

The Brick

Rev. Master Phoebe

Once upon a time there was a young monk, who was very strong and energetic. He worked hard and found pleasure in being helpful to others and in the satisfaction of getting jobs done. Of the three traditional ways of practice in a Zen monastery—meditation, study and work—the working meditation suited him best and for years that was how he expressed his devotion and gratitude. He did not realize it, but that was also how he saw his purpose as a monk, and his place in the community. Then one day his good health karma ran out and he became seriously ill. He recovered very slowly and his physical strength did not come back, no matter what he tried. This was very hard for him, and he struggled with his feelings of uselessness and depression. The other monks tried to encourage him, but that made him feel even worse so he spent most of his time alone in his room.

One day, in early summer, all the monks were outside doing something: many worked in the garden, there was a construction project going on, and even the abbot was out welding a set of handrails by the stone steps to the meditation hall. The windows of the kitchen were open and smells of baking drifted on the breeze. A glorious day. Our friend, the young monk, was very unhappy, because he alone was not out there “doing something”. In his despair he decided to go sit in the meditation hall, which was quite empty in the middle of the day. Here too the windows were open, and he could hear the sounds of work. After a while he became still, absorbed in meditation, even though he continued to be aware of his aloneness. Then slowly he noticed that the brick wall next to him was glowing. Was he imagining it? No, the wall was definitely radiating a gentle glow. A vision of Buddha? Carefully he turned to look. Not a vision of the Buddha, just the wall he had been sitting next to for so many years. He had never paid much attention to this wall, but now he could see all the small irregular bricks it was made of. Each brick slightly different from the next one, and close to where he sat there was one especially bright one. It was a tiny bit smaller than the others, and was therefore surrounded by an extra thick layer of mortar. But it radiated joy, a pure happiness to be part of the wall.

Then the young monk understood: ‘All the bricks in the wall are part of the meditation hall, and I too am part of the fabric of the monastery, simply by being here and doing meditation. Just as the small brick simply sits there in its own place, patiently and happily, so it is not necessary for me to try to be special, or to make myself worthy of being here. If meditation is my job, there is no need to worry about strength or good health or adequacy. Just to be present is enough.’

This story came to mind when we were at Shasta Abbey for the Ten Precepts Meeting. There were many people there, and most of them worked very hard to make the retreat as successful as it was. But there were also some who did not put in much physical work, or teaching, but came to the ceremonies

and quietly sat around the hall. I felt very grateful for all the work that was done, and for the inspiring lectures. But what filled me with joy was to be surrounded by so many, many people who were all there to show their willingness to train and support and encourage each other by their presence. Nothing in particular has to be done, it is enough just to be present as part of the community.

Likewise, having been away for a while, on coming back to Pine Mountain, my joy in seeing people come and spend time at the Temple was renewed. Just as you need more than one brick to make a wall, so you need trainees to make the Treasure of the Sangha. Each one of us can be part of this Treasure just by making the contribution of our presence.
