

TAKING A STEP IN TRAINING

Rev. Master Phoebe

From the moment we get up in the morning we take steps—little ones or big ones, all day long. For me the first steps bring me, with a short stop in the bathroom, to my meditation cushion, where I then sit down for a while, before getting involved in the business of the day. At the end of the day I sit down there again, and from there my last steps of the day take me back to bed. This way I make sure my whole day is embraced by my meditation practice, and everything that happens becomes part of training.

For every step we take we have to let go of our position, of the known, the familiar. Most of the time we don't even think about that, but when a given step seems more intimidating than most, it may be good to look at what is involved more closely. If we are keen to move forward, what we have to let go of makes little impression on our willingness to take a step, even if it is a difficult one. And at times when a seemingly small step meets with big resistance, even if the purpose of it is desirable, that may point to some strong tie with the status quo.

When I came into contact with Reverend Master Jiyu's teaching and decided I would like to study with her and become a monk, that meant I had to move from Europe to America. It seemed an easy step, even if big. I very much wanted to start a new life as a monk, although I was homesick at times for my old language and culture, family and friends. For most people, "leaving home" is not quite that dramatic—although there are many examples in Buddhist history of people who had to travel far in order to do what they needed to do. Reverend Master Jiyu herself went all the way from England to Malaysia and Japan; Dogen crossed the sea to China; and Bodhidharma traveled from Southern India to China. Everyone who comes to a temple for a retreat has to leave their home and comfortable habits for a short while; most everyone knows the resistance which getting ready for a retreat brings up, and most people find that just doing the packing and getting in the car are the best way to allow that resistance to dissolve.

When I had been with her for a while, Reverend Master Jiyu asked me if I would be willing to become a permanent resident so I could stay and train with her, and I said yes. After ten years at the Abbey, the INS decided that I had to leave the country, and so with great reluctance, I had to leave my Master.

Moving to Throssel Hole Abbey was a much harder step to take because of my attachment to Reverend Master and my monastic family, even though I was cordially welcomed into the community in England, where training was very similar. My connection with The Netherlands, where I was from, had faded in my mind already, but when I developed health problems and needed medical care and rehabilitation, it turned out that my being a citizen of the European Union who had paid her taxes earlier in life made me eligible for financial help, for which I was and am very grateful. That made it possible for me to continue to train as a monk and not have to go back into the world to make money.

Just as I thought I was going to stay in England for the rest of my life I was offered a position and place to live in the Santa Barbara Buddhist Priory, and this time it was possible for me to apply for a permanent residency—the "green card". Twenty years after my initial coming to this country, the immigration official told me I was "certainly well qualified" and stamped my papers.

I only came to the USA to be a monk, and have done nothing else since. If it was possible to not be a citizen of any specific country, I would perhaps prefer that—but it is not. Monks are encouraged to be responsible members of society, and obey the rules of the country unless by doing so they would break the Buddhist Precepts. I still have my Dutch passport, and have been keeping my options open, not fully committing to either society. Sometime during the last few years, however, as this small temple which has become my training place established itself and

the mutual support between congregation and monks developed, a next step proposed itself to me: the commitment to be a full member of this society, for better or worse—to be one of the people I train with by becoming a citizen of the USA.

At first I would brush the idea aside, thinking it was not necessary, but once I looked at it more closely, it did seem quite necessary. For me—for my training—it is necessary to look at all the deep emotions and fears that this step of openly and deliberately cutting the ties with my old country and culture brings up, and to let go of them. It is not a political decision, but a matter of deepening my training for which the time seems ripe. Once someone who was struggling with making a decision asked Reverend Master Jiyu, saying: “I worry about putting all my eggs in one basket, can you help?” Her reply was: “Well... how many eggs do you have?” There is really no basket, nor do you have an egg once you become a monk. Like water that takes the shape of the container it is in, a monk adapts to circumstances. America has given me the opportunity to train with my Master in the past and now it allows me the continuing opportunity to train with a group of sincere supporters and fellow monks. I am deeply grateful for that and want to express my gratitude by committing myself wholeheartedly to being here and sharing citizenship with all of you.

This step also requires me to renounce citizenship of the country of my birth, where most of my relatives still live, and which has treated me well in the past. I cut this tie with respect and gratitude to The Netherlands and its people.

In the monastic ordination ceremony there is a verse that I find very helpful in all this, since it provides the meditative “bottom line” for the thoughts that sometimes swirl around in my head as I go through the process of filing papers and learning civics:

**Being apart from my family in order to seek the Truth,
I vow to help others.**
