



## The Sangha

'Sangha' is the 'Spiritual Community' and is the third of the Three Jewels.

The Sangha is much more than a group, and is not based upon institutional power. Rather than power and rules, the Sangha is based on Spiritual Friendship. The term here is '*Kalyana Mitrata*'. This is friendship based upon the good, upon the beautiful. '*Kalyana*' means 'auspicious', 'noble', 'beautiful', 'good', 'valuable'. '*Mitrata*' means 'friendship' or 'friendliness'.

If you take away all institutional structures, what's left is the connections between individuals. This is what is at the heart of Sangha – friendship based upon the truth, upon the beautiful. You could even call it 'friendship in the beautiful'.

Because we relate to each other on the basis of the spiritual, the beautiful, we can connect deeply with each other. We relate to each other on the basis of the best in us, rather than over-identifying each other (and ourselves) with the more mundane details of our lives. We relate to people on the basis of their potential, rather than on their shortcomings. The Buddha, in his decision to teach the Dharma, was seeing people's potential rather than their limitations or even their attainments.

The Dharma is relational. Everything we do in the Dharma is only seen in its fullness when it's in relation to other people or the world around us. When we talk about being more mettful or more aware, this is relational to people and the world around us. We even develop insight so that we can see the true nature of our relationships with ourselves and others. The Buddha once said that Kalyana Mitrata is the whole of the spiritual life.

## Why do we need the Sangha?

To have a full Dharma practice we need a Sangha. The Dharma is relational – it's not fully actualised until we practice it in relation to other people. We also all need a concrete, living context for our practice of the Dharma. We all need the friendship, encouragement, support, and inspiration we can only get from other like-minded people, and we need the guidance of those who have been practising longer than we have.

At the end of the day, Buddhism is 'caught' rather than 'taught'. It's something you pick up by being around people who are doing it, more than from books or the information online. It's easier to see this embodied in people around you in the Sangha than in a book or a movie.

## A Short History of the Development of Buddhism and Buddhist Sanghas

Buddhism started with the Buddha, over 2,500 years ago. His early followers were a loose-knit community of 'full-timers' and 'lay followers'. 'Full-timers' were what we'd call monks and nuns, they called themselves *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. They devoted all their energies to following the Buddhist path, and lived with very few



possessions – just the robes they wore, a water strainer, a begging bowl, a blade for shaving, and one or two other basic necessities. They lived by begging for food in the local village, town or city. Society was different back then and lay people were very keen to give food to *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, as it was seen as very meritorious to do so. Initially, the monks and nuns lived sleeping out in the forest around towns and villages, at the foot of trees or in bamboo huts during the rainy-season.

There were also lay supporters of the Buddha who were committed to living out the Dharma life in the context of family. These included merchants, kings, queens and farmers – people from all walks of life.

Over time the Buddha was given gifts of land from wealthy supporters. These were places such as deer-parks or groves near cities where monks and nuns could stay during the monsoon period in India, when travel was impossible. At other times, the monks and nuns would travel on foot around India, teaching the Dharma to those who wanted to learn about it. After the Buddha's death, over time these places developed into monasteries and permanent dwelling places, where monks and nuns remained all year round. Out of this the Buddhist monastic tradition arose.

Over time this community spread out to different parts of India, and a while after the Buddha's death, divided over time into a number of different schools. Each school remained in good harmony with the others, even though they'd vigorously debate their doctrine with each other. Different schools might even exist within the same monastery, exemplifying the spirit of tolerance which is a hallmark of Buddhism.

By about the first century CE two major branches of Buddhism had occurred. Firstly, there were the earlier, more conservative schools of Buddhism. The Theravada, the only school from that time still extant, is still in existence in South-east Asia, in places such as Thailand and Burma. This school is based upon the Pali Canon, the earliest Buddhist texts which, as far as we can tell, are the most historically accurate description of the Buddha and his teaching. These were passed down orally for hundreds of years before being written down, and were probably altered and added to over that time as well.

These contain the teachings which are the bedrock of Buddhism. But unfortunately these schools became a bit ossified, a bit stale, a bit too concerned with the external forms rather than the internal spirit of things. They also tended to take an overly literalistic approach to the Dharma. In particular, they came to over-identify being a monk or a nun with being a real Buddhist.

The function of the laity came to mean supporting the monks and nuns, rather than practicing intensively themselves. It was impossible, according to some monastics, to gain Enlightenment as a lay person. To support this view, some of the texts were added to or particular parts were emphasised at the expense of other parts. You could say that it lost sight of the altruistic element of Buddhism, and became more concerned with the quest for personal liberation. This led to a rather dry approach to Buddhist practice.

As a result, and in reaction to this, another branch arose called the Mahayana. This means 'The Great Way', as contrasted to 'The Lesser Path', or Hinayana, which they called the earlier schools of Buddhism. In this they emphasised the altruistic element once more, placing great importance upon cultivating a warm and compassionate response to other living beings. Instead of just wanting Enlightenment for yourself, you wanted it for all beings. You wanted to help every being in the universe see the truth of things for themselves. It didn't matter if you were a lay person or monk or nun; all could practice Buddhism in their own way.

Even this, in time, became a bit formulaic, so another branch eventually arose. This was the Vajrayana, the 'Diamond Way', which arose around 500 CE. This emphasised that you could gain Enlightenment at any moment, by seeing through to the truth of things. You particularly did this by engaging with symbols and rituals, thereby



engaging the full subconscious energies of the mind. You also took a guru who would empower you to do certain esoteric practices that would release your energy and take you to Enlightenment.

It's worth saying that this is a simplification of the history of Buddhism. Not all Theravada practitioners are selfish and narrow. And not all Mahayana followers are altruistic and compassionate. So we need to be careful of caricatures. But there is a lesson here that any form of Buddhism can (and indeed inevitably will) become stale, and will need to be renewed or expressed in a new form.

Buddhism in India died out between 900 and 1,100 CE. It had gone into decline for a few reasons. Mainly, it had become overly identified with the monasteries and lost touch with the grass-roots of everyday life and everyday people. Huge monastic cities had grown in northern India, for example in Nalanda, which at its peak was reckoned to have 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers. But this was a weakness too, and Hinduism experienced a resurgence at a grass-roots level in the everyday lives of people. Also it became very dependent upon rich patronage which left it vulnerable to political influence. The hammer-nail in the coffin of Buddhism in India was the Muslim invasions which destroyed the monasteries and massacred the monks.

By this time Buddhism, in all its forms, had spread to different parts of the east – China, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and so on. Buddhism continued to develop in all these places to varying degrees. Buddhism has also spread throughout the world and even returned to India in the last seventy years. Many people in India have converted to Buddhism to escape the horror of the caste-system. Most of these people were low caste, so low to even be seen as below what it means to be human. Converting to Buddhism offers them a chance to leave behind a religion that considers their presence to be intrinsically polluting, and be part of a spiritual tradition that says that all beings have limitless potential.

In modern times new schools of Buddhism have emerged, such as the Triratna Buddhist Community.

### **The Triratna Buddhist Community**

The Triratna Buddhist Community was founded by Sangharakshita in 1967 in England. Sangharakshita was born in London and, to cut a long story short, ended up living as a monk in North Eastern India in the foothills of the Himalayas. He came in contact with various Tibetan and Chinese teachers there and started to see what was essential to Buddhism, regardless of whether you were a Theravadan, a Mahayana follower or a practitioner of the Vajrayana. Eventually, he came back to London and was involved in the a Buddhist organisation there, but soon after decided that the time was right to set up a new Buddhist community. This was to bring people back to what was essential to Buddhism, and to not be caught up in what were merely cultural trappings. It was to draw out what was at the core of Buddhism, rather than being over-identified with any one of the Hinayana, Mahayana or Vajrayana.

This new community or movement was initially and for a long time called 'The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order', and at its core was 'The Western Buddhist Order'. In 2010 this name was changed to 'The Triratna Buddhist Community'. The word 'Western' was no longer felt as being appropriate as the community spread to parts of the world that would not consider themselves western - for example, one third of our community are in India. 'Triratna' means 'Three Jewels', which are central to life as a Buddhist.

This movement has spread across the world, and has centres in every continent, from New Zealand to Venezuela, from Mumbai to San Francisco. The Dublin Buddhist Centre is part of it, and there are other Triratna groups in Ireland, in West Mayo, North Wicklow and Killaloe.



## **Distinctive Emphases of the Triratna Community**

### *An ecumenical movement*

The Triratna Community is not identified with any particular traditional strand of Buddhism or traditional Buddhist school, but draws inspiration from an array of different strands in the Buddhist tradition. It calls itself "ecumenical" because it is founded on the premise that there is an underlying unity to all Buddhist schools.

### *'Going for Refuge' is central*

'Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels' is considered to be what makes someone a Buddhist. 'Going for Refuge' is a traditional term that means placing your heart upon the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. You look to the Three Jewels for inspiration and guidance. It means being committed to the Three Jewels. This is what defines you as a Buddhist, rather than a particular lifestyle, or set of robes or vows, etc. All of a Buddhist spiritual life can be seen in terms of deepening one's Going for Refuge.

### *A unified Order*

Unlike some Buddhist Sanghas, the Triratna Order does not propagate a monastic lineage. Sangharakshita devised a non-monastic ordination system instead which emphasises commitment as that which defines ordination. You don't have to live like a monk, though some Order Members do decide to do this. It is the same ordination regardless of your gender - this is quite unusual, if not unique, in the Buddhist world.

### *Spiritual Friendship*

In the Triratna Community there is a strong emphasis on the Sangha, and spiritual friendship based on shared values - spending time with friends who share ideals, and engaging in ritual practice with them, is part of the path of Buddhism.

### *Team Based Right Livelihood*

Working together in teams, in the spirit of generosity and with a focus on ethics, is considered a transformative spiritual practice. Many people have formed Buddhist ethical livelihoods and businesses that allow them to work together on the basis of the Dharma and provide financial support for the workers. But it's not just to be supported, it's to use work as a way of deepening your own practice of awareness, kindness and wisdom. This also manifests in people living together in Buddhist residential communities.

### *Importance of the Arts*

Engagement in, and an appreciation of, the arts are considered to be a valuable aspect of spiritual practice. This helps to refine emotional sensitivity and provide a channel for the expression of living a Dharma life. There are many artists in the Triratna community who see their art as a means of exploring and expressing their Dharma life.



### Home practice

1. Meditation: how are you going to maintain & develop it?

Please note that, going forward from here, a good rule of thumb is to practice the metta-bhavana and the mindfulness of breathing on alternate days.

2. One other practice you learnt on the course that you want to continue with.

3. One thing you will attend to keep in contact with other practitioners.

### Meghiya Sutta – an excerpt

"When the mind's release is immature, Meghiya, five things lead to its maturity. What five?

"Here, Meghiya, a bhikkhu has good friends, good associates, good companions. When the mind's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the first thing that leads to its maturity.

"Furthermore, Meghiya, a bhikkhu is ethical, he lives restrained by the restraint of the code of conduct, endowed with conduct and resort; seeing danger in the smallest faults, he trains in the training principles he has accepted. When the mind's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the second thing that leads to its maturity.

"Furthermore, Meghiya, a bhikkhu obtains at will, with no trouble or difficulty, talk that is sobering, a help in opening up the mind, and talk on modesty, contentment, seclusion, non-entanglement, arousing persistence, virtue, concentration, discernment, release, and the knowledge & vision of release. When the mind's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the third thing that leads to its maturity.

"Furthermore, Meghiya, a bhikkhu lives with energy instigated for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the acquiring of wholesome states; he is vigorous, energetic, and persevering with regard to wholesome states. When the mind's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the fourth thing that leads to its maturity.

"Furthermore, Meghiya, a bhikkhu is wise, endowed with the noble ones' penetrative understanding of rise and disappearance leading to the complete ending of suffering. When the mind's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the fifth thing that leads to its maturity. When the mind's release is immature, Meghiya, these five things lead to its maturity.

"It is to be expected of a bhikkhu who has good friends, good associates, good companions, that he will be virtuous ... It is to be expected of a bhikkhu who has good friends... that he will obtain at will... talk that is sobering, a help in opening up the mind... It is to be expected of a bhikkhu who has good friends... that he will live with energy instigated... It is to be expected of a bhikkhu who has good friends... that he will be wise, endowed with the noble ones' penetrative understanding of rise and disappearance leading to the complete ending of suffering.