

Care of the Temple

Rev. Master Oswin Hollenbeck

Tonight I want to talk about how we organize work responsibilities at the Priory. We seem to be at a place in the development of the temple where we need to shift gears. This frequently happens in the development of a temple. Up until now I have been able to do a fair bit of physical work myself required to maintain the temple. Mike Running's living here was a real blessing, as he did much of the day-to-day maintenance and cleaning as well as more extensive grounds projects on the weekends. Now that Mike has gone to the Abbey — 'our loss, the world's gain' — there is a gap to fill. We need to draw on everyone for more help in order to keep the temple up and alive and going if we want to keep doing the things we are doing. The alternative is to cut back on activities.

There is an ancient Zen saying that a day without work is a day without food. This saying came out of China where everyone in the temple was expected to contribute to the welfare of the community in some way. With the increase in the size of the congregation, the spiritual demands in serving you have been growing, and to be frank, as I get older my physical energy is declining. There is nothing superior about spiritual work as opposed to physical work. It's simply that because responding to your spiritual needs is my purpose for being here, I want to be able to respect and maintain that priority. You can always hire a maintenance man or a housekeeper, but this is not why you have asked me to serve as your Prior. Therefore, we need to find some ways to take care of the temple so that it stays afloat.

You are all very generous with your financial donations, your participation in activities, and your merit. The challenge before us is to respond to more of the labor intensive responsibilities at the temple. Ernie and Nancy are working on a letter that will be sent out with more explanation and some suggestions.

One of the things that I am considering doing is turning over more of the temple responsibilities to you folks, either directly to individuals or less directly to groups. These would be clustered in categories such as grounds, ceremony preparation, and so on. One or more of you who are willing to commit to that responsibility could take up these jobs. You could make that your commitment for, say, a year. It's not for life! I encourage you, too, to learn different jobs — they can bring up different aspects of training to work on. It is also good if some of you know the different jobs and so could fill in should someone get sick, be out of town, etc.

So I will be thinking about this idea, and if there are particular areas in which some of you would like to work, let me know. In addition, there is still a great need for what we call 'empty hands' — just coming up and doing whatever needs to be done. This is a

wonderful offering, too. For instance, Carol came up today and made this lovely salad from vegetables that other people had donated so that we could have supper. I could not have made the salad myself, and in this way good use was made of the offerings of others. There is always a need for this type of help. And if some of you are willing to take up the responsibility for specific jobs, then I would not worry as much about those things being done. I could trust that you would take care of them. The main difference is that it would be up to you to work out the details and times for doing them.

Here's how a temple operates ideally. A big monastery such as an abbey is organized spiritually and practically with the abbot as its Heart. I'm using the word Heart here meaning the Buddha Nature. The 'prior' of a large temple is considered the mind or the intellect, the organizer and administrator. Everyone else is considered to be an 'organ of the body', although of course not in the literal sense of the word. Each monk has a particular function and we trust each other to be responsible for that function. This allows each person one area to concentrate on and make it their meditation. All the tasks are checked with the Prior, the mind, who consults with the Abbot, the Heart, to see what direction the Heart wants to take: What is in keeping with our true Heart?

This model is based on personal training, in which our Heart, the Buddha Nature, is the decision-maker; the mind or brain "runs" things; and the rest of the body takes its orders from the mind. Everything is ultimately the responsibility of the Heart—each of us is responsible for what we decide to do, our heart's intent and choice (the law of karma), and the moment-to-moment functioning is delegated to this incredibly complex organism we call the body. All parts work together as a whole and individually with each other: they "take refuge" in each other. It's also the case that all the parts have a responsibility to let the mind and heart know what's going on with them so that the heart and mind may make the best decisions possible for the good of all.

Just as with the human body, the Heart and the mind of a temple cannot micro-manage. Each 'organ' has been assigned its function. All allow the intellect to organize activities, but the individual organs do the day to day work. One difference, however, is that in a temple the 'organs', the people, are often learning a job as they go along—the specific function does not just automatically appear. Also, in a temple, people usually learn from someone else who has previously performed that function and has some experience in that area. And, most importantly, in a temple we are learning to trust and follow the direction of the Heart. This doesn't come naturally for most of us, either: we train in order to learn this. And most likely the mind is having to learn to let go and trust the heart, too.

Now it is vital that you do not take this analogy too literally, thinking perhaps, "Well I am just a piece of skin or bone and not a lung, therefore I am not important." In a human body and in a temple, everything is essential. Can you imagine living without your skin and bones? Even the smallest function or task is important and works in relation to the rest of the organism. If one element in the human body starts acting out of harmony

with the rest, we call that cancer or some other disease. The body becomes ill and we do not live very well or happily. Likewise in a temple, everyone is valued and appreciated. Each person does their job to the best of their ability, and is content with doing that and not trying to do something else, manage someone else's affairs, or take over the running of things.

A wonderful aspect of this analogy is that on a spiritual level the 'organs' do not decline over time. They actually get better at working together, unlike our human body that just wears out and does not function as well with age. The harmonious functioning is what improves in a temple (of course individual physical bodies wear out). What's learned in the way of operating together and taking refuge in the Heart 'transfers' over to the next job (even though the specifics may be quite different). There's spiritual memory.

In a small temple like ours, the monk functions as both Abbot and Prior, the heart and the mind. This arrangement may not be the ideal, but it's the actual. This is just the way it is in a small temple. The model I've been presenting here is a monastic one, and I don't know to what extent we can adapt this for training in a temple primarily serving a lay congregation. But I'd like to go as far as we can, for I have great faith in householders' ability to meditate and train as spiritually mature adults. So it's really up to you how much you are willing to work together and with me in this way.

One great value of training like this together is that we minimize harm, optimize good, and benefit others – the three pure precepts. Each of us also has the opportunity to learn more clearly how to listen to and follow our own heart as we listen to and follow the temple's heart (abbot/prior). This happens because your Heart and the Heart of the abbot/prior are fundamentally one (no separate self). Which, by the way, doesn't mean that I or any other monk is perfect on a functional or practical level. The emphasis in the training of a monk is spiritual perception and action (compassion and wisdom arising from meditation and practice of the Precepts) coupled with a willingness to 'stay true to the Source', as Rev. Master Jiyu put it. That word 'Source' embraces the Unborn itself, the Buddha Nature of the particular priest, the temple's founder and teacher's Master, every being that's a part of the temple, extending on out to every sentient being. There's no way anyone could be perfect operating on such a huge scale. The Buddha Himself made mistakes. But His heart was always pure in that He wished to help all beings 'speedily accomplish their Buddhahood'. Every priest aspires to do the same.

So I'm asking more of you to become 'organs' and take on some of the various responsibilities that make our temple possible. I know there are some big ones and if they seem to be too big, we can break them up into smaller parts. We can experiment with various methods for doing this. Are you all game to give this a try?

Remember any help you can give is of value, even a half an hour is helpful. You are always welcome to come out, do some work, and stay for a meal or stay for meditation in

the evening. The meditation hall and library are also available, should you wish to sit or read. As the weather warms and clears, the stupa site is perfect for walking meditation.

I wish to work with you in whatever way we can to make your coming up to help as little a hardship as possible. We can never really get away from hardships in life. Our 'American way' suggests that we have a right to be happy, comfortable, 'free', and everything convenient. I doubt that in the human world one can ever really get to such a place, and we're told that even in a heavenly world such merit eventually runs out. I think we also all know that that is not our true reason for living. Buddhism offers us higher things to live for. And yes, they can involve sacrifice. Sacrifice is not a popular word; however, we have to give up something in order to pursue a spiritual practice. Peace of mind and heart are not just going to fall into our laps. Committed practice is more than a hobby, an interest, a sideline, or something that we do once a week. Our practice is our life and our life is our practice. Meditation permeates every part of our life. Our practice needs our attention and energy, love and care, although it will never insist upon it. We learn to love and care for the Child of the Lord, our Buddha Nature within us, as though we were literally pregnant with a child within us. We need to take that much care. IT loves us far more than we can even imagine loving It. We need to give It a little bit of love in order to get the greater love back.

One of the remarkable and hopeful aspects of Buddhist practice is that because of the law of karma, we are guaranteed that practice will bear good fruit over the long haul. We can be sure that in the ultimate sense all shall be well. We have the assurance that we are not going to be ripped off, that we are not going to be gypped or taken in. (This assurance is one of the purposes of our larger Sangha, the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives.) The law of karma is such that if we give ourselves to training, training will give itself to us. Whatever is invested comes back a hundredfold, a thousandfold. You will never lose anything on your investment. Nothing is ever wasted. Training together with sangha helps assure us as we strengthen our own faith and trust and confidence that this is so. This does not mean that we won't encounter difficulties or suffering nor does it mean that we will never be hurt. But with steadfast commitment and continuing trust, the "obstacles dissolve". In the midst of conditions we learn to trust. Without conditions (karma) to contend with, would we even be able to learn to trust and find the Unchanging within conditions? "Trust is," to quote Rev. Master Koten, "an activity." Trust is something that we do, it is an active investment in Buddha Nature. Trust is not blind belief, it is not passive, but very active. If we trust a little, we get a little. If we trust a lot, we get a lot. And we all start where we are and build on that.

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Transcribed by Sally Meadow
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