

Like Potatoes in a Pot

How Relationships in Sangha Affect Individuals' Practice

Lucie Votrubcová

When I came to the Zen center and started practicing, I had a feeling that as far as the direction of practice was concerned, I naturally followed what I had known for a long time. Since childhood I have adopted the direction of our practice—"How can I help you?" I joined the Scouts at the age of ten, and at the age of twelve I made a Scout promise, part of which says "By soul and body to be ready to serve my homeland and my neighbor." The motto of the Rovers—Scouts over fifteen years of age—is "Service." Helping others was part of our mission, and I had all my adolescence for learning this fact naturally and nonviolently.

Our Scout activity consisted mainly in spending time with children we didn't know, and hence were strangers, and in our free time we prepared programs for them and went on trips and summer camps. Scout leaders not only are not paid, but many sacrificed their own annual leave from work for these activities. It may seem that we did not get anything out of it, but our great benefit was that we created a community of people where we were accepted and supported, we could rely on each other, we were always willing to help each other, and children from dysfunctional families could find examples to follow that they didn't have at home.

When I started attending the Zen center, I unconsciously felt there was a similar potential as in our Scout troop. In Liberec our sangha consists of laypeople who do not live together in the Zen center. We meet for collective practice and organize retreats, but we also eat together, go to help build a new Zen center in Vrážné, or go for walks and trips together. While doing all this we are learning and getting to know each other. We interact and have a positive effect on each other. We create a community. Communities are rare nowadays, but also necessary. A lot of people live alone and lack close relationships with other people. Previously, it was common for neighbors to help each other, to lend tools, even to go and help for free with some specialized activity. Today, when living in a city, the maximum we do for our neighbors is that we greet them. But knocking on their door asking if they have an egg they could give us is quite a substantial step out of our comfort zone. In the past, people lived surrounded by family members, and many relatives gathered to celebrate various occasions, but today we often see only the nuclear family model—father, mother, and children, ideally. The family often lives far away from grandparents or other relatives who could help each other.

For most people, being a part of a community is valuable. They may not feel it straightaway, but over time one

always gets tired of loneliness and independence. In our community, we share a common interest in practice, but at the same time we are different, with different experiences. We all come from different backgrounds. Sometimes working on relationships is difficult. What makes one person laugh makes another person upset. What is annoying for one will pass almost unnoticed by another. If a dispute arises or someone gets us angry, then the first thing we think about is to give up on everything, crawl into our shell and never show up at the Zen center again. But if we do not do this and instead communicate and resolve the dispute, it will strengthen not only each of us, but also the whole sangha. Our practice provides big support for us and helps us in looking at situations that arise from a non-attached point of view, exploring them in more detail and thinking a bit more deeply about them. Sometimes we do not realize that a well-functioning relationship between two people can have a positive effect on a third person. It also positively affects the sangha as a whole, newcomers who may have difficult personal situations, and the other people around them.

Some people need to deepen their ability for compassion and humility; for some the hardest is to learn to say no, or "I need this differently," or "This hurts me." Some people manage everything by themselves and do not need help from others. Then they do not understand why they should help someone else. In a sangha these attitudes appear very clearly. By practicing and increasing our perceptiveness to others and to the whole world, we can give honest feedback to each other. We learn to put our ego aside and receive feedback, even if sometimes it's unpleasant. But we also learn not to hurt others unnecessarily when communicating our perspective to them.

In our daily lives we often find it difficult to find time to practice. We steal it at the expense of our families, hobbies, leisure time, or sleep. And probably nobody wants to spend this hard-earned time among people they are not comfortable with. For some, their practice is so important that they are able to deal with it. There are people who can follow their vision; they make a practice that makes sense for them, and they stick to it. But even this is sustainable in the short term only. Often, through practice, relationships are cleansed and made healthier. When Barry Briggs JDPSN visited us, he told us that Zen Master Seung Sahn compared people in a sangha to potatoes in a pot—in Korea potatoes are washed by putting them in a large pot and stirring them with a stick. And as they bump into each other they knock the dirt off and thus clean each other.

On the one hand, it is easy to practice alone. On the

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Or a wealthy man who just managed to save his wife and small child from their house going up in flames from one of the fires near Los Angeles might go from denying the climate crisis to helping.

If moved to act, use **skillful means**. A desire to try and fix things is natural, but perceive when to reach out and when to stay put. If you become or already are an environmental activist, remember that anger hurts us first—keep practicing and going on retreats. Igor Piniński JDPSN said that when Zen Master Seung Sahn came out of the army, his teacher, Zen Master Ko Bong, sent him on a long retreat to take care of his “army eyes.”

We are most fortunate to have encountered the teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn. We are most fortunate to be practicing people. How do each of us choose to live out our bodhisattva vow now? ♦

*Everything is impermanent, but there is truth.
You and I are not two, not one:
Only your stupid thinking is nonstop.
Already alive in the Prajna ship.
—Zen Master Man Gong (1872–1946)*

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other, it is easy to succumb to the self-deception that we have achieved something. It is like the story of the ascetic who practiced alone in a cave for ten years and then claimed to a farmer to have completely mastered anger. When challenged about this, the ascetic ends up screaming at the farmer in rage. (See “One Zen Practitioner’s Response to the Climate Emergency” in this issue. —Ed.)

Therefore, I wish all of us that we find the patience to work on relationships within sangha—and outside of it too of course—and that we can find time to listen to others; to be able to help another selflessly and devote our time and energy to them. I hope we all achieve enlightenment and save all sentient beings from suffering. ♦

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