

What is the Sangha?

In early Buddhism, 2600 to 3000 years ago depending on the calendar you prefer, Shakyamuni Buddha taught his students (monks or disciples) using expedient means or teaching devices to aid them in grasping concepts that were difficult for them or outside their current capacity to understand. Many concepts like the mind to body connection were taught through isolation of sexes and even from the general population, in order to deeply experience the ideas of these mental relationships and cravings of the 'self'. These were the days of monastic privations and asceticism. Shakyamuni taught using words and memorization, rather than relying on very regional and varied writing languages that would divide and possibly confuse meaning for the students.

So, in his day, he described the activity of study and "good students" as those who would share their study and help each other to discover the meaning in his sermons rather than to simply worship his every word. It was always the meaning, he would exhort, that is primary, and the shared discussion with studious friends could bring this about more easily. This he called the sangha. The shared experience of study was in fact a precious thing in its power to access meaning. Known later as one of the three treasures of Buddhism, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, this idea took on an embodied meaning of its own. Many equated the sangha with the monastic grouping and even the ascetic practices themselves. But this was not Shakyamuni's meaning. The Sangha is truly the relationship between students of Buddhism to attain enlightenment while helping one another to understand and discover meaning in the teachings. Shakyamuni spoke of the fallacy of focusing on the pointing finger, rather than the moon, or object being pointed at. In other words, do not focus or worship the words, my words, or even my image or likenesses, because the enlightenment is within you, already extant, and simply needs to be experienced. That experience is not solitary but equaniminous and in all phenomena. A mental experience of unity, inseparability, an expensive experience of life, a Sangha.

As the Buddha's teaching life evolved over some 50 years, Shakyamuni traveled and kept a large entourage of students with him. Obviously, the 'sangha' was his entourage. Not kept in a single edifice or monastery; the sangha was the relationship of shared study and experience with those in his local sphere. Certainly monasteries were continuing in regions he had left on his travels. And they, independently continued in study and practice, living their own sangha or collective study, and in the greater expanse of Buddhist experience at one, in mind, with the Buddha as he traveled. In point of fact, over his teaching life, Shakyamuni reduced the privations and ascetic practices expected of his students as their capacity to understand grew. In his ultimate and final days, his teachings held implications for future generations. These future students, he understood, would need no asceticism to understand basic concepts of mind and body that would be already inculcated into their capacities. So in his ultimate teachings he made no mention of monastic practices other than individual determinations. The practice of the individual student is primary, and the exigences to the Bodhisattva

practice is preeminent in his teaching. Consider for a moment what it is to practice as a Bodhisattva. To facilitate others' practice of Buddhism, to be a student of Buddhism. Is this not the embodiment of the Sangha? Again, the treasure of the sangha is not a specific place or grouping, or even to be found in "community" as such. The Sangha is in the relationship between individuals seeking the meaning in Buddhist scholarship. The sangha is in your reading this note of mine and in my efforts to communicate to you the teachings of Buddha. This is my Bodhisattva practice and yours as well, to participate in. In this moment we experience the treasure of the Sangha.

The Sangha, like all of Buddhism, is experienced in the mind. The Sangha is our Bodhisattva experience. The Sangha is effort, it is our volitional influence, it is our practice. When we sit and focus on the Gohonzon, clasp our hands and chant the Daimoku, recite the Sutra, this is Sangha also. This is the treasure of Sangha. This is the great invention of Nichiren. In Nichiren we find tremendous scholarship and conviction in the Bodhisattva practice and the clear manifestation of Sangha in the object of the Gohonzon, properly revered in a Butsudan, with the personal determination and connection of the Daimoku to interconnect with the Sangha, the Buddhist scholarship and mental 'community' of chanting single-mindedly for our Buddha realization. To endeavor to communicate this with others is Bodhisattva expansion of the Sangha. There is no need or requirement for "membership" as we are all members, all sentient beings, all instantiations of Buddha. We are Sangha. All that remains is awakening.

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