

## What Kind of Community Are We?

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### Gleanings from Eastern and Western Wisdom From *Living Buddha, Living Christ* by Thich Nhat Hanh

**W**hen Buddhists live in community as a *Sangha*, we regard each other as brothers and sisters, and we practice the Six Concords: sharing space, sharing the essentials of daily life, observing the same precepts, using only words that contribute to harmony, sharing our insights and understanding, and respecting one another's viewpoints. A community that follows these principles always lives happily and at peace. But we do not need a perfect *Sangha* to practice. An imperfect one is good enough, and we can help build and improve the *Sangha* by practicing mindfulness and encouraging one another.

When we gather together to form a *Sangha*, we practice opening up the confines of our separate self and become a large body of love and understanding. We and our brothers and sisters are one. This idea of "salvation" is echoed in the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has even more of a sense of togetherness: you can only be saved as a community.

To have a good *Sangha*, the members must live in a way that helps them generate more understanding and more love. If a *Sangha* is having difficulties, the way to transform it is to begin by transforming yourself, to go back to your island of self and become more refreshed and understanding.... To be a real help to your church or *Sangha*, you must first light your own fire of love, solidity, stillness, and understanding. ... Nevertheless, any *Sangha* is better than a non-*Sangha*. Without it, you will be lost.

Jesus was also very clear about the need to practice his teachings in the context of community.... His message was strong and clear. If the church practices well the teachings of Jesus, the Spirit will always be present, and that church will have a healing power to transform all that it touches.

### From George Leonard and Michael Murphy, *The Life We Are Given*

In the beginning was community. When our species, *homo sapiens*, first emerged in Africa some 150,000 years ago, we lived in close-knit hunting and gathering bands ... and to these people existence without community was unthinkable, impos-

sible. Banishment meant death.... To say "human being," therefore, is to invoke community.

In today's rootless, restless, fragmented society, the bonds of community are badly frayed and sometimes ripped apart. Increasingly we seek "virtual" connections through [Internet chat rooms and Facebook], but too often in our lives today, real community is lacking, a need unfulfilled.

There is something magical about any intense, tightly knit group of people working together and playing together.... Something in us senses that community can be the indispensable launching pad for transformation ... it can create the context and the confidence for a transforming journey.

Appreciating this fact of human life, educators and religious teachers have established institutions for this purpose. Saint Paul and Saint Peter formed communities to nurture Christian virtues. To foster the experiences he valued, the Buddha founded a *Sangha*, Plato the Academy, Aristotle the Lyceum, Saint Benedict his monastery.

Think of your own attempts to cultivate new capacities. Have you been frustrated by lack of support? How many times have your programs for growth failed because you didn't have friends or mentors to help you? Contemporary society encourages us in countless ways toward a life of distraction.... To establish disciplines of any type, we have to counteract many distractions of modern life, and this is particularly true if we undertake long-term transformative practices.

Most of us need communities to develop such practices, but we have to make sure they genuinely serve us. While accepting the support and challenges they give us, we need not be limited by them. The final authority for our personal growth is always with us.

## Reflections

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A few of you may have caught a news item out of Louisville, Kentucky that appeared shortly before Independence Day. Ken Pagano, the 49 year-old pastor of New Bethel Church urged congregants to bring their personal firearms—loaded or unloaded—to a special second amendment celebration. "God and guns were part of the foundation of this country," he told the media, "so I don't see any contradiction in this." Responding to criticism,

Pagano—a former Marine and firearms instructor—insisted that he, and not his opponents, stood on the side of the Christian Gospel. “I will turn this into a crusade, if necessary,” he promised.

Although it’s not always wise to assess a community on the basis of its pastor’s peculiar predilections, an event such as this does not take place in a vacuum. It grows out of a particular cultural perspective and may well reflect the congregation’s sensibilities. In fact, the celebration still occupies a prominent place on New Bethel’s website, which should cause some potential members to pause and reflect. Whatever one’s personal views on the second amendment, the spectacle of parishioners brandishing guns in church is one that most of us would probably just as soon forego. Would we be comfortable in a community that felt sufficiently threatened and defensive to arm itself to the teeth?

By contrast, last year our Mid-South UU congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee was invaded by a homophobic, hate-filled gunman, and several people were killed. That community responded in a way that Pastor Pagano might find difficult to fathom. Rather than invite members to carry concealed weapons to church for their own protection, Knoxville’s UUs vowed to “stand on the side of love,” which meant reaffirming the principles of inclusion, acceptance, peaceful living, and right relationship. Subsequently that slogan has expanded to become a national campaign.

I cite these two examples to underscore the point that the word “church” can stand for very different things. As Dan Hotchkiss of the Alban Institute writes,

Congregations have looked like extended families, noble fiefdoms, cells of resistance, and leagues of mutual protection. In the early apostolic church members held property in common and submitted to personal martyrdom.

Lacking historical and cultural perspective, people often presume that “one size fits all”—that churches are more alike than they are different and that they are all resistant to change. Liberated from this preconception, Hotchkiss writes, we are free to create the kind of community that the times call for and that best addresses our spiritual needs and aspirations.

As part of a progressive movement, we Unitarian Universalists prize this freedom and, while maintaining a healthy respect for tradition, we are continually testing new practices and introducing new initiatives. Always faithful to our century and a half

old Bond of Union and our historic mission, we have experimented with new styles of worship, innovative management techniques, educational curricula, and strategies for connecting with the larger community. But through it all, our core identity as a congregation has remained fairly consistent. So in answer to the question, “What kind of community are we?” I would emphasize the following.

In the first place we are, to invoke a distinction made by the NYU philosopher James Carse, a congregation *not* of “believers,” but of “knowers.” This is not to imply that we are a bunch of arrogant “know-it-alls,” modern-day Gnostics gifted with special insight or superior wisdom. As Carse uses the term, a “knower” is a person committed to *developing* greater insight and acumen, in contrast to “the believer” who claims to be in possession of one or more eternal and immutable truths already.

Actually, Carse writes, a “knower’s” real status is that of “awakened ignorance” or “permanent unknowing.” Realizing that there is always so much more to learn, the “knower” regards the whole world as their textbook or, from a spiritual standpoint, their scripture. The evidence is never all in, so, with our Unitarian forebear Ralph Waldo Emerson, we agree that the “secret of the true scholar is this: that every man or woman I meet is my master in some point,” and I can always learn something from him.

As a community of seekers “awake to our ignorance” we do not insist on conformity of belief or uniformity of lifestyle. Members here do not study a set catechism, embrace a doctrine, or profess a creed. To be sure, this flies in the face of traditional notions of “church” and what makes a faith community strong and cohesive. And the truth is, most churches *are* communities of staunch “believers” rather than tentative “knowers.” Consensus on key issues is presumed. Opportunities for questioning and debate are restricted. Behavioral norms are explicit.

But as Hermann Daly and John Cobb argue in their book *For the Common Good*, our world can ill afford more rigid communities composed of submissive and self-satisfied believers. What is called for instead are “pluralistic” communities in which democratic principles are embedded, diversity of

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opinion and life-style is celebrated, and the search for truth is ongoing and open-ended.

A community of “awakened ignorance” like First Unitarian Society would be receptive to someone like Agnes, who needed acceptance and validation at a critical moment in her life.

This was a woman, George Leonard writes, who had a powerful spiritual experience while doing household chores. It was a beautiful day and Agnes was gazing out of a window at trees and birds and sky. Unexpectedly she was struck by the powerful feeling of the absolute “oneness” of creation. This revelation filled her with a happiness she had never known, and when her husband came home, she eagerly related what she had experienced.

But far from sharing his wife’s joy, he became deeply disturbed. After a couple of days, during which she continued to insist on the validity of her experience, her husband demanded that Agnes get professional help. At this point, finding no affirmation of what she had experienced, she told the psychiatrist that she had probably been deluded.

And so, Agnes returned to her workaday life, exorcised of the extraordinary, cured of her joy, and filled with a lingering sadness over a new certainty; that she would *never* let herself have such an experience again.

“What happened to this woman was extreme,” Leonard writes, “but the self-censorship of experiences such as hers is extremely common. . . .” What she really needed was the presence of open-minded, empathetic listeners who were willing to withhold judgment, able to say, “Yes, I hear you—and really mean it. In short, she could have used a spiritual community in which she felt safe to explore the meaning and implications of her discovery.

“Participants in such communities find joy in the give and take of ideas as well as of experience.” Leonard writes.

Intellectual embarrassments fade and curiosity develops. There is a real transforming alchemy in such a community.

Participants in our newcomer orientation sessions are exposed to a *second* key characteristic of our FUS community. Going around the circle, each participant is invited to share a “spiritual experience” they have had within the past week. At first, people look puzzled, but most are eventually able to answer that question. Some recall a beautiful sunset, others their baby’s first tentative step. Still others refer to a piece of sublime music or to a moving visit with a suffering loved one. On rare occa-

sions someone will mention an experience they had in church.

When I point this out, the group looks a bit embarrassed because, after all, church is the place where religion happens— isn’t it? Here again a distinction must be made for, as Thomas Moore puts it in his book *Care of the Soul*:

There are two ways of thinking about the church and religion. One is that we go to church in order to be in the presence of the holy, to learn, and to have our lives influenced by that presence. The other is that church teaches us directly and symbolically to see the sacred dimension of everyday life. In this latter sense, the church helps us to be mindful about the spirituality that is inherent in everything we do. Those for whom religion is only a *Sunday* affair risk dividing life into the holy Sabbath and the secular week. But for others, religion is a *week-long* observance that is inspired and sustained on the Sabbath.

First Unitarian Society belongs in the latter category. While we hope to create a spiritual atmosphere right here, our real business as a community is to assist our members in developing a spiritual orientation, to encourage responsible spiritual investigation, and to support each other in leading fuller and more rewarding spiritual lives. In other words, the spiritual enterprise doesn’t end when people walk out of these exits today. This is just the launching pad for the long flight that follows.

But if one’s faith community doesn’t *provide* an actual encounter with the sacred, why should we bother participating in and supporting it? Can’t we do the same work on our own? Not according to the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. “Salvation,” as you heard earlier, only happens in a communal context.

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From another perspective, it can mean being aware of ourselves as part of a larger interdependent body of compassion and understanding. Such knowledge is “saving” because in its absence we are oppressed by sensations of objectless anxiety, isolation, and

alienation from the ground of being.

But, as Thich Nhat Hanh, warns, don't come to your spiritual community expecting to experience instant togetherness. "To be of real help to your *Sangha*," he writes, "you must first light your *own* fire of love, solidity, stillness, and understanding." Parker Palmer echoes that thought. "Long before community can manifest in outward relationships," he writes:

it must be present in the individual as "capacity for connectedness"—a capacity to resist the forces of disconnection with which our culture and our psyches are riddled, forces with names like narcissism, egotism, jealousy, competition....

People often enter faith communities with rather high expectations. Unhappy, they want to be made happy; broken, they look to be mended; confused, they hunger for irrefutable answers; fearful, they crave comfort and reassurance. In an effort to put more people in the pews, some churches promise to fulfill such wishes, but only if the individual agrees to surrender independent judgment and submit to their "higher authority."

Pluralistic communities are more humble about what they can deliver. What you will find here, to use Parker Palmer's metaphor, is more like a crucible than the Garden of Eden. We do not possess some secret formula for happiness and loving-kindness that can be applied like a salve. However, a

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faith community like this one will help you become wiser about yourself. In the worship setting, in classes, and in small sharing and support groups, we provide opportunities for participants to seek out the real sources of their unhappiness, their fears, their closed hearts.

Slowly but surely, the understanding we gain leads to transformation.

The temperamental qualities most called for in a community such as ours are patience and courage. The spirituality we espouse is not of the "quick fix" but of the long-haul variety and those who benefit the most are those who are willing to stay the course and make a real investment in this imperfect

but "good enough" community.

And speaking of investment, one final aspect of our community—a strictly socioeconomic one—is well worth touching upon. Despite our location and the impressive appearance of our facility, we are not a wealthy congregation. We're basically a middle-class bunch, and many of us dug deep to bring this building into being. Likewise, we rely on hundreds of modest annual pledges to meet our operating expenses. If there are any "Daddy Warbucks" among us, they have remained anonymous.

Because appearances are sometimes deceiving, this may come as a surprise to some of you. I mention it because despite a big spike in attendance and participation over the past 12 months, FUS currently is facing a significant budgetary shortfall. Why? Because the number of families making annual pledges to the Society has actually been declining. If we hope to be a *sustainable* community everyone who can needs to do their part—especially at a time when some members are experiencing economic hardship and can't pledge.

This shouldn't be seen as a burden, however. In Buddhism *dana*, a word often translated as "generosity," is regarded as one of the keys to awakening and happiness. Florence Caplow, a Zen Buddhist from Bellingham, Washington, provides a first-person narrative of the principle at work.

Her *Sangha* had been struggling to find a quiet and comfortable space for study and meditation. Uncertain whether their small group had the financial means to rent a serviceable room, they decided to do something they'd never done before: ask each supporter to make an annual pledge. It was made clear that no one would be turned away if they declined, but almost everyone did make a commitment. Several who never came to meditate also gave because, as Caplow writes, "it just made them happy to know that a place like this existed" even if it didn't directly benefit them.

That, of course, is our hope as well: that the members of this community—whatever their level of involvement—will recognize its value as an alternative to the prevailing culture's spiritless consumerism on the one hand, and its many belief-centered religious groups on the other. What kind of community are we? Hopefully a generous one, because ultimately that is what all good work—spiritual or otherwise—depends upon.