



One Earth Sangha

# Sangha Is Essential

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How many of us who have been part of any kind of sangha haven't heard a talk on sangha before? It's just something that we go into. But it feels important to spend some time, especially in the context of these live gatherings, because the premise here is that sangha is essential for the context, the times that we are in. As hyper-individualism is challenged, as our other forms of community, spiritual community, are purposeful and well supported exploration of what is happening and how we can possibly be with it--what it might look like to respond is essential. That's the premise really of One Earth Sangha, it's in our name. And it's in the subtitle of this Ecosattva training series, *Together at an Edge*. An edge of, we know not what, but it can sure feel edgy. And so the message here, this essential message is we're not alone. Today we're going to explore the role and perhaps the refinement of sangha.

As I said, many here will be well versed in the virtues of sangha, and there are some really awesome teachers who are part of this training. For me it's like, you know, to preach as it were on sangha is a little dicey. But nonetheless, I'm going to step into that more classic form of dharma seat, and just make a few observations.

In this wisdom path--the intention to support ourselves and one another in this noble pursuit, the alleviation of suffering--Ananda says to the Buddha, I think that sangha is awesome, I think that sangha is like half the holy life. And the Buddha says to Ananda, no, sangha is the whole of the holy life. It's that important. In this context, in the challenge that we are in the midst of, to validate and normalize our difficulty, our fear, our pain, our anger, our confusion, our grief, is so helpful.

You know, we get a lot of credit for the Ecosattva training, but the truth is so much of what is valuable about what happens here, you all do with and for each other. That is to come together and offer that validation, that normalization; where we can discover our own dignity and validate that in others, we can bring essential compassion from the outside in, not just the self-compassion, but to have the compassion of the other and perhaps, even skillfully done, humor. Can we do that for each other as well? In sangha, we can inspire and discover new interests, find resolve and motivation where it was not before available.



We always like science to agree with this, and it does; neuroscience agrees. Dan Siegel is so clear; he's in the Ecosattva training, a pretty amazing neurology researcher and well versed in dharma. The mind is relational. This mind is fundamentally relational. In sangha we can co-regulate, we can share our steadiness with others, we can practice externalizing those struggles, articulate for others and reflect on our own struggles with the help of others. Am I crazy? I feel like I'm going crazy. No, you're not crazy. Even in articulating what it is that my suffering is, I have to structure those thoughts and maybe get out of the looping that can naturally happen in the mind, and even potentially go deeper on my own, just in the course of sharing it with you.

I can discover my own wisdom. I can also recognize and reclaim these rejected parts of myself that may have been orphaned, through this conversation with the other, through conversation with sangha. Sangha also teaches us how to listen in a different way. Many of us have been socialized to want to fix; if a problem is shared to just go right into solution mode. Yet on the receiving end of that, we know how that can feel. We know that it's like: I just shared this with you, I've been struggling with this for 10 years, how can you possibly know the answer? It seems so obvious to you and so there's something about honoring the dignity of the other's problem by deeply listening. We can reflect with compassion on our own need to be needed, or our discomfort with the emotional pain of others. But the structure of how we do sangha is also helpful because in these dyads and triads, these modes that we go into, we just have to listen and learn that it's enough to hold the compassionate, loving presence, the loving space for another's pain.

In that, we might actually get the knack of doing that for the other and learn to do it better for ourselves. How do I listen to my own pain in the way that I just listened to yours? There can be this structured way of sharing and listening. But also we can offer each other this magic of being together in silence, where there's this field, this sense of a field of practice, where I feel supported in that noble pursuit of the path; in this realm of the wordless, we're forging a way together with such honesty and dedication. You can feel--those of you who have practiced in silence together know this--the magic of being side by side, embodied. Where it can feel like there's so much going on in my mind and I can project that everybody else is doing it masterfully because they all seem so perfect in their posture; and then I learn that we're ALL falling asleep and that we're all working through all this dukkha. But somehow then, it becomes this field where we're equal and we're doing this together at our edge.

We can offer and receive that collaboration in the practice of waking up; and indirectly find what so many of us yearn for, which is this belonging. We can also challenge each other, ask genuine questions. Hey, can you check my math on this? Like, this is how I'm



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thinking about it. Can you help me with that? Help me understand what is confusing, but also bring whole new fields of knowledge, sometimes critical understanding. For instance, as a white person, I wasn't going to learn about racism on the cushion; it just wasn't going to happen there. I can need others. I need others to shine a light on my shadow so that it can be known; it's uncomfortable, but so necessary. We can help each other awaken. What looks like a solo effort, this practice of awakening, is truly a group project in that way. This heart/mind loves truth, it wants it. It's amazing, right? That we love truth. Even when it's a hard truth, it loves the sense of being something deeper, being more true, more wholesome, more meaningful leading onward. I can take that challenge, but only if there's a basic safety.

If you want to make sure that what you offer ISN'T integrated, it's not believed, it's not understood, not even heard, go ahead and shout it and add some insults. Right? It doesn't work. We are not heard by the other, unless there is this basic safety to hear you. I have to have my own sense of goodness that has to be intact. Then I can let in the challenge. We can affirm that goodness without placating or flattery, it has to be authentic. But you, in your bringing challenge skillfully to me, support my ability to awaken. I, bringing that skillful sharing, challenging you, I facilitate your awakening.

Okay, and let's just be honest, sangha is not always so beautiful, <laugh> so frequently not ideal, right? It can be messy, confusing, disappointing, heartbreaking. In that field of learning what I don't know, light to my shadow, I also discover other shadows. There are mistakes that abound, and then also the possibility of recognition of forgiveness. Sangha is sometimes called the jewel to be polished. How? Through friction. That polishing takes friction, and it can be uncomfortable.

That's sort of some general idea about sangha, but then I would be remiss if I didn't talk about sangha in nature, <laugh> because that is also something that so many of us are finding absolutely essential in the skillful encounter and transformation of ourselves in the context, the times that we're in. In session three, with David Loy, for those of you who have seen it, we explore quite explicitly what happens when we go into nature; when we walk that wild path where the other that I encounter is not playing a role for me and reifying me, but exists on its own terms. If you haven't gotten to that space yet, I think it's really, really awesome to start to frame what's happening with us when we are in sangha with nature.

We can go into the wild there and counter, in that, the objectification that is so habitual in the mind. It can be kind of radical. We can see ourselves as countering consumerism. There's nothing to buy or sell. There's less to become. Although, we can make a gear project <laugh>, I've been guilty of that in the past, making a gear project. Or it can be,



I'm gonna climb this mountain and this is sort of a conquering project going into the wild. We can watch our tendencies there, but over time, it's like the space starts to work on us, and even those tendencies can be skillfully eroded. Nature invites us to attend to the small wonders, to discover dharma, the teaching that is beyond, necessarily beyond words. We can build the skill for listening to the wordless; and then we can discover, even deeper, the beings there that have their own autonomy, the dignity of the other. A place can become a friend, welcoming, enveloping. I'm sure everyone here has a place that is a friend.

I invite you to consider, if you haven't already, that that relationship isn't one way. You love this place, might this place love you? In your specificity. Might you know it, and might it know you as others do not? There's also in nature for us to see the ecology of dharma, the ecology of sangha. We can see that trees collaborate with each other in a certain way, and we're learning more and more about that. They each support entire ecosystems and collaborate in endless ways. There is beauty in this wholeness, but there is also health and regulation. There is friction, sanghas, that ecosangha, the sangha of nature is always polishing; species check and balance one another. They engage in the kind of teaching that we can learn from right now. After a fire, a hurricane, when vegetation is wiped out, what emerges first are called pioneer species; they will start the process of bringing from death, life again. The aspen is the first tree to show up after a fire and stabilizes the soil. Then come the pines; they make way for each other. We can see, perhaps take a teaching, in what it looks like to show up in a space, to be in a space that is in the process of being or already so wounded.

I want to show you an image here of nature as teacher that I find just so powerful. Looks like a normal tree, but hmm...what's going on there? This is in northern New Mexico--Vallecitos, a Dharma center. Oh my gosh... what's happening? That tree fell over at one point. There's what was the rest of the trunk. One can imagine that there was a branch that happened to be sticking straight up when that tree fell. Unattached to a particular outcome, this tree said, fine, this is happening. It ain't over. So it sealed off the wound here, sealed off the rest of the trunk, so that insects wouldn't burrow in, and then invested in that branch to where now it becomes the tree because the roots are still intact. If there isn't a whole lot of dharma in that tree, <laugh> patience, perseverance, flexibility, not being attached to outcome. Amidst what it is that we are going through together, there can be so much heartache. We have this opportunity to bring forward where we see all these forms of what I call hard and soft denial. You know, hard denial--this isn't happening. Soft denial--, climate change, that's a problem, somebody should do something about that, and not seeing just how deep and far and frightening this can go. Being in a community that is willing to go into these places is what Joanna Macy calls rough weather sangha. We're in rough weather sangha. This is a collaboration



increasingly, perhaps for many of us out of necessity, allowing ourselves to be open, surprised even about who might be included in that collaboration.

This also invites us to see how activism doesn't look just one way, that we need each other in so many different ways to be showing up. Yes, there are marks of the ecosattva. It isn't just to say that we can't take inspiration from those who seem to be the most activist. But can we all find that it takes all these different forms; yes, getting arrested, it's so important, but necessarily we have to be diverse in this if we are going to show up in all the ways that we are being called to show.

There are dangers in sangha that we can promulgate a worldview with each other that is narrow. There will always be a frame. Any sangha will have a frame, and it is the task of mindfulness, it is the task of that larger co-regulation, that co-wisdom project to know what that frame is. To know, to see the story that is being told, and to question, to be willing to question that frame of what is happening, how we got here, who or what is responsible, how we should be with this, what response looks like. Mindfulness is a guardian, and that possibility of inquiring into that frame can help us with the downside of sangha, with that potential for harm.

We can practice wise speech and action. We can see how some of us are being marginalized and how we might be replicating oppression, how power, sex, and money, the relational shadow, can show up in our sanghas. All of that must be confronted when we are in sangha together. But that too can be part of, welcomed into the space of our sanghas. That's also part of what we're being asked to wake up to--the way that we are with each other and the implicit frames that we take on.