

Week 6 – The Sangha

Buddhism Level 2 – What makes you a Buddhist?

WHAT IS SANGHA?

Many levels: Cambridge Sangha, FWBO Sangha; in specifically Theravadin sense, the monastic sangha; ultimate sense: all beings of past & present who've attained irreversible spiritual insight. – they are the only ones we can really rely on. We can't rely on FWBO or any institution, but hopefully it's helpful.

IMPORTANCE OF SANGHA

We've hopefully found that being on a course with other people, rather than studying a book at home, has given a valuable added dimension. Being member of a Sangha has many benefits:

- Guards against Dharma practice becoming too dry, abstract, isolated – brings in the human element of relatedness.
- Spiritual friendship is a vital practice and support on the path.

I do not see any other single condition by means of which the Noble Eightfold Path can arise and can be perfected except by this spiritual friendship AN1.72

- Supports us emotionally, while knowing the kind of support that's needed.
- Gives us encouragement when we're feeling out of touch with faith or enthusiasm.
- Helps us to develop positive emotions – easier to be open to people you can trust.
- Prevents us getting too blind to our own habits – importance of giving each other feedback to keep us on the middle way. Reflects back to ourselves, helps us know ourselves better.
- We choose to be influenced by people we respect & with whom we share values & common commitment. Brings out the best in us. Helps draw us "against the stream", or away from the "gravitational pull of the conditioned"

GOING FOR REFUGE TO THE SANGHA

At the beginning, hopefully we receive benefit from being part of the Sangha. But Going for Refuge to the Sangha also means valuing it, putting energy into it. It exists because people come together as a Sangha.

Be open to spiritual friends, and befriend Sangha members, especially newer people – remember how it was for you to walk in afresh.

We can join the Sangha in the more formal sense.

In traditional Theravadin circles, the Sangha is monks – lay person's Sangha practice is to feed them & pay respects.

Sangharakshita took things back to basics: removed distinction between monk & lay, replaced it with criterion of commitment, or going for Refuge to the three Jewels.

"Commitment is primary, lifestyle secondary"

If you want to make that commitment, you can join the Sangha “formally”

- Becoming a mitra is a provisional commitment
- If want to move the three Jewels towards the centre of life, be more fully committed, then join WBO. It’s not just for other people!

HOME PRACTICE

Find some way of speaking with someone about your spiritual / developmental aspirations, or any concerns / difficulties you’re having. Try to talk about the place that Buddhism / Buddhist Centre takes in your life at the moment. You may have to make a date with a friend, someone on the course, someone you meet in the Centre; a sympathetic friend etc. Notice how you feel about having the conversation.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Introducing Buddhism, Chris Pauling, chapter 3 (brief outline)

What is the Sangha?, Sangharakshita, ch 1 & 2

The Sangha, Sangharakshita, CD003

Sangharakshita, A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition, by Subhuti, chapter on Spiritual Community