

## THE SANGHA

*Only a Buddha and a Buddha can thoroughly master it.*

—The Lotus Sutra

I'd like to thank Greg for his wonderful Way Seeking Mind Talk. While listening to him recount some of the events and struggles of his life I felt connected not only to him but to my own struggles to find The Way. I was moved and inspired by how courageously he faced the difficulties of his life. Most important I was very thankful for his presence in our group. I am thankful to all of you for making the effort to be here each Monday evening. Sometimes, during our sitting, I will look at each person to get a sense of their work and I am always deeply moved by each person's efforts to face his or her self. I am also aware of how much of my own work depends on everyone's efforts. It is much easier for me to sit when I can feel the silence of the person next to me. I want to thank you for all your continuing efforts.

As Buddhists we take refuge in the *Three treasures*: The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Buddha refers not only to Shakyamuni Buddha but also to our deepest self. The dharma refers not only to the recorded teachings of the historical Buddha but also to truth itself. It is the sangha, the group of people dedicated to practicing the Dharma, that actually manifests the other two treasures to the world. The three treasures are one, but the understanding, or the way they help us is different. Suzuki Roshi said, "if one of them is missing we could not become a disciple of the Buddha."

Without the sangha, the Buddha would now be a distant figure of ancient history and his teaching would've been available only in dusty scholarly tomes and internet sites. The historical sangha has enabled the historical Shakyamuni to be intimately present in the world and in our lives. His teaching has remained and evolved into a uniquely relevant way of understanding our lives in the twenty first century.

Sangha means group. In Pali, there are two terms: *bhikkhu-Sangha* or the *ariya-Sangha*, which is the group of Noble Beings, who live virtuously, doing good and refraining from evil with bodily action and speech. So when we take refuge in the Sangha by chanting *Sangham saranam gacchami*, we take refuge in virtue, in that which is good, virtuous, kind, compassionate and generous.

Originally, *sangha* from a Sanskrit root meaning “an aggregate” referred to the disciples of the historical Buddha. Later it came to mean monks and nuns as the original teaching of the Buddha developed into an organized religion. In some streams of modern Buddhism, the word still refers only to monks and nuns as a group, but in Zen, the Sangha has always been more than clergy, more than a group of believers, more than just Buddhists. The Sangha is, in fact, the kinship of all things, every entity of this and every universe, past, present, and future, in endless dimensions. It is to the enlightenment of this whole Sangha that we are dedicated in our vows.

There are many Sanghas within the universal Sangha. The Buddha Sangha is one, and the Zen Buddhist Sangha is another. A group of people such as Bamboo in the Wind who meet regularly in a spirit of harmony and unity is another. Suzuki Roshi once remarked that a sangha *is the state of harmony and unity*. It is from the family that we move out into the world. It is from the training center that we simultaneously move out into the world and back toward ourselves.

All of us sitting here may not be direct disciples of the historical Buddha, but we are his descendents. And so we give homage to the long line of teachers and ancestors that form the backbone of the historical sangha in all of our Zen ceremonies. When you receive lay and priest ordination you get a document that traces the blood line of our lineage from Shakyamuni through the Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and American teachers and ancestors. It starts with the Buddha and ends with you.

A useful metaphor for the immediate Sangha is the *Net of Indra* from the Flower Garland Sutra, which describes a vast net that reaches infinitely in all directions. In the net are an infinite number of jewels. Each individual jewel reflects all of the other jewels, and the reflected jewels also reflect all of the other jewels. Each jewel is intimately interconnected with every other jewel throughout time and space. Everything contains everything else. At the same time, each individual knot is an individual person, altogether his or her own jewel, unlike any other.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the Sangha as the harmony of Buddha and Dharma. Infinite emptiness, full of potential, has its form in phenomena, as they come and go. This is the fundamental truth of Mahayana Buddhism, “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” The Sangha is our realization of this harmony. It is

the expression of the interconnectedness of all things. We express this harmony in each of our actions: bowing, taking our seats, chanting and sitting.

I'd like to close by chanting the Upaddha Sutra from the Pali Canon:

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Sakyans. Now there is a Sakyan town named Sakkara. There Ven. Ānanda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Ven. Ānanda said to the Blessed One, "This is half of the holy life, lord: having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues."

"Don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. Having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, he can be expected to develop and pursue the noble eightfold path.

"And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, develop and pursue the noble eightfold path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. He develops right resolve... right speech... right action... right livelihood... right effort... right mindfulness... right concentration dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. This is how a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues, develops and pursues the noble eightfold path.

"And through this line of reasoning one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life: It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to birth have gained release from birth, that beings subject to aging have gained release from aging, that beings subject to death have gained release from death, that beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair have gained release from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. It is through this line of reasoning that one may know how having admirable people as friends, companions, and colleagues is actually the whole of the holy life."