

## **Buddhist Community**

by  
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The government and the media often talk about 'faith communities', the implication being that there is an identifiable block of citizens with a common outlook on life-the Moslems or the Jews or suchlike. Is there such a thing as the Buddhist Community? Not really, just as there is not a simple entity described by the term 'Moslem community'. My time spent meeting Buddhist groups across the UK has revealed a diversity of traditions all working hard and often independently of each other. Rather than a simple and coherent Buddhist community there is a diversity of Buddhist communities centred upon a particular tradition, teacher or geographical area, or a combination of these factors.

Although many Buddhist groups – usually the larger and longer established - have good relationships with others; quite a few work in isolation. This resembles the scattering of Buddhist seeds across the land. Using this analogy further, we could consider the seeds to be of different varieties from the same overall Buddhist family.

Many of us have developed a considerable loyalty towards the particular Buddhist community that we are familiar with, even though we might have found it by accident and without some sort of prior survey and assessment of Buddhist groups. Many of us might not really have considered at the start of our Buddhist practice such questions as, which tradition is the best; or what is the lineage of this group; or where does this teaching fit within the Buddhist historical narrative? Often we join a particular group because it is the only one near us.

How many of us have an objective understanding of Buddhist history? By objective, I mean one based upon recent scholarship and not upon the viewpoint of the particular tradition we associate with. How many of us appreciate the development of Buddhist texts and scriptures? Do we know how the texts came into being and the sequence that they were written in? Although Buddhism is a practical faith, it does have a huge volume of scriptures and commentaries.

So how do we view the tradition that we identify with? We might think that it is the best. I can quite easily become a vocal enthusiast for Theravada and the Forest Sangha and Amaravati. It is easy for me to think they are the best. And then I think, well as a Buddhist I must be kind and compassionate and not criticize other Buddhist traditions, even though I really know that mine is best! How many of us think that our tradition is best? Probably not all of us, but when we do it is because we have found something which we appreciate: kindness, sympathy, and teachers with integrity. I like the openness, non-dogmatism and humour in the Forest Sangha tradition. And that it is firmly based upon tradition. But most of all I appreciate the sincerity and integrity of the Forest Sangha teachers. These are men and women who have made a sincere commitment to understanding and practising the Buddha's path and who have developed real insight.

When we like something, we can easily develop attachment. We want to protect it, to preserve it. We can get attached to anything including groups, families, organisations or individuals. This is quite natural and if the recognition of the value of something is

based upon and motivated by right view (non-delusion), generosity (non-greed) and kindness/ compassion (non-aversion) then we will act well in the ways that we try to nurture and share what we value. However, if motivated by various shades of greed, aversion and delusion then the results of our actions will be poor. When the objects of our attachment are Buddhist traditions we can end up with tribalism or sectarianism. Our tradition is better than yours. Yours is wrong because, etc etc. We can then end up verbally (or perhaps physically) attacking the other group, insisting on the purity of our tradition, condemning different views, refusing to associate with some group or other

How many of us doubt whether other Buddhist traditions are really correct or true? We might accept one or two, but have doubts about others. In my travels over the past year, I have visited many different groups. I have found groups of all traditions to be sincere in their attempts to understand their particular teaching and to apply this.

This isn't to say we must try to force ourselves to agree with everything we find. I certainly did not fully and entirely agree or even understand every group that I visited. There is a great diversity of Buddhism in the UK. It would be quite hard to appreciate all of these teachings and the particular emphasis of every teacher within these diverse traditions.

What we can do, though, is to adopt an attitude of humility and respect towards others. If we practice our own tradition properly and sincerely and it is really Buddhist then we should have little trouble in expressing a kind and generous attitude to those from other traditions. If we have been taught to despise and abuse others, then we should reject such teachings and question the veracity and motives of those who teach such things. We should be very careful of anyone who teaches hatred towards an individual or group.

The Buddha encouraged regular and well-intentioned meetings with others. He praised this as a way of maintaining harmony and avoiding harmful schisms. Schisms are the end result of a failure of dialogue. Once a schism takes place it can often take a long time to resolve.

I have found my visits to Buddhist groups to be very helpful in overcoming my ignorance about such groups. This is something I would encourage all Buddhists to do- to find out something about other local groups, to visit them and to view them as potential friends and allies in treading the Buddhist path. I am not suggesting we must all agree with everything any group does or that all Buddhism is identical, or that we should mix and match traditions. There is room for constructive dialogue and sensitive criticism. Providing this comes from the right motives such dialogue can be very helpful for all parties.

I think that it is important that Buddhist groups know more about each other because I think that this will help Buddhism to flourish. The other important thing – and this is really the most important – is that we all practice sincerely and strive to establish compassion and wisdom in our hearts. Good relations with others – whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist will come naturally from good practice.

However, it is very helpful to meet others and establish friendship. This is why I am particularly heartened by this conference. I know that a lot of energy, thought and planning has gone into it. The organizers have listened to the feedback from last year and adjusted the programme. No doubt the same process will happen again. This conference is motivated by generosity and good will from many and I am very happy to see it take place and to attend it.

The establishment of good relationships between Buddhist groups is at the heart of the aims of the Network of Buddhist Organisations. I became the Amaravati Lay Buddhist Association's representative on the NBO a couple of years ago and have just finished one year as the NBO Development Officer. The NBO is run by volunteers like me who each have their home tradition. We give some of our time to help intra-faith relationships to flourish because we think that this is important. The NBO does not create doctrine or Buddhist policy and is not some sort of overall authority. Indeed, how could it be when it is made up of individuals who are all practitioners within their own traditions?

I have been impressed with the sincerity and approach of those who volunteer their time to NBO activities. However, it is not perfect. But then nothing is. Dukkha is an integral aspect of the conditioned world, and the NBO is definitely part of the conditioned world. The important thing about the NBO is that it is open to those who wish to contribute. It is not dominated by a particular grouping, nor is it fixed in how it operates. The NBO initiative is an opportunity for Buddhist groups to work together to develop a broader community of interest.

I should add that NBO channels are increasingly being used by government and civic bodies to make contact with Buddhists for the purpose of chaplaincy work, SACRE representatives, interfaith meetings and similar activities. NBO volunteers try to act as neutral and honest brokers for these requests and direct them to relevant member organisations.

So I would encourage you all to make effort to practice within your own traditions, to extend friendship to others on similar paths, and to respect those who also share the label of Buddhism.

### **Web Sites**

[www.amaravati.org](http://www.amaravati.org)

[www.buddhacomunity.org](http://www.buddhacomunity.org)

[www.nbo.org.uk](http://www.nbo.org.uk)

## **Saraniya Sutta - Conducive to Amiability**

Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu PTS: A iii 289

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"Monks, these six are conditions that are conducive to [friendship], that engender feelings of endearment, engender feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity. Which six?

"There is the case where a monk is set on **bodily acts of good will** with regard to his fellows in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

"Furthermore, the monk is set on **verbal acts of good will** with regard to his fellows in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

"Furthermore, the monk is set on **mental acts of good will** with regard to his fellows in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

"Furthermore, whatever righteous gains the monk may obtain in a righteous way — even if only the alms in his bowl — he does not consume them alone. He consumes them after **sharing them in common** with his virtuous fellows in the holy life. This is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

"Furthermore — with reference to **the virtues that are untorn**, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the wise, untarnished, leading to concentration — the monk dwells with his virtue in tune with that of his fellows in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

"Furthermore — with reference to **views that are noble**, leading outward, that lead those who act in accordance with them to the right ending of suffering & stress — the monk dwells with his views in tune with those of his fellows in the holy life, to their faces & behind their backs. This is a condition that is conducive to amiability, that engenders feelings of endearment, engenders feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity.

"These are the six conditions that are conducive to amiability, that engender feelings of endearment, engender feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, & a state of unity."