



The Role of the Sangha in Spiritual Practice

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The Sangha is an important element of the spiritual path that provides support for the other elements (meditation, reflection, daily life practice and teacher).

What is a Sangha?

Sangha is generally translated as “community” or “order.” A relative term, samgha, literally means “that which is struck together well.” Historically, sangha is most commonly used to refer to the order of Buddhist monks and nuns. The Buddhist sangha began with the ordination of the first monks, the “group of five” to whom the Buddha delivered his first sermon, the Four Noble Truths (the four principles of suffering). Today, particularly in the West, sangha refers to any community of those who follow the Buddha’s teachings.¹

Sangha has been defined in several ways. Mariana Caplan notes that a sangha is a group of like-minded individuals who have a mutual dedication to serve the spiritual life and development of all in the community.”² Joan Halifax notes that “Taking refuge in the sangha is ...being in a community, where there is a kind of natural feedback, where there is a sense of reality, support, mirroring, building trust and of encountering difficulties in your experience with others and being able to sustain a relationship that will transform those difficulties into compassion and trust.”³

In the wonderful book, *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*,⁴ by Thich Nhat Hahn and John Lawlor, a number of definitions emerge. Following are some quotes from the book.

“A sangha is a group of people who practice mindfulness together, inspired by the historic Buddha, his teachings (the Dharma), and the presence of other mindfulness practitioners (the Sangha itself).”⁵

“A sangha is a community of friends practicing the dharma together in order to bring about and to maintain awareness. The essence of a Sangha is awareness, understanding, acceptance, harmony and love.”⁶

“A Sangha is a community of resistance, resisting the speed, violence, and unwholesome ways of living that are prevalent in our society. Mindfulness is to protect ourselves and others. A good Sangha can lead us in the direction of harmony and awareness. The substance of the practice is most important. The forms can be adapted.”⁷

The Sangha can also be thought of as an interpretive community, a term coined by Stanley Fish⁸. An interpretive community consists of individuals who think and act individually within a context of shared processes and standards. This creates a dynamic environment that allows for a diversity of viewpoints

and allows change and adaptation over time rather than adhering to a rigid structure. In a sangha, the contribution of each member's viewpoints and experiences builds the community and sustains the sangha over time by keeping its relevancy.

What are the characteristics of a Sangha?

The common characteristics of a sangha include:

Community

Inclusion

Safety

Group of friends

Direction

Practice

Mindfulness and Awareness

Communal feedback

Acceptance

Harmony

Love

Sustainability

Commitment

"Sunday night is approaching, and you're aware that a local Sangha will be gathering across town in just a few hours. While a part of you wants to rest and watch television, your deepest desire is to share mindfulness practices with others and feel the same support you enjoyed at the retreat. Somewhat to your surprise, you find yourself in your car on your way to Sangha practice."⁹

Refuge

"..refuge can suggest a sense of going inward. It can be the escape or avoidance we want when we're vulnerable, sad, or angry. But refuge, in Buddhism, is a commitment — a practice — to returning to our own wakefulness, wisdom, and caring."¹⁰

One of the chapters in *Friends on the Path, Coming Together to Realize Our True Home* by Karl and Helga Riedl has some specific principles for sanghas noted below:

Surrender

"Surrender is the spiritual practice of setting aside our ideas and goals and opening to new experiences, to all aspects of life, to the unknown, without opposing them."¹¹

Serving

"Serving means doing what needs to be done—setting aside likes and dislikes, me and you. To serve is to overcome our habitual attitudes towards work and responsibilities and to develop our concern, care, and love for others. ... True serving is to experience the reality of interbeing. Everybody actually supports everybody; there is neither dependence nor independence. It is then that we realize, "I am the Sangha."¹²

Acceptance and Harmony

“In our Western societies, where competition, jealousy, mistrust, and separateness prevail, their opposites - trust, acceptance, openness, and love - are deeply longed for, but it can be difficult to open to them. It is often easier to create a "pseudo-harmony"-where we are just "nice" to each other, where everybody seems to accept and love everybody-by not getting too close to one another, by not touching anything that could disturb the peace, and by closing off to those who do not "fit in.”¹³

Humanity and Respect

“From the depth of our being, we can show respect to ourselves and others. This respect is the foundation of a peaceful life. But respect is not imposed on us as social hierarchy. We do not pay respect to a social position but to a human being. We learn from others, follow their example, and listen to their advice because we deeply honor and respect their having matured on the path. We accept others as "elders.”¹⁴

Safety

“You cannot feel safe with the person who lives with you if you cannot communicate with him or her. You cannot feel safe when the other person does not look at you with sympathy, when you are not capable of looking at him or her with compassion. Safety can be built with your way of looking, your way of smiling, with your way of walking. It can build confidence. Show the other person that you are truly not harmful, that he is safe in your presence, in the way you think, the way you breathe, smile, and walk. Everything you do is peaceful. So by expressing your peace, your compassion, the other person feels very safe. And when the other person feels safe, you are safe. Safety is not an individual matter.”¹⁵

Part II

Why is a sangha important?

Simply put, it sustains your practice.

“At a level more enduring than what is taking place in popular culture, what is most encouraging to me is the way that Western Sanghas have evolved in the past quarter century. In the immediate aftermath of the sixties, these Sanghas were almost exclusively devoted to formal sitting meditation and attended by single, college-educated people. Sangha members would convene in the meditation hall, sit, perhaps listen to a Dharma talk about sitting or koan practice, and go home without discussing the Buddha's teachings or how they applied to their daily lives. You could belong to many such groups for years and know little about the person sitting on the cushion next to you. Not surprisingly, it appeared to me that the average "time on the cushion" for a Zen enthusiast in many such groups in those days was about two years.”¹⁶

The Rock in the River Metaphor

“When we throw a rock into a river the rock will sink. But if we have a boat, the boat can carry hundreds of pounds of rocks, and it will not sink. The same thing is true with our sorrow and pain. If we have a boat, we can carry our pain and sorrow, and we will not sink into the river of suffering. And what is that boat? That boat is, first of all, the energy of mindfulness that you generate by your practice. That boat is also the Sangha--the community of practice consisting of brothers and sisters in the Dharma.

We don't have to bring just joy when we come to the Sangha; we can also bring our suffering with us. But we have to walk on the path of joy with our suffering, we have to share joy with our brothers and sisters. Then we will be in touch with the seeds of happiness in ourselves, and the suffering will grow weaker and be transformed. Allow yourself to be supported, to be held by the Sangha. When you allow yourself to be in a Sangha the way drop of water allows itself to be in a river, the energy of the Sangha can penetrate into you, and transformation and healing will become possible. ¹⁷

“If the twenty-first century is to become a century of spirituality at all, it depends on our capacity of Sangha-building. We need each other, we need to come together to pool our wisdom, our insight, and our compassion to build a lasting peace in the world. We should give up our personal and national interests, and think of the Earth as our true home, a home for all of us. To bring the spiritual dimension to your daily life, to your social, political, and economic life--that is your practice.

It is very clear that Jesus had this intention. It is very clear that the Buddha had this intention, too. And for those of us who come from the background of Christianity and Buddhism, we should be aware that our spiritual ancestors had that intention. We should be able to display the light of wisdom and come together in order to create hope, and to prevent society and the younger generation from sinking into despair.”¹⁸

Its influence extends beyond the members of the sangha.

“Extensive sociological research of small religious groups has been conducted by Professor Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University, author of *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*. This research has shown that small religious study groups generate a substantial amount of caring that extends beyond the boundaries of the group, that they have a generally positive effect on involvement in community activities, that they inspire people to become involved in helping friends and neighbors who are not members of their religious group, and that they encourage active involvement in voluntary agencies. Professor Wuthnow says, “Probably the most important way in which small groups influence the wider community is by freeing individuals from their own insecurities so that they can reach out more charitably toward other people.”¹⁹

“My husband and I have opened our front door weekly to anyone who would like to come and meditate for an hour. The word has spread in our neighborhood.

We meet every Thursday at 7:30 a.m. and have been doing so for several years. This experience has changed many of us; we are softer, kinder, more willing to be vulnerable and live each day with open hearts. We have learned that more than anything, people want to be heard, to know that their presence matters.

In our community, this weekly coming together has helped us to be willing to hear different voices and points of view. When someone has had a loss, we have taken a moment to honor their grief.

I think that our meditation gatherings have made a difference and woven us together. Our lives have become richer, deeper, more meaningful. How beautiful that is!”²⁰

“Don’t think that we sit for ourselves. You don’t sit for yourself alone, you sit for the whole Sangha. Not only the Sangha, but also for the people in your city, because when one person in the city is less angry, is smiling more, the whole city profits. If we practice looking deeply, our understanding of interbeing will grow, and we will see that every smile, every step, every breath is for everybody. It is for our country, for the future, for our ancestors.

The best thing we can do is to transform ourselves into a positive element of the Sangha. If members of the Sangha see us practicing well, they will have confidence and do better. If there are two, three, four, five, six, seven of you like that in the Sangha, I'm sure the Sangha will be a happy Sangha and will be the refuge of many people in the world.”²¹

Building a Sangha

“The sangha building requires commitment, patience, persistence, good humor and trust.”²² Once a group gets together as a sangha, ongoing discussions necessary to sustain and grow together. It is critical to review the beneficial elements of the sangha and keep them alive.

Summary

In closing, here is a verse by Shantideva:

*Those desiring speedily to be
A refuge for themselves and others
Should make the interchange of “I” and “other,”
And thus embrace a sacred mystery.*²³

¹ Robert E. Buswell Jr, Donald S. Lopez Jr. The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, Princeton University Press Princeton 2014

² Mariana Caplan Halfway Up the Mountain Hohm Press 1999 p. 331

³ Joan Halifax Halfway Up the Mountain Hohm Press 1999 p. 330

⁴ Thich Nhat Hahn Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities Parallax Press Berkeley 2002

⁵ Friends on the Path p. 1

⁶ Friends on the Path p. 18

⁷ Friends on the Path p. 82

⁸ Scher, Stephen. Rethinking Health Care Ethics . Springer Singapore 2018

⁹ Friends on the Path p. 55

¹⁰ Cyndi Lee <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgxwBVgqJMHVVwbtsTlfWZjDtIkIc>

¹¹ Friends on the Path p. 98

¹² Friends on the Path p. 98

¹³ Friends on the Path p. 99

¹⁴ Friends on the Path: p. 100

¹⁵ Friends on the Path p. 12

¹⁶ Friends on the Path p. 4

¹⁷ Friends on the Path p. 24

¹⁸ Friends on the Path p. 16

¹⁹ Friends on the Path p. 84

²⁰ Robin Sawyer <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/opinion/letters/david-brooks-weavers.html>

²¹ Friends on the Path p. 30

²² Friends on the Path p. 5

²³ Shantideva. The Way of the Bodhisattva Shambhala. Verse 120