

# Zen Bow

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TAKING REFUGE IN SANGHA

# *Zen Bow*: Taking Refuge in Sangha

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Danne Eriksson

## Ignoble, Noble Sangha

ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

It's Sunday morning in late November, and with the opening of Thanksgiving week people are trickling into the zendo for our annual Ceremony of Gratitude. The ceremony includes a chance for participants to offer brief vocal statements of gratitude. Speaking in random order, one-by-one they single out family members, friends, teachers, co-workers, and fellow Sangha members. It is possibly the most moving twenty-minute gathering of the year, and by the time everyone has had a chance to speak—when 'the popcorn has stopped popping'—our hearts have grown intertwined. This is Sangha nourishing itself.

The Sanskrit word 'Sangha' means, literally, a community that joins and lives together. For

most of Buddhism's 2,500 years this has meant the monastic order. Monks were 'the sons of good family'—the Buddha's family—and referred to as the 'Noble (Arya) Sangha.' They were 'homeless ones,' which in early Buddhist India meant itinerants; they were not to spend more than one night in any single place. In the colder climates of China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan, monks (and later nuns) gathered in monasteries, but were 'homeless' inasmuch as they had left their parents' home and, in taking vows of celibacy, foreclosed their own bloodline.

With the migration of Buddhism to the Americas and Europe, 'Sangha' has changed in meaning in two ways. It has broadened to include non-monastic practitioners, since here

there are virtually no true monks or nuns—no home leavers. Secondly, we've come to use 'Sangha' as a synonym for one's own local congregation, tacking 'my' or 'our' before the word. In using Sangha this way, we've self-centralized the word, and shrunk what in Asia is an expansive collective to one of personal reference. But it's given us a distinctly Buddhist term for 'congregation,' even as live-streaming of sittings, teishos, and other zendo events expands the term again.

Now, it isn't enough to just *have* a Sangha. To enter the Way, we have to take refuge in Sangha as one of the Three Jewels that are our inheritance. What we translate as 'refuge' originally meant 'protection,' so taking refuge in Sangha implies going to the Sangha for protection from suffering. This can sound a little like running for cover from the wider world. But instead it means placing our faith in the community of Dharma practitioners. It's not a running *from*, but a throwing oneself *into*. Refuge in Sangha, then, is ultimately realized in the pure practice of sitting and active Zen. This means non-separation, or non-attachment to thoughts. This is what Zen master Hakuin was pointing to when he declared, 'The gateway to freedom is zazen samadhi.'

In taking refuge in Sangha we are joining with others who have chosen to align themselves with Buddha and Dharma, the other two 'jewels.' This means affiliating with those who place their faith in their Buddha Nature and in the Way—things as they are. Myriad books have been written about the Dharma, but a basic way to understand it is in terms of the Three Characteristics of Existence: suffering, impermanence, and no-self. In principle, then, the Sangha are those who have accepted the inevitability of suffering (in human terms, dissatisfaction, anxiety, frustration), the transitory nature of all animate and inanimate things, and, by extension, that no one and nothing has any enduring self-existence.

It's a good thing that what we call the self actually has no fixed nature to it, because until

full enlightenment, it seems, every one of us is stained by the three poisons—greed, hostility, and delusion. We all are susceptible to any of the many forms of greed, and at the top of that list are the Big Four singled out in the oldest Buddhist texts: craving for money, for food, for sex, and for sleep. In addition to those, we tend to grasp at all manner of things that promise security (cars, clothes, pets, tools, furnishings, gear) and experiences that offer a shot of dopamine—the pleasurable sensations of sports, music, travel, screen entertainment, shopping, states of tranquility and excitement (in just the right balance), novelty and routine (in just the right balance), and pleasant states of meditation. These desires are not 'bad' or 'wrong' in themselves. But our attachment to them, and what we'll do to gratify them, can cause suffering, even if only to oneself.

Ill will (enmity, hostility), the second poison, is also our common lot. We may be spared the worst forms of it—rage, fury, malevolence, malice, resentment—but none of us, no matter how long we've been in Zen practice, is beyond at least occasional flickers of irritation, annoyance, impatience, and other vexations.

As for poison number three, every one of us succumbs, if only infrequently, to states of delusion, which include confusion, folly, and spaciness.

Even those of us in the Sangha, then, have lifetimes of deep cleaning before us, like Hercules shoveling out the Augean stables. And thus has it always been. Zen master Dogen, in his *Shobogenzo Zuimonki*, notes, 'If you look at the elaborate regulations of both the Mahayana and the Hinayana precepts, it is obvious that the monks of the time were moved to perpetrate incredible indiscretions.' He also said, 'In the Buddha's time ... there were some monks who were extraordinarily depraved and of low character,' and that even among the buddhas and patriarchs 'some were guilty of evil conduct and evil thought, some were dull and others foolish.' In the Zen records, koan after koan presents us with monks mired in ignorance. These

go back all the way to the assembly on Vulture Peak, when all of those except Mahakashyapa were struck dumb at seeing the Buddha hold up a flower. In 8th-century China, the Sixth Patriarch, after receiving the robe and bowl of transmission, was urged to flee his jealous brethren and was still relentlessly pursued by the fearsome Myo, who had been a general before ordaining as a monk. In the koans we also meet argumentative monks, arrogant monks, devious monks, and confused and lazy and smart-ass monks. To liberate these members of the Sangha from their stubborn afflictions, we see the masters meting out harsh words (referring to them, collectively, as ‘mash eaters,’ ‘snakes,’ ‘asses,’ and ‘maggots’) and blows of the stick. A Buddhist proverb in ancient China suggested, ‘It is easier to save the beasts than to save mankind.’

If people in the Sangha are laced with defilements like everyone else, why do we take refuge in the Sangha alone? This leads us back to what we mean by Sangha. Those who are maintaining a regular sitting practice—actually walking the path of liberation—comprise the core of the Sangha. They are dissatisfied with themselves—with life—enough to be actually doing something about it. Recognizing that ‘looking over a menu doesn’t satisfy hunger,’ they’re not content to merely read about the Dharma. Nor would just attending a weekly service (for what may be social reasons more than anything else) be enough for them. They’re sustaining the actual physical discipline of Zen in an effort to spend less time in their thoughts and purify their character. We take refuge in this working Sangha because of the intangible but very real support it offers not only us but the whole world. This would be true whether the practitioners are sitting alone or with other Buddhist groups, no matter the affiliation or remoteness.

Within a Sangha more loosely defined as a particular congregation of local and out-of-town members, there may be many who seldom if ever actually practice, but maintain their affiliation for other reasons. Without their financial support, the center or temple wouldn’t be able

to make ends meet, and for that form of contribution alone we look to the Sangha for protection—refuge. Even more important, perhaps, we place our faith in Sangha in tribute to its own faith. That faith—in Buddha, Dharma, and yes, Sangha—is implicit in the contributions of money or labor or goods by inactive as well as active Sangha members. Even if that faith does not manifest yet as actual practice, it must be there in some degree. And like the countless members of fitness clubs who seldom if ever use their clubs, non-practicing Sangha members know that the resources of their member center are there for them whenever their underlying aspiration for the Way grows into the need to practice it.

We also take refuge in this non-practicing Sangha, then, for sharing in our Dharma vision—call it moral support. These people must recognize at some level that the conventional, dualistic paradigm of self-and-other, us-and-them, success-and-failure, right-and-wrong—is incomplete, and that there is a reality beyond what can be understood with our ordinary mind. Many may also recognize the simple truth to Zen master Hakuin’s pronouncement that ‘the cause of our sorrow is ego delusion,’ and, like practicing Sangha members, are not satisfied with their judgmentalism or laziness or anxiety or dishonesty, their jealousy or anger or lack of generosity.

The most liberal understanding of Sangha could include those of any religion—or no religion at all—who are sincerely working on themselves in their own way. We Buddhists can feel kinship with anyone striving to overcome selfishness. But can the definition of Sangha be stretched to the breaking point? That would be the case, it seems, with the so-called Buddhists of Myanmar (former Burma) who are driven by such a virulent, tribal hatred of the Muslim-minority Rohingya people as to carry out wide-scale atrocities against them. How could the Buddha or anyone who understood his Dharma not disavow the perpetrators of such heinous violence?



Gretchen Targee

Besides our Ceremony of Gratitude, another popular date on our calendar of annual ceremonies is New Year's Eve. This, too, is an event at which gratitude can flow like melting ice. Every year, once the evening is launched, I'm enveloped in a feeling of privilege to be bringing in the New Year in the company of Sangha. I've sometimes voiced this appreciation in the zendo at the time, contrasting our zazen and rituals to typical, worldly New Year's Eve activities. This drew an objection once—'Were you suggesting that we were better than others?' 'Better,' no, since obligations as well as preferences can come into play. But for a clear-eyed, uplifting way to mark the occasion—the transition, allegorically, from death to rebirth—what secular activity could be as richly inspiring as this evening of zazen and rituals?

In keeping with the spirit of New Year's more broadly, a key element of our own observances is that of resolution. In the zendo, after acknowledging past mistakes we vocalize our resolve to

do better. At the end of this segment of the evening, we recite the following lines in unison:

The opportunity to practice in the Buddhist Sangha is rare and precious.

We ask the buddhas and bodhisattvas to support us

In upholding the Dharma with energy and devotion.

May our bodies be kept healthy.

May our speech be clear and compassionate.

May our minds be pure and understanding.

May we always be aware that everyone we practice with

Is a Dharma sister or brother striving for self-completion.

Let us honor the Buddha-nature of all of us.

May all beings attain Buddhahood!



From time to time at the Center one will hear a reference made to ‘staff’ and ‘Sangha’ as though separate from each other. This is a misleading distinction. Yes, those living and training full-time at the Center follow a daily schedule with responsibilities in common that are different from those that Sangha householders have in common, but how is the staff not also Sangha? Now that we in the West have expanded the definition of Sangha beyond the early Buddhist monastic order, let’s not linguistically exclude those who are following a semi-monastic lifestyle at the Center. At those infrequent times when it makes sense to verbally differentiate between residents and others in the Sangha, the least misleading phrase may be ‘staff and non-staff Sangha,’ as wordy as it is.

Nor would it be true to suggest that the staff as a group have a special status. They’re in the zendo more than non-residents because they’re required to attend all formal sitting, and they can get to more sesshins (though are not required to attend any), and share a workplace with the teacher. But these shared circumstances do not necessarily mark any given resident as more advanced in her practice or even of higher aspiration than anyone else.

Just as for the residents of any monastery of any period in Buddhist history, we can’t make any evaluative generalizations about residential staff. Like others in the Sangha, some are carrying more karmic baggage and some less. Rōshi Kapleau used to muse that all of us in the Sangha, whether living at the Center or not, are as though in a halfway house. We’ve recognized the problem—addiction to our thought-emotional habit forces—and we’re trying to get free of them. The only thing we know that staff have in common is, plainly, an affinity for residential training. Those of us who live and work in this environment simply *need to do so*. Enough said.

What we call ‘I’ is not a thing but a process that exists only in relation to changing causes and conditions. This dynamic nature of the self

means that our involvement in the actual practice of Zen may change at any time. People who even as Sangha members cannot seem to ground themselves in daily practice may later feel drawn to the mat every day. Likewise, local members who’ve succeeded in sitting regularly for years can start skipping zazen and see their practice dwindle to just occasionally sitting when they’re in the mood.

It’s regrettable when local people who’ve been away from the Center for a long time come back feeling sheepish—or skittish—about having been away. If only they knew that their return is all that matters. My own feeling, upon seeing them in the zendo again after so long, is simple—‘Oh—you’ve come back! You were missed! Thanks for joining us tonight!’ That, and also respect for their willingness to hit the reset button—a measure of their faith. The reasons people have for steering clear of the Center are their business. The Center’s business is to provide space for them and be welcoming.

However we define Sangha, to take refuge in it is to place our faith in the True Nature of each of its members, no matter what afflictions they still bear. Ultimately our afflictions are no-afflictions; our True Self *and* our illusory self are no-self. The *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which constitutes the basis of the Chinese Hua Yen (Jap., Kegon) school of Buddhism, puts it this way: ‘All sentient beings are tossing in boundless karmic consciousness, with no foundation to rely upon.’

Since this nature with which we are all equally endowed is ever in flux, we place our faith in the capacity of all beings to reach Buddhahood. As Yasutani Rōshi says in *The Three Pillars of Zen*, the teaching of Buddha Nature means that all beings can become buddhas—that is, enlightened ones. Even more, all of us, in our original nature, are enlightened. We remind ourselves of this in our chanting services when we declare, with hands pressed palm-to-palm, ‘Ten Directions, Three Worlds, all buddhas, bodhisattva-mahasattvas’—that is, throughout limitless space, there is *only* Buddha Nature.



Tom Kowal

## One World, One Sangha

SAHAYA JEEVAN

Sitting by a Chicago river walk cafeteria, sipping on my decaf coffee, I have a desire to pen down a piece to share my spiritual journey from East to West. Watching the sun's reflection on the river, my mind reflects on the training I recently completed at the Rochester Zen Center and on being a Sangha member in America, a country I was visiting for the first time. I wondered, can I really belong to the Sangha of the United States, a country I have questioned for its history of prejudice in politics and business? On the other hand, can I surrender to the Sangha in India, where my freedom of expression as a single woman is constantly hampered through regressive views? Then again, which Sangha do I seek refuge in when all societies are wounded by a violent history, and when we, the inhabitants of earth, discriminate on every given oppor-

tunity? These are some of the questions I have been pondering ever since my return from the Zen Center.

Traveling the length and breadth of India for my work as a mental health therapist, I have had the privilege of participating in many Indian subcultures, witnessing celebrations and ceremonies of birth and death. My personal journey of healing brought me to the feet of many masters in India and Europe. It must have taken lifetimes of strenuous effort to find Zen Buddhism! And it so it happened that on a family visit to the United States, I found my way to the door of the RZC. Who would have thought that the United States would be the land where my spiritual thirst is quenched? After all, I come from the land of the Buddhas. And yet I find myself seeking hungrily in a new land, thou-

sands of miles away, a land that carries the spiritual energy of 50 million indigenous people who inhabited her before European annexation.

The training program I did at the Zen Center in the spring of 2017 was one of the most precious times in my life. For many years, I had been struggling to release myself from an intrinsic wound that affected my life, my career, my relationships as well as my ability to simply feel anchored. One day while sitting idly in Chicago, I discovered the RZC through a random internet search. Upon arriving in Rochester for training, I surrendered myself to Zen practice and experienced a significant shift in my spiritual growth during a seven-day sesshin—for which I will always be indebted to the practice and to the RZC Sangha.

In all schools of Buddhism, with each prostration the seeker takes refuge in the Three Jewels. We surrender to the Buddha, the teacher; the Dharma, the teaching; and the Sangha, the community. In olden times Sangha was comprised only of ordained monks, nuns, and teachers. Today, the concept of Sangha is more broadly interpreted by many Mahayana and Western groups to include all those who embrace the Dharma because the Buddha saw interaction with others who are on the Path as being essential for practice—the Path that leads us to realize our True Nature, the homecoming!

*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is a Sanskrit phrase, or *śloka*, which means ‘the whole world is one single family.’ The original verse is contained in the *Mahopanishad*, an ancient Hindu scripture. The *śloka* says that those who can bridge the minor differences of humanity go on to find the Brahman, the one supreme. Such individuals enjoy the sweet fruit of experiencing non-separation from the physical world. The second verse describes attributes of an individual who has attained the highest level of spiritual progression to be able to perform his or her worldly duties without attachment, as unconscious actions lead to conflicting emotions and desires. The phrase is not just about peace and harmony among the societies of the world, but also about the truth that somehow the whole world has to

live by rules—like a family—and these rules are perhaps co-created by an unknowable source.

The world is a family  
One is a relative, the other stranger,  
say the small minded.  
The entire world is a family,  
live the magnanimous.  
Be detached,  
be magnanimous,  
lift up your mind, enjoy  
the fruit of Brahmanic freedom.

Our world family is confirmed by modern science as well through a forensic technique called DNA profiling, which is used to identify individuals by characteristics and ancestry of their DNA. It uses advanced DNA science with the world’s largest online family history resource to predict genetics by mapping the ethnicity of an individual going back multiple generations. Often the result of DNA profiling reveals that each of us is connected to someone in another part of the globe and to another race. Only to reveal that all beings are interdependent!

Regardless of our nationality, race, or culture, we will have to learn to seek refuge in the global Sangha. We must let go of the fond opinions of the discriminating mind and awaken to the fact that Mother Earth, though divided by borders and nations, is but one land and breeds one Sangha. Interestingly, in Zen the turtle is used as a metaphor for our True Nature. A turtle is mostly a ‘still’ reptile and is thus portrayed as completely versed in the Buddha’s teachings. The simple thread design on the back of the *rakusu* strap is a stylized reference to a turtle, and reminds wearers that they are at home wherever they go—and that one’s actual home is our True Nature.

This earth where we stand is the pure lotus land, and this very body—the body of Buddha.

*Sahaya Jeevan is a trained Alternative Therapist who has worked with various teachers across India. Her mental health therapy practice includes working with women trauma survivors*

# Becoming Sangha

LARRY MCSPADDEN

All buddhas study together, the self does not study together. There is a difference between speaking of yards and speaking of feet, between saying ten and saying nine. What is not studying together, that is self. What is studying together, that is all buddhas.

—*Dogen Zenji*<sup>1</sup>

Imagine, if you will ...

A world without zafus; no introductory workshops, no private instruction; a world without *teisho*, or the encouragement stick; a world without Zen jokes (or 'in' jokes); no sesshin to attend, no Buddhist memorial services; no joyous picnics with fellow practitioners, no one to give the precepts or to hear our repentance.

It seemed I was born into such a world. As a young boy growing up in Indiana in the 1950s, I heard the word 'Buddha' and a spark inside me started to glow. I asked around, but my parents and teachers had nothing to share. I went to the library—nothing, save a couple of articles in the encyclopedia about Shakyamuni Buddha and Buddhism, which served only to add oxygen to the smoldering coals of my mind.

In my early teens, a friend told me of a book his mother had been reading, about some strange people called 'yogis' sitting cross-legged in the Himalayan Mountains, and my heart leapt. I had to see this book! I hopped on my bike and sped to his house (his folks were out), and searched up and down for it, to no avail. When his mom got home, I eagerly asked her about it, but she denied ever having had such a book (probably in order to spare my tender, Presbyterian sensibilities). What a disappointment!

Through serendipitous coincidence (or karma, if you will), I went 'out east' for my last year of high school, and found they had a fine library—one that included two or three en-

tire *books* about Buddhism, and one even about Zen!<sup>2</sup> I devoured their contents and finally mustered the courage to try meditation on my own. I rolled up a blanket and headed into the closet of my dorm room (somehow I imagined it must be dark to do it properly), and sat.

'What next?' I thought. And I had no clue. Buddha? Check. Dharma? Check. Sangha? Not so much.

That could have been the end of it for me. In college I continued to seek out sources for Buddhism and Zen, and amassed a shelf full of interesting (but mostly unsatisfying) readings. One of my favorites was D.T. Suzuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, which contained, among other gems, a translation of the Ten-Verse Kannon Sutra.<sup>3</sup> Going through a rough patch in the summer before my junior year, I felt the need to find comfort in that chant, but my copy was locked in storage, so I headed to the college bookstore and picked up another. I chose one of seven or so check-out lines, where a young lady was at the cash register. She noticed the book's title, and exclaimed, 'Oh! Have you ever read *The Three Pillars of Zen*?'

I replied, tentatively, 'Uh, I think so, isn't it by Nancy Wilson Ross?'

She laughed happily and responded, 'No, my *uncle* wrote it!'

And the universe tumbled. It was real! There was a Sangha for *me*! ... although I didn't have the word for it at the time.

I located a copy of *Three Pillars* at the bookstore across town, raced to my apartment, and read it through, for the first time, in one sitting. When I saw on the back cover that the author, Philip Kapleau, was holding forth in Rochester, New York, I looked it up on a map and immediately made plans to hitchhike there.

Two weeks later, on a mid-August morning in 1969, I walked up to the front door of



David Merulla

7 Arnold Park and rapped loudly. An answering couple of loud bangs on the door came from inside. Puzzled, I knocked again. Again, 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' echoed from the other side.

This went on for a little while (I figured it was a Zen riddle of some sort), until I saw someone walking up the driveway where 'the Link' between 5 and 7 is now, and I asked a few questions. It turned out that, after a big fire, a complete remodel was underway. When I walked up to what had been the front door (now behind the main altar), the volunteer Sangha work crew was nailing it shut! Ha!

I was instructed to wait on a bench in the driveway, and after a couple of hours a small group of men walked up to me. I stood up and was asked some questions. The one asking the questions, I eventually figured out, was none other than Roshi Kapleau (I was a bit fuzzy-brained at the time, typical for college kids of my generation). Eventually, he looked me up and down, and I surmise concluded I would do

for helping to haul ashes and charred wood from the attic, because he said I could attend morning and evening sittings and the noon meals, if I joined the work crew. Sounded good to me!

I still remember how deeply struck I was the first time I heard the man who was to become my first teacher speak in the zendo. His words went deeper than my heart. Something in me was cracked open, and the spark from my childhood had become a little flame.

When one has confidence in the  
Sangha

And one's view is straightened out,

They say that one isn't poor;

One's life is not lived in vain.<sup>4</sup>

It took a year and a half, which included dropping out of college, participating in political protest, narrowly avoiding the draft, and hitchhiking to and from Idaho and South Carolina, but In January, 1971 I found myself back at

the Zen Center. My quest at that time seemed to be all about me—finding peace, working on something that wasn't doomed to perish, getting enlightenment (whatever that was), and being a little special and different. Unbeknownst to me, however, the 'wisdom and warmth' of the Sangha started to seep in: through a lot of sitting, chanting, bowing, taking the precepts, getting accepted as a formal student and attending dokusan, then a couple of sesshin, and then a few more.

In 1974, life circumstances pulled me back home again to Indiana (where 'it seems that I can see / The gleaming candle-light, still burning bright / Through the sycamores for me'<sup>5</sup>). Since then I've maintained a long-distance love affair with the Sangha. Finishing college, starting a career, getting divorced, and married and divorced again, and married again, helping raise a wonderful bunch of children, all kept me pretty busy ... but not too busy to travel, again and again, for lots of sesshins (multiple times in Chicago, Rochester, New Mexico, Mexico City, Tepoztlán, and Cuernavaca), for holidays, and to be with so many who have become the dearest of friends. But for decades it really was a Sangha that was 'out there' for me, not really my own.

Ten years ago, twenty years into our wonderful marriage, my wife Jane and I discovered she was coming down with Alzheimer's. Her father spent the last five years of his life with us, with Alzheimer's, and died in our home; as a result, we knew firsthand what we were facing. Shit just got real. My world seemingly got smaller, and the focus of my life narrowed. Take care of her! Cherish every golden moment! Be present! This wasn't a test of my faith: rather, it revealed my faith. I knew what to do. Moment by moment.

After three or four years, as her slow decline accelerated a little, I recognized that I needed to take better care of myself, or that we'd be in a heck of a fix. I sat more, and more regularly (blessedly, she slept well, giving me time in the late evening and early morning to do this). I radically changed my diet, I found a trainer,

and then a better trainer, and have been working assiduously on developing and maintaining strength, flexibility, balance, and mobility. I developed and extended a network of support among friends and family (including Sangha friends), and leaned on them frequently. I used Facebook as a journaling tool, sharing some of my feelings about our ups and downs with dozens of friends (many of whom I've never met!).

I studied, and Jane applied, everything I could find on how to slow down the progression of dementia. I believe we extended her 'glide path' by several years through the combination of strength training, food choices, supplements, hatha yoga, balance work, music, nature walks, conversation, chiropractic, allopathic medicine, petitionary prayer, massage, cranio-sacral therapy, acupuncture, and a constant flow of love, sweet love.

Four years ago, when Jane could no longer be left by herself, I found a caregiver, who became a great friend to our family. Missy's dependable help allowed me to continue part-time at my job, and to play an occasional round of golf.

Last winter, though, it was becoming too much. 24/7/365, either caring for (while worrying about) Sweet Jane, or working at the office, I was noticing that I was coming apart at the seams. In February, I found the best place available close to home that provides what they euphemistically call 'Memory Care,' and I moved her in. That was tough. I still see her a lot, and those visits are wonderful in their own way, but they are tough, too.

But I have taken seriously my motivation for moving her—to care for myself and live the best life I can. And in the course of doing so, I am finding my relationship with Sangha is evolving. Lately, I've come to recognize some of my own responsibilities as part of the Sangha.

This past summer, I was able to join the Ralph Chapin Memorial Work Week at Chapin Mill, for the first time. I experienced joy in 'cleaning the temple' and in being with so many good friends. This October, I got to participate in my first sesshin in 12 years, and was deeply re-

freshed and encouraged by that experience. To my delight, I found that my motivation to do sesshin had changed: it seems now to be much more to find ways to help, to generate energy, and to help radiate our collective intention out into a world so much in need.

In closing, I want to share something that warmed my heart when I ran across it recently in Sangharakshita's classic, *The Three Jewels* (a book I recall Roshi Kapleau recommending to us as a good introduction to some of the conceptual underpinnings of Buddhism regarding Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). The author explains that the term *vinaya* 'bore ... the general import of the way of life conducive to the Master's teaching.'<sup>6</sup> He goes on to explain, 'As time went on, a common *vinaya*, ... whether for monks or laymen, was also evolved' (in the Mahayana tradition). He quotes a short extract, a part of a *vinaya* ceremony that a dedicated Buddhist would undertake:

I (person's name), who have thus caused the thought of enlightenment to arise, accept the infinite world of living beings as my mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, ... and having accepted them as far as in my power, strength and knowledge, I cause the roots of goodness to grow in them. From now on, whatever gift I shall give or moral rule I shall keep, or act of patience I shall perform, acting vigorously, or whatever meditation I shall attain, or acting with wisdom shall learn skill in means, all that shall be for the profit and welfare of living beings.

And having undertaken to win supreme, perfect enlightenment, and having done homage to those Bodhisattvas of great mercy who have entered the Great Stage, I go forth after them. Having gone forth, a Bodhisattva am I, a Bodhisattva. From now on may my teacher support me.<sup>7</sup>

This feels right to me now, and appropriate for my life. And it dawns on me, that I am an active, important, significant part of the Sangha. This delights me. How may I be of assistance?

*Larry McSpadden reports, with gratitude, that Indiana is no longer a twilight zone for Sangha. He is happy to be taking care of himself and his many friends there, and wherever he happens to wander.*

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5. 'Back Home Again in Indiana,' composed by James F. Hanley with lyrics by Ballard MacDonald.
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7. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-199.

# Breaking the Silence, Trusting in Sangha

ANONYMOUS

In March 1993 I attended a sesshin that turned out to be my last contact with the Rochester Zen Center for 23 years. Shortly afterward, I lost my bearings as a depression that had started a few months before enveloped me. It began when the administration of the university where I worked asked me to give testimony against my director (a tenured faculty member) for embezzlement, and he retaliated. For me, the most difficult part was that, with few exceptions, I was not allowed to talk about it with anyone.

One of those exceptions was the minister at the Unitarian Universalist church where I took my children. At first he was quite helpful, but then he tried to seduce me, which caused flashbacks to sexual abuse by a teacher when I was 16. I was traumatized by the minister's behavior and fled.

Three months later, the minister told the church's board that he was 'addicted to lust.' The board arranged for a district executive who was experienced with clergy misconduct to talk with possible victims. As a result, I went to a meeting with the executive and 20 women from the congregation. We went around in a circle, sharing our eerily similar stories of his coming on to us.

That small group of women turned out to be my primary resource. They were a wonder. We would get together occasionally, listen to each other, learn more about clergy sexual abuse, and even laugh at times. Compassion flowed freely.

The district executive encouraged us to file complaints, but we were either too frightened or did not have enough clear evidence for a viable complaint. I was in the former category. All the while, the minister was still in place, inflaming the congregation and portraying us as troublemakers. As more and more verbal shots flew our way, we named ourselves 'The Messengers.'

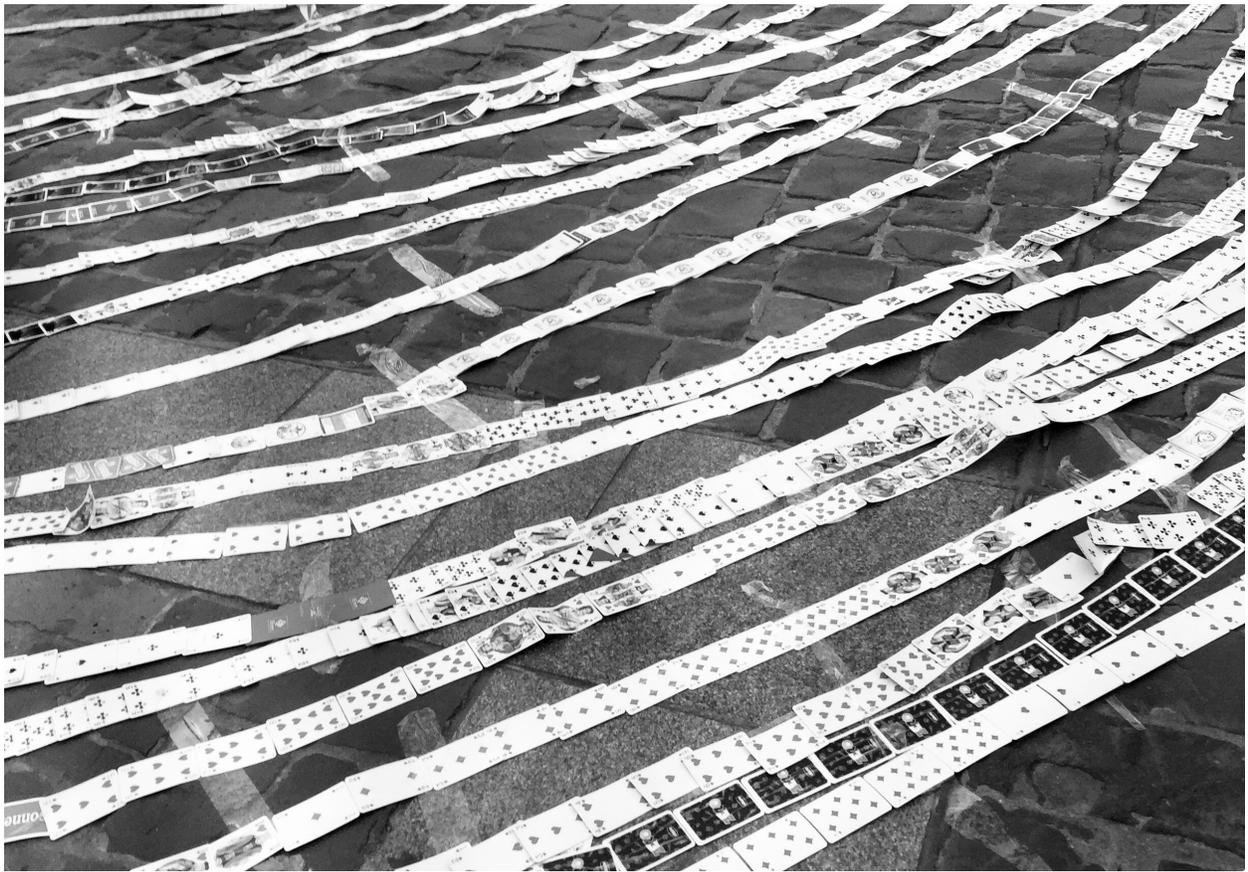
My solution was to go to sesshin—hoping it would rein in my mental collapse. And it was

indeed valuable, although not in the way I had imagined. When I arrived in Rochester, I did not say a word to anyone, not even to then Sensei Bodhin. I thought the Sangha was for tough, silent, samurai-types and that I should keep my mental problems to myself. Moreover, silence is the norm for sexual abuse. I threw myself into just Mu—and it brought comfort, release, even strength.

At home, with sesshin's wind in my sails, I decided to do as the executive had asked and file a formal complaint. I knew it would be hard but I thought I could sit my way through the pain. Wrong. I also thought if one woman stepped up then it would be easier for a few more. Wrong again. No one else did. My name was made public and I became a scapegoat. I was shunned at work, at church, even at the grocery store. Then the mass mailings began. One was anonymous—purporting to be a copy of my confidential complaint. Others were signed by the minister's supporters and told outright lies. And one was a letter castigating all the women, signed by about 30 local ministers and rabbis. Meanwhile, as my complaint was proceeding, the denomination assigned to the minister yet another prominent minister to be his formal advocate, while refusing to assign anyone to me. I became terrified of clergy. My office was near a divinity school and when I ran into a man in any kind of clerical garb (collar, robes, etc.) I would panic and flee, even though they were strangers.

For several weeks after sesshin, I continued to do zazen, however within a month I had stopped, as my faith in almost everything broke—many days it took all I had to simply brush my teeth. The only things that kept me going were my sweet children and husband, plus the kind Messengers.

Eventually the minister was found 'guilty of conduct unbecoming' and the board forced his



Donna Kowal

resignation, but the congregation was in shambles. For six months, his embittered and angry supporters remained. They portrayed me as a puppet of a ‘man-hating lesbian conspiracy’—weak and crazy. But I learned (from *Newsweek* of all places) that this is just the way it is when women speak up about abuse: we are portrayed as either ‘nuts or sluts.’ Somehow that phrase said it all to me. The stranglehold of shame and self-doubt loosened and I was starting to heal.

The reason I share this distressing story is because it is a fairly extreme example of how religious communities may respond to allegations that their leaders are sexually abusive—highlighting a pattern that occurs across all faiths. This pattern includes secrets, factions, denial, collusion, minimizing, marginalizing, and at its core, breaking of sacred trust.

I learned how it can manifest in Zen Buddhism when I attended a 1996 ‘Retreat for Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse by Buddhist

Teachers.’ It was led by the Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune, the foremost expert in clergy sexual misconduct, with Roshi Jan Chozen Bays and Soto Zen Priest Yvonne Rand as co-leaders. Looking back at the retreat, two things are etched deeply in my heart. The first is witnessing the meeting of a pair of survivors who were abused by Eido Tai Shimano. One was young, recently abused—the other older, abused 30 years earlier. The older one was beside herself to see face-to-face a recent survivor. She had tried for years to put a stop to his abuse, but like me, was minimized and marginalized. I loved her spunky outrage; repeatedly she would spit out the two words ‘Mister Shimano’—refusing to call him Roshi. My second memory is of Chozen Roshi saying to all of us, ‘Don’t let these men rob you of your practice. It’s your spiritual birthright.’ I wish I could say that with those words I jumped back on the cushion. But at least it planted a sturdy seed.

Instead, during the intervening years, I focused on restorative justice for clergy abuse survivors and their congregations. It was a time rich in strengthening my communication skills and understanding of the dynamics of power. In particular, I learned how to speak truth to power in a way that is more likely to be heard. The essence was centering firmly in compassion for specific leaders who were misusing their power and then holding those leaders accountable. It was deeply fulfilling work. I was even happy much of the time. And yet ...

Every so often I would sit again for a few weeks or months, but eventually fizzle out. Then on January 1, 2015, I promised myself that I would sit at least a few minutes every day—and I did. At the same time, I finally did what most survivors of clergy sexual abuse do. I walked away from the congregation where the misconduct had happened.

While I no longer have panic attacks when I see clergy, I remain to this day leery of religious professionals. But can one practice without a teacher? I tried books, podcasts, apps, even an online seminar. It left me confused. Which Buddhist practice do you do when? And how? Then I stumbled across a *Wikipedia* page about Bodhin Kjolhede. I read that he was both Roshi and Abbott of the Zen Center—and had been for many years. I sat up in amazement. I knew that he was absolutely trustworthy and, more importantly, at long last I knew I could trust myself. It felt as if I was emerging from a fog into hope and possibility.

Even so, I was fearful, being habituated to a congregation that treated me like a hot potato. After weeks of dithering, I finally picked up the phone and called the Center. I'd never met either of the people who fielded my call but both were kind, easygoing, respectful. The second even got me laughing when he called me 'a strayed sheep.' Heaven knows I felt sheepish. Then, even though we had never met and only talked for a few minutes, he said, 'You should go to sesshin.' I was flabbergasted. And that evening I applied.

That phone call and the first few times I returned to the Center gave me a startling, yet clear, sense that I had 'come home.' I believe the Buddhist term for this finding home is 'taking refuge in Sangha.' However, until writing this article, I have also been leery of Sangha because clergy sexual abuse had broken my trust in religious communities, too—and I was equating 'Sangha' with 'Buddhist religious community.' I know first-hand that religious communities can be dysfunctional and dangerous.

To connect with the word Sangha, I have had to take a deep breath and say to myself that Sangha cannot be Sangha unless there is a reasonable degree of safety. (I say 'reasonable' because Sanghas are not perfect. They are human.) As best I can tell, this was actually an intent of the Buddha himself. He specifically created a flexible regulatory framework called the *Vinaya* as an integral part of the original Sangha. The Cardinal Precepts, including the third ('I resolve not to misuse sexuality') and fourth ('I resolve not to lie'), are distilled from the *Vinaya*.

The bigger challenge for me, though, is 'taking refuge,' since that requires trust—the very thing that was broken. I returned to the Center because of my trust in Roshi. Sangha was not on my radar at the time. However, even though I was not looking for it, this Sangha has been steadily earning my trust. How? Foremost is the humility that I run into in a variety of contexts. Second, is the way women are included—particularly in the new (to me) ending of the *Ancestral Line*: 'And to the unknown women, centuries of enlightened ones, whose commitment to the Dharma nourishes and sustains our practice—you who handed down the light of Dharma, we shall repay your benevolence!' It sent shivers down my spine the first few times I heard it. Third, the Center's leadership is honest about the past—including the samurai culture of the early years and the sexual misbehavior of one of its former senseis. Fourth, there are solid ethics and sexual harassment policies shared on the RZC website. Finally, the Center has a different ethos than it did in the 1970s; I've been

astounded by many acts of warmth, kindness, and welcoming.

While I remain cautious in chanting ‘I take refuge in Sangha,’ I recognize that healing takes time. I know I am most fortunate to have

stumbled back into this vibrant community—and through it I glimpse what appears to be a fathomless well of possibility.

With hands palm-to-palm.

## Gratitude for Sangha

VONDELL PETRY

Like so much that is complicated, the notion of Sangha is not only complex but infinitely rich in the myriad ways it can manifest. And, for this now long-time student of Zen, it continues to evolve.

Over several decades that include living for the most part in Cleveland, Ohio with a five-year stint living overseas in my twenties and thirties, there was always Sangha. Specifically, Cleveland has been fortunate to be blessed with the unqualified dedication and support of Susan and Larry Rakow. The Rakows attended a lecture and workshop that Roshi Kapleau offered in the early 70s at the University of Buffalo and ever since then they have tirelessly worked to create a sitting group and Sangha patterned by the model followed at the Rochester Zen Center. They subsequently hosted sittings wherever they happened to be living and however their life circumstances permitted. I have sat with them on apartment floors, in their living rooms, dining rooms, in an attic zendo (by far the venue with the greatest longevity), and now in a proper, more spacious zendo that occupies most of the ground floor of a house directly across the street from the Rakow’s current home in Cleveland Heights.

During all these years they also have cared for family, managed demanding careers, and juggled the logistics of practitioners who are sometimes uneven in their commitment to regular zazen. Some come only once and never return; some

come fairly consistently and then disappear; and a few come weekly, monthly, or yearly. But it does not matter because Susan, who is the leader of the Cleveland Zazen Group, as we’re called, gives each person her full attention and full measure of ardor. And, Larry is the exceptional life partner and zazen support guy. His resonant bass, for example, always lends its own magic to our chanting services.

I am just guessing that this long-term commitment by the Rakows is a critical component when new practitioners come to our group. New folks will comment that they are impressed that there has been a Cleveland Zazen Group for so many years, and that somehow or other it keeps rolling along when everyday life seems anything but consistent. One suspects this helps to both draw practitioners here to zazen and make a case for sticking with it. If anyone has been doing zazen for the length of time that Susan and Larry have logged, then perhaps, goes the rationale, there must be something worthwhile going on.

While it is impossible to determine the thoughts of short-term sitters who come once and do not return, or perhaps for a few months before they depart, one hopes for a couple of possibilities: that a seed may have been planted for practice and that on some level they know that they were helpful to us in supporting the Sangha with their energies and attendance, no matter how brief. From this perspective, the

Cleveland Zazen Group has been touched by hundreds of souls, some for a short time, some for longer—it all counts and makes a difference on some level. We’ve all heard stories about individuals who read Roshi Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen* but did not actually begin to practice or hook up with a Sangha for many, many years. Wondrous are the ways of karma and of Sangha, too!

A discussion about the Cleveland Zazen Group must also include how we have been consistently supported by the larger Sangha in Rochester. Roshi Kjolhede makes an annual pilgrimage to Cleveland to preside over a Weekend Intensive. This is a shot in the arm for everyone in Cleveland’s Sangha, as for these ‘intensive events’ the zendo is full to bursting, stretching the capacity of our two small rooms to accommodate the 18-20 practitioners who attend. With amazing agility, Roshi and his attendants, backed by the Rakows and others in the Cleveland Group, offer all the ingredients of a full-length sesshin, including formal rounds of sitting, dokusan, teisho, and practicing in silence throughout.

But Cleveland also does something in the middle of all this tautness that adds a local flavor. On the evening of the second night—usually Saturday—Roshi, his attendants, and whoever else wishes to come, enjoy a family-style dinner at a local Indian restaurant. After the hours of zazen on Friday evening and all day on Saturday, this informal interlude suggests a great deal about the benefits of Zen practice, especially for newer participants. There is much good food, happily enjoyed, lively conversation, laughter, and an abundance of warmth. It honestly feels more like a family reunion—and I’ve heard so many newer as well as long-term sitters comment that they had *so much fun*. While these dinners may not be designed for the purpose of Sangha building, they achieve as much anyway.

The energy from the mat carries over to the dinner table and a sense of ‘just being there’ ensues. It could be my imagination, but it seems on the following morning there is renewed energy and focus, especially among those who ate dinner together.

These local intensives also underscore that as grateful as we are to receive Roshi and the attendants who make these events possible, all the zazen practitioners who have supported the Rochester Sangha spanning 50-plus years are also lending support with energy that is dynamic and often palpable. I recall specific instances with specific Rochester Sangha members that were pivotal for me, such as when I did my first seven-day sesshin in my twenties. It was difficult for a number of reasons, and the only thing

‘I take refuge in Sangha,  
and in its wisdom, example,  
and never failing help, and  
resolve to live in harmony  
with all sentient beings.’

—*The Three Treasures*

that got me through, I am sure, was that my mat was positioned between two women who were then in their late 60s. After a while, it was clear to me that their compassionate support was the power that inspired and supported my resolve, and made it possible for me to go on and complete the sesshin.

Arguably, one can extend that notion of Rochester Sangha support to the hundreds of thousands of practitioners going all the way back to the Buddha. The combined energies of ALL who have ever struggled, who have persevered, and grappled on any level with the fundamental questions that lead anyone to sit are there. Without a doubt, the energies of these countless beings help create the compassionate support of Sangha from which we all draw.

The final gift of Sangha is the reality of gratitude, whether from those individuals with whom we sit daily, from the larger Rochester Sangha, or the men and women that followed the example of Gotama Buddha ages ago. The debt is always there and is only paid by fully realizing our True Nature. We are told there is no beginning to practice and no end to awakening.

The same can be said about gratitude for teachers, the teaching, and for Sangha!

How does one sufficiently thank Roshi Kapleau, who sat and shivered in various Japanese Temples for thirteen years before he was ready to return to the United States and bring the teaching to Rochester, New York? While I cannot put words into Roshi Kapleau's mouth, I can speculate that his answer, if he offered one at all, would have resonated with putting oneself squarely on the mat right here, right now.

Similarly, how does one thank the subsequent teachers that Roshi Kapleau trained, including Roshi Kjolhede who has for over 30 years been selling water by the Genesee River and creating Sangha in Rochester, and in all the other affiliate groups that he and the Rochester Sangha support? Additionally, how does one thank the countless beings who have single-

mindedly contributed to practice and a sense of Sangha wherever and whenever it was possible, including the Rakows, who have been at it here in Cleveland for over 40 years?

Gratitude girds and inspires practice, and sustained daily practice, especially with the support of Sangha, manifests the moment-to-moment benefits of using one's energy in this amazing and miraculous, and yet down-to-earth practical way. With hands palm-to-palm, gassho in the ten directions for the teaching, to the teachers, and to all those who for any period of time joined other like-hearted souls in helping us all to wake up!

*Vondell Petry has been a member of the Rochester Zen Center since 1974 and met Susan and Larry Rakow shortly after that time. She is the mother of an adult son and does transition coaching in Cleveland, Ohio.*

### *Countless Good Deeds.*

If you're thinking about financial planning, estate planning, or both, please remember that there are myriad ways you can help the Rochester Zen Center through planned giving. The right kind of plan can help you reduce your taxes significantly while providing for a larger, longer-lasting gift to the Zen Center. Because there is a wide array of bequests, annuities, trusts, and other financial vehicles to consider, you'll want to work with your financial advisor to decide what's best for you. Long-time Zen Center member David Kernan, an attorney who concentrates his practice in tax law, has generously offered to help point you in the right direction at no charge. For more information about planned giving and David's offer, please contact the Center's receptionist.

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## NEXT ISSUE

### Starting Over

In the course of Zen practice, from time to time we may find ourselves stalled, caught in a web of dry routines, or even feeling discouraged enough to quit practice altogether. Yet, at any moment we can take a different course, shaking off the narratives that have defined us, and begin anew. The next issue will explore ways in which we can hit the reset button and free ourselves from habit patterns.



## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

In addition to having a new look, future issues of *Zen Bow* will no longer be limited to exploring particular themes. Readers are invited to submit essays and images at any time and on any topic related to Zen practice to the new editor, Chris Pulleyn, at [zenbow@rzc.org](mailto:zenbow@rzc.org).

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