

Why Sangha- A Reevaluation.

By Paramabandhu

First understandings of Sangha

I first came along to the LBC in 1984 when I was 23. Early on in my involvement I was pleased to learn that the Sangha was one of the three jewels, as well as one of the refuges - that is, something we could rely on. Although I am introverted by nature, I am people-orientated and am generally interested in other people. Friendship has always been important to me, right from being a young child. Starting coming to the LBC I felt that order members seemed to have 'something' about them and then when I came across Dhammarati I was particularly inspired by him. I enjoyed his intelligent exposition of the dharma and found him a joy to hear speak.

I wanted to get more involved and I knew that I would need to have good friends in this pursuit if I was to bring my heart into it. I found I couldn't really make substantial friends in classes and although retreats were a bit better I realised this still wasn't enough. I decided to move into a community. At that time pretty much the only one around was Sukhavati, so there I went. The first person I made a good connection with unfortunately moved out after a few months. I was told I would probably have to share a room soon, since the room I was in belonged to someone who was away for a few months, but coming back shortly. I took the bull by the horns and asked Dhammarati if he would be willing to share with me and happily he agreed. A year after I had moved in Maitreyabandhu arrived (before he was ordained). He gradually became a very good friend, even though it was not all plain sailing in those early years (you can read more about that friendship in Maitreyabandhu's Thicker Than Blood).

Before I was ordained there was an idea in the air of Fierce Friendship. As I had understood this, challenge was an important part of friendship and by bumping up against each other rough edges were knocked off, one learned more about oneself and became a more rounded individual. This seemed to be backed by Bhante's aphorisms such as "Honest collision is better than dishonest collusion." I believe he also said: "Friendship should be like a cold shower rather than a warm bath." However it seemed to me that this teaching could easily be misused or used as an excuse for harsh speech. That notwithstanding, the general principle seemed to be that we should develop metta, which leads to friendliness, which in turn leads to friendship.

In 1990 I was ordained in Guhyaloka. Subhuti led the four month course. At the beginning he gave a series of talks on spiritual friendship, which he had just given a couple of months earlier at Padmaloka. Sitting on the rocks in the Spanish sunshine while Subhuti delivered his inspiring talks, it seemed the very mountains were listening. At the end of the final talk the silence was deafening. Subhuti's ideas on friendship are now well known within the order and movement, but at the time they were groundbreaking, translating Bhante's more general comments into a much more detailed and systematic discourse. This set the tone for our course. Although I felt (as I think we all did) that we fell far short of the ideal that Subhuti was so brilliantly adumbrating, we had over three months left at Guhyaloka to put it into practice. During the course my friendships matured and at times we created an exceptionally harmonious atmosphere. I was also struck by Bhante's 'Why I am a Buddhist' talk that he gave in Bombay, in which he says:

"...I believe that humanity is basically one. I believe that it is possible for any human being to communicate with any other human being, to feel for any other human being, to be friends with any other human being. This is what I truly and deeply believe. This belief is part of my own experience. It is part of my own life. It is part of me. I cannot live without this belief, and I would rather die than give it up." [italics, my emphasis]

So my understanding of Sangha at this time very much centred on the idea of friendship. I understood that by practising metta in a reciprocal way with others in the Sangha practising metta, friendship would be born. I saw friendship as a joy in and of itself, as well as important for spiritual development by giving encouragement, inspiration and feedback through being reflected back - although hopefully not harshly.

Understanding Sangha today

More than a decade later I think the whole issue of Sangha is much more complex. This is in spite of the fact that for me it has been relatively straightforward. I found someone early on that I was inspired by and respected in Dhammarati. I am very grateful for his encouragement and understanding of me. I found good peer friends, especially Maitreyabandhu through whom I learnt a lot about myself. However what if, as I have seen, you don't hit it off with others? Or perhaps it is fine at first and then, like me inspired, you decide to move into a community or work in a Buddhist business. But then you discover that you don't like the other people, even that you hate them or find you are in conflict with one or more of them. Perhaps this is not how you thought it should be. Or what if your teacher behaves in a way that you don't like or don't want, that leaves you feeling harshly treated or manipulated? What conclusions do you draw? Maybe you think there is something wrong with Buddhism, or something wrong with the FWBO or just something wrong with yourself. Of course you may have been told or learned by this time that the true refuge is not any old Sangha, but is the Arya Sangha; those imbued with wisdom and transcendental Insight. However that may not be much comfort, since look as hard as you might, you will find very few dharmafarers walking up to you and saying, yes, rely on me, I am a stream entrant (and if you did you would be wise to run a mile!) Nevertheless there is something important here in this idea of Arya Sangha that I will return to later.

The basic problem and habit patterns

The starting point for our difficulties is that at heart we are self-centred. In the Yogacara tradition this is ethically neutral. It seems to be built into us as the result of having sense organs and consciousness that gives an outer and inner dimension to our experience. We then impute a fixed self to the inner dimension. Not only that, we believe that this self is the centre of the universe and indeed rather special and to be cherished. Even if we apparently hate this self, we are still preoccupied and infatuated, even obsessed, with it. So although the basic self-centredness is ethically neutral it lays the foundations for a host of unskillful actions as we attempt to maximize pleasure and minimize pain for this self. In doing this we build up a complex set of habits that are influenced by our parenting, our culture and society, our experiences and even past lives. The earliest experiences are said to affect our primary patterning, which includes our temperament. Primary patterning is the general tone of our experience and basic beliefs such as whether the world is a safe place or a hostile one. On this are laid down subsequent habits, so called secondary patterning. We learn various means to help us feel ok about ourselves. For example we may care for others as a strategy to help feel ok.

We may attach to someone of higher status or conform to obtain approval. Or we may blame the world, especially if our primary patterning is such that the world feels like a hostile place, and this can help to preserve and boost a sense of selfhood. These different habit patterns are more or less adequately described by the different psychological theories.

So if we put together a disparate set of beings, all with varying habit patterns and all who have a natural tendency to be self-centred, it is not surprising that despite a veneer of Buddhist values such as metta there is conflict. It is probably more surprising that there is not more conflict. Of course we are a mixed bag of weaknesses and strengths. For example even if caring for others is partly motivated by feeling good about yourself, you do nevertheless care for others. Similarly someone with a tendency to being paranoid can also have genuinely useful intuitive responses at times.

Our basic temperament may also make a major difference as to how easily we fall into conflict. By nature I tend to be easy-going and seem to be able to ignore things I don't like, that would really get to other people. On one occasion when I was a mitra an order member made an unwelcome sexual advance towards me. However it was relatively easy for me to decline the offer and all in all it was no big deal. Studies seem to show that our temperament primes us to respond to more of an upbeat or downbeat emotional register. Daniel Goleman in Emotional Intelligence describes a study in which people were shown two sets of movies. One was comedy and the other grisly. The more upbeat found the comedies very amusing but were relatively unaffected by the grisly movies. People that tended more towards moodiness and catastrophizing (Goleman likens them to Woody Allen) found the comedies only mildly amusing and the grisly ones very distressing. This latter group of people appear to have experienced greater distress from adverse life events and are more likely in their life to experience depression and other emotional problems. I think this group are probably more likely to end up in conflict with others. In addition I think the two groups are likely to misunderstand each other. The upbeat group may not take in just how distressing a particular event may be for someone of a more downbeat temperament. The downbeat group may perceive someone from the other temperament as in denial or blocked.

The more melancholic have greater activity in the right prefrontal cortex of the brain and the more cheerful the left prefrontal cortex. The recent news on 'meditation makes you happy' suggested that meditation boosts activity in the left prefrontal cortex. So meditation may help to vitiate the effects of a downbeat temperament (assuming you want to change it - if not, better stop meditating!)

Thus with our different conditionings and different temperaments we are complex and varied beings. It is then not surprising that we get into conflict with one another, that we don't necessarily like each other, and that some may be predisposed to finding untoward events that happen to them within the Sangha especially distressing.

Then add the spiritual life...

Another big problem is built into the very nature of spiritual life. We have a basic premise that we start from a state of being relatively unenlightened and desire to become (more) enlightened - whether that is conceived as a state of awakening out there to be developed or to be revealed within. And to move towards awakening we are likely to

need help. The main two options for help are books - which if sufficient you would not have come to a centre - or other people.

When people come to a centre they will be looking to order members for help. Even without a funny name and decorative piece of silk round the neck and despite the protestations that "I am not Enlightened", the newcomer will turn to the order member for guidance. They are, after all, teaching the meditation and are likely to have been at it for longer than the newcomer. The inevitable result of this is some degree of projection onto the order member. Projection has been something of a dirty word, but in fact it is not all bad.

Polly Young-Eisendrath describes two forms of transference or projection that will occur in this situation. She calls them the containing-transcendent and the iconic-projective. The containing-transcendent is the hope that "this will work". There is an intuition that there is something here that can help and that gets hooked onto the order member / the movement or Sangha / Buddhism. This makes starting the path of spiritual development possible until there is sufficient wisdom within to act as an internalised guide. If this projection did not take place we would not even begin to try to practise the dharma.

The iconic-projective is what happens when all our complex patterns come into relationship with another person, especially someone in some kind of authority. It is as if, in determining how the newcomer will relate to the order member, their psyche does a Google search for "how to relate to someone who is in authority" and locates the best fit from previous patterns, and unconsciously uses that as a template. Not surprisingly the pattern is often based on how we learned to relate to early influential figures, especially our parents. Working all this out is very much the stuff of psychotherapy. Depending on our particular habit patterns and temperaments, this need not be problematic.

However problems can and do occur. For example, if we don't feel very good about ourselves and experience low self-esteem, we may compensate for this in a number of different ways. We may do this by helping others. Buddhism stresses altruism and we may take this up in a one-sided way, that leads to denigrating or denying ourselves. We may exacerbate this with the misuse of sunyata teachings. This may lead to then resenting others who don't appear to help. Or we may compensate by being a perfectionist. Enlightenment is after all a state of perfection. We may then join a (residential) community and discover that the order member is untidy or that people don't meditate together every day, which can lead to a sense of deflation or falling into righteous indignation.

Another means of compensation is to seek approval. So we try to do the right thing and be a good Buddhist - we try to be 'skilful'. An order member asks us to help, which we do to (unconsciously) gain approval, and may even give us suggestions or advice (a foolish and dangerous game!). In time there may be a kick back leading to hating the order member for 'making' us do things we didn't really want to do. Being 'skilful' can then seem like being merely nice or insincere. Yet another strategy to compensate for low self-esteem is to have a good guru. The guru becomes a bit like an object that in possessing we feel ok about ourselves. This can lead to disparaging non-Buddhists or other Buddhists, with a "my teacher is better than yours" attitude. If we are using this attitude as a compensation mechanism, when our guru does something we do not like or really cannot ignore we may find an explosion of fury and betrayal. For we have then lost the support for our own sense of worth.

Hence as soon as someone comes along to one of our centres, innocently enough, to learn something about the dharma the stage is set for disaster! Even if the order member does nothing wrong, like a Greek tragedy, a whole host of unfortunate consequences are set to happen, stemming from the nature of iconic-projective transference. And of course most order members, not being enlightened, are likely to make mistakes.

This is all then compounded by issues on the order members' side. We too of course have our own complex patterns and sometimes these can dovetail in unhelpful ways with those who seek help from us. Being on the receiving end of containing-iconic projection creates its own challenges. We may identify with it and feel superior or arrogant - yes, we really are something of a special spiritual being. We may be quick to tell others what to do or be over-magnanimous in dispensing our good advice. Subtly or not so subtly we can manipulate others to get what we want, even if that is only to help out with the centre. Alternatively, we may not feel up to it. We may think, "I've been practising all these years ... and what do I have to show for it; how can I be of any help?" We may feel a fake and so want to avoid teaching situations. Or we may try to play it down - like the trendy vicar or just being one of the boys.

Moreover our complex and sometimes unhelpful habit patterns do not disappear with ordination. There has been an idea that one needs to develop the ego and then go beyond the ego. Kornfield wrote of being somebody, before you can be nobody. Bhante has talked about becoming a happy, healthy human first; the need initially for psychological integration. In practice psychological and spiritual change seem slow and much more piecemeal. Glaring blind spots can co-exist with penetrating spiritual insight. Character is slow to change or may not change at all in this lifetime. That is, we may keep broadly the same kind of character, through which may shine spiritual qualities. This can create problems if we expect our teachers to have no blind spots or unhelpful character patterns. An order member feeling not up to it may be due to unrealistic expectations of what may change and what is unlikely to change.

Friendship dilemmas

Within the FWBO we place a strong emphasis on friendship. This has many benefits, but if we see the Sangha as synonymous with friendship, difficulties can arise. Logistically an order member at a centre can't be friends with everyone who comes along in any meaningful way. This can lead to disappointment if someone coming along feels that they are not being befriended. Even when sincerely trying to develop a friendship with a peer there may still be conflict and it may not work out. We may discover we don't have the same interests. For example when I was writing this talk another order member delightedly remarked to me that England had just won the rugby world cup. Unfortunately I just couldn't feign a suitable enthusiasm to meet with his. That example may be relatively trivial (although my fellow order member might disagree!) and clearly we don't all want to be clones with exactly the same tastes and interests, but it may be that somehow something in the chemistry just doesn't work. And try as hard as you will a really close friendship fails to emerge despite extended close contact. Additional friendship problems can occur between order members and those not ordained. The order member can try to be a peer, but by ignoring the inevitable (containing-transcendent) projection, frustration and disappointment can occur. On the other hand, being sanctimonious is equally unhelpful and unpleasant.

What to do?

Given all the potential pitfalls in newcomers (and not-so-newcomers) relating to order members what should we do about it? One suggestion has been to get rid of the ordination. This might mean that we don't set up the polarity that causes these difficulties. I don't think this is a real solution. We would still have teachers in some form and projection would creep in just as well by the back door. Either that or we don't help make the Dharma available to others.

Another possible solution is to make what we do more professional. There is an idea of mentorship in which there would be more limited involvement between the teachers and disciples. This might be safer, but personally I find it a bit cold. Moreover it does nothing to prevent inflation of the teacher, and may even feed it.

Seeing the Sangha as network of friendships has its difficulties as I have outlined under the previous section. It might be more helpful to think in terms of fellowship - that is, human beings coming into relationship around the values of the Dharma and helping each other as best as we can. This will be messy, but then human beings are messy.

Whatever model we chose we can't escape difficulties. The Sangha is a collection of people trying to develop (or uncover, etc) such qualities as awareness, clarity, kindness and wisdom. But inevitably we are also self-centred and propelled towards selfish grasping, ill-will and dulling of awareness. Even while sincerely trying to practise we may use the spiritual life to reinforce our ego - and often can't help but do that.

Three areas for our attention

Given the inevitable difficulties we have and will encounter in our Sangha I suggest three areas that may be worth attending to: Firstly we need to be aware of the complexity of character and the stubbornness of character change; secondly we should watch out for naïve views on friendship; and thirdly we need to embrace difficulties.

1. Being aware of peoples' complexity

Order members need to learn to be with, to tolerate, projection. We inevitably use previous patterns of relating in relating to each other. Projection goes on with all of us all of the time, especially if we are in a perceived position of authority.

We need to take care with our communication. We place a high value on openness, and while not advocating concealment, it is probably worth remembering that openness is not the only value. For example sometimes it can be helpful not to mention that we are feeling ill-will towards someone. When an order member falls in love with someone it is not always beneficial to disclose it - although certainly the order member needs to be aware that those feelings have been evoked. The Buddha gives Prince Abhaya criteria for when to tell someone something. He says that it should be honest (true and correct), beneficial and at the right time - although it may not necessarily be welcome and agreeable. So not just being superficially pleasing, but considering will it really be of benefit and choosing the best moment to speak.

As order members I think we need to learn patience with the slowness with which change takes place. Character is relatively durable and we need to learn how to respect the grain of character both in ourself and in others - and not try to do or expect the impossible.

Polly Young-Eisendrath suggests that when psychotherapy is successful, the iconic-projective transference is resolved, but the containing-transcendent transference is maintained. What this means is that the client goes away with their psychological difficulties (especially as these have manifested in the psychotherapeutic relationship) sorted out, but they leave with a sense that the therapist is a therapist and the expert in their area (of providing help). Whereas, she suggests in spiritual relationships the iconic-projective tends to be ignored, and when the relationship is successful, the containing-transcendent is resolved in that the disciple now has a level of wisdom equivalent to the teacher or at least is spiritually independent of the teacher. I think we ignore the iconic-projective - all those psychological patterns that mesh and clash with each other - at our peril. I am not suggesting we all need to go off and have therapy, although many people have found that useful. There are a lot of models that may be of some use to us, and I think we are still feeling our way - both with what models we might use and how we apply them in our various situations. The recent popularity of the Myers-Briggs may stem from a recognition of our needs in this area.

2. Views on friendship

To the extent that we bring into being awareness and kindness and where there is a resonance with each other's core values as expressed through dharma practice (in the widest sense), we will create an atmosphere of friendliness and harmony, and even friendship. Friendship is like a precious jewel that shines within the Sangha - you may see it glinting if you look at it from the right angle. Perhaps this is why the true refuge is said to be the Arya Sangha; friendship may be easier to develop and more reliable among those in whom virtues are most developed and with whom it is potentially easier to resonate.

We can hope for friendship, but not expect it, especially not expect it in a particular situation. Although it won't happen if we do nothing about it - like God and the lottery joke [a man complains to God that despite repeated prayers to God he never wins. God retorts that how could he help when the man didn't buy a ticket.] Friendship, like happiness, is a by-product of the spiritual life. Happiness occurs through engaging with life, and friendship through engaging with each other.

3. Embracing difficulties

The difficulties we encounter in the spiritual life are jewels - fine Shantideva-like rhetoric I know, but almost certainly true. The conflicts, disappointments and let downs are a real growing point of our practice. In the difficulties we see our basic ego tendency. At this moment it is important neither to blame ourself, nor the others (who convincingly manifest as the source of our discomfort). Neither do I mean that we should approve others' unskillful behaviour.

The first issue is to face the difficulty - our reaction - head on; to grasp the nettle. We need to find a way to be interested in a response of, for example, "I'm furious". We need to ask ourselves: What can I learn? How can I bring clarity and kindness to this? For order members these are basic principles of awareness, but how so much easier to say than to do.

We don't need to provoke difficulties, but neither should we ignore ones that occur. There is much we can learn about our own habit patterns. We can try to see how we operate or work, like how to use a specialised instrument. We can also learn to develop new qualities. In my psychotherapy supervision, when I was training, my supervisor told me that I would not have completed my training until I had worked with a strong negative transference – i.e. working with a client who felt a lot of ill-will towards me. One of the eight verse of mind training states: May I view one whom I greatly hoped would help me, but instead mistreats or even harms me, as my greatest spiritual teacher.

In summary

The nature of being human is to interact. Most of us can't spend all our life in a cave. We can try to hermetically seal ourselves, living and working alone. This may lead to less conflict, but for all but the most spiritually gifted is likely to lead to less growth. If we wish to practise the Dharma we need to embrace the truth of interconnectedness, that is life, that is (other) people. And famously people are both a heaven and a hell. Embracing interconnectedness is not always easy. I sometimes wonder if Bhante's idea of being friends with anyone, in his Why I am a Buddhist talk, is hopelessly idealistic. On the other hand, in one of his sonnets he points out that the Buddha-Way, rather than macadamised, smooth and white, straight as an arrow, is instead a hacked path roughly made through densest jungle. Together as increasingly we understand how individually we operate, and increasingly see our own ego grasping, we may be able to co-operate more and create more of an effective Sangha. Ten years ago I would have seen the Sangha as something like an orchestra. Now I think it is more like a jamming session - which sometimes can produce exhilarating music!