

On the Recent Events at Shasta Abbey

Rev. Master Phoebe

As many of you know by now, the former abbot of Shasta Abbey recently gave back his monastic vows, and returned to lay life. He had been a monk for 38 years and a religious teacher for most of that time, highly regarded by many people and much loved as a friend in the Dharma. For such a person to take such a step makes a serious karmic wave, and it is not surprising that monks and lay people alike are experiencing feelings of loss, disbelief, sadness and also anger and hurt. I traveled to Shasta Abbey to be with the monks and lay community there to show my support and love. Even in the short time I was there things were changing day to day, and it was very good to see how our practice of the teaching of the Buddha stands strong and proves true.

The Buddha recommends for us to be good friends to one another, and a good friend is one who will encourage others to look with the eyes of compassion and not hold on to desire, anger and delusion. Also, a good friend will tell you when you are making a mistake. Over the years monks in our order have spoken with the former abbot and pointed out to him their concerns about his attitudes and behaviors.

One of the beautiful things about our practice is that we give each other a lot of time and space to work on our difficulties, and give each other the benefit of the doubt, assuming we are all sincere in our efforts to live within the Precepts and rules of our order. I have seen for myself the positive results of such loving kindness, patience and forbearance, and am grateful to be part of a group of people who are willing to extend that. If the sincerity of training is lost, a person will no longer be able to hear and take refuge in the Dharma, and soon the karmic consequences will begin to show themselves, naturally the situation will become untenable, and one will be asked to leave. It is said in the Scripture of Brahma's Net, that by not keeping to the Precepts, one will not be able to cultivate within oneself the Bodhi Mind, and loses the continuously wondrous fruits of Buddha Nature.

So for those of us who are left behind, it is helpful to reflect on the following: karma is not personal, and each one of us can use this situation to look within and learn from this example on how not to train.

As long as we are alive it is always possible to make a mistake, there is no guarantee that we will not become confused by some piece of karma that arises. The self is subtle, and if we do not continue to take refuge in wise friends, are willing to see where we may be wrong, self can begin to get stronger and stronger. We do not have to be overly concerned with someone else's karma, it will work out in a way that will give him the opportunity to learn what needs to be learned. For ourselves, we can see this as an opportunity to strengthen our commitment to the practice and each other. While I was at the Abbey, it was just lovely to see how people came together and realized how fortunate we are to have the Teaching as well as a dedicated place and good company to put it into practice. This gratitude is a powerful motivation to do just that, let go of our suffering and be careful to not cause more harm.

If anyone has specific questions about the sequence of events or how it affects you, please do not hesitate to ask either privately or at a temple tea and question period.