

21 October 2024

Dear Sangha,

In his *Instructions for the Zen Cook*, Master Dogen reminds us that “the sangha is the most precious of all things.” It is with this sentiment and with immense gratitude that I am writing this letter to you.

Nearly a decade ago, I entered the Village Zendo for the first time in search of spiritual practice and a community of likeminded people. It was a time of great change and instability in my life not only culturally, being a recent transplant in New York City, but also internally, after a divorce from my partner of many years whom I met in my early twenties. So, there I was – in my early thirties at the time – searching for a new home again, but this time within. And so it happened that the Village Zendo was conveniently located on my way from work. I walked into the space at 588 Broadway to meet a relatively large group of curious people. We were greeted by a deaf monk who explained how to meditate, and when people danced around to get his attention, said with a joyful smile on his face: “I know I’m deaf... You won’t offend me.” It was in that moment that I thought to myself: “This! This is what I want.” What “this” meant was still unknown to me, but I knew I was in the right place. I found a steady ground in Zen and a family in our sangha.

When asked by Shinryu Roshi to be Shuso for our winter Ango, I was surprised – I have seen many experienced sangha members fulfill this role – and asked myself: am I ready? It has been a humbling experience to have been asked to be Shuso but even more so to start reflecting on what I can offer as Shuso. Bernie Glassman in his *Instructions to the Cook* points out that “the Zen cook knows that every aspect of life is an ingredient of the Supreme Meal.” And he warns us: “Our natural tendency is not to use ingredients we think might ruin our meal.” Looking back at the feeling of “this!,” I realize that what I was searching for when I entered the Village Zendo for the first time, that sense of “home” within, was a safe environment to explore and a way to reintegrate those parts in my life that I’ve been pushing away for so long.

I hope you’ll join me in doing exactly this. Let’s invite all the ingredients of our lives into our Ango period. Let’s take a plunge together. Be courageous but at the same time gentle with whatever arises. Or as Dogen instructs us, let’s try to “have the affectionate and caring concern of a parent raising a child” for ourselves and for our fellow participants.

In gassho,

Guy Ryugin Barash