

Strengthening Your Priory Practice

A temple like ours exists primarily to provide support for lay Buddhist training, and specifically to offer teaching to those who wish to practice Serene Reflection Meditation (Soto Zen) within the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. The Order is the lineage family of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett and her disciples, which means that all our temples follow the Buddhist teaching as it has been handed down through her from Koho Zenji in Japan and Seck Kim Seng in Malaysia. Here are some ways to strengthen your relationship with the Priory. This article assumes that you have established a regular meditation practice at home. Nothing can take the place of that. Formal meditation, sometimes expressed as communion with one's spiritual source, Buddha nature, is taking refuge in the Buddha, the first of the Three Treasures.

1) Take refuge in the Dharma, the second of the Three Treasures, that wondrous repository of our faith, trust, and confidence. If you will **concentrate your Dharma study to teaching offered or recommended by monks of our Order**, you will strengthen your "family" connection and deepen your understanding of Buddhist truth. Our tradition does not have a monopoly on truth, nor do monks wish to control people's minds and hearts. Some writings from other traditions blend well with ours; other simply cause confusion. Our compassionate wish – and vow – is to enable those who come to us to realize their potential, Buddha nature. After many years of great effort by Shasta Abbey, we now have available a wonderful wealth of books and tapes, articles and translations: make good use of it. I will do a follow-up article sometime on different aspects of spiritual reading.

2) **Get to the Priory as often as you can for activities.** The community of practitioners is the Sangha refuge. They are a treasure – treat it as such. Buddhism is not about beliefs; rather its focus is on what we do, the karma we create through body, speech, and mind. Priory membership is dependent upon "regular attendance," an activity, karma. I interpret this loosely, trusting that everyone makes their best effort to be here when the sangha gathers. The opening and deepening of the heart depends on that commitment. It's understood that family and livelihood are the primary fields of

practice and merit for householders. I would never intentionally ask anyone to shirk those obligations, for personal responsibility is the bedrock of Buddhist practice. Perhaps it's naïve, but I would like to hope that the Priority comes in around third as your priority after family and work.

Another often-overlooked value of participating at temple activities is *dana*, giving. Simply your presence is an offering of faith and commitment to others. You affect others by what you do, or don't do. It's also a well-known fact among personal transformation groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous that mutual support and assistance of other people "in the program" helps keep oneself going, too.

3) **Assume that any teaching is for you personally.** Great Master Keizan writes in the *Denkoroku* that thinking Buddhism is for anyone other than ourselves is the most stupid of all stupid opinions. The teaching that is offered at the temple, whether through Dharma talks, our newsletter, *Journal* articles, personal instruction, and ceremonies – consider it offered for you. A monk, or at least I, does/do not teach for anyone other than for whom he or she is responsible. If others find what I say helpful, fine, but the teaching is addressed to this particular sangha. And it's timely: please try to read newsletters, articles, and recommended reading at the time they're suggested. (But don't "take it personal," that is, nourish hurt when the teaching hits home in sensitive spot.)

4) **If you don't understand the teaching that is offered at the temple, please ask.** Teaching is a two-way street; it doesn't exist in a vacuum. Given that particularity, a teacher needs your response and feedback in order to clarify points and to dredge up greater depths within themselves. A teacher can literally "dry up" if her or his sangha does not want, practice, and inquire about the Dharma.

And, choose your times for asking wisely. The middle of a concrete pour is not the best time to discuss the prior's directions as to where to pour the concrete! Often we are called upon to "let go" in the immediacy of activity, as in community work or ceremonial. Then later we can ask if there is need. And keep in mind impermanence. Because every situation is

new, what is needed each time may be different. This kaleidoscopic mind keeps us on our toes, as in life.

5) **Provide financial support, “dana.”** This is not just “donations” – it is an attitude of mind and heart, a generosity of spirit that we cultivate in regard to all things. Regular support is another criterion of membership, but again, I allow flexibility. There is no set amount charged to be a member, and monthly pledges are also not required. Practicing the commitment is the important aspect of pledging. It helps remind us what we value in life. Try it and see.

6) **Practice “courageous faith.”** As Buddhists, we don’t seem to talk too often about courage. However, look at the picture of Achalanatha, “the Im-movable One,” in the left corner of the meditation hall the next time you’re at the temple. He stands boldly in the midst of the fires of great suffering – that’s courage! His determination and willingness is an aspect of our own heart. Sit still and be bright – it’s all within each of us – right there in the middle of the difficulty. The bright mind results from placing our faith, or confidence, in the Dharma and from our willingness to act in accord with the teaching. There’s a quote (in Thai) on the Shakyamuni Buddha scroll high on the wall as part of the Founders Shrine that poignantly expresses that trust: “The Dharma protects the Dharma practitioner.” *The Litany of the Great Compassionate One* also gives voice to this trust in the training: “Om to the One who leaps beyond all fear!”

7) **Contemplate the spiritual purpose of the temple** – not merely this building, but the group of sincere friends who link our lives together in trust in order to practice the Buddha’s way. This combined effort enables each of us to clean up our karma, realize the truth, and benefit all beings. An article entitled “The Temple” on the Edmonton Buddhist Priory website explores this theme further: www.serenereflections.ca.

The Priory as a living spiritual entity can be illustrated by a mandala, a three-dimensional depiction of how training works. (A two-dimensional type hung on a wall is often used in Tibetan Buddhism.) There’s a Buddha at the center, and Buddha families with their Bodhisattvas, guardians, and

helpers spread throughout. Each being holds up and enlightens a part of the mandala. All, no matter how seemingly small or unimportant, are needed to make the mandala complete and the Dharma wheel turn. Each of you, wherever you are, is a vital part of this bright and living mandala. Your presence, participation, and training are invaluable.

Thank you for your continued training and support of the temple.

Rev. Oswin
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