

Life in the Day of a Head Dharma Teacher

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Most times it has been like this: I arrive at Providence Zen Center to sit a long retreat, and someone lets me know that either the temple's head dharma teacher or the retreat Zen master is looking for me. I go to their room. They tell me the person who was supposed to be the retreat's head dharma teacher can't make it to the retreat after all.

Will I do it?

That is pretty much how I've ended up being head dharma teacher at each of four or five week-long retreats at Providence Zen Center—including, once, as part of Kyol Che, our multi-week summer retreat.

The first thing that might happen after they ask me is that a little thought of pride comes into my head. They

When you are HDT, you hope the moktak master will do a good job or you will have to be keeping an eye on the clock on top of all your other jobs. The definition of HDT heaven: A reliable moktak master. The definition of HDT hell: An unreliable one.

Orientation

No one really seems to teach you to be a head dharma teacher in the Kwan Um school, at least in my experience. You kind of get thrown into the deep end because someone has decided either (1) you are at that point in your Zen practice where you should take more responsibility, or (2) there is no one else to do it. You learn from having watched other HDTs at retreats you've sat and by running around frantically, in the hour before the retreat starts, asking people with more experience than you what to do.

Then, you're suddenly in the dharma room giving an orientation to the people who have never sat a retreat before. What do you tell them? There is no list. You tell them what you would have liked to know when you were new.

Please be on time for everything. Get a drink of water or go to the restroom during walking meditation but don't think of walking periods as time for a rest—it's still practice. You can stand up behind your mat if your legs hurt. Stay still. Biggest of all, *keep silence*, though any experienced HDT will tell you it is not the newcomers who keep breaking silence—instead it is the seasoned practitioners you find having chats in the corners.

After one orientation, a new student runs up to me:

"That big stick you walk around the dharma room with during meditation—how do you know when you should ask for a hit on the back?"

I think for a minute.

"When sitting still another minute seems so uncomfortable that even getting hit on the back with a big stick seems better. That's when you should ask for a hit."

Meditation

There is a seating chart on the bulletin board. Sometimes the retreat HDT has to make it and sometimes the temple head dharma teacher has made it for you. Monks and Ji Do Poep Sas sit closest to the Zen master. Then, ev-



Photo by Allan Matthews

could have asked anyone to help lead the retreat but they asked me! Then, I remember that they asked someone else first. I was actually only second choice. Haha. Monkey mind!

Next thing: Who is the work master? Who is the kitchen master? Have all these jobs that will keep the retreat running been assigned? Is everyone clear about their jobs? I wonder this because, while the Zen master or Ji Do Poep Sa is teaching during student interviews, the head dharma teacher is responsible for the smooth running of the retreat.

One thing I always hope: That the person assigned to be moktak master wears a good watch. Because the moktak master doesn't just lead chants, but also gives the signal that everyone should go to the dharma room five minutes before every practice period. If the moktak master is late, everyone is late.

everyone else sits in order of seniority. That is good because it puts the least experienced meditators at the end of the row closest to you, the head dharma teacher, where you can keep an eye on them and give them support.

Usually, there is a lot of confusion at the beginning of the first sitting period as people try to correlate where they are sitting to what they saw on the seating chart. Sometimes, even before the retreat starts, you get a complaint. "I took my senior dharma teacher precepts before so and so, so I should be seated closer to the Zen master!" A senior dharma teacher who is attached to where they are sitting? Welcome to being head dharma teacher!

During meditation periods, part of the HDT's job is to help maintain form, silence and stillness in the dharma room so that people's minds can settle and they can inquire into their nature. What am I? What is my human job? Don't know . . .

It is so amazing and humbling, really, that so many people have gathered to make this inquiry. After you hit the chugpi three times to mark the beginning of meditation, you might look around the silent room and take it in. A wave of gratitude for these people might wash over you.

At the beginning of the retreat, people follow correct form, sit up straight and don't move. Eventually, one of the newcomers might start to shift around on the mat and you might perceive they are too embarrassed to be the first to stand up. At that point, you might do them the favor of standing up yourself—symbolically giving them permission and encouragement to do the same.

That is a big part of the job: perceive what each person needs that will help them to maintain and hold their big question and their inquiry. How can you help participants not to be distracted by pain, by other people moving around or making noise or even by the temptation to fall asleep?

During the last practice period of the day, in the evening, you might notice someone nodding off. During one retreat where I was HDT, there were three or four people who were falling asleep a lot and the Zen master asked me to do something about it.

In the middle of one practice period, when I noticed the nodding, I waited a few moments and then shattered the silence when I roared at the top of my lungs, "Everybody wake up!" I was very embarrassed. Who was I to shout in the dharma room? But it was the only thing I could think of to do, and it worked. People stopped sleeping.

One thing you have to learn as head dharma teacher during a retreat is that you really have to trust yourself. You have to trust your perception of what is needed and then offer it the way you know how. And guess what? Not everyone will like the way you choose to do things. You get complaints from students. You get complaints from teachers who are more senior than you. Even the Zen

master might complain to you.

And still you must trust yourself and also trust getting complained at. Then there is your own practice. What is the mind that does not move through all of that complaining? Sound fun?

The Formal Meal

The first meal of the retreat is usually disorganized, but it is through the disorganization that you can see people's karma. Who is very anxious to make sure everything is in the right order on the mat where the food is placed? Who brings in a dish and then just goes and gets their bowls without further concern? Who is making sure the teaspoons in the condiment tray are all absolutely precisely aligned?

If you are really paying attention, watching people move around the mat where all the food is being placed brings up so much love and compassion. You can see people's attachments. You can see their desire to help. You can see their humanity. And when you notice your judgments come up, your own likes and dislikes, you get to see your own humanity, too.

After you hit the chugpi to begin the meal, the dance continues. Some people want to serve the food as a kindness. Others have pain in their legs and want any excuse to get up. Maybe because of that, people rush to put out their bowls so they can start serving and it can be very noisy.

The first meal is really too soon to begin asking people to be more mindful about form and silence; people need to settle in. Later, I will point out that meal service is the closest practice in the retreat to being in the real world. Serving the meal is all about giving and receiving. Living in the world is also all about giving and receiving.

The meal service is our chance to be mindful about that giving and receiving; how much noise we make, how much we clack our bowls is a sign of how mindful we are being as we give and receive. "Don't clack your bowls!"

At the end of the meal, you hit the chugpi once when it is time for tea to be served. At last summer's Kyol Che, one participant got up to serve tea at every single meal but, because he was far from the teapot, someone else always beat him too it.

Finally, I asked, "Everybody please remain seated and let that guy have a chance to serve the tea." Sometimes, the kind thing to do is not to serve. Know when to serve and know when to receive.

Carrying the Stick

If being head dharma teacher is a job then here is the pay: as head dharma teacher you get to stand up and walk around the room with the hitting stick every 15 minutes. In other words, because you're walking instead of sitting, you get paid in knees that don't hurt.

Carrying the stick is one of the really intimate parts of the retreat. As you walk, you may notice that someone has

about 15 cushions on their mat. Later, there will be a huge look of relief on their face when you whisper, “Would you prefer if I got you a chair?” Last summer, as I walked, I saw that four participants were dripping with sweat because their mats happened to be in direct sunlight. “Pull your mats back and out of the sun in the next walking period,” I whispered to them.

Some people want to be hit hard with the stick. One participant makes a fist and pumps it to say so. Others want soft; they make “just a little” sign with their thumb and forefinger. They don’t realize it, but each person who asks for a hit is doing you, the head dharma teacher, a favor.

By this stage of the retreat your heart is sometimes breaking with love for all the humans being totally human on their mats. Unlike when you are a regular participant, your job is, in part, to pay attention to other participants. You can see their struggles and joys. That makes you love them. When they ask for a hit, they do you the favor of allowing you to let the love out.

Maintaining Silence

Once, about halfway through a one-week retreat, my guiding teacher, Zen Master Wu Kwang (Richard Shrobe), announced to everyone, “This is the part of the retreat where things start to fall apart. We throw our cushions instead of placing them gently. We forget to bow at the door.” But letting into that temptation to loosen form, he told us, actually makes the retreat harder, not easier. When you are weary, that is the time to tighten form.

It is around this time of the retreat that you notice people whispering in corners of the Zen center during breaks. Also, some of the retreat participants might start to bicker at each other during work period. The kitchen master might get mad at the work master, or vice versa. Participants start to decide that they should be in charge of the

thermostat or other conditions in the dharma room, a job that belongs to the head dharma teacher.

A Ji Do Poep Sa said to me, “Everybody should just do their jobs and follow forms without talking. As long as you don’t break silence, how can there be a problem?” Nothing lasts very long on a retreat. Work period is an hour. Sitting periods are never longer than 40 minutes. Chanting is over quickly, too.

In everyday life, human beings have the habit of trying to escape what is going on in their minds by changing what is going on in the world. The retreat is a chance not to try to change the outside in order to try to change the inside. Instead, we get to truly observe our minds and watch the coming and going of our likes and dislikes. That is part of why we maintain silence.

And by the way, senior students are more difficult to convince of the importance of silence than younger students. Younger students follow the rules. Older students follow themselves. They might think, “I know when to break silence.” But sometimes they forget the effect they have on other students.

So, it is time to give the dharma room a lecture on strengthening form and maintaining silence. But, you remind them, it is not about following rules. It is about doing what is kind to your dharma brothers and sisters and what will help us all with our practice.

The Circle Talk

The retreat is over. Everyone is taking a turn talking about their experience and there is much laughter. It’s kind of sad in a way. Kind of wonderful. It’s so fun to watch people talk about their experiences, some of which, as head dharma teacher, you have intuited.

It is fun, too, to sit next to the Zen master because, during the retreat, you have been having little conversations about how the retreat is going and you both have blown off steam to each other. You’ve grown friendlier.

Everyone feels kinship to each other. It is a nice feeling. But for me, because I was head dharma teacher, I’m feeling so proud and grateful to everyone. During circle talks, everyone thanks you. But I, in turn, thank them. Because maybe being head dharma teacher—having seen everyone’s humanity and feeling at one with them—is the best way to spend the retreat of all. ♦

Colin Beavan’s coaching, consulting, speaking, writing and activism have encouraged tens of thousands of people to align their lives with what’s truly important. The lifestyle and career adjustments he helps people make allow them to live abundantly and purposefully, for the sake of both themselves and their communities. It is Colin’s mission to wake people up, on both individual and organizational levels, to ways of life and doing business that are healthier, happier and more just for individuals, for our society, and for our planet.



Photo: Albert Lee