

The Practice of Taking Care

By Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei (while training as Shuso)
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“If we look at anything that we encounter throughout the day, we find a seamless web of inter-relationships and the more we cut through the seeming dualities, the more that we find this seamlessness. Work is then regarded as a way of recognizing this fact and taking responsibility for it. “Responsibility” means to make a response, an answer. We must answer the situation by doing what needs to be done.”

~ Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi, October 1986 “Active Recognition” from “Zen and a Bad Case of Birth and Death”.

Samu means “Caretaking practice”. That can sound like a noun, but the experience of samu, of practice in taking care, can only really be understood as a verb because samu is the exertion of practice. Samu is work done for the benefit of the Sangha, not one’s personal benefit. So transcribing teisho or proofreading one of the Roshi’s books is “samu”. Cleaning your garage or doing yard work in your own home is something you do for your own benefit, so that is not “samu”.

Samu tasks come out of the functioning of the monastery and include a vastly varied range of tasks: Cleaning, repairing, copying teisho, Dharma Talks and classes, transcription, publishing and distribution, sewing, studying and much, much more. In order to organize this array of activity, weekly formal samu meetings are scheduled at which the monks gather to discuss what needs to be done, by what time or date, and who can do it. But that is just one part of it.

Following the direction of the Roshi, samu meetings themselves serve as a medium of training for monks. And it is a rigorous training because the standard that is set for us is very high. What we are asked to do and are learning how to do is to approach what we do without a sense of problem. What that means, in practical terms, is that there is nowhere to go but to greater clarity in everything that we do.

This does not mean that tasks are carried out in a brittle, military-like fashion and there are not excuses for lapses. Far from it because that approach could only come out of a sense of problem.

Someone forgets something. To vent a sense of problem, to vent anger or frustration, to take up any kind of attitude towards that person misses the point entirely. We are human and so we are going to make mistakes, forget things, confuse things, get lost in misunderstanding. If we do not allow ourselves to default to a sense of problem, what we are left with is a series of questions. What was it that was missed? How can we prevent that from happening? What was not clear? From this has grown criteria which is applied to samu tasks.

Misunderstandings, lapses, often occur in the isolation of one’s thoughts about the task at hand. Rather than working as autonomous units, we have come to view the samu tasks not as the responsibility of any one individual, but as the expression of what actually is, dependent on every other thing for its existence. That allows us to go about them in such a way that they can be clarified and easily conveyed to others who also have varying capacities.

We have found that if we do not default to a sense of problem, then like and dislike have nothing to do with

how things actually are. Agreeing and disagreeing with each other are just some of the ingredients that are present. We look them over, just as we do the samu tasks, and decide what is useful, what is not, in getting things done.

The majority of the monks practice an average of 40 hours per week, and some also have full-time jobs. Some work situations require a certain amount of travel and so sometimes the momentum slows. When that happens, the samu meetings become crucial.

Only by coordinating our activities, by stepping past our beliefs about who and what we are, what we can and cannot do, what we think 'fair' is or is not, can we simply do what needs to be done for the benefit of all? We can if we release the notion that we are some sort of centre point, that holding to that point is what defines us — as what we do — as important or unimportant. All it really entails is seeing what needs to be done and doing it as well, as accurately, as thoroughly as we possibly can.