

# A Dedicated Space Makes Everything Possible

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Unlike the temples of Japan, originally developed by the government, the formal institutions of Zen schools, and priests and monks, the places where Zen has taken root in this country have been radically diverse and democratic. While most people are familiar with the large Zen centers that were established on the Japanese Zen or Chinese Chan model, the surprising vitality of Zen here in the West has emerged out of small, informal groups meeting for meditation, talks, and fellowship. Sometimes these groups have an authorized teacher, but just as often, sanghas are drawn together to practice, study, and support each other on the Buddhist path. Members might go to study with teachers at a Zen center for a sesshin or a practice period, there may be opportunities for the group to work with teachers online, and so on. Sitting groups meet in libraries, bookstores, churches, yoga studios, parks, and individual homes all over the country.



Inquiry at Appamada

Appamada began as Live Oak Zen group in a side room of a Unitarian Church, moved to a yoga studio, and finally to a formal Zen center during off hours. Through all of the changes and inconveniences of using borrowed spaces, the sangha members continued to sit, demonstrating a genuine commitment to this path. But we were very limited in what we could offer in borrowed spaces. We were always at the mercy of our host's schedule and activities. We could not establish a daily zazen offering, intensives, or ceremonies, because

of limitations on the time and space we could count on. We could not offer classes, study groups, or inquiry as we do now.

Moving the sangha into my house turned out to be a catalyst for the sangha's evolution. I am convinced now that a dedicated home makes everything possible, and transforms the sangha from a band of occasional acquaintances to a profoundly connected, dynamic organism. The place turned out to be uniquely suited for the deepening of our practice and our relational work, work that has woven a fabric of mutual development and care.



Appamada Zendo

Because we could offer daily zazen weekday mornings, in addition to our Sunday program, sangha members could train in roles and practice them. Where once I simply came and rang

bells for zazen and clappers for kinhin, now new people could be monitors, timekeepers, jishas. Because we now had a dedicated altar, people could learn to chiden and arrange flowers for the Zendo.

Because we had a study, we could make Buddhist books available for loan, and because we had an office, we could manage some administration of the sangha: a website, a bookkeeping program, community groups, email lists, event registration, and archives of talks and classes. Because we had a kitchen, and space, we could offer intensives—on our own schedule. The zendo was large enough to offer classes and public inquiry.



Appamada Study

As the offerings grew, so did the opportunities for sangha members to take on new roles and responsibilities in support of the sangha and so the sangha could deepen and mature in experience and training. Meanwhile experienced zen students committed to the sangha were emerging as leaders, and we have a place to meet with them weekly in Councils, and to work with them in retreats and training. Appamada does not have priests or residents. Councils are small groups of experienced students who share their practice path deeply as spiritual friends and who also share responsibility for supporting the sangha and maintaining the space. They are the lifblood of the sangha.



Ultimately, then, we built the little house in back of the main house, where Flint could see clients and prepare for classes and other teachings. It has a kitchen, so that we can use it for cooking during intensives, then serving meals in the main house. And it has a generous wrap-around porch where people can sit and talk. Through a generous bequest, we were able to landscape the grounds, creating an inviting urban oasis that is serene and lush.

None of these things could have been possible without a dedicated space. Whether you have the good fortune to have a home that can be transformed in this way, or whether you rent a space or find a way to buy or build a place for the sangha to grow, the importance of place cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the design, decor, and maintenance of the place provides an opportunity to express Zen aesthetic principles and teachings about the mindful care of a space and “leaving no trace.”



The back house