



## Those Who Came Before Reflections on Family and Dharma Ancestors Saturday, Nov. 15

### 1. Dharma Talk

#### Families

It is a particular affliction of popular Western post-modern thought that:

- a.) We live and create in the present, for the future, therefore history is not important to us, we don't need to know or care much and
- b.) The truth of the past is a matter of perspective, so we needn't concern ourselves with details.

In our practice of mindfulness, with its returning to the present moment again and again, we might be tempted to likewise disregard the past, especially our own histories. This would be a mistake.

The Buddha's teaching reminds us that all things are transient but are also the result of causes and conditions that precede it. That is, there is a continuity between the present moment and what precedes it. There is no dividing line, no rating of more or less important. Our every action and tendency emerges from where we have been.

In most far Eastern Dharma, there is a recognition of the relation between generations, what is called "filial piety". Every child has obligations to their parents and

ancestors. There is a recognition that parents establish what the child will be, and in turn, the child shows their gratitude by caring for the parents. Even more, there is a recognition that even after death, ancestors, like grandparents and beyond are, in some way, still active in our lives. They can be asked for advice and guidance. In return we remember and honour them. Our Dharma uncle, Thich Naht Hahn says even further, that not only do we have a relationship to our parents, we are our parents lives. They become us, as they did their own and their grandparents.

Today, we reflect on our own families, in particular those who have gone before us. We do so to acknowledge what we have received from them (you can recollect the *naikan* exercises we did a few weeks ago). This serves several purposes. It recollects the unbreakable connection between us and those who went before. It honours their efforts and their sacrifices, made for our benefit.

This re-collection also serves to re-establish for us that what we call "myself" is inextricably connected to those previous lives. Can we really pick out something and say "this is me"? How often do we either squirm with embarrassment or swell with pride when we notice how much we are like a parent or ancestor. How often do you look in the mirror and see a parent?

Perhaps the family of your childhood is largely

intact, perhaps you have lost grandparents, parents, siblings, uncles or cousins. Today is our opportunity to remind ourselves that the set of lives within which we find ourselves has a continuity that goes back into unmeasured time. Perhaps nowhere else is the truth of inter-connection so visible as in our families.

### **Dharma Ancestors**

We are also gathered here as members of another family - the sons and daughters of the Buddhas. There are, for us, uncountable relatives in this family, each one having contributed to our lives, whether we understand that or not. We talk about the Three Refuges of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha - the Teacher, The Teaching and the Community of Practice. We acknowledge an interconnection between these three, they are like three facets of a beautiful jewel, none can exist alone and all are the source of the brilliance of the jewel.

The Buddha Shakyamuni turned to dust so long ago we couldn't even find a speck of him. His great act was to , as we say, realize the Dharma. He became the Dharma in every action. The Dharma was unfolded in his life. Thus as the Community grew and changed, students and teachers generation after generation also became the Dharma. Not that they became twins or stand-ins or anything like that. It's that they too realized the Dharma in their lives and actions. Thus, we may not see Shakyamuni in this time, yet we continue to have the presence of the Dharma he realized in our presence. Each and every of these Dharma-ancestors made the Dharma available to us, over and over again. That so many of them gave their lives over to presenting the Dharma, and we now have that available right here is a miraculous display of generosity. Today then, we also acknowledge the efforts and connection with all of these ancestors of ours.

Here's an example to illustrate and teach you a little Dharma history in the process.: -

Earlier this year we considered Nagarjuna, a giant of a teacher who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century in India. He was several generations after Shakyamuni and deeply trained in the Abhidharma tradition, the earliest monastic Buddhist practices of India. His writing became the standard for teaching over the next few centuries, and in fact are still influential today. It is from him that we learned what we accept as a common teaching, that of the "emptiness" of all conditioned experiences and entities. Nagarjuna's teachings were subsequently brought to China a few centuries later by Indian missionaries. They were then studied and commented on by Chinese Buddhist monks, such as Chi-i, the founder of the T'ien-t'ai School, the Chinese equivalent of the Indian Madhyamika or Middle Way School Nagarjuna founded.

Another few centuries later, the Japanese monk Saicho, also trained in the ancient Abhidharma style, came to China to study. He learned the teachings of Chi-i and returned to Japan to found the Tendai school. This later gave birth to most of the major schools that survive in Japan today, the Zen, the Pure Land and Nichiren. As you know, the Tendai recently arrived in North America and made a home at the New York Betsuin where I am now studying. In between these generations are millions of unnamed teachers and students who are my ancestors. One by one they have kept a precious treasure so that I could have it to learn and take my turn at passing it forward. Isn't there something miraculous in all this?

So, today we take a few moments to consider all the teachers and practitioners who have given their entire lives so that we can sit here and study and practice.

## **2. Ceremony**

### **Reflection 1**

Consider what you have received and carried on from your family ancestors. What wholesome actions have you acquired or learned from this person?

### **Reflection 2**

Consider a person or persons who helped unfold the Dharma for you - perhaps a living author or teacher, or the words of some teacher from another generation or even the Buddha himself.

What aspects of practice have inspired you, in thought or action, from this individual?

*presented at Akashaloka,  
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