

We Need A Sangha

In my tradition we learn that as individuals we cannot do much. That is why taking refuge in the Sangha, taking refuge in the community, is a very strong and important practice. When I say, “I take refuge in the Sangha” it does not mean that I want to express my devotion. No. It’s not a question of devotion, it’s a question of practice. Without being in a Sangha, without being supported by a group of friends who are motivated by the same ideal and practice, we cannot go far.

If we do not have a supportive Sangha, we may not be getting the kind of support we need for our practice, that we need to nourish our bodhichitta (the strong desire to cultivate love and understanding in ourselves). Sometimes we call it “beginner’s mind.” The mind of a beginner is always very beautiful, very strong. In a good and healthy Sangha, there is encouragement for our beginner’s mind, for our bodhichitta. So the Sangha is the soil, and we are the seed. No matter how beautiful, how vigorous our seed is, if the soil does not provide us with vitality, our seed will die.

One of the brothers of Plum Village, Brother Phap Dung, went to Vietnam some years ago with a few members of the Sangha. It was a very important experience for him. He had been in the West since he was a small child. Then when he went to Northern Vietnam, he got in touch with some of the most ancient elements in Vietnamese culture and with the mountains and the rivers of northern Vietnam. He wrote to me and said: “Our land of Vietnam is so beautiful, it is as beautiful as a dream. I don’t dare take heavy steps on this earth of Vietnam.” By this he meant he had right mindfulness when we walked. His right mindfulness was due to the practice and support he had in the Sangha before he went to Vietnam. That is beginner’s mind, the mind you have at the beginning when you undertake the practice. It’s very beautiful and very precious, but that beginner’s mind can be broken, can be destroyed, can be lost if it is not nourished or supported by a Sangha.

Although he had his little Sangha near him in Vietnam, the environment was very distracting, and he saw that if he stayed too long without the larger Sangha, he would be swept away by that environment, by his forgetfulness - not only by his forgetfulness, but the forgetfulness of everybody around him. That is because right mindfulness for someone who has only just started the practice is still weak, and the forgetfulness of the people around us is very great and capable of dragging us away in the direction of the five cravings. Because most people around us are being drowned by the five cravings, it is this environment that drags us away and stops us from practicing right mindfulness.

To practice right mindfulness we need the right environment, and that environment is the Sangha. Without a Sangha we are very weak. In a society where everyone is rushing, everyone is being carried away by their habit energies, practice is very difficult. That is why Sangha is our salvation. The Sangha where everyone is practicing mindful walking, mindful speaking, mindful eating seems to be the only chance for us to succeed in ending the vicious cycle.

And what is the Sangha? The Sangha is a community of people who agree with each other that if we do not practice right mindfulness, we will lose all the beautiful things in our soul and all around us. People in the Sangha standing near us, practicing with us, support us so that we are not pulled away from the present moment. Whenever we find ourselves in a difficult situation, two or three friends in the Sangha who are there for us, understanding and helping us, will get us through it. Even in our silent practice we help each other.