

## Sangha

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Today is our *Saṅgha*-wide potluck, and I'm glad many people came today. It is a beautiful day for us to sit outside and enjoy our mutual company. So it made some sense, I thought, to talk about *Saṅgha*, or talk about community. That is one of the pillars of Buddhist spirituality. It's a very important element. What I thought of talking about is what I see as three very important elements that build community or make community.

These three are solitude, listening, and speaking. It might seem a bit funny to you for me to connect solitude with community, or with *Saṅgha*, with a spiritual practice community. But I thought, for me, solitude is a very central element to Buddhist spirituality, and I would say maybe for all spirituality. I would hope so. I don't know about other forms of spirituality so much, but solitude is really one of the great jewels of human experience. Probably very little genuine and very deep spirituality happens without some experience of solitude, some appreciation of solitude, or maybe more important, a capacity for solitude.

In this wonderful jewel of solitude, it's often encrusted over by alienation, isolation, loneliness, fear, and perhaps things like being overly stimulated by the crowd, or by too many people, being around too many people all the time. Certainly one of the great obstacles to the wholesome appreciation of solitude is the experience of loneliness or isolation or alienation, which is very common in our culture. It seems almost as if the more we live on top of each other, the more we're constantly bombarded by the stimulus of other people, the less experience people have of solitude. For some people, a kind of addiction builds up where they don't neatly see that the constant stimulus and constant need and desire to be connected and be involved with people is the very thing that's kind of making people more agitated or less connected with themselves. That discomfort, or agitation, or being overstimulated, or the discomfort of being out of touch with oneself, then motivates some people to reach

out to even more stimulus, more contact, which just kind of perpetuates the cycle. It just strengthens it.

We need to have some way to step out of so-called addictive cycles of constantly wanting more and more in order to appease our discomfort, to find out how to step outside of the system entirely. Rather than constantly trying more, socializing more and more and more, we need another way. I think many of you will find that when you do meditation, the mind has a tremendous momentum. If you try to appease the mind or try to satisfy the mind's desires or the mind's aversions within the game the mind is playing itself, there is no end to it. You'll just keep kind of wanting more and more, keep putting up more resistance to things. Part of the power of meditation is to help us go a step outside of the game, outside of the regular patterns that we're caught up in. By stepping outside, we allow the mind to settle, or to calm, or to relax in some deeper way.

So I think our tremendous momentum to socializing, for some people, gets in the way of a very deep connection with themselves, and paradoxically, often a very deep connection with other people. I've talked to a number of people in the context of meditation retreats where people's sensitivity to what propels them and what motivates them and what hurts them is usually quite strong. I've talked to people who maybe feel either very judgmental of other people or feel very isolated and alone, or often both. As you begin probing and exploring, inquiring into what's really going on for people, the alienation that some people feel toward the world around them, or the way they're judgmental toward other people, often is symptomatic of something much deeper and more important. It is the alienation they have toward themselves.

Many times I've heard people say things like, "You know, I don't really have a lot of friends out there. I don't really feel like people know me very well. I don't really feel like I know other people very well." When we get to the heart of it, it seems like what's really going on is they don't know themselves, and they are unwilling to come and go into themselves because, you know, sometimes it's difficult to do that. If we don't know ourselves really well, or don't have the capacity of touching ourselves deeply, then it's very hard for other people to get to know us. If other people can't get to know us, then we feel even more angry, more uncomfortable, and then maybe we shut down even more. But there needs to be some turning back that steps outside of that system and turns back and helps these kinds of people really get to know themselves well first. Then they can connect better with other people.

In the same way, I think solitude provides a very deep familiarity, hopefully, of ourselves with ourselves, and that familiarity helps us to connect more honestly and completely with other

people. Solitude also provides an opportunity for us to find out who we are, and for the momentum of our life to begin to unwind. If we don't have the experience of solitude, it's often very hard to let the constant momentum of desire and aversion, or wanting and coping and dealing with things, subside. It is hard to see the deeper currents of our life underneath the surface chatter, what is constantly going on. Certainly a daily sitting practice provides some of that solitude. For some people, it's quite profound. It may be enough to kind of create the balance.

But aside from any value that solitude has in what it provides us with beyond itself, it's been my experience that solitude is wonderful in and of itself. I don't need to kind of explain that I want to find solitude because it helps me connect better with other people, or because it helps kind of reduce the neurotic momentum of our lives. Rather, just simply being alone, sometimes having the ability to be solitary, is really, I find, a fantastically beautiful thing to do. Some of my greatest joys in life have come in periods of solitude.

But in terms of *Saṅgha*-building or community-building, I think that solitude, the ability to be solitary, the ability to feel comfortable with one's own solitude, makes it a lot easier to enter into a community without neediness, without kind of getting complicated. If we're able to be comfortable with ourselves, be at home in ourselves, which is almost the same thing as the ability to be solitary, then we can encounter other people and not have that encounter be filtered through our needs, our desires, our fears, our inhibitions. We can just simply meet other people as we are. We can just be ourselves, in a sense, without any extra agendas going on. So I think solitude, the ability to be solitary, is very important to build community.

Many of us don't have that ability, or don't have that ability that often. So a *Saṅgha* is not necessarily a place where you're supposed to be ideal, but rather a place where you begin to explore the interface between, for example, our search for solitude and our search for being together with others in a healthy way, our search for being independent or being free, and our search for being connected and involved. So it's often a wonderful playground or workshop. Sometimes I feel like it's a battleground, a *Saṅgha* life, living in community, because we're not ideal. None of us are ideal. Because we're not ideal, we have to kind of brush against each other, and our hard edges kind of brush against each other. That brushing against each other, and meeting each other, and finding out about how actually we work, is a wonderful thing that happens in community life.

Community life, maybe it happens anyway all the time, but the difference in a *Saṅgha* and in a spiritual practice community is that it's allowed to have friction, or friction is held within the container. It's understood that none of us come here as ideal beings. Because of that, there's

awkwardness as we encounter each other and meet and talk or do whatever we want to do together. That awkwardness is included and welcomed, in a sense, as part of the mirroring and part of the help, where we kind of begin to find out what's really going on. So rather than turning away from the awkwardness because it's uncomfortable, or rather than judging it because this implies that the other people are wrong, or I'm wrong, or whatever, rather it becomes the field of what we practice with.

So solitude. The other important element of community-building is the capacity to listen. Maybe this expresses my bias, but I believe that, going through the order of importance, solitude, listening, and then speaking, in terms of building community. Of course, many people may operate under the idea that it's the opposite way around. First, it's very important that everyone listen to me, and then maybe I'll listen to them, and then maybe eventually I can feel some solitude. So the idea that listening is important, to be able to listen to each other, find out what's going on with other people, to listen very deeply.

There's a wonderful saying I've referred to from somewhere, that God gave us two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak. But to listen deeply, listening involves partly a loss of control. Maybe that's why some people don't want to listen, because when you're listening to someone else, you have to give up some control. You have to become willing to kind of find out what's going on there. It's unknown. They're going to speak for a while, and you don't know what they're going to say.

So there is some lack of control. Control manifests itself often as rushing in to state our opinions, or to interrupt, or to criticize. Sometimes control takes the form of spacing out. "I'm not going to listen to this." But giving up control is a very important element of, I think, at least Buddhist spirituality, or at least knowing what areas of our life we can have some control over, where it's important to bring our attention and our choice, and what part of our life where we don't bring our choice but rather, in a sense, let go or surrender into a loss of control, lack of control.

There's an idea, which maybe isn't so well formed, but I like it. It is that if you're not comfortable with the mystery, then you can't become the mystery. The question is, do you want to become, or do you want to keep yourself removed? I got this little kind of idea from a Zen friend of mine who, when he does funeral ceremonies for people, says something like this. In Zen funeral ceremonies, you often speak to the person who's died, and he says to the person who's died, "Now you've become the mystery," having died. So there's something about the mystery of life, the unknown, maybe some people don't like the word mystery, but some element of giving up control, of entering into some other sphere of momentum, some other

sphere of life that doesn't necessarily involve our constant manipulation and control and judgment, and even our understanding of what it is.

Understanding is one of the great hindrances to liberation. If you always need to understand, then that'll keep you back from the experience of liberation. Liberation is never going to be what you think it is. So if you're struggling to understand it, then that'll hold you back. So listening involves partly a lack of control. Listening involves being really present, for some of us, and being willing to suspend as much as we can our inner judgments, our inner voices, our inner interruptions of what people are saying. We listen very deeply to what's going on, and not just listen to the words, but also listen to what's behind the words: the feelings, the emotions, the history of the person, the struggles of the person, the joys of the person, the intentions of what's being said. The intentions are often not, sometimes not, what's stated overtly. Other things are going on.

A story I've told a couple of times recently is of a friend of mine who had a parking lot altercation with someone, I guess, over a parking space. He was a little bit mindless, so he somehow ended up taking someone else's space or blocking someone. As soon as he realized what the problem was, he kind of tried to correct it. But the person was quite furious at him and was yelling. So my friend kind of apologized, and I guess pulled out of the way or did something appropriate. Then he said to the person also, hopefully, I imagine, with great appropriate compassion, something like, "You're having a hard day, aren't you?" As soon as he said that, the fellow relaxed and said, "Yeah, it's been a difficult day."

So there was an example. He was listening to something else besides the anger or the hostility. He was listening to what was behind it, and he assumed, kind of what made sense, was that he was having a hard day, and his frustration level was what was feeding his hostility. One of the great practices in listening is to hear out hostility. Hopefully all of you have had that opportunity. If you haven't, look for it. It's a great thing to listen to, to hear out someone's hostility, because most of us, when someone is hostile, we get hostile back, or defensive, or run away.

But actually, if it's a safe situation, to hear out the hostility, just hear what the person has to say and ask questions, invite them to keep saying why they are so hostile toward you or what's happening. Sometimes you'll find that if you hear it out, it'll dispel the hostility, because hostility often has, if it's very strong, filled with hate and venom, very little to do with the object of the hostility, but a lot to do with what's going on inside of the person who's hostile. So if you listen, you hear out the hostility, you can often get a chance for an inner tension to begin to unravel, to show itself, and to relax. So to listen deeply, to find out what's

going on with other people, even people who come with great kindness, with expressions of care, or expressions of sharing themselves in a very, very deep way, is very important. A very important part of *Sangha* life is taking the time to listen to each other, to hear each other, find out what's going on with each other.

Listening, in a sense, is very closely connected to the practice of mindfulness itself. It's a form of mindfulness. Rather than simply being mindful of your own thoughts and feelings and body sensations, it's also being mindful of someone else and listening very deeply to someone, hearing, sensing, and feeling. I was at a Spirit Rock teachers' meeting this last week, and we decided we had to listen to each other better. So we instituted that each time we have a meeting, we take twenty minutes of the day-long meetings, and we sit in little dyads, and we just talk with each other as teachers about our personal relationship to each other. Over the months and years, you can't go through all the seventeen people on the Spirit Rock Teachers Council very quickly. We have meetings about four times a year, so I guess about every five years or so you cycle through.

It's actually been very wonderful for the teaching council, because it has really helped us to create community. Now we know each other a lot better than we did before. Anyway, so we were going to do these dyads last week, just to talk with each other about each other, how we see each other, and give constructive feedback of various kinds, and about our teaching, and how we are as teachers, from other teachers, imagine that. So one of the teachers interrupted, kind of, at the start. He interrupted and gave us a little *Dharma* talk about how we should listen to each other. It felt a little bit odd, you know, in that context. When we teachers get together, you're supposed to stop being a teacher. But anyway, it was nice. The sentiments were nice, and I think the intention was good.

What he said was interesting. I had never heard this idea. He said, when you're listening to each other, don't listen so much as stay a hundred percent in your body. Just stay in your body sensations. Stay with what's going on in your body. He felt quite confident that if you just stayed with your body sensations, listening would happen anyway. You would hear what is going on, but you'd also be tracking what your reactions and feelings were. If you started kind of being carried away, you'd notice that really quickly, and it would actually be easier to stay present for the listening.

I have some doubts about this, at least for me, because if I put my attention a hundred percent someplace, I tend to kind of shut off the other sensors. So when I listen, I try to do both. I kind of go back and forth, or I'm tracking many different areas. I'm trying to listen very carefully. I'm tracking my feelings, my body, my sensations, my reactions, my thoughts. I'm

tracking all of these because if I'm a hundred percent with the listening, then I'm not really a hundred percent with listening. It means that my conscious attention is with listening, and my unconscious, my inner life, might be doing something very different, carrying me away, or judging, or reacting.

But if I do both, if I stay very careful and attentive to who I'm listening to, and at the same time try to be very attentive to what is going on inside of me, then I feel like I have very good listening and very good communication. That also means that I tend to track much more carefully why I want to say something when I am going to say something in conversation. I know that if I'm not doing that careful tracking, listening carefully and also tracking carefully my reactions inside of me, then I can say things rather impulsively, and sometimes I'm sorry I've said them. Sometimes I rely often on intuition for what I am going to say in conversation. But it's an intuition that is not just spontaneous. It's an intuition where I'm very attentive to the wider inner ecology of reactions and thoughts and judgments and fears and body sensations that are going on.

Because I'm aware of those things, then I feel like I can track my intuition more carefully and know when an intuitive hunch or intuitive statement is appropriate and when it's not. One of the things I've learned is my intuition is not always right here. So I don't want to say, you know, intuition, it's all great, and it gives me access to wonderful sources of wisdom. Intuition doesn't always do that. But the careful tracking that I do often helps me discern when it is and when it isn't. A lot of it has to do with paying attention to my intention. What's the intention for saying this? Why do I want to say this?

So speaking is the last of the three community-building factors I'm talking about today. Speaking helps create community, builds community. But speaking also can tear apart community, can ruin friendships and relationships. Probably all of you know the kind of saying that goes, you know, it can take twenty years to create a very good friend, but a minute to spoil it by what you say. Speech is very powerful. Because of its power, I think it's very helpful to listen, to learn to have really great skills of listening before we rush into our speech.

But how is it that speech creates community? It creates community, I think, when we share ourselves honestly, when we have the ability to know what's going on with us and to share ourselves honestly. "This is how I feel. This is what's going on with me." Rather than expressing in our speech our judgments or gossip or criticism or cynicism, I think cynicism and gossip and sarcasm all, in a sense, tend to make community more difficult. But if we can somehow track our speech and notice what kind of speech we make that tends to sever community,

and what helps create a healthy community, I think that's very important for helping create healthy community.

One of the things to pay attention to is, does it really help? Is it really creating community or a feeling of closeness or connectedness with the immediate person you're talking to? Or is it also helping to do that with the wider community? Why I say this is that sometimes gossip or sarcasm or cynicism can be shared between two people and can bring a lot of energy. You know, if you can sit down and say, "Let me tell you what the other person did. Let me tell you what so-and-so did to the other people." "Oh yes, I want to hear about that." Then you tell them. "Well, how could they have done that?" Suddenly there's a kind of feeling of camaraderie, and kind of, you know, we're in on it together. "You're the one and I really know." There can be a lot of energy and a lot of aliveness.

Two people can share in gossip until you find out that they're gossiping about you some other time. So you want to be very careful that the sense of connectedness that you're creating is a healthy one. One of the ways is to kind of track and see, well, is this really helping to create concord in the wider community? Gossip and cynicism and sarcasm often, in a wider community, tend not to create harmony, but rather to work against it. So in relationship to speech, it's very important to track the intention behind our speech. Why are we saying what we do?

I've noticed that many times I'm not aware of the intention before I speak, but I try to do that. I think that's one of the great ways in which mindfulness has helped me in my life, by helping me pay attention to why I say what I want to say. There are often many agendas going on. It isn't just simply that I'm giving some piece of information that's very important for the person to know. It's very seldom that we're just exchanging information. We often want something in relationship. We're trying to create something in the relationship. We're sharing intimacy in the relationship.

Sometimes the intention is, "I'm going to tell you this because I want you to see me in a certain way." So I'm going to say it in a certain way because I want to be seen, and I want you to recognize this is who I am. I remember once, some years ago, I've told this story before, I saw someone I hadn't seen for a long time just before our Monday night sitting group, before I was going into the Quaker Friends Meeting House there. We were having a wonderful kind of warm exchange, and then it was time to go in and sit, for me to give a talk. The last thing I said before I went to sit in silence was that I gave this person a very important piece of information that the person, of course, needed to know. That was, "I hadn't prepared a talk tonight," you know, making sure he knew, right?

So I sat down, and that was resonating in my ear, in my mind, what I had just said, as I sat down in silence to sit. Because I sat down in silence to sit, I merely noticed, you know, why I said that. Unfortunately, I noticed after the fact rather than before. After the fact, I realized why I said that was that I hadn't in fact prepared, and I was a little bit nervous about this friend of mine hearing me make a fool of myself. So if I could give him this little piece of information, I was preparing him, kind of trying to predispose him so that he would not judge me negatively for making a fool of myself because I hadn't prepared. So we often, I think, at least maybe you say me, sometimes have these intentions, these agendas going on in why we say something besides the overt message we're trying to pass across.

So it is our paying attention to that intention in us. Why are we saying what we're going to say? I would venture to guess that it would be transformative for most of you here if the only mindfulness practice you did was mindfulness of why you're going to say what you're going to say before you said it. If you tracked throughout the day for one week the reason why you're going to say something, each time you're going to say it, I think it would be transformative.

So solitude, learning to appreciate it, learning to take refuge in it, learning to settle back in it in the middle of a conversation, to be comfortable maybe without saying anything for a while. Are you comfortable with silences in your conversation? If you're comfortable with solitude, maybe you will be. And to train yourself, to dispose yourself, to be a better listener than a speaker, to listen carefully, and then to speak mindfully, with intention, and speak in such a way that is conducive to concord, not only with the person you speak with, but the wider community you live in.

So it's a great thing that we have this *Saṅgha* here on the Peninsula. I am very grateful for this community, and it's been rather amazing for me personally to see it grow and the many ways it's growing. I remember when, when I first started, there were twelve, fifteen people who came once a week, Monday nights. That was ten years ago. Slowly it's grown and grown and grown, and now we have a lot of activities. Some people just come to one activity, which is fine, but we have a lot of different things going on. One of the real strengths that's happening here is that we're developing a very strong *Saṅgha*, a very strong community.

I think it's really necessary for that to happen in many ways, because it actually gives a greater range of opportunities for people to develop their practice. The more the community does, the more activities there are, the more areas of our life we can somehow address as areas of mindfulness, of practice. It lets us develop our spiritual life in different areas of our life. So having a *sutta* study class, for example, gives people opportunities to explore that more intellectual side of the practice. Perhaps to have a potluck gives people a chance to socialize

more and develop more that side of their life. So as we do more, there are more and more opportunities for a kind of wider and fuller spiritual life.

But as we develop more as a community, I think it's very important to remember the value of solitude, because there's a tendency for many people, because we are social beings, that as a community becomes more and more a community with more social activity going on, it's easy to let the balance of one's involvement with the community go from dedication to the practice to its becoming mostly a social club. Not that that's bad, and for some people that's what they need for a while. But part of my function is trying to ensure that we have a balance of a very strong grounding in the practice itself and a supportive community for that practice. So as long as we stress the value of solitude, then we can now, I think, become as strong a community as we want, and I hope we do.

I have a great appreciation for this community. As I just said, I'm kind of in awe of what we've become, and very appreciative. So I express my great gratitude to all of you. Now I guess we can all share in that gratitude by feasting together, having a potluck. So all of you who want to stay for the potluck, I look forward to seeing you there. For the rest of you, have a wonderful week. Thank you.

Maybe excuse me for saying this, but I realize that many people came today who don't usually come to our Sunday gathering. So you kind of, in a sense, are new here on Sunday, and maybe you don't know a lot of the people here. Maybe before we break, there's five minutes before we're formally supposed to end the talk. Could you each turn to two other people near you and say hello and introduce yourself, just so that everyone kind of feels that they've been, you know, known? Someone here may be new, and it can help create, now, break the ice.