



One Robe One Bowl, by Sylvia Boorstein

In the early years of my practice, a group of Burmese monks were guest teachers for a week at a retreat at which I was a student in southern California. They were housed in one of the cottages at the edge of the retreat center. One morning after breakfast, the retreat manager announced, "The monks are leaving this morning. If you want to, you can stand outside their cottage as a gesture of respect as they leave." I stood silently with the other retreatants and watched the monks walk out single file from their cottage, each one carrying his begging bowl in a string bag. I realized that whatever they were wearing, whatever they were carrying, and whatever was in the two suitcases on top of the minibus they were traveling in constituted all of their worldly goods. Watching the monks seemed to me a visual representation of the truth that not-needing--not needing more, not needing other--is the end of suffering. I thought, "They have everything they need." At home these days, I keep a copy of a small book of poetry by the Zen monk Ryokan, 'One Robe, One Bowl', not on the bookshelf but someplace where I see it often--on the kitchen counter, or propped up on the piano next to the music. The title reminds me of the image of the monks. When my mind becomes cluttered, and therefore tense, with desires--with things I think I need or ways in which I think things need to be in order for me to be happy--I remember that the clutter itself is the cause of my suffering, and I think, "What is it that I really need?" When I see clearly enough, I can be generous toward myself. I can give away the clutter. --Sylvia Boorstein