

The Redwood Sutra

Thus have I heard one time when the Venerable Mṛgāvataṃsakā was residing in the redwoods by the banks of the Smith River, California. After eating a breakfast of grilled corn together with the sangha, the Venerable Mṛgāvataṃsakā spoke to the assembled monks and nuns, surrounded by firs and redwoods, with nomads, campers, squirrels, jays, elk, and a bear nearby.

"O friends of the forest! There are eight qualities of a redwood tree that make it an exceptional tree, worthy of respect and admiration. What are the eight?"

1. The redwood knows how to grow its wood in such a way that it protects itself from infection and rot.
2. The roots of the redwood know how to grow laterally on the forest floor and interlock with each others' roots into a mat to support its enormous weight.
3. The redwood can tolerate shade well for many years until it has access to sunlight, when it grows up straight rapidly to reach the top of the forest canopy.
4. The seed of the redwood is small like a tomato seed, but it grows higher than any other tree.
5. The trunk of a fallen redwood provides a surface and sustenance for the younger generations, which put down their roots in and over it.
6. The burls and crotches of the redwood create soil, access to sunlight, and water for many other plants—huckleberries, ferns and other trees—and animals that grow and live on it.
7. The redwood harvests the fog and rain, providing water for itself and the forest floor below.
8. Redwoods know that they can grow most beautifully, tall and stably in a grove, supporting and protecting one another in harmony."

The Venerable continued:

"In the same way, O friends of the forest, when a monastic in our sangha knows how to put into practice these eight qualities of a redwood, they also become an exceptional monk or nun, worthy of respect and admiration. What are these eight qualities?"

1. Monastics know how to protect themselves by their practice of the precepts and fine manners from sense impressions that give rise to craving or hatred—impressions arising

from the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, or the mind. They see that these sense impressions are as fleeting as a bubble, a flash of lightning, or a magic trick, and their mind is not attached to or carried away by them. That is how monastics protect themselves from infection and rot.

2. Monastics put down good roots like a mat throughout the sangha, knowing how to connect with others and find joy in the whole sangha, without discrimination. They always see the good qualities in everyone in the sangha and are able to help others to do the same. That is how monastics know how to use their roots to connect into a mat, interlocking their roots with the roots of others throughout the sangha.
3. Monastics know well their great aspiration to wake up and help all beings to be free, and they also know how to be patient in the practice. Thanks to the strength of their aspiration, they walk straight on the path of liberation, whether they encounter many difficulties or few obstacles, growing strong and straight in the sangha. That is how monastics can tolerate shade well for many years until they have access to sunlight, when they grow up straight rapidly to reach the forest canopy.
4. Monastics know that learning the Dharma and progressively putting it into practice gives them a predisposition for rapid vertical growth, and so they do not become dispirited by the time it takes to transform their afflictions. Though they may come to the sangha with just the tiny seed of a spiritual life, monastics who take refuge in the Dharma and spread out roots in all directions in the sangha soon establish a stable practice and use this imperturbable stability to grow ever higher, ever stronger. That is how monastics practice to grow higher than any other tree, even though they start out small as a tomato seed.
5. Monastics know how to live in the sangha and practice the Dharma in such a way that their actions continue to nourish their younger brothers and sisters for many generations into the future. The actions of body, speech, and mind of those monks and nuns become nourishment for future generations, even long after the dissolution of their physical body. In this way, their younger siblings establish stability in the Dharma. That is how monastics provide sustenance for future generations, which put down their roots around them.
6. Monastics know how to build a sangha wherever they go, making good use of the conditions that manifest wherever they find themselves. They know how to transform suffering in such a way that it becomes a platform for others to grow closer to the sunlight. They know that happiness is not an individual matter, and that the transformation of their own suffering can help many living beings suffer less. That is how monks or nuns practice to allow the burls and crevices to create soil and access to sunlight and water so that many other plants and animals can grow on it.

7. Monastics see that everything can be a Dharma teaching and nourishment for their happiness and insight. The more established they become in the Dharma, the more others can take refuge in them and benefit from their presence. That is how monastics harvest the fog, providing water for themselves and the forest floor below.
8. Monastics see that it is rare to have a chance to live in the sangha and don't waste this precious opportunity to be nourished and supported by the sangha. Seeing that their own progress is inextricably intertwined with the progress of their siblings and that they already have more than enough conditions to be happy, they grow up strong and stable, and never leave their sangha. That is how monastics grow beautiful, tall, and stable among the other redwoods, supporting and protecting one another in harmony.

This is how, O friends of the forest, monastics, by practicing these eight qualities of a redwood, become exceptional, worthy of respect and admiration."

Thus taught the Venerable Mṛgāvataṃsakā. The monks and nuns, alongside the nomads and campers, with the bear, squirrels and elk nearby, rejoiced and straightaway put her teachings into practice.

*Jedediah Smith Redwood Forest, June 2023
by Brother Pháp Lưu and Sister Lộc Nghiễm*