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Group Practice

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One of the most sensitive and contentious issues in a Zen Center or Sangha is the role of group practice. I will argue that the public nature of group practice is a fact of life and becomes more critical as a person progresses up the ladder of leadership. Not only does group practice become more important but private practice merges into group practice as well.

A definition of group practice is essential prior to any discussion. For the purpose of this discussion, there are two forms of group practice. One is in the Dharma Room and the other is in the world outside the Dharma Room. Practice outside the Dharma room takes the form of not only specific teaching programs but interaction or mutual support of the Sangha and temple activities. It is also the way we conduct of our personal lives. As the commitment of Sangha members deepen with the assumption the five precepts and intensify with the assumption of 10 precepts and higher, their practice is not only observed but becomes more scrutinized by everyone. The source of this scrutiny is not in the tradition of fault finding but more a consequence of role modeling, be it conscious or unconscious, by subordinates, peers and superiors alike.

The nebulous nature of leadership is another term that requires a definition for this paper. Essentially any person who has taken ten or more precepts. However, in the broader scope it is applied to everyone in the Sangha as their example can set a precedence of what or what not to do.

Like it or not, it is the leader's example and not their words that set the pace and tone in the Dharma room. A leader has no "special situations." Not only does a leader have no special situations but the very absence of leaders is an example. The moment a leader or Dharma Teacher stops setting the example and the pace, then they stop being a Dharma Teacher or leader.

The significance of setting the example came home to me with particular clarity in April of 1997 when I was teaching at the Medium Security Prison in Shirley. Often we sit on tile floors without benefit of zafus and zabutans. I was having a particularly bad time and happened to shift my foot. Immediately after the sitting, all the inmates commented that I had moved for the first time in about 20 months. I never realized the intensity of their scrutiny. On another occasion, many years ago, when I reported to my first Special Forces assignment as Lieutenant, the Team Sergeant pulled me aside and in no uncertain terms explained that the officers must not only set the pace but do all the common tasks as well as or better than everyone else. He meant that if the officers find an excuse not to do something then everyone else will produce a "special situation" that will excuse them from doing the same thing.

On a more humorous note, the power of setting the example reaches all the way down to the animal kingdom. Sam, a young cat in my apartment is constantly doing whatever Cocoa, my old dog does. Not too long ago, I gave Sam a chunk of Banana which was immediately rejected as unfit food for cats. So, I gave the rest of the banana to Cocoa in small chunks and with great ceremony. Then I got another banana and gave Sam a chunk which was tasted and consumed. Sam now eats bananas.

The Dharma Room is the factory floor of Zen. It is here that the presence or absence of the teachers is the first point of observation. This is not so much as checking but people looking to teachers as role models and sources of inspiration in their practice. This inspiration is often what drives others to surmount hurdles raised in their own practice. How many times at circle talks have we heard someone say they were inspired and motivated by "so and so" to keep going. The absence of teachers "in the day in and day out grind on the factory floor" raises the question: If practice is so important then why are they not here? This undermines the very heart of not only the Sangha but the value of the practice as well. Of the 10,000 justifications for being

absent the most often heard is my practice is conflicting with my career, sports, education, health, home life etc. Well, if the practice is so good, why is the practice not enhancing the career, education, sports, health, home life etc. instead of competing or conflicting with or detracting from it?

Having dealt in absolutes, it is time to revert to "special situations." There are times when "special situations" will become "special." At these times, a leader may have to draw upon the strength and understanding of the Sangha. A leader may or may not choose to share the special situation with the Sangha. That is a decision that must be moderated by the event and position of responsibility that leader occupies within the Sangha. The fundamental consequence is its impact on the "role model."

The expression of role modeling is synonymous with that of any kind of teacher or leader. It means exactly what it says: being a model for a role. The role is Dharma teacher and the model is the teacher's action in the performance of that role. Non-actions as well as absences are also actions and as such are inescapably noted by student and other observers.

One argument often advanced in the avoidance of formal practice is that, "my practice is private and none of your, or anyone else's, business." That on its face may very well be a valid statement. However, if it is, then whoever postulates it does not need the support of a Sangha, a Dharma Room to practice in or a teacher for guidance. If someone's practice is private, then he/she ceases to be a role model as there is no role to follow. Ceasing to be a role model also means ceasing to be a teacher or leader as there is no example to follow. On a more basic level, it also means that person is not there to help others that may need an example or support.

Another argument is that "I conduct my life in Zen and do not need to practice." There are two interesting aspects to this argument that deserve comment. My first counter to this is the statement: "In Zen, our first job is to become enlightened and then save all others from suffering." A person may very well lead their life in Zen or incorporate Zen into every part of their life. But how can you teach without leading and how can you lead without being in the Dharma room to set the example. If you are already enlightened and are capable of saving all others without the Dharma room then why truck with Zen at all?

The above two arguments have an underlining common denominator worthy of discussion. That is I with a small "i." Not everyone in a Sangha has a practice strong enough to stand on its own. Not only is strength drawn from the leaders by their example by it also comes from the companionship and example of the people on the left and right as well as those across the room. It is this selfless companionship that not only reinforces the Sangha's practice and fellowship but motivates and inspires others.

The transition from the small "i." to the "I" is a tempering process that all too often requires the examples of leaders for inspiration. This is especially important for people who have to struggle with priorities and conflicts forced on by the outside world. Steel comes from iron that has been tempered in cauldron of fire and hammered on the blacksmith's forge. Confidence, compassion and understanding comes both from having survived and surmounted the struggles of practice and continuing to survive and surmount those same struggles. This confidence, compassion and understanding is not only the trademark of a leader but the example required to inspire others who in the struggles of their practice may succumb to the pressures of the moment. It is a natural trademark that can not be conferred by certificate or ceremony. To deny subordinates the power of the example is to undermine their practice.

The Dharma room as well as any factory floor has tasks with standards and conditions of performance. In Zen we call this the form. The form takes shape and each aspect of it is defined as well as regulated in the Dharma Mirror. As in any successful factory, the standards of production and/or performance not only insure its quality, success and longevity but create the basis of unification where the participants rally and are united in the performance of their duties. In this sense Zen is no different.

I often ask myself why did I come to Zen? The answer always goes back to my first YMJJ. I was and am still inspired by two people. They are Ellen Gwynn and Bobby Rhodes. Ellen sat beside me for the three days. Not only did she sit with poise and calm but she was also the kitchen master. I wanted what she had and I could not believe that I was suffering so much doing the same thing. No less important was the discovery that after three days, I could know everything relevant about a person without knowing the pedigree, history or situation. Nothing in the ensuing 6 years has caused me to change my mind. Bobby did two things that retreat which earned my respect. The first was taking on a job during work period that no one else in the house would touch. That job was cleaning the bathroom on the second floor which was not only filthy with

just dirt but ages of crud and slime. She turned it into a bathroom to use and relax in. The other incident occurred the first night of the retreat. I went to sleep on the top floor hallway with an older friend in the bed next to mine. At the time, not only was I unaware that he had to use the bathroom every 60 to 90 minutes but the dark of the night created a major obstacle course from his bed to the bathroom. In my sleep, I was totally unaware of his trials and tribulations. When I woke up, there was Bobby in his bed. She had shifted beds during the night so that my friend could have a bed next to the bathroom. Many times when I am in doubt as what to do, I fall back on that retreat for guidance and inspiration. The role models of Ellen and Bobby during that retreat proved to be a never ending source of inspiration guidance over the years. Both Ellen and Bobby have jobs and lives that scream with "special situation." My impression is both have a practice that not only serves as a role model but supports their family, career, health and development.