

The Sangha Treasure

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Sangha is the ancient Buddhist word for the community, or followers, of the Buddha. It is one of the Three Treasures, or Jewels, the priceless objects of our faith. The other two Treasures are the Buddha, simultaneously the historical Shakyamuni and He Who is alive in our Hearts, and the Dharma, His teachings. We also call these the Three Refuges, for it is to them that we go for true security and peace in the midst of an everchanging, often violent and sorrowful world. This world also includes our own sometimes turbulent minds.

It is probably no accident that Shakyamuni Buddha, our religion's founder, established taking refuge in the Three Treasures as the first step in becoming a disciple. We retain this priority in our Serene Reflection/Soto Zen tradition by calling these three refuges the "Three Treasures Precepts," and as such they constitute the first set of the new Buddhist's commitments when they take the Precepts at lay ordination. The final vow (Tenth Great Precept) echoes and returns full circle to that first set: "I will not defame the Three Treasures. I will not deny the Unborn within myself or others."

The Sangha does not exist independently of the Buddha and the Dharma. As Dogen and other great masters have taught, they are three aspects of one thing, the Unborn. We cannot participate in Sangha unless we simultaneously take refuge in the other two Treasures. Otherwise our "sangha" becomes just a nice group of pleasant people, a Buddhist club, a study or support group, or at best a collection of people who share noble ideals.

Sangha is much, much more than that. To quote Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett in her *Commentary on the Giving and Receiving the Precepts (Kyojukaimon)*, Sangha is "the embodiment of the Preceptual Truth [Dharma] of the Buddhas." Sangha are those people who have committed themselves to the Buddhist teachings in order to cleanse their karma and know the Buddha. For us at the Priory and in our Order, this process of cleansing, our "practice," is the meditation we call serene reflection, or "just sitting." Other religions and Buddhist traditions may do it in other ways and may be equally valid, but--and--what unites us is our shared commitment to this particular practice.

It is through this shared practice, and the understanding that flows through and from it, that we reach out and relate to each other. This type of meditation is the "ticket" to being a part of the sangha. No one is looking over anyone else's shoulder--much less reading their minds!--to see who "has a ticket." It is the practice itself which enables us to train together harmoniously together. It is what puts us in touch with what is truly Real, softens brittle idealism, and dissolves emotional entanglements. In short, the meditative cleansing of karma helps us let go of selfishness so that we may act from the True Self which exists in us, others, and all things.

Without the regular practice of serene reflection meditation, you may very likely find yourself at odds or out of step with your fellow trainees and/or your Prior. You may feel confused or hurt because you feel no one "understands" you or will give you the kind of help or support you expect or would like. This is a good time to talk to your Prior or one of the lay ministers. It also is a signal to do some self-examination: Are you keeping up a regular practice of sitting meditation? Are you endeavoring to live by the Precepts and teaching offered by the Prior and other monks of the Order, i.e. the Dharma? Are you making the effort to be at the Priory for activities to train with others--not just the ones you like, but the whole range of events from meditation to ceremonies to work days to classes to members' meetings and socials? Is it your heart-felt intent to take refuge in all three Treasures?

All the help and support we give to each other comes from, and in the context of, meditation practice--this coming to know the Buddha through the cleansing of karma. We have to want enlightenment, the Unborn (perhaps only vaguely perceived at first as something better than "this"!), and be willing to do the training to realize It. This process can be, and usually is, at times difficult, uncomfortable, distressing, painful, and inconvenient. These feelings are the natural karmic consequences as they arise in and through our meditation, flowing naturally from past acts of suffering we have committed. The law of karma, cause and effect, is naturally just: "What goes around comes around." In Buddhist training, thank goodness, when it comes around it may not have to be experienced externally (actually lived through) but rather can be experienced internally as states of feeling in meditation. Either way, we feel the pain we caused others and are thus motivated to "turn our hearts around" (*sange*) and dedicate ourselves to not repeating such selfish acts. The Precepts, the Dharma, serve as our guidelines for preventing and freeing ourselves from future suffering.

Our sangha friends can understand and sympathize with these training experiences, because they've been there. They can provide invaluable help and support. And, if we are not ourselves keeping up the meditation practice, that assistance will no better than just throwing rocks into a pond. The Buddha expressed this principle in regard to His own instruction as, "The Buddhas do but point the Way. You must prove these things true for yourselves. Ultimately, you must go alone." In order to receive and make use of the help we're given, we as individuals must do the training.

So as we "develop sangha"--and I feel this is an important stage in the temple's evolution--let us make sure we endeavor to do so with equal emphasis on Buddha and Dharma. "Buddha" in this context is meditation, the cleansing of karma. "Dharma" is studying what we learn in meditation and applying it to daily life. "Sangha" is doing this together. Let us take Refuge in all Three Treasures, for they are like the legs of a tripod. Depending on only one or two will cause collapse. Our meal in the cookpot--our life--will fall into the fire. All three refuges are needed for successful strength and stability.

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