

From *Go as a Sangha* by Thich Nhat Hanh

PRACTICE IS EASIER WITH A SANGHA

The only way to support the Buddha, to support our Sangha, to support the Earth, to support our children and future generations, is to really be here for them. “Darling, I am here for you” is a statement of love. You need to be here. If you are not here, how can you love? That is why the practice of meditation is the practice of being here for the ones we love.

To be present sounds like an easy thing to do. For many of us, it is easy because we have made it a habit. We are in the habit of dwelling in the present moment, of touching the morning sunshine deeply, of drinking our morning tea deeply, of sitting and being present with the person we love. But for some of us it may not be so easy, because we have not cultivated the habit of being in the here and the now. We are always running, and it is hard for us to stop and be here in the present moment, to encounter life. For those of us who have not learned to be present, we need to be supported in that kind of learning. It's not difficult when you are supported by the Sangha. Then you will be able to learn the art of stopping.

The Sangha is a wonderful home. Every time you go back to the Sangha, you feel that you can breathe more easily, you can walk more mindfully, you can better enjoy the blue sky, the white clouds, and the cypress tree in your yard. Why? Because the Sangha members practice going home many times a day—through walking, breathing, cooking, and doing their daily activities mindfully. Everyone in the Sangha is practicing in the same way, walking mindfully, sitting mindfully, eating mindfully, smiling, enjoying each moment of life.

When I practice walking I make mindful and beautiful steps. I do that not only for myself but also for all of my friends who are here; because everyone who sees me taking a step like that has confidence and is reminded to do the same. And when they make a step in the present moment, smiling and making peace with themselves, they inspire all of us. You breathe for me, I walk for you, we do things together, and this is practicing as a Sangha. You don't need to make much effort, and you enjoy doing it a lot. When you have a good Sangha, your practice is easy, because you feel that you are supported by the Sangha.

When we sit together as a Sangha, we enjoy the collective energy of mindfulness, and each of us allows the mindful energy of the Sangha to penetrate us. Even if you don't do anything, if you just stop thinking and allow yourself to absorb the collective energy of the Sangha, it's very healing. Don't struggle, don't try to do something, just allow yourself to be with the Sangha. Allow yourself to rest, and the energy of the Sangha will help you, will carry and support you. The Sangha is there to make the training easy. When we are surrounded by brothers and sisters doing exactly the same thing, it is easy to flow in the stream of the Sangha.

As individuals we have problems, and we also have problems in our families, our societies, and our nations. Meditation in the twenty-first century should become a collective practice; without a Sangha we cannot achieve much. When we begin to focus our attention on the suffering on a larger scale, we begin to connect with and to relate to other people, who are also ourselves, and the little problems that we have within our individual circle will vanish. In this way our loneliness or our feeling of being cut off will no longer be there, and we will be able to do things together.

If we work on our problems alone, it becomes more difficult. When you have a strong emotion come up, you may feel that you cannot stand it. You may have a breakdown or want to die. But if you have someone, a good friend sitting with you, you feel much better. You feel supported, and you have more strength in order to deal with your strong emotion. If you are taking something into your body that is toxic and realize it will make you sick, even with this insight you may not be able to change your habit. But if you are surrounded by people who do not have the same problem, it becomes easier to change. That is why it is very important to practice in the context of a Sangha.

It is fortunate when we have a friend who is strong in the practice, a Dharma brother or sister. Without a Sangha, without co-practitioners, the practice will be difficult. You can always ask your brothers and sisters to practice looking deeply with you every time you need support. Because you feel supported there, the Sangha is the most appropriate setting and environment for the practice of looking deeply. If you have a Sangha of two, three, maybe even fifty people who are practicing correctly-getting joy, peace, and happiness from the practice-then you are the luckiest person on Earth.

So practice in the setting of the Sangha is much easier. We don't have to practice so intensely. Our practice becomes the practice of "non-practice." That means a lot. We don't have to force ourselves to practice. We can give up all the struggle and allow ourselves to be, to rest. For this, however, we need a little bit of training, and the Sangha is there to make the training easy. Being aware that we are in a Sangha where people are happy with being mindful, where people are living deeply the moments of their days, that is enough. I always feel happy in the presence of a happy Sangha. If you put yourself in such an environment, then transformation will happen without much effort. This is my experience.

PRACTICING IN THE SANGHA

If you are a beginner in the practice, you should not worry about what is the correct thing to do. When surrounded by many people, we might be caught by the idea, "I don't know what is the right thing to do." That idea may make us very uncomfortable. We may think, "I feel embarrassed that I'm not doing the right thing. There are people who are bowing, and I am not bowing. People are walking slowly, and I am walking a little bit too fast." So the idea that we may not be doing the right thing can embarrass us.

I would like to tell you what is really the right thing. The right thing is to do whatever you are doing in mindfulness. Mindfulness is keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality. To bow may not be the right thing to do if you don't bow in mindfulness. If you don't bow but are mindful, not bowing is the right thing. Even if people are walking slowly and you run, you are doing the right thing if you run mindfully. The wrong thing is whatever you do without mindfulness. If we understand this, we will not be embarrassed anymore. Everything we do is right provided we do it in mindfulness. To bow or not to bow, that is not the question. The question is whether to bow in mindfulness or not, or not to bow in mindfulness or not.

If you take a step and you feel peaceful and happy, you know that is the correct practice. You are the only one who knows whether you are doing it correctly or not. No one else can judge. When you practice breathing in and out, if you feel peaceful, if you enjoy your in-breath and out-breath, you know you are doing it correctly. You are the best one to know. Have confidence in yourself.

Wherever you find yourself, if you feel you are at ease and peaceful, that you are not under pressure, then you know you are doing it right.

The function of the bell in a Sangha is to bring us back to ourselves. When we hear the bell we come back to ourselves and breathe, and at that point we improve the quality of the Sangha energy. We know that our brother and our sister, wherever they are, will be stopping, breathing, and coming back to themselves. They will be generating the energy of right mindfulness, the Sangha energy. When we look at each other, we feel confident, because everyone is practicing together in the same way and contributing to the quality of the Sangha. So we are friends on the path of practice.

The Sangha is made out of the work of individuals, so we have the duty to help create the energy of the Sangha. Our presence, when it is a mindful presence, contributes to that energy. When we are absent during the activities of the Sangha, we are not contributing to Sangha energy. If we don't go to a sitting meditation, we are not feeding our Sangha. We are also letting ourselves go hungry, because we are not benefiting from the Sangha. We don't profit from the Sangha, and the Sangha doesn't profit from us.

Don't think that we sit for ourselves. You don't sit for yourself alone, you sit for the whole Sangha – not only the Sangha, but also for the people in your city, because when one person in the city is less angry, is smiling more, the whole city profits. If we practice looking deeply, our understanding of interbeing will grow, and we will see that every smile, every step, every breath is for everybody. It is for our country, for the future, for our ancestors.

The best thing we can do is to transform ourselves into a positive element of the Sangha. If members of the Sangha see us practicing well, they will have confidence and do better. If there are two, three, four, five, six, seven of you like that in the Sangha, I'm sure the Sangha will be a happy Sangha and will be the refuge of many people in the world.

[...]

In the *Sutra of Happiness* the Buddha said that to have regular contact with a Sangha is true happiness. To be able to practice the Dharma, to have the opportunity to learn the Dharma and to participate in Dharma discussions, is the greatest happiness. Together as a Sangha we can continue the work of the Buddha. We can achieve the things that the Buddha has not achieved, because there are many Dharma doors to be opened. There are teachings yet to be offered. To play the role of the continuation of the Buddha is the task of Sangha. Sangha is the continuation, the community that carries within its heart the Buddha and the Dharma. A true Sangha – one where there is mindfulness, awareness, understanding and love – that Sangha is the Buddha in flesh and bones.

Nhat Hanh, Thich. *Friends on the Path – Living Spiritual Communities*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2002.)