

Clarifying the Way

Dharma Talk

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It's so wonderful to be together with you here in the Zendo again, and online. I've missed being with you and I'm so glad to see you!

I have been hearing that there is some confusion about how Appamada is organized and managed, so I'd like to talk a bit about that today. It's not a conventional Dharma talk, but maybe...well, you'll see.

At Appamada we have a unique and practical system for good governance. It is of course not a perfect system, but it is generally conducive to organizing ourselves to engage with each other and act with wisdom, compassion, and clarity. It might help to review some other systems to better understand this Appamada way.

In traditional Japanese-style Zen centers (and many other traditional religions), the system is organized in a strict hierarchy. Participants may change, but the temple roles and their relationships to each other are well defined and strictly maintained. There is a system of ranks as well as roles. This gives the institution its enduring structure as a container for the teachings, which are closely guarded and protected in this way. While this structure provides some stability, consistency, and continuity, it is not very adaptive to changing circumstances, changing cultures, languages, gender, or demographics. Basically, participants must fit themselves into the structure; the structure has limited capacity to evolve and adapt. In Zen centers, rank is conveyed first by Jukai precept ceremonies, then priest ordination, dharma transmission, and mountain seat ceremonies that establish an abbot. An ordinary participant does not have a voice in how things run in such a system. As ranks create power differentials, the potential for abuse of power is great, almost irresistible. Many traditional religious institutions have faced and continue to face the enormous damage caused to the community by such abuses, baked into the power structure of the institution.

On the other hand, we in the west tend to favor more "democratic" social structures, and we are accustomed to having a voice in the way things function. In Zen centers as they are emerging in the West, participants expect that their preferences will be addressed, their opinions will be valued, their individual needs met. Furthermore, they have a strong faith in majority rule. So if a significant number of sangha members feel strongly that something should be done, or changed, or addressed, the belief is that the sangha should follow. This is the second ditch for religious organizations: holding to naïve democratic beliefs. The truth is that it is not uncommon for a majority, even a supermajority of people to have wrong views,

wrong actions, wrong speech. We have seen this countless times in the history of our own nation. People are easily persuaded by fear, mistrust, anxiety, doubt, even loneliness to join together under very wrong views, to act out of anger and cruelty, and to create divisions in the society. Alternative views are suppressed, ignored, even punished. Even the smallest informal sanghas can develop such pathologies.

At Appamada Flint and I have carefully reflected on the limitations of both of these standard social architectures for religious communities. We have discussed and continued to discuss Appamada's evolution and architecture. We have viewed this evolution not as some kind of blueprint or vision, but as our care of an organic ecosystem, growing naturally from our relationships, the teachings of the Buddha and our lineage, contemporary conditions, sciences, inquiry, artistic expression, and emerging wisdom.

Our development of the sangha's social architecture has evolved over time, but it is stable, sustainable, and most of all wise and compassionate. It is established on the deep foundation of the Buddha's teachings. We have amplified those teachings with contemporary training, so that, for example, the Buddha's Precepts are complemented by parallel training in Right Use of Power. This provides the sangha with a necessary moral compass and a commitment to ethical conduct. Right Use of Power gives us the skills, approaches, concepts and even language for open discussions about power dynamics in the sangha and beyond, the practical lived experience of the Precepts in contemporary community.

We made a conscious decision not to ordain priests in the Appamada sangha. We have observed how in other sanghas, this creates a division in the community, between those who are ordained or on the ordination path, and those who are not, for whatever reason. Many sangha members not on the ordination path in those places have described their feelings of being "less than,"—less committed, less serious, less devoted to the dharma or the sangha, and often they feel they are viewed that way by the leadership of the sangha and other community members. The priests are seen—even by themselves— as a kind of spiritual aristocracy, despite the fact that their role is primarily serving the community.

Still, we want to honor the commitment and dedication of sincere and experienced students who want to support the community in their hearts and in their practice. Rather than create a rank such as priest, we have evolved the Councils, where those folks committed to the sangha can have peer support in small ongoing groups that meet each week, learning together, deepening in their practice, providing insights into the community and its needs, and also serving as a brain trust for the Teachers and Board. They also have responsibility for some aspect of the community's functioning. In this way, the functions of a "priest" are distributed, while Council members are also gaining insight into how the sangha is managed. There is not an "elite" of favorites of the teacher, but rather a wide-ranging and distributed deep care for the sangha. In fact, our commitment is to create a new Council when we have

6 or 7 people who have the consistency in practice, Precepts training, training in roles, ongoing work with a teacher, and dedication to helping build the community.

During Practice Periods we also have Head Student roles, described as “friends of the sangha.” They give dharma talks, teach a class, meet one on one for informal teas with sangha members, and participate in entering and exiting ceremonies. This experience prepares them to be Zen mentors, regular friends of sangha members on an ongoing basis. They can lead service, teach workshops and classes, and give Dharma talks.

Consequently, Teachers consult regularly with Councils in the process of making decisions that will affect the whole community. The wisdom of experience, training, deep practice, and dedicated commitment to the sangha is a bottom-up evolution, while the most experienced, practiced, and wise can ultimately grow into the Dharma Teacher function, the appropriate seat of authority and decision-making for the sangha. Meanwhile, the Board also functions to support wise governance, fiscal responsibility, and our long-term ongoing visions for the health and welfare of the sangha.

Some decisions are the responsibility of the Board, and others are the responsibility of the Dharma Teachers, but in every case they are arrived at through a process of consultation with Councils, Dharma Teachers, and often, the sangha. Those decisions are not based on fiat, nor on “majority rule,” but on “wisdom and compassion and ethics rule.”

This is admittedly a novel organizational structure, which nevertheless has served Appamada extremely well for 15 years. A couple of people have expressed their opinion that Appamada should seek a priest to lead the sangha. This should never happen, and I would strongly oppose such a move. Our Dharma Teachers have far, far more training and years of experience, both with the Dharma and in contemporary psychology and relational Zen in the way we teach it at Appamada than any priest. They are better prepared to lead the sangha than even most dharma-transmitted teachers I’ve observed in my consulting with many other sanghas, many of whose leaders have had no practice in teaching, administration, working with a Board, understanding finances, or other administrative functions necessary to the health and welfare of an independent sangha. Because of our distributed architecture, no one person has to know about all of these things, and therefore, no one person needs to carry the burden of it alone, as is the case in many sanghas.

However, this distributed function of experience and authority does have its challenges. Although everyone’s view is valued, there is still a clear process for making decisions that does not rest on opinion, assertiveness of one view, argument, voting, or simple fiat. No Teacher or Board member would want to make decisions in a vacuum, without consultation with Councils or often more generally, the sangha. Yet ultimately the decision must be made, based on wisdom, experience, and care for the community, even if that decision is widely unpopular. Because Appamada has the extraordinary benefit of two Senior Teachers and

three fully entrusted Dharma Teachers, at present, and several more on the entrustment path, no one teacher can simply exert his or her will, but is always in ongoing consultation with peers. This is a valuable corrective for misguided views.

Most importantly, the story of Appamada is an ongoing narrative co-authored by everyone in the sangha. So far, it is a story of major challenges overcome, difficult situations weathered, ceremonies and celebrations shared, and strong relationships of trust and mutual respect created. It is an improbable story, given the differences in any group of people, with their individual perspectives, conditioning, and needs. But it is working. Our challenge is to sustain and co-create the conditions for human flourishing—together, as circumstances change and new situations present new challenges. The pandemic was one immense challenge we have successfully met. The relocation of two senior teachers is another that is still evolving. I would never have made such a decision to move without absolute confidence in the foundations, knowledge, ethical grounding, preparation, skills, wisdom and care of our wonderful Dharma Teachers, Council members, and Board.

Furthermore, we are members of the Lay Zen Teachers Association, a large organization of contemporary Zen sanghas similar to our own. We can draw on their collective experience and shared wisdom, seek advice for unusual situations, or ask questions of others who share our values and our view about contemporary Zen practice. This is a tremendous resource for our sangha, and we in turn are a resource for other sanghas working out how to support and cultivate contemporary Zen communities.

Who can say where it all began? With two children who each, thousands of miles apart, found joy in solitude in nature? With lying in the grass lost in the cosmos of a star-spangled night sky? With the shudder of a teenager realizing that someday she will die—that everyone she loves, everyone alive will die? Maybe with the eager curiosity that landed a new freshman in University of Iowa's renowned comparative religions class, where she was struck by the lightning bolt of *Three Pillars of Zen*. But I think this whole journey here really began years later, for me, when I met Joko.

So the story of Appamada is both a personal one and a collective one, the stories of everyone who has joined us, no matter how briefly, on this path of waking up and growing up together. It cannot be understood apart from the extraordinary spiritual partnership and creative synergy of Flint and me. That partnership really deserves a book of its own. Maybe someday. In any event, it will be woven throughout this current book project. Because it's safe to say neither one of us could have envisioned, created, and developed Appamada on our own. When I told Joko about the emerging spiritual partnership between Flint and me, she said that life looks for a channel, and when two people come together, that channel becomes much larger—not merely double, but far greater than that.

Now just imagine the vast, boundless channel for life that is created by a group of people—a whole sangha—coming together! The power of such a shared aspiration grounded in the Buddha’s foundational teachings, and growing in wisdom and compassion through mutual care cannot be comprehended. It is literally the living expression of the robe of liberation, the boundless field of benefaction in our daily robe chant.

[So what is Buddha nature? It’s clearly not a thing, a quality, or even an essence. I guess I would think of it as an unobstructed flow of pure goodness, pure light, pure wisdom—a stream, not an identity. An owl’s scooping up a shrew, a tree creaking in a windstorm, an unremarkable sunset, a murmuration of starlings wheeling into the sky, the moment of having nothing to say, heavy traffic, a mom with a stroller entering the park. It’s a friend’s face when she tells you she has cancer, the moment in the movie theater when the lights go out, the email you dread sending, the light spilling out of the window at twilight. It’s a child’s Christmas morning, an airplane high above, inscribing white lines on an impossibly blue sky, the fresh smell of grass just mown. It’s an unexpected kindness, a photo of a grandchild, a new house being built next door, a misunderstanding that leaves you tossing at night. Do you see? there’s no complexity or philosophical speculation to it. The Buddha himself compared it to a speck of dirt on your fingernail. so ordinary, so obvious, so easy to overlook in the mad crush of “more important matters.”]

I’m embarrassed that I have somehow failed to convey the awesome majesty of this extremely rare convergence called a sangha. But we are all faulty emissaries of the Dharma, enchanted and befuddled by our conditioning, captivated by our tiny melodramas, convinced of the rightness of our mistaken views, the urgency of our fleeting impulses and feelings. That is why we need each other.

We help each other recall what we really are—that boundless Buddha heart and mind, streaming fabric of the cosmos and liberated being. Because we prefer our self-centered dream, we need each other, we need these teachings, the light of the Buddha, to awaken.

Until then, as Joko said, we are living a substitute life, not our true life. Our challenge is to do the work, together, to discover our true life, both as an individual, and as a sangha, a living force field that is the expression of the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha here and now, in this time, in this world, where it is most needed.

So let’s take up this liberating work with joy and delight in challenges met, in struggles resolved, in deepening respect and trust—in each other, in the path. We are not trying to create a perfect world, we are learning how to meet the world and its beings as they are, bringing the light of wisdom and compassion with, as the last ox-herding picture shows, *gift-bestowing hands*. We nourish and fortify each other in this perfect practice we can only do imperfectly, just as we are. Let’s keep inspiring each other and being inspired by each other, by the Buddha and the Dharma. The great American Zen teacher Maurine Stuart once said,

“ Zazen washes the mind, leaving it fresh and clean. You all have your zazen mind, so use it!”

Successors

by Chandler Davis

On these ruins left to us we build our home.
The view from my porch includes today's maples
and pines that were, and even long-gone cycads.
We tell our stories, which means that I could tell you
my father's story, and some he'd heard before:
my great-grandfather's story. Pass it on.
This yard is gently touched, garden and rooftop,
by faint far starlight, and still more gently touched
by cryptic spores almost intangible.
More messages come in than we can read;
I cherish more than I can understand,
but I have fathomed some. Pass it on.
Oh, newborn mice and newborn wrens and newborn
of ours, trusting mouths open to be fed:
Your trust may not be valid, but your selves
are valid. We in whom you put your faith
may let you down, but we are not without faith,
for we have faith in you. Pass it on.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC2aTWt7y5E&t=718S>