

Residency at Dharma Rain During COVID-19  
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Before moving into residency, I asked a few residents about what to expect. Each time, whether I inquired of a monk, a teacher, a recent resident or a resident from years ago, the response was the same: Every residency is different. My repeated attempts to find out what the experience was like before I had the experience became ridiculous even to me. I finally stopped asking, turned towards Don't Know Mind, and dove in head first.

Almost a full year into residential practice, I am beginning to feel like I have my "sea legs" when it comes to balancing life as a lay practitioner working within a monastic practice schedule. I wouldn't say I've become *comfortable*, but I've settled in to not knowing how each day will unfold, how today I will be asked to meet my experience as lay resident. It helps to practice with a monk like Kakumyo, who once commented at dinner that he loved surprises because suddenly our predictable narration was stymied.

Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup> unfolded in ways I could have never predicted. As is our habit on sunny days, the resident community ate lunch on the back of the engawa. Gyokuko brought over the day's funnies with her cup of tea. Ananda crawled into a curve in the berm at the edge of the garden and panted in the sunshine, nose twitching.

Kakumyo arrived with a somber expression and quietly told the residents that the Board of Directors decided to close the temple to public events in response to concerns about health and safety regarding COVID-19. It happened so fast. Just the night before Jyōshin and I had been discussing whether or not the Wy-East sangha should keep meeting in person, as if meeting in person might still be a viable option. In the kitchen after lunch, another resident asked me, "Are you scared?" And my immediate response was "Nothing is different." I surprised myself with that answer (and perhaps the other resident as well). Nothing is different? My goodness, everything is going to be different for a while.

But what was true for me in that moment was a recognition that I never know what each day will bring. In my practice, I work with the fear that accompanies Don't Know Mind. It takes courage to open my hands and heart to whatever each moment brings. It's a fierce practice, and I understand why *mahasattva* is sometimes translated in terms of being a warrior, brave like a lion.

Since the closure, sangha members have asked about what the residential container looks like in the current conditions: "What is life like at the temple? Are you still having morning service? Do you eat together? Are people coming by anyway? What happens when one of the residents gets sick?" What follows is a description of residential life at the temple during COVID-19 so far. But every day has brought changes since that sunny lunch on March 12<sup>th</sup> – by the time this is posted, some of the information might not be true anymore.

As residents, we continue to follow the regular weekly schedule. Our communal practice week begins midday on Tuesday and ends with the Sunday morning program. We sit zazen from 5:30 to 7:30 AM and again from 11:30-12:30 PM in the zendo. We eat our meals in the Sodo dining room and clean up together afterwards. We still sit around two tables pushed together, we still pass hand sanitizer before chanting the Five Thoughts, the abbot still sits at the head of the table. Following the early morning service is twenty-five minutes of soji, or temple cleaning. The tasks are familiar: clean the bathrooms, brush the cushions, sweep the Sodo floors, prepare the altar, make the breakfast, rake the gravel. After soji, we gather in the dining room for oryoki

breakfast. We eat silently, only using our voices for the meal chants. Once breakfast is over, we drink tea and each resident shares their intention for the day. Sharing a daily intention is the usual Ango morning ritual, and is the first verbalized indication of what each resident is working with in their practice. During the day, everyone engages in work practice: office responsibilities, cooking, cleaning, laundry, sacristy, gardening, and repairs. At 9:30 every night, a resident walks the temple grounds, checking to make sure doors and windows are locked, candles are out, and the alarm is set in the barn. During these Closing Rounds we chant a verse that begins, "*Peace upon this temple which protects the dharma...*" On the whole, we simply have continued our practice of serving the temple through zazen, chanting, work, and harmonious living in community.

Closing the temple to public events was the most obvious measure undertaken to protect the entire sangha and our local community. For the first ten days of the temple closure, the lay and monastic leadership were immersed in two main activities: one, discerning skillful ways to keep the sangha and the residents safe during this health crisis, and two, creating virtual pathways for sharing the temple's programs. The Board of Directors, the Health and Safety Committee, and the resident community worked collaboratively to develop detailed protocols that outline responses to various scenarios for the residents remaining at the temple. As our residential units were designed for interdependence, it's been a tricky balance of protecting each other while also allowing for personal autonomy and communal care. Because of the physical layout of the temple living spaces, determining how to isolate a resident who has symptoms of COVID-19 (fever, cough, etc) for at least 14 days was initially very challenging.

One early adjustment we made at the recommendation of the temple's Health and Safety Committee was no tablecloth or placemats at meals. When we pass the dishes clockwise, it's a little noisier without the thick tablecloth to soften the sound of a glass bowl being placed in front of your neighbor. Meals are brought to residents in isolation, and we've designated the residents' kitchen as a place for symptomatic and recovering residents to prepare their own meals if they want to. Genkō (the tenzo) gives me a "shopping list" for what food needs to be brought from the pantry in the Sodo building to the residents' kitchen in Daitoku.

In the zendo, we moved the zabutons further apart in keeping with the social distancing recommendations. With the addition of a laptop at the back of the zendo for broadcasting programs, we tend to cluster towards the front and in the center rows so at-home viewers can see us. The residents in isolation maintain the practice schedule, sitting in their quarters during periods of zazen, offering incense at their own altars. We suspended early morning sanzen for now, given how close to each other teacher and student sit in that room.

A new soji task is wiping down high-touch surfaces with bleach rags. Residents in isolation share their Ango daily intention and what their work practice will be for the day on an email thread that is shared with the community instead of at work circle after breakfast clean-up. Work practice for the staff shifted almost entirely to getting the temple set up to virtually share programming. For non-staff residents, work practice has shifted to doing all the temple tasks that are usually performed by the many sangha members who now can't come to the temple. I appreciated how much the temple is cared for by the sangha before the closure, but now I have a more nuanced understanding of the specific tasks: Enji, I'm sorry to say that I just don't seem to be able to iron and fold the kitchen aprons like you do!

My response on March 12<sup>th</sup> to the other resident, Nothing is different, wasn't so far off. Yes, on the one hand so much has changed. It's very odd to have a lit-up computer screen in the

back of the dim zendo during 5:30 AM zazen. We've had to get creative with meal forms, allowing for a break in the passing of dishes to serve plates for residents in isolation. Even with the increase in the number of stir-crazy families meandering through the garden, it feels so quiet around here without the sangha. And of course there is the overwhelming sense of awe at the enormity of the disruption to society and the suffering experienced by so many.

But practice continues here at the temple. We continue to turn towards manifesting the dharma through our speech, actions, and thoughts. We practice to end suffering. We are a smaller sangha right now experiencing daily life on the temple grounds. But our direct experience of interdependence with the entire sangha is steadfast: As you sit at home, we are sitting with you in the zendo. Hopefully you feel our presence and our practice as much as we feel yours.