

Community as a Jewel

by Gil Fronsdal

Buddhist practice is supported, nourished, and protected by a community of fellow practitioners, i.e., the Sangha. This idea is expressed in the notion of Sangha as one of the three “refuges” for those who walk the path of liberation. Together the three refuges of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha have such great value they are also known as the Three Jewels that can provide tremendous inspiration.

Each refuge is equally important, together they are like the three legs of a tripod; to stand upright each one needs the other two. Even so there is a tendency in American Buddhist circles to emphasize the Buddha and the Dharma. People tend to be much more interested in Awakening that is represented by the Buddha, and the practice and teachings represented by the Dharma. The important role that community has in a life of practice is often undervalued or overlooked.

Practicing alone can be very difficult. Buddhist practice often changes our values and priorities. The values of virtue, contentment, peace, generosity, love and compassion that grow out of the practice can be in conflict with the values of consumerism, ambition, selfishness and insensitivity found in much of our popular culture. A community of practitioners offers mutual support for living by alternative values that may be undermined or overshadowed in some areas of our society.

Also, a Buddhist community, especially one with mature and experienced practitioners, can function as a mirror allowing a person to see themselves more clearly. This works well when members of the Sangha who are compassionate don't support or participate in the many conceits or fear-based attempts for approval and personal delusions we may bring to our interactions. When such Sangha members respond with kindness, wisdom, pauses and wise silence, we may be able to see more clearly the attachments we have. While this type mirroring may also come with feelings of discomfort, the self-understanding it brings is invaluable.

In addition, a Sangha may be the home of people with personal maturity, compassion, and peace who inspire us in our own practice. They can function as encouragement to continue practicing when practicing the Dharma is difficult. Their behavior can provide practical lessons in how to express the values and teachings of Buddhism in life. We might learn more from watching some of these exemplars than from reading books on Buddhism. Importantly, it might be in the example of other practitioners that we gain confidence in how worthwhile and transformative the path of liberation is.

Of course, other communities besides Buddhist ones can provide helpful mirroring and modeling. However, there is a dedication that a Buddhist community tries to live by that may well be different than most other groups. A Sangha is a place where anyone can come and practice. If we end up in conflict with someone or we don't like what they have said or done, we don't banish that person from the community. Rather we bring mindful investigation to the conflict. We look for opportunities for healing, reconciliation and for wise ways of respecting one another and making room for differences. We try to notice any attachments, fears, projections and confusions that unnecessarily complicate a conflict. This all expresses a dedication of inclusion in a Sangha that aims to be, making a safe place for everyone to continue along a path of spiritual maturation.

For the same reason, a Sangha is also a safe place to experiment with new ways of being. As practice relaxes our insecurities and unhelpful habits of behavior, a Sangha can be, for example, a place for compulsive speakers to explore speaking less, or inhibited speakers to explore new ways of speaking up.

While there can be many benefits to practicing with others, we also must be aware of possible problems. As soon as a group of people gathers as a community, there is a culture, and cultures always have blind spots, or "shadows." If we avoid being involved with a community because it has a shadow, no community will ever be adequate. If we relate only to the positive qualities of a community, we are doing ourselves a disservice. If we relate only to the shadow, you are also limiting ourselves. A function of Buddhist practice is to clarify and draw out the shadow and see it in the light of wisdom and compassion. Without honest practice, a culture's shadow can remain hidden.

For example, one of the common shadows of Buddhist communities is anger. This is in great part because Buddhists value kindness and compassion. And the more a group of people values kindness and compassion, the easier it is for anger and hostility to be pushed into the shadows. People will be reluctant to show this side of themselves, sometimes even to themselves. One function of mindfulness practice is to shine a light into these shadows. However, even though developing personal mindfulness may reveal some of what we have been overlooking in ourselves, a Sangha that brings mindfulness to its own social dynamics can strengthen the practice of each Sangha member.

Life is made up of encounters and we learn about ourselves in the encounters. In relation to Buddhist practice, we look at what we bring to each encounter. How do we allow other people to encounter us, and how do we encounter them? To meditate and to settle on oneself, and encounter the world from that settled place is a wonderful thing. A practice community is a place to begin learning to bring that settled place into the rest of our lives. It is a place where our wisdom and inner freedom can be met and supportively mirrored by others. The more mature practitioners in our Sangha the more facets there are to our Sangha jewel.