

Dharma Etiquette

by Rodney Smith

A recent article in the Seattle Times pointed out that on the average our tolerance for waiting is very limited. If we have to wait in line or are placed on hold for longer than five minutes, we become impatient and often rude or disruptive. If situations transpire to throw us off schedule or cause irritation, we rebel. We are, the article concluded, an impatient nation.

I am beginning to see this trend within Dharma circles across the country. Here at SIMS, leaving an event early or lying down during a Dharma talk has become common enough that visiting teachers are commenting. It is not uncommon for someone to leave in the middle of a dharma class, discussion or be unwilling to complete a full day of a nonresidential retreat. The person may not like the subject of the talk, or the speaker, or simply feel the competing pressure of another area of his/her life.

The Dharma requires more from us than a drop in mentality. We can become so casual in our relationship to truth that we no longer stretch upward to meet where it is pointing. We can miss the entire point of the Dharma by responding to its entertainment value rather than looking at our need for entertainment.

The etiquette of the Dharma is very simple: remain sitting attentively from beginning to end. Deal with whatever comes up as part of our attendance to that event and commitment to the Dharma. If we cannot do that, it is better not to attend than to be insensitive to the teacher and the sangha by leaving early. Whether we like what is being said or who is saying it is secondary to our willingness to work with our mind's reaction and to be aware of our impact on the whole gathering.

We recently had a reputable Zen teacher speak to our sangha and during the talk a half dozen or so people left. Later I met one of the people who departed and asked why he left early. He said he wasn't connecting to Zen like he did Insight Meditation. I asked if he was connecting to himself during the talk and if he understood the impact on the whole, let alone the teacher, when anyone leaves before it is finished. Developing clear comprehension and a deeper sensitivity beyond one's own gratification is the Dharma. When we go to a Dharma event and do not practice the Dharma, we might as well have stayed home and watched a movie.

All this being said, there are legitimate reasons for people to leave early. If we have to catch a ferry or have an urgent bodily need, or a babysitter requires relief, then by all means quietly, without distraction, tend to those requirements. We might want sit in the back to minimize our leaving when the reason is known beforehand. By in large, we come for the entire event and work with it internally regardless of whether we like it or not. This is what it means to be free of conditions and maintain sensitivity to others.