

Host Within Host

The Path of the Ancestors, our meditative, serene, and scenic pathway through the gardens and woods, marks the names of Great Teacher patriarchs and matriarchs in our lineage. We have the opportunity to dedicate a Great Teacher's name along with someone in our lives whom we wish to be honored. There are 137 Great Teachers grouped at 30 stations. Placques bearing family or friends names appear along the trail and thus our own memories and blood lines mingle with our honored teachers and become one family. At anniversaries, flowers and incense appear at certain names, and ceremonies help us to express what our loved ones mean to us.

On our work mornings at Olympia Zen Center, it is always someone's job to clean the Path. The person wears rakusu and goes from one station to the next, clearing away spider webs, adjusting flags that have been tossed in the wind, and wiping dust from name plates. The person chants quietly as she or he goes, showing respect for the ancestors, honoring their presence in our lives, and chanting in gratitude for their realization which brought us to this place.

Who are we when we take up the morning practice of caring for the Path of the Ancestors? We are at the headlands of the trail, walking with our ancestors ahead of us, walking behind our ancestors, through and beyond each teacher, men and women, whose lives we venerate because they teach us something particular and larger than our own small selves. Ryokan writes: "Ancient sages left their works behind, not to let us know about themselves, but to help us understand our own stamp. Had we wisdom deep enough to know ourselves single-handed, no benefits would result from the works of ancient saints." Thus, we host the lineage in our practice as we realize we are the lineage. We host the Buddha within us as we open to the Buddha we host. We take care of teacher as we become aware we are the teacher we take care of. We host the student within us as we understand that Buddha and teacher are students and are the student we host.

One teacher described this process of lineage and student-teacher relationship as standing on one another's shoulders. When we want to see a wider space in the landscape, we climb onto something high. Animals climb a tree, as do trail blazers, when they want to see beyond their own small space. In practice then, the student spiritually and psychically stands on the shoulders of the teacher and sees the Big Self in the light of existence. The teacher doesn't tell the student what to see, or what will be there when the mind opens. Simply, the teacher says, I will host you, climb on my shoulders and take a look. This is what spiritual comrades do for one another. We trust the Dharma to reveal itself clearly. In this way, the teacher at that moment is a student hosting the student, and the teacher is the teacher hosting the teacher who will be realized in the student. Can you slow down very quietly to realize this? If you can, you can begin to realize the nature of the host within host and you can find a way to climb spiritually onto your teacher's shoulders.

This year we are practicing hospitality and there is nothing superficial about this. We may complain when we travel that the hotel did not do this or that, the soap wasn't very good, the beds were uncomfortable, but we are talking about something else. It is true that superficial kinds of things show up when we are not aware of deeper matters, but in our practice in Dharma we have to look beneath, within host within host to really see the underpinnings of how we work in this relationship of Buddha to Buddha, truly seeing the Buddha in each one and opening the gates of realization within ourselves. This must come from within ourselves to realize the incredible degree to which we have been hosted by Dharma, by Teacher, by Sangha in our lives. We have been supported by the Triple Treasure all along.

My teacher, Niho Roshi, will visit in late August and early September. He doesn't often come to Olympia so it's important to see him now. He will bless each of the dedicatory placques on the Path of the Ancestors and he will bless Gogo-an where we host those who come for personal retreat. We will host Niho Roshi from whom we receive the Transmission of Dharma, which we host within, as Niho Roshi has been hosting us as his children in lineage. Surely we will all be there to be the essential host, to see Buddha in each other's eyes.

Eido in Dharma in Gassho