Sangha
by Rodney Smith

When I was beginning my Buddhist practice, I often reflected upon the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The Buddha had collectively called these three, "The Triple Gem." Early on, I could understand pairing the Buddha and the Dharma. The Buddha and his teaching were obviously one and the same, inseparable from each other. But I could never reconcile including the Sangha in this echelon. Yes, it was important, it provided needed support and encouragement, but in my opinion one could also do this difficult work alone. Christianity also left me puzzled on this point. Christ is said to have proclaimed, "When two or more are gathered in my name, I will be with you." Two or more? Why not one?! As a matter of fact, self-reliance somehow seemed more ennobling than depending upon others. So I accepted the Buddha and the Dharma as a diamond and a ruby and reclassified Sangha as a semi-precious stone.

Over the intervening years I have grown in my understanding of what Sangha offers, and see it now as an equal partner in its wealth and display. I no longer separate Sangha from the Buddha or the Dharma. Together these are three perceptions of the same event. The answer to why two or more must gather and not one, now seems obvious. Isolating and separating oneself from the world is at the heart of our pain and suffering. Buddhism is about inclusion, not exclusion. Its focus is to look at the problems of our selfishness and separation, and to understand them as a misperception of reality.

We cannot do this work alone because we are never alone. We remain interconnected even as we attempt to cut ourselves off. Our minds are always relating to external objects even in our remote hermitage. In fact, our minds only exist in relationship. To understand the nature of relationship is to understand our separation and remains at the heart of Buddhist practice. Through Sangha we bring people into this equation from the start. We become aware of how we avoid certain types of people and attempt to change ourselves with others. We explore our psychological reactions and see our history playing forth in the presence of friends and family. Using the company of others, we explore our reactivity and ego involvement. Who we become with other people, becomes our line of inquiry. We use people to enhance our own

inward process. People become a vehicle for understanding our minds even as we delight or reject in their company.

Literally Sangha means "gathering", specifically the gathering of like minded people who share a love for the Dharma. It is connecting with good hearted people who are working towards honest and true relationships. The Dharma is the light around which we all gather. Even those with passing interest in the Dharma must have some sense that facing truth will ultimately serve their greater needs. Since others often know our weaknesses and blind spots better than ourselves, it becomes incumbent upon us to offer and receive honest feedback. There is joy in sharing this bold embrace of life with others who relish the truth because it is done with compassion. The force and spirit of the Sangha serves everyone's awakening and is an ongoing reminder of the caring heart.

It makes sense to hang out with the most conscious people we know. Such company will inevitably challenge our complacency. The Sangha is an ongoing reminder of our Buddhist heritage. Retaining our connection with the Triple Gem assures that we will not be overwhelmed by our suffering. We will forever be linked to a tradition of wisdom and compassion through a shared and common spirit of discovery. The Sangha keeps that discovery alive and active within us all.

Like anything of value, building the Sangha takes effort. We must be willing to spend the time and commit the energy to connect and establish the relationships. Coming to social events, staying after classes and retreats to meet others, taking the initiative to form the friendships, all help establish the foundation of Sangha. Experienced students begin to assume the more important role of mentoring and assisting the beginning participants. These activities directly deepen our understanding of the Buddha and the Dharma, each shining with greater radiance with the growth of the Sangha.