

Meaning of Community

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Nick, I thought I would talk a little bit about the notion of community in Buddhist practice, in Buddhism. There's a very important word that we use for community, a Buddhist word called *saṅgha*, S-A-N-G-H-A. And that is often taken to be the rich community of practitioners and people connected to the values and the practices and the orientations of Buddhism, and they share it together. And so here at IMC, we would be considered a *saṅgha*. And that part of being here, for some people, is quite important.

It's probably kind of accurate to say that when people come here for the first time, some people are looking for community, and some people are looking for meditation, and a place to meditate, a place to learn meditation. They might not be oriented towards community at all, and they don't want to be, and that's completely fine. We've had people who came up to me after being here for many years, and they said hello, and I didn't recognize them. And they said, yeah, I've been sitting kind of in the back row, and I love being here because it's a way of being kind of in a group of people and nothing's asked of me. And I want to be anonymous, I just don't want to have to interact, but it's wonderful to have this community to meditate in.

And there's other people who are here for community, and sometimes we know it as soon as they show up. You know, they make it very obvious, and it's quite wonderful too. But for the people who come not necessarily for community, then over time there's a kind of a beginning of noticing, wow, the community is actually an important part of this. And then they might find out that in Buddhism, *Saṅgha* is considered to be one of the *Three Jewels*, one of the three treasures of Buddhism. And the other two are the Buddha, who is the exemplar, the primary exemplar of what's possible through this practice, being awake and being compassionate. Right?

And then there's the *Dharma*, which in a simplistic way is the teachings of the Buddha, but more deeply it's the practices and what unfolds in us as we practice. And so this is the *Dharma* that is in some ways understood to be a wonderful cause-and-effect relationship that gets set in motion by the practice that we're living in, that we're growing in the *Dharma*. Okay. So the Buddha, the *Dharma*, the first two jewels, and the third one is the *Saṅgha*, the community that you're practicing in or experiencing Buddhism in. And the value of the *Saṅgha* tends to grow over time.

And now I've been part of Buddhist *saṅghas* for over 50 years now. It's quite impressive. It's quite impressive. And I just find that it keeps getting more and more enriched. I'm surprised by how it's growing for me, even after all this time. I understand it in new ways, appreciate it in new ways.

And it's possible that there would be no Buddhism without the *Saṅgha*, without the community. And in retrospect, only in retrospect, do I understand how important it was in my early years to be practicing in community. I probably wouldn't have maintained the discipline of practice if I wasn't in community. I probably wouldn't maintain the inspiration to practice in community. And I probably wouldn't have gotten the exemplars, the feedback, the lessons about how to practice and what this practice can be about without the example of the people around me who'd practiced longer. That was so important for me to kind of be inspired, to keep going, to stay in it, and to know what the direction was.

At some point I came to live in a Buddhist community because I wanted to be in the presence of more experienced practitioners. They provided so much meaning for me and inspiration and example that allowed me to kind of open a door for me to enter this practice more deeply. And it wasn't always a comfortable door. Sometimes that door was a mirror. And I really cherished the mirroring of myself in the presence of senior practitioners. But partly I appreciated it because it was often uncomfortable. I got to see parts of myself that I needed to address and look at.

And I really benefited from being in a community that didn't go along with my neurosis, or didn't go along with the social games I was playing, the ways I was trying to get people to like me or to see me as being an important or special person. Because I would do those things with my friends in college kind of without even consciously knowing I was doing it, and we were all doing it maybe to each other, and we were good friends anyway. But when I came to a Buddhist community and was around these more experienced practitioners, I would continue to behave that way, and they didn't respond the way they were supposed to. And not getting the expected response, it got me to look at myself more deeply. Wow, Gil,

what's going on here? What are you doing here?

And I really cherish that discomfort. I cherish that mirroring so I can bring this mindfulness to this part of myself. And there was also the mirroring of things that were good about me. I also didn't realize that at the time it was happening. But there were people who responded or related to me by touching into places that were good in me, the good qualities I had. And I didn't know they were doing it at the time, but they would kind of just shine a certain light or appreciation.

Sometimes people would say nice things about me. The teachers did in a kind of particular way, and I kind of just ignored it consciously. But I think that it made a difference. It kind of pointed to something, oh, this is something to value in myself. This is something to appreciate. And sometimes it was simply the fact that they were appreciating that I was practicing. They were appreciating that I was meditating every day in the community.

And I wasn't expecting or wanting appreciation, but just getting some kind of appreciation or getting some kind of sense of joy, because we were sharing in this wonderful activity, also helped me to orient myself to meditation, to the practices, to the ethics, to the way of living that came alive through this practice. And so one of the values of being in a Buddhist community like this is to be around people with shared values. And sometimes it's very different what we're doing here than in ordinary society. And sometimes people feel like, you know, in their regular life, they're the odd person out.

I've known that sometimes kids thought their parents were weird because they came here. They don't know any other kids with parents who meditate differently. And this is really weird. And then I've seen it change sometimes when they've come to kids' programs and they realize, oh, other kids do this too. Maybe their parents aren't so weird after all. I don't have to be as embarrassed about my parents because it's shared, it's known.

But some people, adults even, have that. I've known people who have come to IMC and looked around and said, somehow, as a group, as a whole, there were a certain kind of values in our society which weren't being enacted as dramatically here or elsewhere. And they felt quite disturbed by this. Like, you know, somehow, is this okay? I can't be this way. And one of them has been the number of people who don't color their hair, who allow their hair to go gray. People explicitly said this stands out to them, and it's kind of weird. And, you know, you're supposed to kind of make yourself something different than you are.

And so here there's sometimes a different orientation to how we present ourselves and how we try to show or show off to other people. And we're not trying to do that really. So there's

different values. And some people find that as they meditate, they get a heightened attunement to the impact and the source of their behavior. So, for example, some people say that it was second nature for me at work, at the water fountain or getting coffee, to be gossiping. That was the medium through which we connected at work.

And at some point, it just feels off to do that. If you really sit calm and centered and aware of the cost of this on yourself, it just feels off. And people have told me they're so happy to come to IMC because this is not the medium of exchange, is complaining or gossiping about people. And they find it very valuable. They find it inspirational and they find it educational. Oh, this is how you can have conversations with people in a very different way.

And there are other values that are represented here. Not that everyone has to be a vegetarian, but for some people it's valuable to come here and find that here we're supposed to have potlucks that are vegetarian. And just having the ease and the relaxation around that, for some people they don't have that sometimes where they eat and where they are. I just came back from a foreign country where it was kind of like I was from Mars, that I'm a vegetarian. It was like, what? What? And they scratch their head.

And so I've been, not this time around, but before I've been that way in places where their idea was, well, you're vegetarian, so we'll just heat up some canned peas for you. You know, that was okay, but it wasn't quite a meal. It was so foreign. So I think that was many years ago, decades ago, things have changed. And so to be around shared values and to realize that maybe there are other people who share this, and feel some confidence then or some courage even to live what can for some people be an alternative lifestyle.

It's not uncommon, and maybe no one will come back now if I say this, but it's not uncommon for people who really get into this practice and really find that their inner life is changing and becoming more ethical or being directed by other values besides money and status and consumerism, that they start being downwardly mobile. And where all around you, everyone is upwardly mobile. And sometimes people even feel uncomfortable by their choosing to be downwardly mobile, but they're living a life that's so different than their friends who are going a different direction and being successful perhaps in different ways. And it can be awkward and difficult and cause uncertainty if they made the right choice. But it really helps to be around other people who've made the same choice or are living a simple life and quite happy with it. And, oh, it's possible.

I remember many years ago in Palo Alto, the creep of consumerism. You know, I was a monk. I was living pretty simply. And I came to be in the area and was starting teaching in Palo Alto. And I had a relatively old, beat-up car, and was driving around Palo Alto in the 1990s, and it

was already kind of upscale compared to many other places. And I was doing that for a few years. I don't know how many years, but maybe five years, six years.

And then one day, I saw my mind have this thought, I should get a new car. And the thought was only there because I saw all the new cars, these fancy cars. Somehow that had crept in and produced this thought in my mind. And then I did at some point need to get a new car, or didn't, I don't know if it needed to be new, but I went to check out a brand new little Honda Civic. I'd never bought a new car before. Yeah.

And I was driving around just here in Redwood City with this Honda Civic, with the salesperson in the passenger seat, who started to explain to me that I deserved air conditioning. He didn't know me, you know. How is it that I deserved it? And here we get that creep, you know, of consumerism was coming in. But I guess now it's no choice. I think they all come with air conditioners, but back then there was a choice.

And then I remember that during the same time, you know, the car thoughts and deserving thoughts were being, someone was trying to plant those seeds in me. I had a friend who lived in Palo Alto, who was one of the poorest people I knew on the peninsula. Yeah. And he never locked his car, and he never locked his home. He was more free, he was more happy, he was in some ways richer than almost anyone that I knew, because of the way he lived, his happiness, his engagement, and his freedom that he lived.

And it was kind of lovely to see. I was inspired by seeing someone living that way. And it was a model for me of a different way that was a very different influence than the car salesman. And so shared values. And then I already explained to you how it was so important for me to be around people who were examples. And even something as simple as examples of people who don't move in meditation. Well, that's possible. Yeah.

Maybe I should push myself a little bit. Maybe I should try that and not scratch at every itch and not squirm every time I'm a little uncomfortable. Maybe that's useful. I see other people who are pausing and listening carefully rather than interrupting. Wow, this is a nice example. Maybe I can do that. Maybe this is an interesting thing to explore.

Examples of people who carry themselves with equanimity, or carry themselves with kindness, carry themselves calmly in situations which are trying and difficult. People who have something happen and they don't react with anger, but they act with care and attention and respect. So there are many other people in the world who do this, and probably other communities as well. I'm sure of it. But, you know, a Buddhist community hopefully has these ways of doing. And some people come to them for the examples they're seeing. And that's

so meaningful for them.

And then also, like it was for me, one of the values of the community is to be mirrored, is to see more clearly what you're doing. So if you do get angry when you're challenged, then you know, oh. So if you drop your fork at a potluck on the floor and it clangs, and you get angry with someone, and so you say a four-letter word out loud, you know, this feels a little bit out of place here at IMC to be this way. And rather than being embarrassed, it would be, oh, well, maybe there's another way. Maybe these people are an example of a different way I can respond to a dropped fork. Maybe there's another way.

So anyway, there can be mirroring that goes on that is really beneficial that the community provides. And as it was for me, it's not just mirroring what's happening, you know, difficult in us, but also what's really good in us. That we get mirrored and we see in ourselves, because we see it in other people, our own capacity for kindness, for being ethical, integrity, being equanimous, being calm, calling on mindfulness when things are difficult, rather than spiraling out.

And one of the values of this kind of seeing examples, maybe also having mirroring, in the Buddhist communities I've lived in, and it happens here at IMC to some degree as well, is that in some Buddhist centers that are mostly retreat centers, the teachers come and they're mostly seen as retreat teachers. It's a little bit rarefied, special way of seeing people. They're sitting in front of a stage, and that's the only way the students ever see them, is being in the teacher role. But in the multiple roles that teachers have at IMC, people see teachers in all kinds of ways, sometimes as administrators, sometimes as taking out the garbage, sometimes helping with getting newsletters ready or helping with different committees, being on the board.

And so the teachers are involved in all kinds of ins and outs of the community. So we see them in different ways, doing different things. And sometimes people say, this is really one of the most important things I have at IMC, is to watch and see how a teacher behaves in all the activities they do. At IRC right now, we have a really, I think, a marvelous example of this because the managing directors who live there are also two of IMC's teachers. They're a couple, Kodo and May. And so the people there see Kodo and May in all kinds of circumstances.

They see them behaving in informal social times. They see them involved in community meetings where there are maybe challenges they have to talk about. They see them working with the plumbing problems. Recently we had septic problems. And so they see them, you know, going in there and getting their hands dirty, perhaps. So the community down there sees the teachers in all kinds of ways. And sometimes they see them in a teacher role itself,

but often in other ways. And as senior practitioners and as teachers, people are watching them and learning and inspired by them.

So I could say a lot more. I'm hoping that saying these words and a few more here can stimulate your curiosity about what this community life can be like. What different dimensions this kind of community phenomenon brings forth in people, and brings forth this possibility in *Dharma* growth and developing even your meditation practice. And there are many things we do here that support community building. And there are many ways in which people who are not interested in that can participate fully without needing to feel the pressure to be part of a community.

So hopefully what we try to do here is kind of a very open, very welcoming environment where people can somehow find their way to what works for them, what their needs are, what's supportive for them. Yeah. We're kind of meant to be a very welcoming place to come. There's no prerequisites or requirements you have to fit in order to come here. We don't test anyone for their beliefs so you're properly Buddhist. We don't have to sign up for anything and be a member. You can just be yourself. It's kind of an open-door policy, and that's intentional.

So everyone is welcome who wants to be here, is equally welcome to be here. And then sometimes, because meditators are quiet, some people who are new kind of feel like these are a little bit unfriendly people because they're quiet, and they've never seen something like this before. But if they hang in there and come a few times, you'll find that most people here are quite friendly. And it's just that they're quiet. And so it takes a little while for that. And if you come for the potluck, it's noisy.

And so over a person's practice Buddhist life, community sometimes is in the background, is not so important, and sometimes is in the foreground, it's quite important. I've known people who have been major volunteers, or have been volunteers because they wanted to be part of the community more and benefit from being more deeply embedded in the community. And I've known people who've been volunteers, and they grew dramatically as volunteers. By volunteering and doing work and being involved with other people who are also practicing and also involved in these Buddhist values, that's where most of their spiritual growth happened, from their big volunteer jobs that they did. And that's what, you know, it's a phenomenal place to grow.

Some people I've seen, like they were the board president of IMC, and they'd never done anything like this before. And it was so cool to watch them grow in leadership. Only when they finished being president, they just put it down and no longer were a leader, but they had

matured and developed a kind of personal confidence about how to be with people and be in larger groups that they didn't have before. So there's all kinds of ways and avenues here for growth and development in the practice.

And then finally, communities also have their challenges. And every community will have a shadow side. And I'm sure we have shadow sides here. One of them is probably a classic in Buddhist communities, conflict avoidance. Sometimes kind of hiding the anger people feel because you're not supposed to be angry in Buddhism. You're supposed to be kind. But what protects us a bit from the shadow side of a community like this is that we practice mindfulness. And the function of mindfulness is to highlight these things so we see them and are honest about them.

If we didn't have the meditation practice and the mindfulness, the shadow might go unaddressed. But hopefully it's addressed here, and it's something we talk about and address and are open to practice with. And the other is conflict. And if I'm trying to spark your curiosity about community life in a place like IMC, I would love to spark your curiosity about how conflict is handled here. I just can't wait to see it, as long as you're not in it.

And every community will have conflict. And the health of a community is not measured by the absence of conflict, but by how they meet conflict, how they work with it. And so the dedication, at least I have, and our community has, I hope, is that we're never going to reject anyone here. We're always going to stay present and be available, and we find a way when things are difficult and when they have conflict. And that's an important part of practice, naturally. It might be we learn more about ourselves and more about freedom, more about compassion and kindness by a willingness to stay and talk about conflict than be conflict avoidant. And that's one of the functions of the Buddhist community, is to be a place where we can find a healthy way with conflict.

So those are my thoughts about some of them. I can go on and on. Fifty years' worth. Perfect. But do you want to ask me any questions about the *Saṅgha* community, what I've said, things I've missed that are important to address?

I guess somebody needs to break the ice, so I'll be the one. I first want to... Is it not on? Okay, I'll speak a little bit louder. Yeah, just my hearing aid is... My hearing aid, I don't have them in. So thank you for that, and also thank you for everything you do. I listened this week to the 7 a.m. talk you did on, I think it was love was the main topic, and it was wonderful. I just moved into this area, and I'm excited to be able to be physically present.

Thank you. My question related to, you gave a couple of examples of Buddhist practices

that you yourself do. For example, being a vegetarian. For example, living a simple life. Of course meditation, etcetera. My question to you is, do you need to do all of those things to be a proper practitioner? Or if, for example, in my case, I do eat meat. Yeah. And am I now doomed? So that's my question. Do you need to do all of those practices?

My impression is that most Buddhists in the United States eat meat. Probably the majority eat meat, is my impression, from being around all kinds of Buddhists and Buddhist places. And usually they're vegetarian at the centers, but then go somewhere else and they go order meat. But some people are vegetarian. And they do that for a variety of different reasons. And I have my own reasons for it.

But generally, these are the kind of things that people are left to choose for themselves and answer the question for themselves. We're accountable to our own hearts. We're not really accountable to the Buddha. He's dead. Dead and gone. But we're accountable to our own hearts. And so, you know, ask your heart what you do and listen to what it has to say. And then you find your way. And I think when we're mindful and paying attention deeply, you'll find your way. You don't have to. And this is not a community that's going to be judging.

But there was once, many years ago, one teacher who really kind of drew a line. So hopefully... I don't know what you do, but hopefully... We were on retreat, and someone asked the teacher, said to the teacher, I'm an attorney, and in my particular line of law, or my work, I'm expected to lie. And he said, so can I be a Buddhist and lie at the same time? And that teacher said no. It was unusual to have such a categorical statement, but he said no. So he didn't ask for the nuances of what was going on with that to get the bigger picture. So can I be a Buddhist and kill people? I would say no.

Thank you. One of the interesting things for me around this kind of question of the ethics and how people live their lives and the choices people make is that I've learned for myself that there's the ethics around judging people for their ethics. And I've seen that I get contracted or limit myself or even harm myself, maybe sometimes quite slightly, by the judgments about other people's choices. And so if there's no reason for me to evaluate or to be involved in judging why someone is doing what they do, I don't see it. If there's no value, no purpose, no consequence, I don't see why I should spend any time thinking that and being that way. And I'm just like, okay, that's the way it is.

And I remember there was, I think one of the first times I had that thought was... I don't know how much to say here, but there was a Buddhist teacher I knew, a friend, who was doing something that I thought was unethical. But it was certainly legal, but it was unethical, and he enjoyed it. And I thought, well, this, you know, I think participating in this activity is

societally harmful, I thought. But then I thought, you know, why am I going to waste my brain power, my heart power, being upset, or being closed, or being contracted, or spending any time judging? It's so much nicer for me just to be open and present and available.

And why should I lose that openness? Why should I lose my friendliness? I could stay closed, I could be judgmental, but it's not going to do the world any good. It's not going to do him any good. I'd rather just keep the field quite open and kind and friendly. And maybe there will be an opportunity then to have a conversation about this someday. But why should I care? Why should I care enough to somehow harm myself in the judging, the complaining, the whatever?

And so it does take some discernment. It isn't that I'm just blowing it off and accepting it blindly, but it has more to do with how I am, and not to diminish myself. There's so much suffering in the world. Why should I contribute to more by judging someone for what they're doing, when the judging has no purpose, no value? Anyway, I don't know if this is interesting for you, but this was interesting for me.

I'd like to give the mic to someone.

I was going to say something about, I try to be less critical and judgmental. And somebody once said to me, he who is critical and judgmental to others uses the same muscle that is self-critical. So anyway.

Yeah, hi Gil, my name is Paul. Could you say a little bit more about volunteering in the *sangha* as a practice opportunity.

Yeah. So one of the great values or movements of practice is generosity. Yeah. And not generosity that's an obligation, but generosity that's kind of a natural unfolding of this practice of mindfulness, deep sensitivity, freedom. It's just kind of like an expression of appreciation, expression of wanting to support other people, expression of giving what we have to support something that seems pretty wonderful. So some people get inspired to volunteer because it's just a wonderful act of generosity and support.

So many people here. I shouldn't be picking on Martha like this, but Martha has been generously managing Sunday morning for a very long time. And so she, I hope she feels the joy of how she supported so many people to come here. It's her generosity, her care, her love, supported so many people to be here and benefit from here. And she was also trained as a chaplain. So she understands something very deep about the human heart, human suffering, what this means for people. So for her, this is an abundance.

And not only does she manage here, but then out of her, hopefully, generosity, she was the

one who brings the trash every week out to the sidewalk. It's so wonderful. Thank you. And so generosity. The other is that volunteering work, doing work in volunteering, is itself considered a Buddhist practice. It's a place of mindfulness, a place of equanimity, a place of discovering ourselves and understanding ourselves better.

And sometimes doing volunteering, doing this work in this kind of setting, in a Buddhist setting, in a community setting like this, we're more likely to see it as practice, even though we might do the same thing at work. There, it's just like, you know, get it done quickly or in a hurry, and you have to prove yourself, and, you know, there's hardly any time to catch your breath. But here, there's hopefully spaciousness, there's time, and here there's a reminder, oh yeah, include this as part of the practice. Be present for what you're doing in a careful way.

Because you're in community, you know, as I said, community sometimes is difficult, right? And it's an area to explore other ways of being, to explore how to be more ethical, how to be kinder, to explore how to speak mindfully, how to speak without being judgmental or harsh or complaining a lot or something, to speak kindly and appropriately, to learn how to listen more. So there's all kinds of things that we can experiment with and kind of practice in community that maybe we're less likely to do, you know, again, at work or in a normal social environment.

So some people find that coming into volunteering is a way to really do this. And there are some people who meditate for a few years and they say, I want to expand what's happening in meditation, apply or discover the benefits I get in meditation. I want to try to find those benefits in my social life. And what a good place to begin that experiment, but do it within a Buddhist community of people who understand this and value it. So those are some things. But you've occasionally been a volunteer, a little volunteer. Is there one thing that you have benefited from?

I know you're putting me on the spot. Well, you did it for me. You're up there. So many things. I mean, actually one of the things I find best with is, you know, when I'm doing, like I'm working on a program at the moment, and it pulls me in, right? And if I was doing it at work, if I was still working, I'd just be, you know, 24-7. But because it's here, and I've talked to you about it before, I can sort of be aware of the draw of the activity, how it pulls me in, and be mindful of that and actually create the space. And then it's actually an opportunity for practice.

Fantastic. Fantastic. Thank you. So maybe one more, and then we're going to go...

I volunteer once a month at IRC to clean, but I noticed it's been, I don't know, maybe 10 months. I noticed it took me quite a few times not to have my teacher brain and go through. I went through those tasks so fast. I did more than anybody else. I was cleaning everything. But everyone else was doing it in a practice, and I think it took six or seven times. And now, oh, oh, this is practice. So it took a... yes, so thank you.

All right, thank you. So thank you all. I hope that this perked your interest and curiosity about this part of the life here and practice, the offerings of IMC. And there's a lot of things we do that build community, bring people together, sometimes quite intentionally. And one of them is a potluck. So you don't have to bring anything. That's not really, the point is just to be together. You're all welcome to come and come for as long as you like. And if some of you would like to have a ride from someone, it's at the Red Morton Park. And we'll start in about 15 minutes there. Thank you.