

# **Dharma Assembly: What? Why?**

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## **What is the Dharma?**

Dharma with a big “D” means the Teachings of Awakening, The Teachings of Reality. A small “d” dharma describes phenomena, a mental event, a moment of experiencing, any moment of experiencing experienced by the bodymind and, as your practice deepens, more and more frequently known and practised.

## **What is a Dharma Assembly?**

A Dharma Assembly is a gathering together of Sangha: monks, Teachers and practice advisors, and any students, formal, general or associate, for an extended period of practice and study of the Teachings of Reality. Dharma Assemblies are a long-standing and traditional part of practice. Essentially, Dharma Assemblies are sesshin for students that are not deshi (formal students of a Teacher).

## **Who May Attend?**

All students may attend. As there are a limited number of places all students must pre-register. As well, knowing the number of attendees is essential for ingredient shopping and the preparation of meals.

## **When?**

A Dharma Assembly starts at 9:30 a.m. and closes at 9:00 p.m. on a Saturday. Notification of the date is always posted in the eMirror.

## **Where?**

Dharma Assemblies are held in the Hatto, the formal Dharma Hall on the second floor. Meals are taken in the Zendo on the first floor.

## **How?**

Formal entry starts the assembly. Formal entry is similar to that at the beginning of every 6:00 a.m. formal sitting during the week. During Sesshin and O-sesshin formal entry is practised at the beginning of both the early morning and the evening sittings. The Formal Entry opening a Dharma Assembly is excellent preparation for any associate student who may be interested in practising as a general student in the future and for general students who attend the morning formal sittings and may be interested in eventually practising as formal students.

During the Assembly a Teacher or a practice advisor presents a Dharma Talk to the assembled practitioners. Talks are recorded and are played at subsequent sittings. Sitting periods are 30 minutes long and kinhin is practised between sitting rounds. Daisan and practice interviews are scheduled.

Lunch and supper provide an introduction to oryoki, a traditional form for eating meals which is practised during sesshin and O-sesshin.

## **Why Should Students Make the Effort to Attend?**

Dharma Assemblies provide a taste of more intensive practice for all students. Instruction is given which helps students mature their practice. All level of students benefit from this practical introduction to the forms. Formal students who have already established a strong mindfulness practice have an opportunity to practice the forms in more detail and offer, through their example, unspoken instruction and support for general and associate students.

General students who may have an interest in one day applying as a probationary formal student or who have wondered what it is like to practise as a formal student are provided an introduction to longer, more intensive practice which helps cut through unquestioned assumptions, beliefs, and misunderstandings, about longer periods of practice. They may be intimidated by thoughts of sesshin or O-sesshin and with no experience of longer periods of practice often find their imagined prospect daunting.

Associate students have an opportunity to sit with monastics and students who have been practising more intensively. There is an opportunity to practise the forms they will encounter if and when they attend general sittings.

All students gain a better understanding of the functioning of the monastery and are encouraged to attend as often as they are able.