yourself be transported by a chant, during a joint ceremony that liberates and transforms the energy.

And all this ritual shows us that what we practice then is different from everything we experience in everyday life. Our practice allows us to return to our normal condition, but to make this come back, we need to take a step aside. And the ritual helps us to take that step back, to emphasize the fact that we are stepping out of our daily bubble.

Sometimes the word "sacred" is used: I do not like this word very much, because it gives the impression of something exceptional and outside the normality. Whereas what we do here and now in the dojo is the return to our normal condition. The ritual allows us to underline, to emphasize this step aside. The ritual aspects, the symbols, help us to prepare ourselves and put us in a state of openness and letting go. It is the side-step that allows us to access that vast space that opens us to the whole universe.

Ritual helps us to tune into the universe. All these little devices, the Buddha, the candles, the ceremonies... it is a bit like the tuning fork for an orchestra: it is a tool, a means of giving the "A" to harmonize the whole orchestra. All these devices are there to help us harmonize with the universe.