

Community and Commitment

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Our Priory sangha has been exploring aspects of community in the past few years. I'd like to explore here the relationship between community and commitment, for these are intricately interwoven. Turning to our dictionary, we find that the word "community" comes from a Latin word meaning "fellowship," which in turn is derived from a word for "common." Community comes into being when we share something in common. "Commitment" comes from words meaning "together" and "to send, do, or perform." Again, the emphasis is on sharing, an activity which involves cooperation. Of several definitions of "commitment," the one which comes closest to the spiritual practice we're talking about here is: "to give into another's care: entrust."

So what do we Buddhists have in common? What do we share? What is it we entrust ourselves to? At the most fundamental level, that "something" is the Three Treasures—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In this article I want to focus on the active aspects of these three: the Buddha as meditation itself, the living from the True Heart or Buddha Nature; the Dharma as the practice of the Teaching; and the Sangha as the taking refuge in and living and working with others. It is critical that we get the Three Treasures in the right order. Although all are essential and all are aspects of and indeed are one thing, it is the pure meditation which must be done, as Great Master Dogen teaches in *Rules for Meditation*.

To use the analogy of the American stagecoach of the western frontier, meditation—the Buddha—can be compared to the driver and scout. He or she is the one who knows the Way. The Dharma is the team of horses that pulls the coach—beautiful, strong, knowledgeable, and yet still needing the guidance and direction of the driver. The Sangha is the coach with its passengers, which includes all of us. We trust the driver, the Buddha. We trust the horses, the Dharma. We entrust ourselves into their care: we depend on them to get us where we want to go. This is the primary commitment which each of us as individuals needs to make. No one can make it for us: "each person their own karma makes." There is absolute free will in this. And we travel with others, because we care about each other's arrival as much as our own—their success is our success. Traveling together enables us to connect with a good driver and reliable horses, to have a coach to ride in, and to get there more quickly. We provide invaluable support and encouragement for each other in what is often a dangerous and difficult journey on the road of life. Our commitment to each other's success is an expression of the Bodhisattva vow, the wish to help others as well as ourselves in realizing enlightenment. Here our stagecoach analogy needs to shift slightly—we passengers are actually more like the crew on a sailing ship: we each have essential responsibilities, to each other and for the success of the voyage. And as Rev. Master Jiyu teaches in her "*Kyojukaimon* with Commentary," the Dharma and the Sangha become the embodiment of each other.

Now back to the stagecoach: there is a reason why our primary commitment needs to be to the driver and the horses, meditation and Dharma practice. It is they who direct and pull the coach, not the other way 'round. A beautiful, strong coach is a wonderful thing, but without driver/scout and horses, we would be lost and on foot in the wilds, wandering about at great risk to our lives. Excellent horses are likewise admirable, but they too, need the driver. Because training is fundamentally an individual matter between each person and the Unborn, if all our fellow travelers decide not to continue training and "jump ship," or even if the physical coach itself falls apart, one has the driver who knows the way to the journey's end and one still has the team of horses which one can ride bareback if necessary. One can even lose the horses, the Dharma, such as when we grow old and can no longer read scriptures or train in familiar ways. But the driver, the meditation—Buddha Nature—can't be dispensed with. He/She/It is needed to the very end—and beyond.

So when we focus on community, it is essential that we place our highest priority on meditation and training—and by training I mean Dharma practice in daily life. It is our shared individual commitment to contemplative practice which keeps us from becoming a "social religion" rather than a "mystical one," as

Rev. Master Jiyu expressed it in a recent *Journal*. There is no problem in being social, so long as it is understood as the expression of our wish to be, and facilitates our becoming, one with the Unborn, i.e. if it is incorporated as part of our practice. If we do not keep up our individual training and meditation, we run the risk of becoming a “mutual admiration society” in which we only reinforce each other’s delusions. As human beings, we are social animals, and we have the potential to be Buddhas. Times together can rightly be used as opportunities to get to know each other better, to learn to trust one another, and to learn to live more carefully within the Precepts in an environment designed for that. And it is good to keep our true purpose paramount—to embody the Dharma.

Commitment to a spiritual community is trust and faith in something deeper and more lasting than to the specific individuals in a group. We commit to the shared trust in the driver and horses—the Buddha Nature and the Dharma as taught in our tradition and lineage. It is this commitment to the shared meditation and Dharma practice that continues to live on when the present set of individuals passes on. As with our stagecoach journey, passengers embark and disembark at many points along the way. The practice of the Dharma, of following the Buddha, lives on. And this particular set of persons, the vessels of this Dharma practice, are to be highly prized and treasured. As Great Master Tendo Nyojo, Dogen’s teacher in China said, “Within this hall we must love each other and be deeply grateful....How fortunate we are to be together. ‘The fact that we are in this boat is due entirely to our good deeds in past lives; that we are blessed with the opportunity of spending the training period together...is equally due to the same cause.’” We must never give up on each other—they are our shared Life.

By keeping the primary emphasis on practice, we have the tools to weather all the ups and downs that every community inevitably goes through. This shared approach to life—and Life—gives us the flexibility, courage, trust, and all-acceptance which are embodied in bowing, a key component of our ceremonial. As the eminent Japanese Ancestor for whom our lineage is named, Great Master Manzan, taught, “As long as bowing lasts, Buddhism will last.” When we all put our emphasis on practice, we can find the strength and flexibility to bow to the “True Master” which Rev. Master Jiyu describes in her short article “Perfect Faith”—That which is beyond both master and disciple, community and leaders.

The commitment to meditation and training gives us as individuals and collectively as community an ever-increasing awareness and knowledge of what is good and not good to do. We experience the consequences of enlightened and unenlightened activity together and learn from them, sometimes painfully, but without judgment. Out of this learning experience we can come to choose more wisely and continue to let go of our conditioned opinions and ideals, wishes and desires. As Rev. Alicia pointed out in her Dharma talk while visiting recently, we can trust our True Heart to guide and direct us naturally. This trusting of the learning process gives us the flexibility to keep our community alive, sensitive, harmonious in the midst of differences, and a sangha to whom others are drawn. This acceptance of both our humanity and the evolving shared practice is always a voluntary act. Trust cannot be forced. It is up to each of us to make the effort to trust, and to trust together. We cannot wait for trust to be there, or for someone else to make the first move. Each of must DO IT, kindly and gently, with patience, compassion and effort. We create and grow trust by trusting.*

*See previous newsletter article on “The Cultivation of Trust,” February-March 2002.
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