

Tending the Place Where You Sleep



We seem to have a natural curiosity about other people's sleeping arrangements. When visiting museums or historical sites, we curious trespassers spend a great deal of time congregating near the beds of the famous, entirely captivated, totally intrigued. There is actually something very moving about viewing these sleeping places, where the people

were most vulnerable, most themselves. Even though the beds may not have been slept in for the past hundred years or so, there remains a sense of intimacy and immediacy about them.

We all have our place to rest, whether it is in a baroque, canopied, sequestered chamber or in a dirty sleeping bag beneath the freeway overpass. Sleeping is one of the fundamentals of any life, and the Lotus Sutra (one of the treatises based on the teachings of Buddha) refers to bedding, along with food, medicine, and clothing, as one of the Four True Offerings

that can be given to others. It is one of the true gifts that can make a difference between life and death.

When you go to bed, you surrender yourself to a totally new environment, an intimate sector that contains possibilities for rest, love, birth, and death. It's the one place where you are completely vulnerable and unguarded. Even if you sleep with another, you eventually withdraw into your own private self, and the bed becomes the place where you make the transition from being conscious to unconscious and back again. The edges of the bed contain the borders of your sleep. You let go of everything you know, and trust in some greater power to keep you safe and protected until morning.

When I was a young boy, I asked my mother, "How far can we go in our dreams and still get back in time to wake up?" This was quite a joke around our house for a long time afterward, but thinking about it now, I wonder if this wasn't a telltale sign of my nascent interest in Buddhism. We Buddhists are always desperately, fervently, trying to wake ourselves up. And it is little consolation to learn that Dogen once said, "Even in sleep, we continue our practice."

The temple priests and monks were provided with a wide variety of mats and cushions—zafus, futons, zabutons, and the like—in order to practice "sitting and lying-down Zen." The traveling monks and hermits who headed out on their own considered the entire outside landscape to be their home. They spoke of using "the stone as a pillow, the sky as a blanket." Even today, we can consider the place where we sleep as a kind of landscape—the broad fields of the blankets, the hill-like pillows.

As you air out your own sheets and blankets, you can be grateful for the fresh-smelling aroma and sunshine that permeate them. As you plump the pillows, try to remember the dreams that were born upon them. And when folding quilts, you can recall the robes of the "patchwork monks"

who slept enveloped in the smell of pine trees. The sewing of these robes was described by one monk as “the sewing of one cloud to another.” This is the way our lives are put together, one piece, one moment at a time.

As you smooth the wrinkles from the top layer of bedding, you can consider the waking world. What does it mean to come fully alive? How do you change as you prepare to go out and encounter others? What do you leave behind? Now that you are embarked on your life again, it is the bed’s opportunity to rest. Perhaps you can take some of its comfort with you. As you leave the bedroom, you might offer a slight bow, or *gassho*, hands palm to palm before your face, as a small offering of thanks. We are all most grateful for this period of rest and quiet. But as Katagiri Roshi told his students, “Now it’s time to wake up! Your life must be rooted in the real earth, not in sleep.”