

The Sangha Treasure

Sangha means community. Traditionally, this was understood as the community of monks and nuns, lay men and lay women, who gathered around the Buddha, learning and practicing the Dharma. It is the hidden, often overlooked jewel of practice. In one of the early sutras, Buddha's disciple Ananda says, "The sangha jewel is half of the holy life." He says this as a way to praise and acknowledge the importance of the community. But the Buddha responds with a bit of a rebuke, "Not so Ananda," he says, "the sangha is the *whole* of the holy life."

Often we come together in community seeking support and sustenance. And while this is worthy and well needed—in a world where so many of us feel alienated, disconnected, alone—it is not enough. In Sangha we create a fellowship of people dedicated to a cause beyond our immediate, individual needs and concerns. Sangha both weaves and stretches us. When we come together, united in something bigger than us, we have the opportunity to become bigger, too. This kind of community offers an opening; a place we can connect and sink roots, and from this shared ground grow—stretching the bounds of who we have taken ourselves to be, and what we have believed to be possible.

The premise of the entire Buddha Dharma is that we are not separate. But it's one thing to say, "we are all connected," and it's another thing entirely to engage with people in our day-to-day interactions from this understanding. In theory, we may see the benefits of being kind and loving to everyone. In action, it is not so easy.

Zen monastic practice is community practice. Beyond the few hours of sleep each night, there is very little time alone. The core of monastic practice is following the schedule—a detailed flow of events, marked by bells and drums and gongs. Wake up is at 3:30, periods of meditation are forty minutes long, lunch is at 11:55, work period lasts for an hour and a half each afternoon. Everything is done together; as one giant body moving through the day.

Even the long hours of silent sitting are done in tight rows, with monks sitting nearly shoulder to shoulder. From a distance, it may

appear still and peaceful. But a neighbor with the sniffles, or the person who is always late or who keeps moving your shoes, or who chants off-key, becomes a source of agitation and annoyance. As life is pared down to the basics, the opportunity to study our picky, petty mind—full of views, opinions and preferences—blossoms into full view.

Sangha is where our lofty aspirations meet the nitty-gritty of relating. Other people are the grit that polishes the pearl. Sometimes monastic life is described as rough stones churning together in a rock tumbler—polishing each other’s edges until each one becomes smooth. The tumbling and churning is not always comfortable, but it is the necessary ingredient to create beauty.

Taking refuge in sangha means seeking reprieve from being refugees—people without a home or place or community to drop into. Today’s world is ripe with refugees; people who have been uprooted, and are literally without a home. Homelessness is rampant in our cities, in our alleyways, on our sidewalks. Every year, there are more and more people living on the streets. When we walk past them—perhaps offering a crumpled dollar bill, a few dimes, or a “hello” and nod—and then continue on our way, the discomfort we feel is one of recognition. The line between “us” and “them” is much thinner than we care to acknowledge. As the song says, “There but for fortune, go you or I...”

Each of us houses internal refugees as well—the discarded, unsightly parts of ourselves we grimace and shrink away from. We may toss a few quarters or leave a plate of food from time to time, but mostly we cringe and wish they would go away. We spend huge amounts of energy staving off the affront of the unacceptable parts of ourselves. We reject, deny, justify, ignore, and exert enormous effort to avoid direct contact with these pervasive, shadowy selves.

Even if we have a home, a job, family, and friends, most of us know the sting of not fitting in. This is the pain of feeling a part from instead of a part of; of feeling lost and unable to find our place in life. In a world of multiple marriages, jobs that force us to uproot, and lack of extended family, the search for community arises for many as a gaping hunger. We seek groups where we can “be ourselves;”

places where we can relax and rest into the comfort of being with “our kind of people.”

Dogen says, “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self.” Buddhist community is a place where we come together to study ourselves. The irony is that we only discover who we really are with others. The simple, unadorned truth is that, ultimately, we are one tangled web of Being. The refuge and home we seek to soothe the strain of our felt sense of disconnection is much closer than we imagine. It is not in a distant place or on a silent mountaintop. It is always right here, in the arms and eyes of those around us.

Bodhisattvas vow to engage in “studying the self” by rolling up their sleeves and jumping into the fray. They understand that it is by caring for one another that we are cared for; that by meeting and bumping up against one another we discover who we really are; and that this “who” is precisely the solace we seek. There’s a bumper sticker that says, “For happiness, cherish others.” This illuminates and points to the truth that whenever we stretch beyond the limits of our narrow self-concern, we step into a circle of love that supports and buoys us.

Years ago, I tapped this truth and twisted it. Understanding the connection between selflessness and awakening, I decided to take on the practice of “putting others first.” I would let other cars pass me on the freeway; step aside when faced with an overcrowded elevator; resist the temptation to speak out in groups, ceding the floor to my friends and classmates. I would replace the roll of toilet paper and wash the dishes left in the sink. And I did all of this without complaint, without bragging, without telling a soul what I was up to.

As the weeks passed, my smug self-righteousness grew. Finally, unable to keep my goodness a secret any longer, I went to report to Reb. “I’ve taken on a new practice,” I reported, “of putting others first.” I paused, feeling pleased with myself. “It seems to me,” I continued, “that this is a great way to unravel the self.” I was bright-eyed, full of enthusiasm, hoping he would delight and praise my discovery. Selflessness was, after all, clearly the goal of practice. The

self was the enemy. Uprooting the sneaky, slippery strings of I-me-mine was surely the path to enlightenment. Why not use compassion as a stepping-stone to reach the goal?

Reb was silent for too long. I began to squirm in my seat, feeling my cheeks flush. I was embarrassed by my eagerness and bravado, wishing I had kept my mouth shut and my “secret” practice to myself. At last he looked up, his face somber, and said, “Someday, you will understand...that you have it exactly backwards.”

Putting others first in order to relinquish the attachment to self is like using spiritual practice as a tool for personal fame and power. It’s exactly backwards. The point is not to help others in order to wake up. The point is to wake up in order to be of greater and greater service to others.

If I had kept my practice to myself, my confused understanding might never have been illuminated. My ideas of compassion or generosity or wisdom mature and develop as I test them out in the community of friends and peers and get feedback. This is how compassion and generosity and wisdom grow. To do this, we need each other. Like rocks in a tumbler, as we rub and chafe, the kinks in our understanding are smoothed and refined.

Spiritual development moves in the direction of erasing, or at least softening, the lines between us and them; widening the net of inclusivity beyond the known and familiar. Initially we begin internally, with the willingness to include more and more of ourselves—our ungainly, uncooperative bodies, the vast range of painful, inconvenient and embarrassing emotions—into the fold of “me.” This means making friends with our rough edges and mixed up understandings; allowing our increasingly clear seeing to bathe in an ocean of compassion.

As we grow and mature, the circle expands, from our family, tribe, or neighborhood, to include people of different colors, religious affiliations, languages, and so on; growing wider and wider until it includes all people, all animals, and all of life itself. This expansion, extending out in concentric rings from each human heart, is the ripening and expression of our shared human consciousness.

Martin Luther King describes it this way: “We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”

In my job, I frequently travel and stay in hotels. Recently, because my preferred hotel was booked, I spent a night in a new hotel south of Los Angeles. I arrived crabby and out of sorts—after an hour long cab ride, a good portion of which was spent lost—wandering through run-down neighborhoods as the sun set and evening fell. When I checked in, the hotel staff explained that I would not be able to set up the conference room where my class was scheduled for the next morning because “my” classroom was filled with dinner tables, candles and bouquets—for a loud and boisterous wedding party. Dinner and dancing, I was told, would continue into the wee hours of the night.

The banquet manager was busy with the wedding and unavailable to retrieve the boxes sent for my class. I watched my mood slip from annoyance to anger, until I was in a full primadona huff. Once ensconced in my noisy room, I ordered room service, watched a movie and slept fitfully, as the wedding band bass drum pounded away in the dark.

I woke, tired and tense, knowing that—somehow—I needed to get out of the snit I was in and find my footing so I could show up for the class. I sat cross-legged in an overstuffed chair, breathing into the knot in my belly, and then splayed myself on the floor to do a few simple yoga stretches. Lying on the floor, gazing up, my eye caught a black mark in the corner. I twisted to get a better look and discovered an arrow on the ceiling, pointing toward nothing in particular. I rolled my eyes. Surely this was the quirkiest hotel I had ever visited...And then I got it. Remembering that the menu offered “halal” foods, curry dishes, and that even the bacon and sausage were listed as pork-free, the meaning of the arrow on the ceiling came into sharp focus.

When the server arrived with my halved, sliced grapefruit, egg white omelet and toast, I sized him up. He was dark, round and polite; friendly, but trying a bit too hard. As he placed the tray on the table, I thanked him for the meal and signed for it. He smiled, but wouldn't meet my gaze. "The arrow on the ceiling," I began, pointing toward the corner, "is it pointing east?" Suddenly, he lit up. "Oh, yes," he answered, beaming. Our eyes caught for a moment and he laughed, "Yes, yes, you understand. You are very smart."

Seeing this hotel waiter in his full humanness, reconnected me with my own, and shook me out of my funk. I was no longer an exasperated, impatient hotel guest. In meeting him this way, I became a member of the vast family of seekers. From this place, the world ceased to be a set of hurdles to overcome and opened, instead, as a warm, gracious invitation.

As Bodhisattvas in training, our work and delight is to witness and drop into the simultaneously unique and universal passions that bind us warm heart to warm heart. This means opening and stepping into the breadth and span of our human community and connectedness. It means opening to the simple, profound truth that none of us can wake up until all of us wake up—and realizing that this is not a daunting task or project. It is the very fabric of life that supports and sustains us.

As we practice together, we come to see that Sangha is not a select group. Ultimately, it includes all of us: our teachers, close friends and family, as well as the homeless person on the street, our cab driver, banquet manager, and the room-service guy—who knocks on the door in the morning, bringing breakfast.