

November 30, 2014

Dear Sangha,

Being your shuso is an intimidating responsibility. But I have the courage to do it because I know you will be gentle with me.

Zen students walk the Bodhisattva Path, the path of generosity. In the early years of my practice I understood generosity poorly. Sometimes I was selfish; I withdrew into my practice and tried to perfect myself. Other times I was ostentatiously generous. I went far out of my way to help prisoners, teach poor children, or march in peace demonstrations. These are worthwhile acts, but I did them from pride. I made big gestures outside my daily life, and I ignored the people closest to me, who needed my generosity most.

Now I recognize I must be generous at many levels: with myself, with those who are close to me, and with those who are far. I think my generosity is most valuable when practiced among those who are close: my friends, family, colleagues, and sangha. After all, when I give a dollar to a beggar I don't know if I am helping or harming. But when I maintain the Zendo's website, or when I am generous with my partner Keishin, I'm certainly helping. Because we are close, I know what is needed.

In an editorial on LionsRoar.com, Roshi wrote, "My hope is that we Buddhist practitioners will turn today's dharma wheel in the direction of outspoken and direct social justice." She has asked me to point the sangha's attention to social justice this winter. I think that, most of the time, we are effective when we address global injustice with local repairs. For instance, I work in the software industry, where sexism is widespread. I repair the injustice locally by mentoring and cheering for female colleagues in my own company. The prison system is unjust everywhere. Our sangha makes local repairs by sitting zazen with just a handful of prisoners in Sing Sing.

This angu we are reading "The Ceasing of Notions," in which a teacher answers a young student's questions. When the student asks how to help others, the teacher says, "Spontaneously right, without any skillful means. There is no occasion to plan ahead. How could it be possible for sun and moon not to shine, or a lamp, when lifted high, not to cast its light all round?"

But this may not be how we help people today. Sometimes we must plan ahead carefully, sometimes we must be experts in skillful means. It won't feel as effortless as the moon's shining. But I have faith that if we turn our attention this winter to healing the world by helping those closest to us, we will be effective and we will realize the Bodhisattva Path.

Gassho,
Jiryu