

Karunakarma Series: Volume III

SANGHA WORK

*Essays, Contemplations and Practical Exercises
to Support a Community of Friends in Dharma*

Tools for a Healthy and Happy Community

by

Tarchin Hearn

Karunakarma Series: Volume III
Sangha Work
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Karunakarma means compassionate activity, the work of compassion, or compassion at work. The Karunakarma Series is a collection of coil bound notes and articles that can be used for study or as teaching aids. Some of the series is available in e-book form from the Wangapeka website. May these writings water the seeds of wisdom and compassion for the benefit of all beings.

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THE TIME HAS COME TO HAVE a more extended go at the very challenging work of birthing into being a community who, through their very way of living and understanding, may grow, slowly but steadily, into a refuge and guiding light for many others; a bodhisattva sangha which not only would provide a rich foundation of teaching and guidance for the ongoing activities at Wangapeka but would engage in wholesome work in many other places as well.

CLEAR SEEING COMPASSION-IN-ACTION and non-clinging awareness, along with deepening empathy, patience, consistency in practice, flexibility of mind, and a reverence for a vast diversity of life, will surely be the shared values of a community of beings living their dharma practice.

FOR A SANGHA TO BE a truly functioning sangha, it must be composed of people who share a common aspiration and common ethical code, who practise together and who see each other on a frequent basis so that the opportunity to communicate directly, heart to heart, is easily accessible. Simply the fact of being a member of an organization does not necessarily make one a participating member of the sangha.

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Introduction

Do you have a sense of community, a sense of sangha? If you don't, how can you find it? Assuming you have a community, does it work, does it function well? What can be done to get it working? How can we recognize sangha, heal sangha, unfold and strengthen sangha? All of these explorations come under the term, sangha work.

All of life is relationship – relationship in action. Atoms are relationships of electrons, protons and neutrons. Molecules are relationships of atoms. Minerals are relationships of molecules. Cells are relationships of all the above, both within and outside the cell membrane. Groups of relatively stable relationships are communities. One person could be considered a community. Our body is a continent inhabited by countless micro beings, a living fabric of interacting relationships. This seemingly separate human body inhabits the relating bodies of others which we call the biosphere. The world is a sangha, a community of interbeing. It's what we are. Relating is co-operating and in the co-operating, we form a larger whole. In spite of so much ambivalence and difficulties in the area of relationships, relating is not an option. It's already happening. Rather than struggling over whether to relate or not, a much more meaningful question is how can we relate in ways that are healthy and support wellbeing in everyone?

Sangha is a Pali word meaning community. When I use the term 'sangha work' I am using the word 'work' in an intentionally ambiguous way. When we say a clock works, we mean it is able to keep the correct time – it's functioning. Sangha work is the work of discovering real community and realising that it has been functioning well, since the beginning of life. The entire world is sangha in action. Sangha work is work to bring forth a knowing of community – a sangha that is an interweaving of the talents and energies of many beings which all together make up a larger, functioning whole. Sangha work is relationship work. It involves doing what is necessary to cultivate a potential that is in everyone – the potential of being profoundly present for each other. Sangha work is work to awaken our valuing of community. It is work to enable us to interact skilfully together, even when difficulties arise. Sangha work involves actively nourishing whatever strengthens community. It means living in a continuum of bright, alert, responsive, well grounded, presence. Sangha

work supports us in waking up to the vastness of what we are and, in so doing, developing the strength and confidence to be able to appreciate and interact with a diversity of talents and understandings in others – talents and understandings that are sometimes very different from those that are in us. Pragmatically, sangha work is about exploring how we can live together in ways that are mutually supportive. This is dharma in action.

What is community? Where does it begin and end off? Are there different types of community? What is special about a dharma community or sangha? How can we deepen our understanding of community? How can we deal with problems that arise between community members? How can we raise community to the highest level rather than sinking, through the tyranny of the group, to the lowest common denominator? How can we support community while simultaneously supporting the uniqueness of each individual?

This booklet is a compilation of essays and ideas that have been collecting on my hard drive and percolating in my mind for many years. Some of these writings are fairly complete while others are unfinished but I have decided to include them, polished and unpolished, in the hope that they will stimulate fresh thinking and perhaps some discussion and experimentation. Much of this writing has arisen in response to direct, real experiences of living at the beautiful Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre in New Zealand as well as spending time at many other centres devoted to dharma. Please don't try to read straight through this booklet as I have made little effort to link the various articles in a smooth and progressive way. Instead, I invite you to read a section and then to contemplate it. How do these themes arise in your own experience? Can you allow these ideas and explorations to intermingle with the vastness of your life experience and in doing so, bring into being something that is fresh and new? If you can, then perhaps you will take it one step further and share your fresh understandings with your own immediate community.

The coil bound format of this publication is such that it will allow us to change things and add things as time goes by. It is my sincere hope and aspiration that the ideas and exercises sketched out in the following pages will stimulate exploration and experimentation which will feed sangha work everywhere and through this process we can help to birth, what may truly become, a Community of Friends in Dharma.

*May we have the courage to see and be seen, to hear and be heard,
to meet all beings with kindness and interest and,
to touch each and every difficulty with patience, love and deepening understanding.
May our efforts nourish the seeds of sangha work everywhere.*

What is Sangha?

Some Thoughts on Sangha Towards a Lay Universal Sangha

*Sangha is a Pali word meaning, multitude, assemblage and community.
It is one of the three refuges in Buddhism.*

At the time of the Buddha, the sangha of dharma practitioners was not considered to be separate from the larger society. Both sangha and lay community were profoundly intermingled and intermeshed. Each supported, inspired and nourished the other at many levels. To really appreciate and understand this, you need to be open to the possibility of a well functioning culture with very different sets of values than those we have in the market driven world of today. I'm sure ancient Indian society had many traits that we could easily recognise. A caste system separated people according to ethnicities of money, vocation and religious beliefs – not much different from the social strata that we generally take for granted today. One big difference though was that in India there was a huge respect for people who left their worldly careers in order to pursue truth and the quest of enlightenment. One could shave one's head and wear simple robes and be called a *samana* meaning "one who is calming, tranquillising, soothing, allaying, extinguishing or destroying the passions of attachment." The word *samana* also has the flavour of one who is honoured or respected – honoured or respected for grappling directly with the great issues of how to live well as a living, conscious, thinking, feeling being, immersed in a matrix of mystery – a mystery of birth and death and grief and feelings and curiosity and wonderment – this world we humans inhabit.

Two thousand five hundred years ago in India, there were all kinds of religious orders: communities of naked ascetics, communities of renunciates, communities of forest dwellers, communities of sadhus. In the sutras, the Buddha often referred to these gatherings of yogis and meditators that acted as de-facto families and homes for aspiring seekers. The main stream society at the time of the Buddha, not only tolerated what today might be thought of

as dropping out, dole bludging, or simply antisocial, neurotic or at least irresponsible behaviour but, by and large, admired this way of living and saw it as a heroic quest. Even though the average person may not have felt that they could follow such a path (calming, tranquillising, soothing, allaying, extinguishing or destroying the passions of attachment), they were often happy to feed and give support to those who tried to do so. It was a way of contributing to the well being of the greater society, of participating in a larger scope of meaning. I suppose, in a manner of speaking, the samanas of old held the prestige of astronauts today. They were the rare, brave, determined, explorers of the 'beyond'. Their lives were a visible compass always pointing a path of sane, integrated living; a reminder of something extraordinarily precious yet freely available for everyone.

In the 1960s many of us tried to form communities that aspired to something more meaningful than making money and blindly increasing the human population. Unfortunately we identified with a word that eventually helped to marginalize a lot of the good efforts. The word I'm thinking of is 'alternative'. We pursued and celebrated alternative life styles, alternative healing and so forth. This was an understandable attempt to separate ourselves from the madness of a society that was arming itself with nuclear weaponry, engaging in horrific wars over political ideology, and learning to methodically condition, through advertising, even in the youngest of children, a life-long insatiable desire for acquiring merchandise. Unfortunately, our attempts to distance ourselves from this insanity meant that these 'alternatives' were at best, tolerated as benign aberrations, and so they had very little direct effect on the lives of most of the human population. Many of my friends became interested in Buddhadharma in its various forms. They helped to create meditation centres in mountains and forests, and teaching houses in cities but, by and large, these efforts ended up as little cliques and clubs that fell short of positively influencing the direction of the larger society. In those youthful days, when we tried to build communities for dharma study and practice, it often involved cultivating a sense of being at least slightly morally superior to the rest of the population who seemed to be blindly supporting the collective madness. 'Dropping-out' became synonymous with being a great yogi and, filled with self righteousness, we tried to ignore the rest of the world in order to lead what we hoped would be more healthy lives. We had quite a strong sense of us and them; in the dharma and not in the dharma. When this 'us-ing' and 'them-ing' became strong, it actually hindered our ability to realise true sangha. Unbeknownst to us, it tended to obscure our knowing of the deep communal nature of everything

When the Buddha began to teach, many came and wanted to live and study with him. His presence inspired people to wake up from the murky conditioned dreams of greed, hatred and delusion. To be fair, he probably had a lot less competition. Try to imagine the Buddha arriving in New York city today. Supporters would place advertising in the New York Times for a weekend retreat. It would appear along with the other 450 'spiritual' workshops and related activities happening that weekend, not to mention the movies, theatres, nightclubs and glittery shopping. Perhaps at the time of the Buddha, when he came to a village to teach, a much higher percentage of beings would attend. He was the best show going, perhaps the only show!

In those days, to be ordained into the sangha was very simple. The Buddha said "*Ehi bhikkhu*" and snapped his fingers and that was that. *Ehi* means come. *Bhikkhu* in this context means wander. Come wander forth for the good of the many folk. Right from the beginning there was a sense that joining the order meant going forth from a life of blind habit to a way of living that uplifted everyone. In Tibetan, the word for bhikkhu is *gelong* and it carries the additional meaning of 'one who is free to ask question'. *Ehi Bhikkhu* could just as well mean; come, wander forth, freely questioning and investigating the natural world of inner and outer for the benefit of the entire community of life. My waking up inspires your waking up. Your waking up inspires my waking up. Our lives are profoundly interwoven at multiple levels of being – multiple streamings of becoming. There is an orderliness to life – the laws of nature. That is why entering the Buddhist sangha is sometimes called entering the Order. Becoming ordained.

I imagine a relatively small group of beings, living and studying the dharma together. The wider, extended community was happy to give them support in the form of food, clothing, medicine and shelter and, in return, the sangha provided a very visible example of sane and mindful living. In this way, the sangha supported the society and the society supported the sangha. Each benefited the other. Sangha was not an alternative lifestyle choice. It was a co-operative endeavour the entire society engaged in, to support community building. Today we could call this, '*sangha work*', the work of discovering the true communal nature that we are.

As the years went by and the fame of the Buddha spread throughout the land, more and more people came to join the community. Five monks became ten, became five thousand and I imagine the Buddha could have spent all his time snapping his fingers and saying *Ehi Bhikkhu*. Eventually he allowed the senior monks to ordain beings into the sangha in the name of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. In those early years the sangha was small and the monks quite gifted in their aspiration to awaken for the sake of all beings. They spent their days in a continuous exploration and cultivation of compassionate awareness. As the Order grew, however, the calibre of the monks gradually diluted. What would you expect? You could be a servant and get ordained. With the snap of fingers, suddenly, the tables were turned and your former master would be offering you food with respectful bows. As Namgyal Rinpoché once remarked, a lot of monks were in it for a free lunch! They were not necessarily mature in their aspiration to cultivate wisdom and compassion for the sake of all beings. In the grip of desire and lust they would hunger after the visiting men and women and sometimes get sexually involved. They would speak angrily when caught up in frustration and, sometimes, when floundering in general confusion and unawareness, they would lose the inspiration to meditate or engage in any exploration or practice at all.

The lay community of supporters began to grumble. Why should we support these lazy do-nothings? They went to the Buddha and complained. Understanding the suffering that was arising in these situations and recognizing the importance of harmonious interactions between the ordained community and the lay community, the Buddha '*allowed*' the monks to have more and more rules, guiding their behaviour. By time the teaching of Buddhadharma was established in Tibet, monks had more than 226 precepts! In the early

days of the Buddha's teaching it would take a matter of seconds to ordain someone. When I received the full ordination from His Holiness the 16th Karmapa the ceremony took more than two and a half hours and I was the only person being ordained at that time.

Today, in many Buddhist communities, there is a clearly visible gap between the ordained sangha and the lay community. This gap manifests in numerous ways and has contributed to many unhelpful attitudes and beliefs. Monks and nuns and the lay community are identified as separate from each other by the clothes they wear and the life styles they follow. Too often, there has developed a belief that only monks and nuns have any possibility of awakening and this tends to support further beliefs that the ordained sangha is somehow superior while lay people are inferior. These beliefs are mutually colluding and often actively carried by both groups. This sense of separation has led to all sorts of conceits, rooted in comparisons such as better than, worse than or equal to. In the process, the living dharma which was originally to help beings cultivate wisdom and compassion has often become so utterly obscured under rules and rituals concerning 'us' and 'them' that the Buddha himself would have been saddened to see it.

Turning to sangha work today, could we cultivate a sense of dharma sangha that is thoroughly inclusive? Not a sangha of celibates but a lay bodhisattva sangha – a community of beings who are waking up to their interdependence with all living creatures and cultivating their abilities to be of service to others. Could we work towards a sangha that was visible and concrete enough to give people a sense of belonging to something wholesome and clearly defined, while at the same time, spacious and open enough to not exclude? This means not excluding others from the sangha but also, not excluding the sangha from others. Could we cultivate a lay sangha that is non-hierarchic, yet carries a deep valuing of the wisdom of experience of those that have lived and practised before us? Could we cultivate a vibrant appreciation for the talents and life experience of each of the current members of the community? Could we bring forth a sangha that has the strength and resilience to act as a place of refuge and support for its members when they are lost in states of difficulty while simultaneously being flexible and responsive to the needs of the surrounding larger world? Could we live as a community of friends in dharma who support each other on the path of awakening love and clear seeing and through this, become an inspiration for others even when they are from very different walks of life?

The year 2005 seems to be a time of mounting sectarianism. Fear has become a tool of governance. Suspicion of difference is on the rise. Race, religion, economic status, and political affiliations have become powerful motors for divisiveness. The challenges of ecological change continue to grow and yet we humans seem to be retreating from addressing and exploring in any practical, meaningful way the huge question and immense implications of true sangha. How do we live well together on this cosmically tiny sphere of living rock we call planet earth? Who are we? What are we? Where do we begin? Where do we end off? What are we doing? How is what I am doing affecting what you are doing? How can a thinking feeling human being function well in this vast mystery? Contemplate the stars. Contemplate the creatures living in a drop of pond water. Marvel at how a

caterpillar can transform into a butterfly, how the moon stays up in the sky, how an acorn becomes an oak, and further still, how it is possible to raise any of these questions in the first place. Just to embark on such questioning is to enter into sangha work.

An Open Letter

(un-published) Feb/2000, Triple Gem, Wangapeka

June and Duncan (*who were caretakers at the time*) asked if I would write something for 'Newsphere' about sangha work unfolding here at Wangapeka. At first I said I'd rather not since it is still a very on-going process and I am already engaged in writing something which will probably take some time to complete. (*Here we are in 2005 and it still is not complete!*) On returning to my hut though, I thought to offer few words to share some personal ideas with you, at least of a general nature.

Wangapeka is 25 years old this year. Although an immensely generous input from hundreds of different beings has brought the physical structure of Wangapeka to its present state, a group of beings, loosely connected through a shared vision for a piece of land, even as wonderful as Wangapeka, does not necessarily constitute a sangha. In Buddhism, the Sangha is one of the three jewels. It is considered one of the great doorways to refuge; a source of inspiration and guidance. It is a community of people who share common aspirations, common practices and common teachers; a community in which the individual members value and cultivate wisdom, compassion and awareness in order to be of great service to others.

Along with many other shared aspirations for Lovingkindness 2000* I have also seen it as a year in which we might have a more extended go at the very challenging work of birthing into being a community who, through their very way of living and understanding, may gradually become a refuge and guiding light for others. I am imagining a bodhisattva sangha which would not only provide a rich foundation of teaching and guidance for the ongoing activities at Wangapeka but would engage in wholesome work in many other places as well. Though it's a grand vision, it will only emerge through the dedication and efforts of many inspired individuals.

At this point, I don't think we have a functioning sangha or dharma community associated with Wangapeka. This is not a failing in any way. Over the years a tremendous amount of

* In the year 2000 we held a one year retreat on the theme of Lovingkindness

work has gone into the physical structures of the centre. In a sense we now have the basics in place. I believe the time is coming, when we will be able to more actively and consciously address the question of a living, practising, manifesting, community of wholesome beings.

At the weekend entitled Healthy Dynamics in a Spiritual Community, there was reference to people who in the past had difficult experiences with aspects of Wangapeka and still carried pain in them over this. There was talk about the need to invite these beings back into the sangha with the aspiration that this would encourage a healing of old wounds. Though the aspiration was good and was shared by most of those present, I don't feel that we actually have a sangha that is an unshakeable refuge for all beings, to invite them into. This current community is at best a delicate young shoot. It needs much nurturing and this will take a good amount of practising dharma while living and working together.

In my mind, it is an unnecessary cause for suffering to talk about the Wangapeka Sangha and the difficulties some beings are having with it, as if this reflects a shortcoming on the part of the sangha or the Trust itself. The difficulties are undoubtedly there for some beings but a sangha at Wangapeka does not yet exist in any kind of stable, mature and wholesomely powerful way. Being on the mailing list or a member of the Trust doesn't make one a member of the sangha. Clear seeing compassion-in-action and non-clinging awareness, along with deepening empathy, patience, consistency in practice, flexibility of mind, and a reverence for a vast diversity of life, will surely be the shared values of a community of beings who are living their dharma practice.

A non-hierarchical lay sangha will not be created through meetings, discussions and rule making, though the meetings and discussions may be a part of the process. A resilient community, unshakably founded in lovingkindness, clear seeing and non-clinging awareness will come into being as individuals live and work and practise together, learning the challenging art of communal honesty, openness and mutual wholesome support.

We have been having a very rich and wonderful year so far at Wangapeka. Many beings have expressed interest in joining us later on in the program. It is a tremendous opportunity for healing and, if you are already feeling quite healthy, we hope you will come and share your wholesome energies with us.

best wishes to all
Tarchin

Levels of Sangha and Various Bits and Pieces

It might be helpful to consider a dharma community or sangha from a number of different perspectives. The following are a few that have arisen in my own contemplations. These divisions are not attempts to define or limit the possibilities of sangha but to stimulate clearer question and enquiry into what exactly is sangha. How can we recognise it? Who are its members? How does sangha function? What is its relationship with the broader community? And, once we can more clearly define sangha, is this something we aspire to? I hope these rather simplistic observations will serve as a starting point for further contemplation and investigation, either on your own, or together as a group.

Four Levels of Sangha

1) A Structural Sangha

This level of community has the collective concern of creating, organizing and maintaining structures. For example all the people who are co-operating to build and maintain the various physical structures of Wangapeka would, at that moment, be members of this level of sangha. When members of a structural sangha lose their way and fall into interpersonal difficulties they often resort to examining the organizing principles, redefining jobs and responsibilities, and looking for solutions in terms of more effective control. Talking and having meetings is a normal way for this level of sangha to try to get back on track.

2) A Practice Sangha

A practice sangha is a community whose main commonality and focus is dharma practice. Members study, meditate, and practise both together as a group, and individually on their own. They share a common pool of teachers, aspirations, sense of refuge, and ethical values.

When members of this level of sangha get into difficulty they usually get back on track by returning more vigorously to their practice.

3) *A Bodhisattva Sangha*

A bodhisattva sangha is composed of beings who are beginning to see and occasionally experience the multidimensional interconnectedness of all manifestation. This deepening knowing of interdependency contributes to a growing empathy for others. The primary commonality of a bodhisattva sangha is a desire to uplift all beings and to cultivate non-clinging awareness in each moment of life. When a member of a bodhisattva sangha loses their way, he or she will naturally feel the suffering of the situation directly within themselves, and then, appreciating the interconnectedness or interbeingness of the entire situation, do whatever helps to suffuse the arising situation with the *brahma vihara*: lovingkindness, compassion, joy, or equanimity. The bodhisattva vow and the practice of the six paramita can be great supports and reminders for members of this level of sangha.*

4) *The Aryan Sangha*

Aryan Sangha means Noble Sangha and is one of the three great Buddhist refuges, the others being the Buddha and the Dharma. This level of sangha will not be identifiable by outer signs such as rituals, vows or aspirations or particular practices. This is a community of beings who are firmly established in the moment by moment realisation of unity. This unity could be expressed in innumerable ways: the unity of wisdom and compassion, thingness and un-pin-down-ability, form and emptiness, or easeful presence and lucid discernment. It could be expressed as the effortless presence of openness, clarity and non-separation. If members of this level get off track, usually the slightest word or reminder will bring them straight back to a way of wholeness.

A sangha member at the fourth level will be able to simultaneously operate at all the other levels. A sangha member of the third level can operate at the first and second levels but they won't really know the fourth level. The second level can embrace the first level and it is possible for a being to be part of a first level sangha without really knowing or appreciating any of the other levels.

A community that operates only at the first level can't really be thought of as a spiritual or dharma community. This level is more the nature of a group or organization. We need to be clear about the difference between a group of people and a dharma sangha. A group is an association based on particular outer structures or forms. The members could be focused on a property, a job, a charitable cause and so forth. They work together to accomplish shared goals but don't necessarily interact in any other ways. A practice

* The bodhisattva vow is mentioned in the following essay. The six paramita, often called the six perfections are the practice of generosity, wholesome relating, patience, skillful application of energy, concentration and wisdom.

community, on the other hand, is an association based on shared aspirations, practices and living experiences.

A community that works at the first two levels could function as a dharma community but this type of community will sometimes have a characteristic obsession of being very 'us' and 'them'. One's membership in the sangha is as dependent on identifying who are outside the sangha as it is on doing the practice. We, 'the virtuous practitioners', and those others who are 'lost in samsara'. This type of sangha is often very hierarchical in organization. The guidance and inspiration comes from sources of authority who rarely, if at all, participate in the day to day activities of the sangha.

A community working at the first three levels will have a more fluid and compassionate feel to it. There will be a natural tolerance for and appreciation of diversity. This will support more easeful interactions, between sangha members and between the sangha and the larger society. Here the teachers are likely to be more active in the sangha though there will be still a tendency to idealize some beings who participate very little in the day to day activities.

A community operating on all four levels will have no real boundaries. It will be very healthy and able to bounce back from many sorts of difficulties as all the factors of healing are alive and functioning within itself. The more experienced members of the community provide a stability of vision and a living example of dharma in action for the newer members. The newer members provide a freshness of perspective and question, and a challenge to any tendency on the part of more experienced practitioners to rest on mere conceptual knowledge. Can you walk your talk? Or do you seek a sense of well being with only those who can understand your jargon?

For a Sangha to be a living source of refuge it needs to be manifesting at all four levels. It needs some visible structure to link the members. It needs shared aspiration and practices. It needs a deep communal valuing of the mystery of interbeingness and a dedication to cultivating compassion. And it needs at least some members who are solid enough in their realisation and practice to be, simply through their presence, a source of inspiration and support for any who lose their way.

A sangha as refuge can't just be a group of well meaning people muddling along together. Although we are indeed always walking into the unknown, we are also a manifesting of all the activities of life that have preceded this moment. A dharma sangha needs to consciously use the support of past experience to more clearly discern what is wholesome and what is not and then to actively cultivate the wholesome. To be a real refuge for others, there needs to be a visible firmness of clarity and compassion.

Explorations

Look at your spiritual community in terms of these four levels. Where are you strong? Where are you weak? Are there things that you could do to strengthen your sangha?

Two Levels of Engagement in Sangha

We could identify two natural levels of engagement in a spiritual sangha. The first level could be thought of as a visible practice or aspiration level. Here, what links all the participants is common aspiration, teachers, practices and ways of behaving and so forth. The second level could be thought of as an invisible realisation level and it will naturally emerge out of the first. Members of this second level are very stable in their understanding, realisation and manifesting of the dharma. These beings will be precious sources of guidance for the aspiring level of sangha.

Entry into the visible level of sangha can be outwardly recognized by a public statement of aspiration for living and practice. The invisible level of sangha would have no additional outer criteria. The individual members of this level would be recognized from their actions. A strong, robust sangha needs to have sufficient members who are stable in their understanding and practice to be able to hold and manifest the vision in situations where first level members sometimes wander off track.

Two Ways of Structuring a Dharma Sangha

There are two basic approaches that could be taken when structuring a spiritual community. The first could be called a 'bottom - up' approach. Here, the community has a set of clearly stated guidelines, and possibly even rules. Although these may often be expedient and useful, occasionally they have to be dropped or changed or at least applied with flexibility in order to harmonize with a larger, more encompassing understanding of a given situation. Unexpected circumstances will always arise. Bottom-up organising relies heavily on stated or unstated codes of conduct and ways of doing things. The advantage of this is that if people are not clear about what they are doing or how to approach a particular situation, then by following the guidelines, they are not so likely to get into trouble and hopefully will arrive at a workable resolution. Bottom-up organising can help new sangha members deepen in their understanding and experience of dharma and to publicly demonstrate to non-sangha members what the community is on about. With a bottom - up approach there are many practical guidelines, such as precepts and codes of conduct that will provide a support in all sorts of specific situations.

The second way of structuring a dharma community is a 'top - down' approach. Here the deepest principles and understandings of dharma are valued and held as aspiration from the very start. A central organising principle of the sangha is to encourage all the activities of the group to be guided by these principles. The Chinese Hua-yen school of Buddhism, sometimes called the Buddhist teaching of totality, presents an understanding of life which is so inclusive that it is able to embrace all seeming dichotomies so that they are experienced as the arising of one unbroken whole. Teachers and students, members and non-members, physical space and psychological space, mind and matter, self and other; all of these are understood to be so interdependent that one cannot shift without affecting the other. This realisation supports an experience of the world that is spacious, open and innately

compassionate. With the top - down structure, this embrave understanding is recognized and incorporated in all aspects of organization so that even rules or guidelines concerning the so called 'mundane' aspects of running the centre accord with the highest principles. With a top - down approach, our highest aspiration is a central support that helps inform all our actions.

The bottom - up approach is good for providing structure and clear nitty-gritty guidelines for what to do and what not to do in particular situations. This is valuable when people are looking for practical advice as to how they should proceed. The drawback of this approach is that sometimes we can attempt to resolve difficulties as if they were merely a legalistic problem of right and wrong or black and white, and the spirit of wisdom and compassion can become very obscured in the ever proliferating haggling over rules and constitutional by-laws. At this point the means is frequently treated as more important than the ends. If a sangha or individual sangha members find themselves in this situation they really need to recontact and refresh their deeper aspirations.

The top - down approach is good for keeping our broad aspirations continuously in view, so that all our actions flow out from them. The drawback of this approach is that sometimes the aspiration becomes an empty concept, mere words and pious formulae. We can spend hours weaving beautiful phrases which are disconnected from our actions. When the aspiration becomes all important, the ends seem to justify the means at which point all kinds of unwholesome activities can be done in the deluded belief that they will support something wonderful. At times like these we need to let go of grand ideas and simply and honestly touch the person or situation that is immediately present with straightforward compassion and interest. If the community gets lost in conceptual ideas it is useful to have some practical guidelines to bring everyone back down to earth. Both top - down and bottom - up approaches, are needed for a well functioning dharma sangha.

Explorations

How does your sangha tend to function? Does it have clear guidelines? Are the over-all aspirations clear? Do you personally have a bias or preference for how to do things, top-down, bottom-up? Are you able to be open and relaxed with different ways of doing things?

A Traditional Meditation On Sangha

Let's look at the Salutation to the Sangha and see if we can see anything that is relevant to us today. In terms of the four levels of sangha that were discussed earlier, the sangha that is being described here is the fourth level of sangha, the Aryan or Noble Sangha.

*Supatipanno bhagavato savakasangho, ujupatipanno bhagavato savakasangho,
nayatipanno bhagavato savakasangho, samicipatipanno bhagavato savakasangho,*

yadidam cattari purisayugani atthapurisapuggala esa bhagavato savakasangho ahuneyyo, pahuneyyo, dakkhineyyo, anjalikaraniyo anuttaram, punnakkhettam lokassa'ti.

A standard translation from a booklet of Buddhist reflections called, "The Mirror of the Dhamma", printed by the Buddhist Publication Society is as follows:

Of good conduct is the Order of the Disciples of the Blessed One; of upright conduct is the Order of the Disciples of the Blessed One; of wise conduct is the Order of the Disciples of the Blessed One; of dutiful conduct is the Order of the Disciples of the Blessed One. This Order of the Disciples of the Blessed One - namely, these Four Pairs of Persons, the Eight Kinds of Individuals - is worthy of offerings, is worthy of hospitality, is worthy of gifts, is worthy of reverential salutation, is an incomparable field of merit to the world.

If we peel away some of the repetition we get:

Of good, upright, wise and dutiful conduct, is the Order of the Disciples of the Blessed One. This Sangha, namely the Four Pairs of Persons or the Eight Kinds of Individuals is worthy of offerings, hospitality, gifts, and reverential salutation and is an incomparable field of merit to the world.

This paragraph is basically a description of what sangha members would be like who are truly living the way of the Buddha.

Bhagavato savakasangho – The Order of Disciples of the Blessed One. *Bhagavato* means blessed one and refers to the Buddha. *Savaka* means hearer or one who has heard. At the time of the Buddha, the teaching was transmitted orally so students were called 'hearers', *savaka*. *Sangho* means community, multitude or assemblage.

Supatipanno – Of good conduct. *Su* means good or wholesome or that which nourishes the wholesome. *Patipada* means pathway, method, means, mode of progress; means of reaching a goal or destination. *Patipanna* means having followed or following up, reaching, entering on, attaining. The sangha members live in such a way that every aspect of their lives, (body, speech and mind) becomes a pathway or means that supports or leads to the good and wholesome both for themselves and for others. Good conduct is hinting at a way of living that supports the flowering of compassion, love, clear seeing and deep understanding in the midst of any arising circumstance.

Ujupatipanno – Of upright conduct. *Uju* means upright, straight, honest and direct. Even today we might refer to someone as being upright or straight implying that they are honest. When our every action of body, speech and mind is flavoured with straightforward honesty, we have nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide from ourselves or from others. We are not devious or crooked but simple, direct and relaxed in all of our relationships. Sangha members, living the way of the Buddha, would be like this.

Nayapatipanno – Of wise conduct. *Naya* means method, truth, system; logic; fitness, right manner, right path. Sangha members who are truly following the way of the Buddha

engage in a method of practice. They engage in a path of mindfulness training that leads to a cessation of suffering and an augmentation of well being, both in the individual sangha member and in others. This way of living is considered wise conduct.

Samicopatipanno – of dutiful conduct. *Samici* means right, proper, dutiful. Sangha members who are truly following the way of the Buddha are dutiful in the sense of respecting and appreciating the instruction and guidance they receive from teachers and friends on the path. They listen carefully, ponder the meaning of what they hear, and then put the teachings into practice. The experience of practising mindfulness inevitably gives rise to implications of how one might live. The sangha member then allows those implications to direct further explorations and actions. This is how to respect our teachers and the teaching. Dutiful conduct also implies duties towards all beings, not just teachers and mentors. In this case the sangha member is aware of how their actions impinge on others and so they try to act in ways that bring forth the best in all beings.

Notice how these four attributes, good conduct, upright conduct, wise conduct and dutiful conduct, in a way, are quite ordinary. The sangha is not characterized by people who manifest extraordinary psychic abilities that are out of reach for most ordinary people. These are characteristics that each one of us could manifest, if we felt it was worth while and if we worked at it. Of course, if we looked at the behaviour of many politicians and leaders of industry we would find these qualities are too often lacking. In a society that has tacitly condoned unwholesome conduct, dishonesty, as well as illogical and selfish activity, it might take some courage and determination to live in a different way. It would mean that we would have to appear to go against the norm.

This Sangha, namely the Four Pairs of Persons or the Eight Kinds of Individuals

The four pairs of persons and the eight kinds of individuals are referring to the Theravadin (the oldest school of Buddhism) understanding about the progressive stages of realisation. According to this system, there are four levels of attainment which are divided into pairs. The initial moment of attainment is called path and every subsequent moment is called a fruition, although path and fruition are essentially the same experience. At each stage, certain hindrances or fetters either fall away or are seriously weakened. The levels are as follows.

(1) Stream-Enterer (*sotapanna*)

Three fetters fall:

- (1) Belief in a substantial self (*sakkaya-ditthi*)
- (2) Sceptical doubt (*vicikiccha*)
- (3) Attachment to rule and ritual (*silabbata-paramasa*)

(2) Once-Returner (*sakadagami*)

Two fetters are weakened:

- (4) Sensual desire (*kama-raga*)
- (5) Ill-will (*vyapada*)

(3) Non-Returner (*anagami*)

Two fetters fall:

(4) and (5)

(4) Worthy One (*Arahant*)

Five fetters fall:

(6) Craving for existence in the form world (*rupa-raga*)

(7) Craving for existence in the formless world (*arupa-raga*)

(8) Conceit (*mana*)

(9) Restlessness (*uddhacca*)

(10) Ignorance (*avijja*)

These four pairs of persons or eight individuals are worthy of offerings, hospitality, gifts, and reverential salutation, and are an incomparable field of merit to the world. Members of the Aryan Sangha who are 'of good, upright, wise and dutiful conduct' and who have become free from various unwholesome patterns are an incomparable field of wholesome energy (merit) for the world. Their very presence is an inspiration and support for others.

This classical contemplation of Sangha (which is one of the three Buddhist refuges) could be an aspiration for how a community of friends in dharma might manifest. Without getting lost in the details and definitions of Buddhist tradition but instead, touching the intended spirit behind the words, can we bring the essence of this into the workings of whatever community we are involved with? Can the way we live together become an incomparable field of merit for the world – a field that is so fertile (rich in good, upright, wise and dutiful conduct) that it invites the seeds of offerings, hospitality, gifts and respect, which in turn grow into myriad forms of nourishment that supports innumerable beings in countless ways? This would be sangha work in action!

Contemplations to Support A Well Functioning Dharma Community

*Ethics must evolve from clear seeing.
Attempting the reverse is a recipe for disaster!*

Periodic examination of ethics, moral guidelines and how we relate to each other is an essential, ongoing process for any well functioning dharma community. A healthy ethical stance, particularly at residential centres such as Wangapeka where there is a steady flow through of people, can never be something that is carved in stone. What is needed is a fluid approach to relationships that will reflect and support the current needs and experiences of all the people involved. A community that aspires to "awaken for the sake of all beings", needs to look deeply and frequently into the foundations of life, and of reality, so that each member's behaviour is in tune with the unfolding of Nature and is not just a reflection of a particular collection of human hopes and beliefs. A workable code of ethics must evolve from clear seeing. Attempting the reverse, in other words, to limit one's seeing in order to fit the constraints of a pre-existing rigid set of moral rules, is a recipe for disaster.

To encourage some looking and hopefully careful consideration, I have outlined five fundamental contemplations that, if we go into them deeply, will suggest a clear course of action in our daily lives. I hope that these reflections will serve as a starting point for discussion and study so that the process of learning to live together, in ways that support the flowering of wisdom, compassion and skilful action in the world, can become a vehicle of awakening for all those involved. Rather than a presentation of Buddhist "shoulds" and "should nots", this article will hopefully raise many questions and inspire some clear and useful thinking; perhaps even some fruitful discussion.

May we have the courage to live together with trust and honesty and in a way that supports awakening in all beings.

Five Themes to Contemplate

Causality

Everything and everyone comes into being due to myriad causes and conditions. Ultimately, every action affects everything else. What I do affects you. What you do affects me. What one person does affects the whole community. What the community does affects the individual person. What the humans do affects the plants and animals. What the other creatures do affects the humans. Contemplate this deeply.

Interbeing

Each of us is shaped and moved in unimaginable ways by the inspiration, the aspirations, and the life examples, of uncountable dharma teachers from many backgrounds and traditions; a great river of wisdom and compassion expressed through art and poetry, through writings and philosophies and through the examples of their own inspiring lives. Contemplate this deeply.

Each one of us is an embodied expression of our parents and our parent's parents. This includes their hopes and fears and attitudes to life. We contain the talents and foibles of an ocean of ancestors; their patterns of speech, their genetic tendencies, their approaches to work, religion, child rearing, politics, property and power. Each person is a vast treasury of possibility. Contemplate this deeply.

Every person is an interbeing of myriad dimensions. Each of us is a manifesting of an entire unfolding ecosystem, an evolving planet arising now as you and me. The green plants, and the water cycles, the sun and the mineral realms, along with all the other creatures, are weaving the fabric of myself and yourself through every shifting moment. Each one of us is part of the other. Contemplate this deeply.

Individual Activity

Every action of body, communication and mind is the seed for a future result. Every person carries within them the seeds of love and hate, of greed and generosity, of wisdom and confusion, of humbleness and pride. These seeds were planted by the uncountable actions of ourselves and the innumerable ancestors who preceded us. How can we water the wholesome seeds in ourselves and in each other? How can we weed out the unwholesome seeds so that they don't sprout again in the future? Consider this deeply.

Mind and Knowing

Everything that I experience arises in my own knowing. Each moment of perception is the bringing forth of a world, filled with meaning and import. At the same time, each being that I meet is, him, her or itself, also bringing forth an equally vast and meaningful world that is arising as their own unique knowing. The flavour of my knowing, my overall attitudes, typical emotional states, prejudices and aspirations helps to mould the universe I perceive

and live in, and so too does yours. The universe that is my knowing shapes and affects the universe of your knowing while simultaneously the universe of your knowing is shaping and affecting the universe of my knowing. Contemplate this.

A Matrix of Knowing and Understanding

When we see the vast miracle that each being is, we relate to them differently than when we see them as a discrete fragment of our own field of experience. Each being is an expression of immeasurable inspiration, talent and raw material. Each being is a unique matrix of knowing with their own hopes and fears and aspirations. The question of wholesome relationship between ourselves and another, needs to consider not only how not to harm ourselves and others but also how to support each other as well. Opening to the vastness that is me and opening to the vastness that is you; with this understanding, what would it be like for all of me to meet all of you? How might this be different from most of our daily meetings and interactions? In what ways can you encourage this understanding in yourself and your friends? Contemplate an entire community living with this appreciation.

These themes are overlapping and each one contains and implies the others. To recognise the vastness of oneself inevitably leads us to appreciate the vastness of another. To feel small and insignificant frequently leads to us to see others as small and insignificant. Before declaring rules and guidelines for community members surely we need to give immense energy to enquiring and searching into what we are and what the world is. If we find that we are completely autonomous, independent entities competing with other autonomous, independent entities for limited resources, this will imply a certain way of living. If we regard every being other than our self as a object to be used to prop up our sense of well being, then this will imply a way of living. If we know in the bones of our being, if we feel with intelligence and empathy, our interdependency and interbeingness with everyone and everything, then this will suggest yet another way of living. Surely any code of ethics must be preceded by deep, heartfelt investigation of what is. Anything else would be a recipe for more suffering.

Over the years at the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre, we have encouraged all residents and visitors to use the Five Training Precepts, the Precepts in Positive Expression and the Bodhisattva Vow, as a way of encouraging mindfulness and ongoing question into how to relate to others during their stay. The Precepts and Bodhisattva ideal are basic to all schools of Buddhism and have historically arisen out of deep and profound contemplation of themes such as the one's I have suggested above. They are not rules in the way of the Ten Commandments. Rather, they are attempts to bring increased compassionate awareness to some of the major themes of daily living such as: how we take life as we do each time we eat, how we relate to each other through objects and the entanglements that can arise with a sense of ownership, how we use our senses, how we communicate, and how we feed ourselves. With deepening mindfulness of what we are and how we affect each other we can relate with others in ways that supports the wellbeing of the entire community. The Precepts and Bodhisattva vow are discussed in "Daily Puja" as well as some of my other

books such as "Natural Awakening". The themes of interconnectedness are beautifully presented in Thich Nhat Hanh's "Cultivating the Mind of Love".

The Five Training Precepts

When we are lost in confusion or are in the grip of negative habitual patterns such as fear, jealousy, anger or lust, these traditional training precepts can be a life raft that can save us from doing something that later we might regret.

1. I undertake to train myself to abstain from taking the life of any living being.
2. I undertake to train myself to abstain from taking that which is not given.
3. I undertake to train myself to abstain from sensual misconduct.
4. I undertake to train myself to abstain from unskilful speech.
5. I undertake to train myself to abstain from taking substances that cause intoxication to the point of heedlessness.

Precepts in Positive Expression

When we are feeling clear, awake and responsive, guidelines for wholesome relating that are expressed as negatives, ie 'I will train myself not to do such and such,' are hardly enough. Spending our lives not doing things isn't a very creative way of living. These positive expressions of the five traditional precepts point to a way of living that actively embraces and supports the wellbeing of everyone and everything.

1. I will train myself to support and appreciate the life of all living beings. I will live with a sensitive and responsible awareness for the whole ecology of life.
2. I will train myself to dwell more and more in the mind of spontaneous generosity. Daily I will give material support, emotional support, and an example to others of awakening in action.
3. I will train myself to use the senses to further awakening, explore Dharma, and to come to know the world more profoundly and more compassionately.
4. I will train myself to communicate in a skilful and compassionate manner.

5. I will train myself to be ever more directly aware of how nutriment affects the mind and body. I will eat and drink and nurture myself and others, in a way that supports awakening.

Bodhisattva Vow

There are many versions of the Bodhisattva Vow. All of them are essentially a strong expression of aspiration to live a life that is thoroughly imbued with compassion and clear seeing.

However innumerable beings are,
I vow to meet them with kindness and interest.
However inexhaustible the states of suffering are,
I vow to touch them with patience and love.
However immeasurable the Dharmas are,
I vow to explore them deeply.
However incomparable the mystery of interbeing,
I vow to surrender to it freely.

From this day forth, with Wisdom and
Compassion as my Lamp and Staff,
I dedicate all my life energies to the welfare
of all beings.

Further Explorations

1 – Each day take one of the five themes and make it your main contemplation for an entire day. Use it to shine the light of fresh seeing on the ordinary activities of your life, such as relating to your family and friends, to the people you meet at work, to strangers, adversaries, flowers, trees, dogs, cats, birds and other creatures. At the end of the day review what you discovered and consider what this implies in terms of how you live with others and how you could live with others. Is there a difference here? In the light of this contemplation, would you change the way you do anything? Does this have any implications for how you earn your living, how you relax, and in general, how you live your life?

2 – Do the above exercise with a small group of people, (between 2 and 5). After exploring a theme for a day or so, come together in a group. Begin by spending a few minutes relaxing into awareness of your breathing. Then, if they are meaningful to you, recite the verses for Refuge along with the Bodhisattva Vow. Having expressed together a shared aspiration then share your insights with each other. What did you discover? Is there anything you

feel bad about or regret? Are there ways that the contemplation has strengthened you? What do your discoveries imply in terms of how your behaviour helps or harms yourself or others?

3 – Each day take one of the training precepts or one part of the Bodhisattva Vow and keep it vivid and present with you in the midst of whatever interactions happen for you that day. At the end of the day review what you have experienced and what you have learned.

4 – Do the above exercise with a small group and, similar to exercise #2, share your insights and discoveries with each other at the end of the day.

5 – Having contemplated any of the preceding themes for some time, create a work of art that somehow expresses your insight or understanding. A painting, a poem, a dance, a sculpting, a piece of music and share it with others.

6 – Use your creativity and find ways of bringing these contemplations alive for yourself and others in ways that no-one else has ever done.

May your explorations and investigations flower beautifully for the sake of all beings.

Strengthening and Healing Sangha

Touching Base in Community a procedure for maintaining a healthy sangha

Whenever you have a group of people living together in close quarters for a long time, there will inevitably be moments of conflict arising between group members. This can happen in a family group, a group of employees, a religious group, a social organization, even in a group that is gathering to study the dharma. It might be useful to distinguish between a group and a sangha. Many groups lack the means of solving a problem because essentially the group is just a bunch of people who happen to be in the same place for sometimes quite different personal reasons. As we've all experienced, it is possible to be part of a group and never really get to know or appreciate the other group members in any deep and meaningful way. A dharma sangha – a community of friends in dharma – has a much better chance of helping individual members to resolve difficulties because ideally, a sangha is a group of people who genuinely care for each other's well being. When profoundly cultivated, this deep level of caring can become the thread that weaves everyone together in a resilient and beautiful fabric of wisdom and support. When problems arise in a group we may not feel sufficient trust to ask the group to suggest ways of resolving the difficulty. A living dharma sangha is a visible manifesting of trust and so the sangha can be a real source of refuge and support.

True sangha is a marvellous thing. It draws together the energy of wisdom and compassion, of an ocean of beings. As members of a community of friends in dharma, we need to consciously train ourselves to recognize and appreciate that each person expresses through their body, speech and mind, the reverberations of countless teachers, mentors and guides for compassionate, mindful living. Each person is a living embodiment of the life experience of uncountable ancestors. Each person is an interbeing of an unfolding planetary ecosystem – a living fabric of plants and animals, of ocean, rock and sky. When we are aware that the people that we are living with are immeasurably vast, that they are expressions of a wisdom that has been ripening through millions of years of symbiotic living, then, we might feel moved to use the sangha as a source of guidance, as a place of refuge and as a support upon the path.

A group of people who happen to be living or working in proximity to each other are not automatically a sangha, even if they are living together at a retreat centre. A functional sangha is not merely an accidental gathering of well meaning people. A dharma sangha, a community that can be a source of refuge for many beings, is a precious jewel that takes conscious effort to build and sustain.

Consider a living tree. When it is young and newly planted, it can be a bit delicate and needs supportive conditions for it to grow tall and strong. It requires just the right amount of sun along with regular watering. It needs mulching and composting, the occasional weeding, and sometimes fencing from rabbits and other creatures that might eat it. Until it is well established above the surrounding grass, it must be cared for on a regular basis otherwise it can wilt, or be choked by weeds, or eaten by insects or damaged by wind. As the tree matures it becomes more and more resilient and adept at looking after itself. As its branches reach into the sky and its roots spread further through the soil, the grasses and weeds become less and less of a problem. It produces many chemicals that discourage harmful insects. It establishes symbiotic relationships with fungi in the earth and the growing trees around. It attracts insects and birds that help its pollination. As it ages well, it gradually becomes a home and shelter for countless living beings from the tiniest forms of micro life through to large animals and other plants. A dharma community or sangha is like a living tree.*

Although sangha as tree is a nice image, it is not quite right because a dharma sangha is also like a river. Membership is in a continual process of flux and flow. Think of a tree as a river of life. Individual elements that make it up are constantly flowing through. Water, gasses and chemical elements are continuously on the move, linking the tree into the larger universe and the larger universe into the tree. Just as a tree grows more and more roots to balance and feed the branches and more and more leaves to nourish the roots, so too, a sangha river/tree is more than meets the eye. Many invisible factors support the health of a sangha and it is an important part of the work of a functioning sangha to frequently bring to mind an appreciation for these deep roots and branching networks of profound connection. These are the source of our nutriment. These are the foundation of our stability and strength.

As the sangha becomes more mature it will naturally become a place of refuge for many different beings but since the sangha members are always flowing through, in a way, a sangha can be mature and yet simultaneously young and delicate. Just as the young tree needs caring for, so too does the eternally young sangha. This is the famous 'beginner's mind', both strong and delicate at the same time.

Touching Base in Community is one way of caring for this flowing sangha tree. It is an opportunity to gather together in a supported and supportive environment, to water,

* The image of a tree as sangha has been inspired by David Suzuki and Wayne Grady's wonderful book *Tree: a biography*, Allen & Unwin 2004

and weed, and compost and protect and prune and generally look after this precious living creature. Just as a tree or a garden needs to be cared for on a regular basis, so too does a community of dharma practitioners. Each member is a living part of the whole sangha and contributes something unique and necessary to the sangha's health. A healthy sangha is like a great tree that gives shelter and sustenance to all the individual people who live in its branches. When we value the preciousness of sangha we find the energy to care for each other and this mutual caring is the strength of the sangha.

Touching Base in Community is to encourage and support ongoing health in the sangha or community. We began exploring with this format during a one year retreat on lovingkindness in the year 2000 and we have continued using it on a weekly basis at the Wangapeka School of Living Dharma. We have been experimenting with it for a while now and many people are seeing it as a very useful tool, even more than that, a unique and precious opportunity, in terms of nurturing wholesome relations within the community.

How to Do Touching Base in Community

The group sits in a circle. In the centre arrange some objects of beauty that will provide a pleasing and inspiring visual focus for everyone. Have one member of the sangha assume the role of facilitator, or leader, or host. It's good to have people take turns doing this so that everyone can have the experience. This person needs to have participated in Touching Base in Community a sufficient number of times to really appreciate and understand the process and to feel confident enough to be able to introduce it to any new members and to skilfully remind the older members.

1 - Walking

If the location and weather allows, the sangha could begin by doing 15 - 20 minutes of silent walking meditation together in a group. *This may need a little instruction for new people and or a reminder for everyone else. After the walk everyone should come to their seat and sit down in silence.*

2 - Introduction

(sound the bell)

*"FOR THE SAKE OF ALL BEINGS, WISDOM,
COMPASSION, NON-CLINGING AWARENESS"*

The facilitator then would welcome everyone and remind them what Touching Base is for and how it is done. They may say something like this:

Welcome everyone. Touching Base in Community is a time to touch base with each other in a deep and meditative way. It is an opportunity to practice speaking from the heart; to communicate concisely and clearly and compassionately about things that are important for

you. At the same time it is an opportunity for us to practice listening; to open the ears of empathy and understanding and to hear, not just with our minds but with all of our being.
(Pause and breathe)

Perhaps even more important than speaking and listening, Touching Base in Community is a time to remember our interbeing and, like the Buddha on the night of the awakening when he touched his right hand to the earth, to touch base, to touch the ground of being, our groundedness of being, and to do so in the presence of each other. This is a time for profound listening. To listen with compassion. To listen with intelligence. To give all of our attention to the words that are being spoken and the meaning and intent behind the words. It is a time to speak of things that involve oneself and the health of the community. To share difficulties or concerns. To acknowledge and praise the good actions of others. To share personal insights or understandings that could uplift the community. It is certainly not obligatory to speak. It is, however, necessary to be fully present, and to listen.
(sound the bell)

The more we value a well functioning sangha the more we will realise that good preparation for Touching Base in Community is important. We walk mindfully together and then sit in a circle, remembering the inner smile and mindfully breathing. Each person should do whatever is necessary to bring a calm, clear state to offer to their sangha friends. After sitting for ten minutes, we will contemplate our *whakapapa**, our rootedness in a vast continuum of life. After that, to refresh our shared aspiration, we will recite the refuge and bodhisattva vow. Then I will sound the bell. At that point we will sit for about an hour. During that time if someone wishes to speak they indicate this by bringing their hands together at their heart and bowing. To show that we are ready to listen attentively we bow in a similar way in return. At that point the speaker has the floor until they are finished. Since no-one will interrupt, the person can speak meditatively, taking as much time as they need, to pause and reflect. When they have completely finished, they bow and the group bows in response and that indicates that someone else can speak.

Touching Base is not a time for discussion or making comments on what someone has said. What is said may, however, lead to further discussion outside this forum, if it seems useful and appropriate. When we approach the end of the hour, I will indicate that there are five minutes left.
(sound the bell)

*May we listen from the heart.
May we speak from the heart.
May we share what is meaningful and thus
nourish the wisdom and compassion of this sangha.*

* Whakapapa is a Maori word meaning genealogy, cultural identity, family tree. It is very important in the Maori culture in New Zealand where people meeting will introduce themselves by reciting their whakapapa. It seems to me that people in modern society have lost their sense of being rooted in a larger continuum of life. I am using whakapapa here in a broad sense of a genealogy that links us into the entire unfolding universe.

3 - Sitting Meditation

Now we will sit in silence for 10 minutes and do breathing meditation. (*If there are new people present the leader should give them a little instruction.*)

4 - Reflections and Aspiration

Begin by reflecting on how everyone present is an interbeing of multiple dimensions. Read or recite, Touching the Earth (found in the following section p32) or something similar. Then recite the going for Refuge and Bodhisattva Vow.

5 - Main Session

Approximately one hour sit during which people speak and listen.

6 - Five minutes

Indicate when five minutes remain.

7 - Sharing the Merit

Finish by sharing the merit.

*Touching the Earth**

The host for the Touching Base In Community session can read this on behalf of everyone in a slow and majestic way, pausing many times for contemplation. After this they can lead the sangha in taking refuge and refreshing the Bodhisattva Vow. Touching the earth, reminds us of our interbeingness with everyone and everything. Practising it on its own or in the form connected with doing prostrations, encourages a spacious quality of experience as we learn to rest with increasing confidence in the vastness that we are. Learning to see ourselves this way and simultaneously to see others this way, leads to a deepening of appreciation and respect for each other. Learning to see ourselves and others with what I think of as 'eyes of interbeing' is sangha work in action.

1 – *Smiling, breathing, present* – we open the doors of appreciation to all the beings who have been dharma teachers for us. Lamas, yogis, gurus of many lineages and traditions; artists, philosophers, scientists, adventurers, writers; educators, social activists, healers, and friends; beings who have inspired the unfolding of our lives in the direction of Wisdom and Compassion. We open the doors of appreciation to all the teachers of the past, all the teachers in the present and all the teachers yet to come. We feel your presence around us and within us. You continue to inspire and shape us in innumerable wondrous ways. You are expressions of the very foundation of our being, reminders of what is truly functional and meaningful. With deep gratitude and profound appreciation, knowing your presence expressing itself through our bodies, speech and minds – we touch the earth.

OM AH HUM Then, like the Buddha on the night of the awakening, we lower our right hands to the ground in the earth witness mudra while mindfully breathing and feeling the presence of all these sources of guidance and inspiration flowing in the body, speech and mind of each person gathered in this circle.

2 – *Smiling, breathing, present* – we open the doors of appreciation to the genetic and historical river of becoming. Our mothers and fathers, grandparents and great grandparents, a beginningless chain of ancestors extending back as far as we can imagine. We feel the presence of whole societies, peoples migrating across the earth, meeting new

* This has been adapted from a slightly more elaborate version called Touching the Earth in Six Prostrations

challenges, discovering ways of surviving, passing on knowledge to future generations, a river of talents flowing through as an eternally creative present. We feel your presence in the shape and workings of our bodies, the dance of our senses, the play of our attitudes, the history of living forms weaving the story of becoming that is this planet making itself known, through us and around us. We feel your presence flowing out into our children and our children's children, generations of ancestors yet to come. Knowledges of healing, of educating, of growing food and building shelter, of arts and sciences, of religion and philosophy. Feeling this vast repository of talent and knowledge empowering our bodies, speech and minds, with profound wonderment and respect, we touch the earth.

OM AH HUM With the earth witness mudra, we mindfully breathe in and out while feeling the union of ourselves and these myriad sources of talent and knowledge.

3 – *Smiling, breathing, present* – we open the doors of appreciation to the ecological ground. We feel ourselves embedded in a vast dynamic ecology of life, an unfolding of myriad interdependent manifestations of intelligent shaping. With each breath we breathe with the green plants. Our bodies, speech and minds are expressions of air, water, earth and radiant solar energy; weavings of becoming, journeyings of atoms, molecules, cells, and organs. They are a dancing of organisms, bio systems, planets, solar systems and cosmic arisings. We feel the rivers and oceans in our blood and tears. We feel the mystery of transforming vegetables and animal flesh, the continuous coming into being and passing away that are our bodies, feelings and thinkings. With awe and wonderment, sensing the beginninglessness and endlessness of everything that is, we touch the earth.

OM, AH, HUM. With the earth witness mudra, we mindfully breathe in and out while feeling the union of ourselves and this vast ocean of becoming.

4 – *Smiling, breathing, present*, with deepening confidence that each of us and these three great treasures, these three faces of the ineffable ground of being, have never been separate in the least; sensing the unbroken wholeness of totality, a seamless un-pin-down-able mystery appearing as the fullness of now; with awe, vitality and presence, resting in the mystery of non-separation, the spacious openness of interbeing, we touch the earth.

OM, AH, HUM. With the earth witness mudra, we mindfully breathe in and out while feeling mystery of union revealing itself in every moment of knowing.

5 – *Smiling, breathing, present* – we recognise how clinging to patterns of body, communication and conceptualising, are habits inherited or arising from this same triple ground. Feeling the suffering of clinging, the struggle of trying to make permanent that which is impermanent; feeling the anguish, pain, hopes, fears and confusions of uncountable beings weaving these present patterns of dysfunction and defensiveness in each one of us, with courage and determination to uplift everyone, letting go of clinging in body, speech and mind, we touch the earth.

OM, AH, HUM. With the earth witness mudra, we mindfully breathe in and out while completely letting go in every aspect of being.

6 – *Smiling, breathing, present*, experiencing a vast glow of kindness and interest for every manifestation of life; radiating lovingkindness to all beings of present, past and future, with a deep wish that everyone recognise the true nature of being; with body, speech and mind, we touch the earth.

OM, AH, HUM. With the earth witness mudra, we mindfully breathe in and out while feeling the healing presence of lovingkindness flowing out in all directions, supporting and nourishing every arising manifestation.

Mini – Touching Base

Touching Base in Community will often highlight areas of difficulty between community members that could benefit from further discussion, exploration and healing. A mini touching base can be a very fruitful way for resolving conflict and generating deeper understanding of a particular situation. Here, instead of sitting with the entire sangha, we meet in smaller groups, of two people or more.

The format is similar to Touching Base in Community except, in this case, there is a specific topic that you wish to explore together. Do a bit of preparation to help establish a meditative space; perhaps walk together and then sit in silence together. Then take refuge and recite the Bodhisattva vow and aspire that this time can help to deepen your understanding. Then take turns speaking about the topic. As in Touching Base listen without comment until the speaker has finished. Where this is different from a more formal Touching Base in Community is that a mini touching base might become more of a dialogue where you are free to respond to what another person has said. This is done in a meditative fashion with the aspiration to communicate clearly and to listen with patience and openness.

It is a good idea to set a time limit for a session, before you begin. If you run out of things to say then you can meditate together till the end. If there is lots of talking then a time limit prevents it dragging on too long. At the end, sit quietly for a short time and then share the merit, aspiring that this discussion may water many wholesome seeds that will flower for the benefit of all beings.

A mini touching base session can be used when people feel that communication between them over a certain issue has become difficult. It can also be a fruitful way of exploring positive aspects of dharma together. In large courses, breaking up into smaller discussion groups like this, can give people the opportunity to exchange understandings, questions and insights on a particular topic. Along with facilitating a deeper exploration of the topic, these structured discussion groups will support a growing appreciation for the talents and gifts of fellow sangha members. Deepening our appreciation for each other is sangha work in action.

Sangha Sharing

Sangha sharing is a form of sangha work to be used during long, silent retreats. It is an opportunity to utilise the collective intelligence and experience of the community to inspire and remind people of their practice. Sometimes an insight or understanding offered by the person two rooms or three cushions down from you, can inspire or uplift your practice more than a formal dharma talk from 'the teacher'.

During long retreats, I often suggest that the meditators gather together once every week or ten days to do a session of sangha sharing. This is a time to sit together and to share with your fellow meditators one or two particularly meaningful insights, discoveries, breakthroughs, or understandings, that have arisen in the course of your practice. You could think of sangha sharing as essentially an opportunity for deepening generosity. Can you, without embellishing or undervaluing your experience, share something that has arisen during the preceding week of practice that for you was positive and worthwhile? Its not supposed to be a blow by blow description of your week. It's not a report on all your trials and tribulations or a detailed exposé of your inner life. You are invited to select one or two meaningful experiences, out of a week of myriad moments, and to offer these insights to your friends.

Sangha sharing is a time for honest and generous communication, a time to speak with wholesome motivation. Your offering may be just the thing that will inspire or uplift someone else. Be humble, you never know how useful your experience may be to another. Honest, generous communication also implies listening with full attentiveness and not drifting off into comparing what's being said with your own experience. Watch that you are not using the other person's offering as an opportunity to pat yourself on your back or to beat yourself up for your shortcomings. Can you listen without a shred of envy or jealousy? Can you feel sympathetic joy as you realize that someone has made a wonderful discovery? Can you allow the experiences of your sangha friends to inspire you to deepen your practice?

Although sangha sharing takes up only one hour out of a week, it can be an important enrichment for everyone. It is a opportunity to reconnect with all these other silent meditators and to realise that they too are making the extraordinary effort to cultivate ongoing mindfulness, to meet all arisings with kindness and interest and to touch every difficulty with patience and love. They too occasionally lose the plot and then creatively find their way back on track. They too are having moments of great clarity and also moments of confusion. Knowing that all of this is happening in each meditation hut and cell will remind you that you are not alone in your efforts. This realisation is a great support.

How to do Sangha Sharing

Sangha sharing is like a stripped down version of Touching Base in Community. The whole process is limited to one hour, including the ten minute sit at the beginning. One person should volunteer to lead the session. They will briefly welcome everyone and remind them what the session is for. Then they keep the time, lead the recitation of refuge and bodhisattva vow at the beginning and the sharing of the merit at the end.

1 – Breathing Meditation

Sit in a circle as in Touching Base and do silent breathing meditation for 10 minutes.

2 – Aspiration

Remind everyone what sangha sharing is for. Take refuge and recite the bodhisattva vow.

3 – Main Practice

Sit for the duration of an hour. When a person wishes to speak, as in touching base, they indicate this by bringing their hands together at their heart and bowing. Everyone else indicates that they are ready to listen with all of their attentiveness by bowing in return. When the speaker is finished speaking they bow once again to indicate that they are finished.

4 – Five minutes

Indicate when there is five minutes left.

5 – Sharing the Merit

Finish by sharing the merit and then depart in silence and continue with your own practice.

Heart Sounding*

Heart sounding is a wonderful opportunity for reconnecting with someone when our relationship has become awkward or has fallen into a repetitive pattern of assumptions and take it for granted-ism.

Heart sounding is a meditative exploration to be done by two people who already have a reasonably well established practice of mindfulness. It can be a wonderful tool for reconnecting when our relationship with someone has become awkward or has fallen into a repetitive pattern of assumptions and take it for granted-ism. In essence, heart sounding is a meditation that encourages us to appreciate, in a deep experiential way, the myriad life processes that weave together our being, while in the presence of another person who we know is doing the same thing. In this way, heart sounding is a profound remembering of the vastness that we are – two people meeting each other in a space of openness and wonder.

When teaching heart sounding to a group of people, I first get them to sit in pairs. Then I verbally guide them through the steps, while they actually do the meditation together. If you are learning the method from this booklet, I suggest both people familiarize themselves with the following instructions and then, not worrying about getting things exactly right, trust in your good intentions and experiment. After the session, check the instructions again to see if you left out anything that is important and then, next time you do this meditation, try to include them.

It's not unusual for people who are new to heart sounding to feel a bit of anxiety. It may be the first time they have meditated with another person in such an intimate way and the ego can wriggle around with its various judgmental concerns. After the first session though, most people find that a lot of the unease drops away as they discover heart sounding to be very supportive and interesting work.

* This section has been adapted from part of Chapter 15 of Tarchin's book, "Natural Awakening". For further guidance commentary on this method, please consult with the original text.

It's worth keeping in mind that heart sounding is a meditative exploration. It's not psychotherapy and it's not a time and place for confronting anxieties about openness, vis a vis another person. Although your reasons for doing this exploration may have been triggered by some kind of dissatisfaction, it's best not to approach a session with the hope that it will resolve a particular problem. Heart sounding can be profoundly healing, but in a quiet and subtle way. It provides an opportunity to meet each other in a space of ease and deepening appreciation. After the session, the shared experience will often lead to new ways of being together. What is most important is that both people really aspire to both let go of dysfunctional patterns of interacting, and to meet each other in a fresh and open way.

Method

(1) Arrange your seats so that you are facing each other and your heads are approximately at the same height. The distance between you needs to be close enough to feel in contact with each other, but not so close that you feel crowded by the other's presence. I sometimes suggest that people begin with their knees almost touching and then move apart until it feels just right.

(2) Sit in a posture that supports a quality easeful relaxation and alertness.

(3) Become aware of your breathing and body sensations. Touch whatever is arising in your experience with a quality of friendliness and interest. Take a few minutes to relax into this.

(4) With open eyes, gaze in a gentle, natural way at the area of your partner's chest. Notice the rise and fall of their breathing and realise that, seated in front of you, doing the same exploration as you are, is a living, breathing, human being.

In heart sounding, we don't make eye contact, though it may occur towards the end of the session. Holding a prolonged period of eye contact is not a natural way of relating to another. It often brings up aspects of challenge and confrontation which is not the intent of the heart sounding method. At this point, the main thing is to be peripherally aware of the presence of a living, breathing being who is sharing your aspiration for openness. At the same time, you are closely attending to your own breathing and the sensations that are arising in your body. Essentially, it's as if you are each doing your own breathing and body scan meditation while appreciating that you just happen to be sitting together.

(5) Take a moment to silently reflect on your aspiration. "Why am I doing this meditation?" Remind yourself of your desire for healing and wholeness. Determine that for the next twenty minutes you will try to meet the sensations and feelings arising in your body with a quality of alert, engaged interest which, at the same time, reverberates with friendliness, mercy and forgiveness. Realise that your partner will be doing the same. If it helps you might recite the Refuge and or Bodhisattva Vows together.

(6) Now, having touched your aspiration, really begin to settle into your breathing. Deepen your awareness and explore the shifting and changing sensations that are arising in your body. Just allow whatever is happening to happen. After a minute or so, very softly begin to make an 'ahhh' sound on the exhalation. You're not singing to your partner. You 'ahhh' softly within your body, just loud enough for your partner to hear your sound. In the same way that we did the ah-ing exercise (*outlined in an earlier chapter of Natural Awakening*), inhale with a great sensitivity. Really study the texture and quality of the inhalation. Feel how it is being shaped by the current matrix of muscle tensions throughout your body. On the exhalation, allow an 'ahhh' sound to gently vibrate within you as the air cascades out. Sometimes the breath releases in a great sigh, like a great letting go. Eventually this might become a wonderful letting be. Using the 'ahhh' sound, continue to breathe in and out with exquisite attentiveness.

If any emotions or feelings arise, touch them and be touched by them in a gentle, caring way. Bring friendly enquiry to these moments in the same way you did with the body scans and the sounding work (*described in earlier chapters of Natural Awakening*). If difficult states arise and you notice a tendency to push them away or to control them, just 'Ahhh' into this need to control. It's okay to be this way. May you be well and happy. I'm here for you. Simply allow the situation to be as it is, while enquiring into it in a sensitive and intimate way. Breathing gently, settle into the ocean of your own heartfelt knowing.

(7) When we explore heart sounding in a group we usually do the ah-ing part for about twenty minutes. If making the sound audible becomes too much of an effort, let it fade and become internal for a few breaths, just feeling the 'ah' silently. Then allow it to become audible again. Heart sounding is not supposed to be a marathon race. After the twenty minutes, or however long you have decided to sit, let the 'ah' sound gradually fade away and simply rest in a deep awareness of your own breathing.

Sit with the breathing for another five minutes. Then begin to expand your field of sensing to take in the room and the other beings in it. Breathing in. Breathing out. Feeling present. Allow your eyes to gently look around. Notice your partner. Notice the place you are in. Stay with the breathing and the overall quality that is present for you. Now there may be eye contact with your partner, but let it be natural – learning to be natural in the presence of another being. When you feel the meditation session has come to an end, have a stretch and change your posture if you wish.

(8) Without speaking to each other, take a few moments to silently review for yourself what happened during the session. What took place? What did you learn? Did any insights arise? How did your partner's presence affect the meditation? When you have finished reviewing take a moment to share the merit, aspiring that any benefit arising from doing this practice be for the good of all beings.

(9) Finally, if it feels appropriate, share with your partner something of your experience. It's not necessary to do this, and it's certainly not necessary to share everything that happened. The valuable part has already occurred, the fact that both of you have done this healing work together.

Though deceptively simple, heart sounding can be a wonderful process that leads many people into a new degree of openness. It often deepens their sense of contact with the world at large and gives people a taste of relating to another person in a profoundly intimate way, without the usual habitual associations that go with intimacy. This can feel quite strange to people the first time they try it. Many have commented that they felt they had discovered something exciting and new; to be so close to another and yet at the same time so detached. One often feels that it is an incredible privilege to be able to be with a person in this way, as if they have given us a most precious gift.

This practice can be done again and again. It can be practised with the same person or with many different people. It's a wonderful way to get to know someone in a very new way. At the end of a two week course in heart sounding, one participant observed that he wouldn't have believed it possible to have come so close to people that he knew so little about in conventional terms. Although the participants were talking about where they lived and what they did, all these details seemed much less important than the direct meeting that had taken place in the heart sounding work itself. There is something very special about being in the presence of another who is completely engaged in deep healing.

Immeasurable

This essay originated at Wangapeka in 2000. It is a wonderful practice in itself and can be an inspiring tool to use in the context of sangha work. Read it through slowly with frequent pauses to breathe and allow the words to invoke direct experience within you. Apply it to your friends and your enemies and the fly that might be buzzing around the room. May this way of looking nourish your understanding of others in many wondrous ways.

Oh my friend, I breathe and feel myself resting firmly on the earth; the womb of becoming. I open my eyes of appreciation and look deeply into the whole of you. All of me reverberating with all of you. I see your mother and father and brothers and sisters. I see your aunts and uncles, your cousins, grandparents and great grandparents. I see your friends and adversaries, your teachers and guides. I see acquaintances and passing strangers. All of these beings; each and everyone of them, have needs, hungers, appetites, feelings of lack, and aspirations; web workings of reaching and becoming.

I breathe and look deeply into you and see the whole world; the universe unfolding in the uniqueness of being that is you. My friend, you are immeasurable. Even the tiniest or seemingly least consequential part of you is immeasurable. To feel the vastness of your being both giant and small, fills me with immense wonder; awe struck in the face of mystery as big as all the universe. I touch you, touching me, touching all; immeasurable mystery of four precious jewels.

My friend, I feel the tides of breathing and rest embedded in the wonder of now, drinking in the transience that is you. The tapestry of causes and conditions, each shaping your existence; people changing, societies changing, cells changing, molecules changing, sun sent photons, water cycle, earth and organisms, and photosynthesis in the air; this unbroken wholeness, this mirage-like shimmering, this ever freshening newness that is you. This "beginner's mind", this unborn brilliance, this continually brightening matrix of being with unexpected colour and possibility. I breathe and look deeply into you and see an infinity of fresh continuous weaving. Un-pin-downable; the moment I grasp you, you die and birth into someone I've yet to meet. Indefinable, immeasurable mystery, of four precious jewels.

My friend, the breath of my knowing ebbs and flows with the ebbing and flowing of your breath of knowing. The uniqueness of your being defies comparison. Not like so and so. Not like yesterday. Not better than before or smarter than him or more honest than her. This universal mystery of you is incomparable. You're not like anything that's ever been and nothing will ever be like you again.

My friend, I rest with the fullness of what you are, all judging, all valuing; good, bad, indifferent, dissolving in the vibrant surprise ofnowness. You are immeasurable and your boundless mystery awakens and births and midwives into the world the four precious jewels.

Oh my friend, the children of this meeting are called Lovingkindness, Compassion, Sympathic Joy, and Serenity; Four Precious Jewels. They are born from looking immeasurably and they give birth to the knowing of immeasurableness. Let me give you a further sense of what I mean.

Last month, some friends gave me a stunning photograph taken through the Hubble Telescope. It showed what looked to be a field of stars but on reading the caption, I found that only a few points of light were stars and that all the other blobs, ovals and spirals were galaxies, each one of which contained tens of thousands of stars. Reading further, it said. *"This is our universe: layer upon layer of other worlds, as far as the eye – or the Hubble Telescope – can see. Light from some of the galaxies in this view has taken 11 billion years to reach us. The largest white blob at the top centre is one of the nearest, hovering a mere four billion light-years away."* The picture on it's own is quite stunning but reading further I found out that the photograph covered an area of sky equal to the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length.

A few weeks ago, I was retreating in the hut at the very top of Wangapeka. I sat in the predawn, bathing in the radiance of countless numbers of stars. As the last ones faded in the morning light, I extended my arm with a grain of sand on the end of a finger and saw that at one arm's length, a grain of sand covers the area of just one star. I pointed my grain of sand 'telescope' in all directions imagining in my mind's eye the vast number of galaxies that existed, invisible to my eyes, in every direction. How many grains of sand at arm's length would it take to blot out the sky? How many worlds, how many sentient beings are there, perhaps at this same moement pointing their own sand grains and wondering similar thoughts?

As the light increased I directed my sand grain 'telescope' at a tree. Telescope became microscope and in the mind's eye were revealed uncountable numbers of cells, organelles, molecules, and atoms. How many sand grains at arm's length would it take to cover a tree? A bird settled on a branch revealing organs filled with micro organisms which themselves were composed of organs, cells, molecules etc. Moving my sand grain telescope/microscope in all directions revealed a universe that is truly immeasurable. As it is said in the Hwa-yen teachings of totality; realms within realms within realms, all interpenetrating, and mutually shaping each other, without obstruction.

As you may know we have dedicated this year at Wangapeka to the cultivating of what are called in Buddhism, The Four Immeasurables. These are Lovingkindness, Compassion, Sympathetic or Empathic Joy, and Serenity or Equanimity. Please join us, even if you are unable to come to Wangapeka. Look at your children. Look at your mother, or father. Look at your dog or the purple mushrooms growing at the end of the garden. Look with lovingkindness, genuinely wishing them all that is good. Look with compassion, seeing their struggles and standing firm, being there for them in any way that helps. Look with sympathetic joy, bubbling with their joy and success without a hint of jealousy or envy arising in your being. Look with serenity, eyes of deep appreciation, knowing and understanding the vast complexity and miracle of their lives. Immeasurable lovingkindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

My friend, try to pause many times in the course of each day to rest in the awareness of your breathing. Allow any tension to soften in the release, the sigh of the out-breath. Open your eyes and look deeply, appreciating and being moved by the immeasurableness of all that you see. May the experience of these four immeasurables, flower in the garden of your mind for the benefit of all beings.

Resolving Conflict

*A Few Thoughts Towards Resolving Conflict in The Sangha**

Many conflicts at a retreat centre devoted to the study and practice of Buddha Dharma arise out of ignorance, people simply not understanding each other and, for that matter, not understanding themselves. In the stream of activity, individuals often barge ahead with their own agendas, their own ways of doing things, hardly recognising that others may be seeing their actions in a very different way than they are. What might begin as a small misunderstanding, because it is not acknowledged or talked about in a skilful way, can fester and grow into a difficulty that is completely out of proportion with the initial situation. At that point it is much more problematic to resolve.

At places devoted to the study and practice of dharma, there needs to be a conscious aspiration to mutually co-operate in creating an environment, both physically and attitudinally, that will support and inspire the unfolding of the *Six Paramita*, also known as the "Path of the Bodhisattva". This aspiration will benefit both the people that visit the centre and people who live and work there.

The Six Paramita or Parami are often referred to in Buddhist writings as the Six Perfections. For me, the word perfection sounds a bit too brittle and idealistic. Too many people have used the ideal of perfection to pass negative judgment on themselves and on others. *Para* means beyond. *Mita* is related to *mitra* and *metta* which means friendship. You could think of these as six modes of friendship that help carry one beyond the illusion of being an independent, separate entity, to the realisation of profound interdependence. Not six perfect ways of being, but six ways of friendship that carry us deeper and deeper into the a harmonious knowing of our real state.

The first paramita or parami is *dana parami*, the great friendship of generosity. Dana parami is the essential keystone of any well functioning Dharma Community – "to give material support, emotional support and an example to others of awakening in action". At the most

* Initially written in 1999

fundamental level, the practice of *dana parami* involves cultivating the ability to give all of our attention to another. This is the bedrock of meditation and the core of healthy relating. Not to 'pay' attention but to 'give' our attention. When we pay, we expect to get something in return. When we wholeheartedly give, we do so without expecting something in return. Can we give our undivided attention to listening to another? Can we give all of our attention to a situation, to a feeling, to our breath, to a thought? Training in meditation is really training in generosity – cultivating the ability to give all of our attention to whatever is arising whether it be inner or outer.

The second parami is *sila parami*. This is the friendship of wholesome relating; learning to relate to others through our body, speech and mind in ways that enhances the well being of everyone involved. More will be said about *sila parami*, further in this essay. The third parami is *kshanti parami* or the friendship of patience or the spirit of inclusiveness. The fourth, *virya parami*, is the friendship of skilful exertion or application of effort; particularly making efforts to recognize and understand unwholesome states when they are present, and then to take steps to end them; and making effort to recognize and understand wholesome states when they are present and to take steps to support them and cultivate them further. The fifth parami is *samadhi parami*, the friendship of being well grounded and centred in the midst of what ever is taking place. The sixth parami is *prajna parami*, the friendship of wisdom, the union of love and profound understanding.

The six parami contain each other in an unbroken weaving of supportive friendship. Each parami is augmented and enriched by the practice of the other five. Deepening generosity encourages letting go and increased flexibility. This leads to more wholesome, fluid, relating with others. Wholesome relating spontaneously gives rise to greater patience. Patience – being more inclusive rather than reactive, will lead to being able to energetically apply ourselves to activities in ways that are fruitful and balanced rather than disruptive. Skilfully applied effort will support a spontaneous quality of groundedness – an ability to be centred in the midst of what is occurring. Clear, centred presence brings forth deep understanding thoroughly imbued with love and compassion. This is wisdom in action. These six ways of being are real friends. They support us individually and collectively and when really practised, will provide a solid foundation for any dharma community.

Ethics and Wholesome Relationship

A tremendous amount of interpersonal difficulties arise due to shortcomings in the area of the second parami, *sila* (ethics and wholesome relationship). Of course, if we examine the situation we will see that any shortcoming in *sila* is a reflection of shortcomings in the other five parami. As members of a community who regard the study and practice of dharma as a life long journey, it is critical that we remember to actually use the teachings of *sila* when we get into difficult situations and not just to consider them when everything is going well or when we are reciting the morning *puja*. Whenever difficulties arise within the community, each person involved needs to mindfully re-examine the Training Precepts and Bodhisattva Vow with as much honesty and inner integrity as they are capable of – not from

the point of view of whether or not other people are living up to these aspirations, but in terms of how they themselves are living with them. Hopefully, the very act of carefully reflecting on these principles will lead everyone to harmonize their actions with the spirit of sila.

In the area of sila, the Buddhist teaching urges us to avoid the Ten Non-Virtuous Actions and to cultivate the Ten Virtuous Actions. In the Vajrayana Tradition these ten are divided into three of body, four of speech, and three of mind. These ten are basically covered by the five training precepts.

Ten Non-Virtuous Actions

Three of Body – killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct

Four of Speech – lying, slander, harsh speech, and idle talk

Three of Mind – covetousness, malice and wrong view.

Ten Virtuous Actions

Three of Body – not killing, but protecting life; not stealing, but practicing generosity and receiving in ways that augments the giver; not indulging in sexual misconduct, but practicing love and intelligence in sexual matters.

Four of Speech – not lying, but speaking the truth; not slandering, but speaking harmoniously; not speaking harshly, but using comforting words; not chattering, but speaking with discretion and meaning.

Three of Mind – not coveting, but rejoicing in the wealth and good qualities of others; not bearing malice, but having good-will; not holding wrong views, but cultivating right ones.

These teachings on sila, are taught in all the different schools and traditions of Buddhism. Putting them into practice will surely go a long way to avoiding conflicts and alleviating difficulties when they have arisen.

In this day and age of media sound bites and empty promises, we should perhaps add a further consideration in the area of speech. It is important to actually try to carry out what we say we will do. It has become all too common to chatter away about what we plan to do or about what we think others should do. The world today is filled with empty planning that rarely bears any fruit. Perhaps this comes under the category of idle speech. It could also be considered a form of false speech since it involves the planner deceiving him or herself. Sometimes, saying we will do something and then not following it through can become a habit. It can also be a form of lying, often unintentionally, as we say we will do something and then don't. Others can be upset by this. They begin to feel the planner is unreliable and gradually distrust and conflict creeps in. Even worse is when this non-following-through becomes the norm in an organization – constantly making plans that rarely are carried out. Then no-one really expects anything to be followed through and a

kind of cynicism arises that can undermine the accomplishment of projects before they even get started. Too much talk and too little action is ultimately exhausting for everyone.

In the traditions of Mahamudra, the teachings often urge us to make short term plans and then to execute them, "like a pump going straight up and down". Living this way is considered part of leading a 'blameless' life. When our actions are truly arising for the sake of all beings, we will be more considered in our planning and not say we will do things we can't or won't follow through with. If we say to the group, we will do something and then it derails for whatever reason, it would be a courtesy to the other members to acknowledge this and make a new arrangement if that is necessary. We need, however, to consider the other side of the situation and to cultivate tolerance and forgiveness when it appears that someone else is not carrying through what they said they would do.

In general, the cultivating of sila involves cultivating a vivid sense of presence so that we act as an integrated whole person in ways that are completely in tune with the given situation. Imagine a community of friends in dharma, valuing the moment by moment integration of body, speech and mind – living and exploring together. This would be a functional sangha. In your imagination, extend it even further, this would be a functional society!

In our experiment at bringing into being a functioning dharma community at Wangapeka I hope that sangha members will feel free to meet with the whole sangha to air any difficulties they may be experiencing and to creatively explore ways of resolving them according to the principles of the teaching. If we can't at least attempt to do such a thing here where we are supported by the strength of Dharma, I see little hope for peace in places like Kosovo and Iraq.

Sangha friends, please consider these words. It is my aspiration that we can have the courage to look with deep sensitivity and compassion into any difficulties that arise through our interactions with each other. Supported by a confidence in the Dharma and a real heartfelt aspiration to awaken for the sake of all beings, may we learn to live together in meaningful harmony for the benefit of everyone.

Some Practical Suggestions

I – Staying in Touch

I think it is important that the people who are staff and or long term residents at Wangapeka, meet regularly to inform each other on what they are doing and what projects they are currently working on. This way everyone will have a clear sense that everyone else is pulling their share of the load. Also, anyone's not working will be apparent and the group can address that, instead of a policing role falling on one individual. From a more positive perspective, hearing about the accomplishments and good efforts of others can be uplifting and inspiring and energizing for the whole group. Don't hide your light under a bushel! Be

generous and allow others to delight in knowing about your wholesome activities. Share the opportunity for sympathetic joy.

II – *Honouring Another's Enthusiasm and Talents*

In operating a centre such as Wangapeka, I think it is very important to encourage people to work according to their own energies and enthusiasms. To respect and encourage the creative initiative of individuals will nourish an overall positive outlook at the whole centre. Over the years, Wangapeka has, to a large extent, been built by trusting and allowing beings to flow with their passion and their interest, rather than by legislating tasks and then having to be concerned about whether those tasks get done or not. Control-tripping is not a long term recipe for happiness for anyone. We need to check from time to time that we don't fall into the suffering of expecting others to work at projects in the way we think they should.

Living at a residential centre is a great opportunity to practice tolerance and learn to appreciate different ways of being – ultimately to honour the great diversity of life experience that continually streams through the door. Inevitably, we will brush up against some difficult patterns and expectations both in ourselves and in others, which are good opportunities for practising the dharmas of acceptance and clear seeing in the midst of the nitty gritty. The Wangapeka is actually quite beautiful and, compared with many other centres, runs reasonably well despite the problems that crop up from time to time, so this laissez faire method must have some merit.

III – *The Blessing of Patience*

Short of *Sammāsambodhi* (complete and utter awakening), all beings will have their moments of defilement, moments of being in the grip of some aspect of greed, hatred or confusion. This should not be seen as a crime but as a fact of life, an all too common feature of human experience. The practice of patience could be seen as the practice of inclusiveness. When we run up against a difficult situation, can we remember to pause and to breathe and to open our capacity of understanding? Can we feel our roots in the earth, open our senses, and aspire to include rather than exclude? With compassion and tolerance we meet the challenge of impermanence; sharing with each other as much as possible; staying open and sensitive to the lives of all beings, especially to our fellow sangha friends. Then we can really begin to help beings on the path when difficulties arise.

Let us rise above the dharmas of blame to unfold and manifest the dharmas of wholesome aspiration and continuous mindfulness. May we develop the Six perfections and awaken speedily for the sake of all living beings.

Any merit arising from this "thinking on paper" belongs to all that is good. May it continue to grow and bear fruit for the benefit of innumerable beings.

A Formal Sangha Meeting for Resolving Conflict

The word sangha means community but this isn't referring to any casual group. Thich Nhat Hanh has written that for a sangha to be a truly functioning sangha it must be composed of people who share a common aspiration and common ethical code, who practise together and who see each other on a frequent basis so that the opportunity to communicate directly, heart to heart, is easily accessible. Simply the fact of being a distant member of the Wangapeka Trust does not necessarily make one a member of the Wangapeka sangha.

A great diversity of people are attracted to the Dharma and to any particular teacher. Given the vast range of social and family conditioning, it is likely that some of the people would have never have come together except that they are sharing this mysterious link through teacher and teaching. In the life of a dharma community, occasional difficulties will inevitably arise, usually due to unconscious hopes and fears being projected into a given situation. We could think of these as collisions of different conditioning patterns. In a non sangha situation these difficulties may grow into grudges, resentment and an inability to forgive. Within a functioning sangha, the strength of *Bodhicitta*, the aspiration to awaken speedily for the sake of all beings, can help us to listen deeply to each other with a willingness to learn from the situation and a willingness to grow and to let go of old patterns when they no longer are functional. With this in mind, I would like to offer a few words on calling what we might think of as a 'Formal Sangha Meeting'.

If a dispute or conflict arises between members of the dharma community they should first of all review the precepts and bodhisattva vow and then attempt to resolve the problem by talking to each other directly. I would suggest they begin by meditating together on breathing, then after a few minutes, they should restate the refuge and bodhisattva vow together. This is followed by taking turns listening to each other with compassion and openness. It is important to listen to each other without interrupting or commenting. As you are listening try to put yourself into the other person's shoes and feel the situation from their point of view. Please approach these discussions as an opportunity for reconciliation and healing and not as a confrontation to find fault. Finish the session by sitting quietly for a few moments and then sharing the merit. This method was covered in the section called Mini Touching Base.

If the above does not bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion then the disputants may wish to ask the sangha to support them in their attempts at reconciliation. For this they could request a formal meeting of the sangha.

How to Run A Formal Sangha Meeting

A Formal Sangha Meeting is not primarily for the purpose of resolving problems. Its main function is to create a safe and wholesome environment that, one, reminds all sangha members of their familiness in Dharma and, two, can allow difficult feelings and experiences to be aired in public in a way that useful learning can take place. As a sangha becomes more functional, it is highly likely that in such a meeting, sangha members, who are not directly involved in the arising problem and are respected by both parties, will be able to offer suggestions that will allow a new viewing of the situation and thus an unsticking. Often a few wise and friendly words can remind us of what we already know and aspire to, but have temporarily forgotten.

1 - Begin with everyone doing walking meditation for twenty minutes

2 - Sit in a circle and practise breathing meditation for ten minutes

3 - Recite the refuge, bodhisattva vow and precepts

4- Have a sangha member who is respected by both the disputants welcome everyone and remind them why they are there. It could be something along the lines of:

Welcome everyone. We are here because suffering is arising in our midst. May we remember that we are all one family in the Dharma. We share the same aspirations, the same practices and the same teachers. Our lives are so woven together that our joy and our sorrow becomes the joy and sorrow of the whole sangha.

(bell)

May we clearly and publicly acknowledge that we are still vulnerable to states of greed, hatred, confusion, pride and jealousy and that these are major roots suffering.

(bell)

May we listen deeply with empathy, compassion, alertness and open heartedness and together, walk the path of deepening health and well being.

(bell)

May we be willing to understand, to forgive, to let go and to begin anew.

(bell)

May this attempt of healing and reconciliation flower for the benefit of all sentient beings.

(bell)

5 - Now we shall sit in silence and I invite _____ and _____ to speak meditatively from the heart. May we all listen deeply and attentively, without comment, until the person speaking is completely finished.

6 - After _____ and _____ have spoken, then the rest of the sangha will be invited to speak from their clarity and understanding.

(If any person feels that they need a pause in the proceedings in order to re-contact a state of grounded mindfulness, they should feel free to indicate this (*perhaps a bell could be rung or some such mechanism agreed on by the group*) and the rest of the sangha should join them in mindful breathing for a few minutes. After that the speaker may wish to continue.)

7 - At the end of the meeting the sangha should link hands and breathe together in silence. Then, if it feels appropriate, chant or sing together some form of lovingkindness practice.

8 - Finish by sharing the merit.

This is really a beginning attempt at Wangapeka to grapple with these common problems of communal living. Over time, I'm sure the sangha will evolve other ways of doing this work. For now I pray that these suggestions may serve as a guideline to facilitate some courageous experimentation and exploration. To revere the Dharma is to put it into practice.

Ethics

(written at Wangapeka in 1995)

*My finger is pointing and my mouth is saying "ethics"
My finger is pointing , "Look at him and look at her."
My finger is pointing and my mind feels very righteous.
My finger is pointing over here and over there.
My finger is pointing but it seems to be quite maddened,
It runs around in circles in a tanglement of parts.
My finger is pointing, it fascinates to watch it
My finger is pointing and it's pointing to my heart
My heart it seems is aching, it wants so much to care
Replaced by pointy finger, that scratches here and there.
It's time to take that finger, and join it to a hand
To reach out with some goodness and help where helping can.
It's time to see that ethics is not the finger part.
It's time to see that ethics rises only from the heart.*

Beginning Anew

Beginning anew rests on a willingness to recognise shortcomings, to apologise, to forgive, to let go and to walk on in love and clear seeing. Every moment is potentially a new beginning. Non-clinging awareness is the experience of continually beginning anew.

Like any large organization, the Fully Ordained Buddhist Sangha of monks and nuns has, over time, developed mechanisms to deal with problems that arise in the community. One such mechanism is the *uposatha* days which traditionally take place on the days of the full moon and new moon. At these times the order would meet and recite the *patimokkha*, the rules of discipline for the monks or nuns. As these rules are recited, anyone who has fallen short in terms of their training in these areas would mentally confess and aspire to deepen their training in the future. This was a time to acknowledge shortcomings of the past, to let go of them and to aspire to begin anew.

Any community will occasionally experience difficulties arising between its members. In a dharma sangha, whose very reason for existing is to support the flowering of wisdom and compassion in all beings it is tremendously valuable to have a periodic opportunity to collectively acknowledge difficulties that have been experienced, to refresh shared aspirations and to collectively aspire to "Begin Anew". The effectiveness of beginning anew rests on a willingness to recognise shortcomings, to apologise, to forgive, to let go and to walk on in love and clear seeing. Every moment is potentially a new beginning. Non-clinging awareness is the experience of continually beginning anew – everfresh awareness in action.

The following 'Ceremony for Beginning Anew' was originally inspired by a text in the *Plum Village Chanting Book* published by Parallax Press. It has gone through many changes over the years and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Although based in the Buddhist tradition, I hope that the essential elements and aspirations that are expressed here will inspire you to adapt it to suit the needs and language of your own community.

Ceremony for Beginning Anew

Preparations:

If this meditation is done in a traditional shrine room, it is suggested that the sangha sit in a circle with a gap facing the shrine so that the symbol of the Buddha is part of the circle. Alternately, the sangha could sit in a closed circle. In the centre arrange the eight offerings along with a platter of earth symbolizing the ground of being and various objects of beauty and inspiration. If the sangha is not too large you could also include tea and scones to be shared afterward. One or two 'tea-masters' should be appointed to formally serve everyone at the conclusion of the ceremony.

Someone, who is very familiar with Beginning Anew should volunteer to lead the ceremony and to give clear instructions and explanations for any who are new to it.

1. – Walking Meditation

20 minutes, preceded by instruction

2. – Introduction

The Buddha once said, 'If you would honour me, practice what I teach.' This ceremony for Beginning Anew is just that, an opportunity to honour and practice what we value. It is a time to remember our strengths and a time to recognise our failings. It is a time to remember the blessing of forgiveness, letting go and beginning anew. It is a time to nourish our aspiration and determination to cultivate love and clear-seeing presence for the sake of all beings.

3. – Sitting Meditation

10 minutes, preceded by instruction

4. – Refuge in Universal Form

We take refuge in Wisdom.

We take refuge in Compassion.

We take refuge in Non-clinging Awareness.

May we develop the Six Perfections.

And awaken speedily for the sake of all living beings

Bell

5. – Bodhisattva Vow

However innumerable beings are

we vow to meet them with kindness and interest.

However inexhaustible the states of suffering are,

we vow to touch them with patience and love.

However immeasurable the Dharmas are

we vow to explore them deeply.

However incomparable the Mystery of Interbeing
we vow to surrender to it freely.

From this day forth, with Wisdom
and Compassion as our Lamp and Staff,
We dedicate all our life energies
to the welfare of all beings.

Bell

6. – *The Yoga of Eight Offerings*

Rest at ease, enjoying the flow of your breathing.

Within and around each one of us is the shrine of the world, a monastery of becoming. Clouds in the sky, plants reaching towards the sun and creatures living in water, air and earth, the smells and sounds of living beings singing their stories, friends and companions on the path. Let us sit together for a moment and open our senses and breathe.

We feel the presence of our teachers inspiring awakening in the very marrow of our being. We sense our ancestors, rivers of talent bubbling through the changing landscapes of time. We rest in the immense ecology of this living world, breathing with a matrix of being and becoming. We pray for the well fare of everyone and make offerings, giving ourselves away.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer water for drinking. Crystal water flowing through the body purifying the sense doors. Cleansing our seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and mental activity so that we can meet the world, just as it is; so that we can be utterly present and compassionately responsive to every arising object, whether inner or outer, animate or inanimate. Offering water for drinking, we flood the entire of being with the fluid bliss of seeing clearly without judgment, of hearing without confusion, of touching with wonderment and curiosity, of smelling with vast sensitivity, of tasting with fine and subtle discrimination, of remembering, emotioning, thinking, and conceptualising whilst clearly knowing that these extraordinary processes are occurring. This is the offering of water for drinking and we offer it without attachment.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer water for washing the feet. Feet symbolise foundation, strong roots extending throughout the ground of being. Washing the feet purifies and reveals the deep base of wholesome motivation, one's 'heart for awakening' (*bodhicitta*). The act of purifying is the act of hundred percent-ing, being utterly present, giving all of our attention to whatever is arising. By washing the mud from our feet, instead of a chaos of conflicting projects, whirlwinds of hopes and fears that churn the ocean of our lives, we discover our total at-oneness with a vibrant mystery of awakening that is already in process; a mystery that is the core of each and every sentient being. We nourish a deepening appreciation for the interdependency of everything and feel a conscious determination to unfold myriad talents and good qualities in order to help all beings flourish in this tapestry of awakening star dust. This is offering water for washing the feet and we offer it without attachment.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer flowers, mysteries of living beauty. Not dead plants, not style or fashion, but the natural beauty that shines forth when we feel utterly in tune, when the inner and the outer mesh together in a harmonious burst of creativity, birthing newness into the world for others. Ultimately, offering flowers is to offer the beauty of buddhahood, the flowering of wisdom and compassion, tolerance and kindness, the budding, the bodhi, the buddha that is everyone's very nature shining forth and functioning well through body, speech and mind. We offer the flowering beauty of our lives and we offer it without attachment.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer an immense cloud of incense, the incense of pure moral conduct, scenting each activity of our body, speech and mind. Appreciating and supporting life, cultivating a mind of spontaneous generosity, actively using the senses to explore the world, communicating skilfully and compassionately, and nourishing ourselves and all beings in ways that support awakening; all these actions pervading our relationships with people, animals, plants and landscapes, with micro beings too small to see and macro beings beyond our comprehension, with inner thoughts and feelings and memories, with each and every facet of this vast dance of life. To offer incense is to perfume every action with love, compassion, clear seeing and deepening understanding. May the activities of our body, speech and mind become perfume for all that we meet. This is the offering of incense and we offer it without attachment.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer light; not merely candles or butter lamps, but the illumination of wisdom; appreciating and understanding the profound interconnectedness and interdependence of everything and everyone. Just as the light from one candle can ignite another, so too, the natural play of broad, inclusive, continuously fresh awareness, awakens others to broad, loving, inclusiveness and this in turn awakens others; a fire of love and understanding spreading in every direction. Dwelling in the domain of the all embracing, we offer the light of deepening wisdom. May all beings shine forth illuminating the best in each other. This is the offering of light and we offer it without attachment.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer the perfume of sincere devotion. This is an offering of love and support for all that is wholesome, perfuming each moment with immense energy; a heart felt commitment to uplift beings. Devotion to truth. Devotion to honesty. Devotion to compassion. Devotion to questioning and exploring freely. Devotion to looking deeply into whatever is arising and then to living according to the implications of what is discovered. May all beings enhance the world with the perfume of total engagement flowing from a fearless heart. This is the offering of perfume and we offer it without attachment.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer a banquet of food. This represents abundance, an abundance of talents, interests and engagements, all laid out as a magnificent feast to feed beings, each according to their needs. We offer the food of delight which comes from living in accord with dharma. We offer the food of samadhi, the harmonizing of body and mind through meditation. We offer the food of prajña, the wisdom of seeing through the illusion of separateness. May the activities of our body,

speech and mind become a banquet for all beings. This is the offering of the food of abundance and we offer it without attachment.

To all of you teachers, ancestors and matrix of living beings, we offer music, the voice of Dharma, a symphony of teaching, encouraging, cajoling, inspiring, instructing, humouring, reasoning, uplifting and demonstrating through the voice of silent action. We offer the wonderful rhythms, harmonies, syncopations and surprises – the music of heart and mind functioning beautifully, singing the song of awakening to all and with all that we meet. This is the offering of music and we offer it to all without attachment.

Abiding in the midst of this miraculous mandala of being: water for drinking, water for washing, flowers, incense, light, perfumes, food and music, we offer all that we are and all that we have.

E, MA, HOH!

Resting in a beginningless endless stream of offering, parent to child, child to parent, teacher to student, student to teacher, inner to outer, outer to inner, friend to friend, creature to creature, this is the yoga of eight offerings, a celebration of living. May we cultivate it in every situation of our lives.

Bell

7. – *Salutation*

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Buddhadharma is all around us.

It can be found in everything and every situation.

It is closer than hands and feet.

May each one of us take the dharma to heart.

May we put it into practice and realise its true meaning.

8. – *Bowing*

Teaching and living the way of awareness in the very midst of suffering and confusion, to Shakyamuni Buddha, the Enlightened One, we bow in gratitude.

Bell

Cutting through ignorance and awakening our hearts and minds, to Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Great Understanding, we bow in gratitude.

Bell

Working mindfully and joyfully for the sake of all beings, to Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Great Action, we bow in gratitude.

Bell

Responding to suffering, serving beings in countless ways,
to Avalokiteshvara, Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, we bow in gratitude.

Bell

Removing difficulties, supporting all beings on the path of deepening wisdom,
to Arya Tara, Wondrous Bodhisattva, we bow in gratitude.

Bell

Seed of awakening and loving kindness in all living beings,
to Maitreya, the Buddha to be born, we bow in gratitude.

Bell

Showing the way fearlessly and compassionately,
to our entire stream of ancestral teachers, we bow with profound gratitude.

Two strikes of the Bell

9. – Confession, Aspiration and Beginning Anew

With immense respect, we remember and appreciate the Buddha essence that dwells in the spacious openness of our own heart/minds and the heart/minds of all sentient beings.

In the past, we have often lived in states of short sightedness and confusion, frequently forgetting the Dharma. We have helped to bring about our own suffering and through that, the suffering of others. Too often, we have been blinded by fixed views and rigid opinions which have led to much misery. Our heart's garden is sown with attachment, hatred, envy and pride. In us are seeds of killing, stealing, sensual misconduct, and dishonest communication. Our everyday deeds and words can do damage. All these unskilful actions are obstacles to peace and joy.

Let us begin anew.

Bell

From time to time, we thoughtlessly stray from the path of compassion and mindfulness. We are a storehouse of suffering, worries, and anxieties, due to wrong or distorted perceptions and, at times, we are jaded with life. When gripped with states of fear and defensiveness, we do not understand others and we sometimes maintain ill-will against them. Even after our dispute with them has been resolved, we can continue to feel enmity, making the rift greater. There are days when we are unwilling to speak to each other, unwilling to look each other in the face, and in doing so, we reinforce unwholesome tendencies. Sitting together this day, we turn to the Three Jewels resting right here in the openness of our hearts. Sincerely recognizing our errors, we breathe deeply, appreciating the enormity of all actions.

Let us begin anew.

Bell

We also know that in our consciousness are growing innumerable wholesome seeds – seeds of love and understanding, and seeds of peace and joy. But if we forget to water them, and allow sorrow to overwhelm them, how can they spring up fresh and vibrant? When we chase after future happiness, life here and now becomes but a thin, shadow play of reality. Too often, our mind is occupied by the past, or worried about this and that in the future. Grasping at permanence, we trample on real happiness. Now we recognise these patterns and tendencies.

Let us begin anew.

Bell

Although we recite the precepts and bodhisattva vow and chant the prayers of refuge, when difficulties arise, the dharma often seems abstract and far away. May these great supports and guides on the path flower in every action of our body, speech and mind. Remembering the dharma, let us begin anew.

Bell

With all of our being, we go for refuge, turning to the Buddhas in the ten directions and all the bodhisattvas – friends and companions on the path.

Breathe and contemplate

Without blaming or making excuses, we recognize our errors and the mistakes of our wrong judgments.

Breathe and contemplate

May the balm of clear understanding wash the roots of our afflictions.

Breathe and contemplate

May the raft of the true teachings to carry us and all beings over the ocean of sorrows.

Breathe and contemplate

From this moment onward with great determination, we aspire to live in ways that support awakening in ourselves and all beings. We will learn the path of true happiness and cultivate compassionate awareness in the midst of all of life's arisings.

Breathe and contemplate

When we stray into difficulty, may we quickly and courageously strengthen our awareness of the ever fresh present. May we plant our heart's garden with good seeds; and cultivate strong foundations of understanding and love.

May we follow the way of mindfulness, the practice of looking and understanding deeply in order to be able to see the nature of all that is and so to be free of the bonds of hope and fear.

May we learn to speak lovingly, to be affectionate, to care for others whether it is early morn or late afternoon, to bring the roots of joy to many places and to help people to abandon sorrow.

May we realize everything and everyone to be embodiments of spontaneously present, ever fresh awareness.

May we continuously begin anew

Bell

We take Arya Avalokitesvara, The Lord of Compassion, as our companion and protector on this extraordinary journey of unfolding dharma. May we remember Chenrezi whenever there is difficulty.

OM MANI PADME HUM (*108 times*)

Faultless One of pure white colour
With the fully enlightened Buddha as the decoration on your head,
Looking with greatly merciful eyes on all that live,
To 'Great Continuum Seeing', Mahakarunika, Chenrezi,
We reverently bow down.

Supported by the light of Dharma, we vow to practice all aspects of the path. May these efforts bear fruit for the benefit of all beings.

Three strikes of the Bell

10. – *Gatha*

All unskilful actions arise in the mind.
When mind is realised as pure, no traces of wrong are left.
Repentance of unwholsomeness lightens our hearts.
Clouds in the sky have always floated in freedom.

11. – *Determination*

We take refuge in the Buddha,
the one who shows us the way in this life. *Namo Buddhaya.*

We take refuge in the Dharma,
the way of understanding and love. *Namo Dharmaya*

We take refuge in the Sangha,
the community that lives in harmony and awareness. *Namo Sanghaya*

We are aware that the three gems are within us.
We vow to realise them.

We vow to cultivate happiness, to practice mindful breathing and to look deeply into whatever is arising.

We vow to never abandon trying to understand living beings and their struggles to live and unfold,

We vow to cultivate the *brahma vihara*, lovingkindness, compassion, joy and equanimity.

Bell

We vow to offer support and inspiration to at least one person in the morning and to help relieve the grief of at least one person in the afternoon.

We vow to live simply and sanely, content with just a few possessions, to keep our bodies healthy and to use the five precepts,

both in traditional and positive expression, to inform our conduct.

We vow to let go of worry and anxiety in order to be light and free.

Bell

We are aware that we owe so much to our parents, teachers, and friends; in fact to the entire matrix of life.

We vow to honour their struggles and discoveries by engaging in this vast work of unfolding, so that understanding and compassion will flower,

We vow to do all that we can to help living beings be free from suffering.

May the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha support these efforts.

Three strikes of the Bell

12. – *The Three Refuges*

Buddham saranam gacchami

Dharmam saranam gacchami

Sangham saranam gacchami

Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami

Dutiyampi Dharmam saranam gacchami

Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami

Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami

Tatiyampi Dharmam saranam gacchami

Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami

13. – *Sharing the Merit*

Beginner's Mind

Everfresh Awareness

Unshakable Presence

Beginning Anew

Different words to point out a single truth.

By the power of living and knowing this great mystery,

May our lives be rich with awakening.

Living thus may we abandon all unwholesomeness.
Through the endless storm of birth, illness, old age and death,
May we help each and every being to cross their own particular ocean of suffering.

*Aham avero homi! abyapajjho homi! anigho homi!
sukhi attanam pariharami!
Aham viya sabbe satta avera hontu, abyapajjho hontu,
anigha hontu, sukhi attanam pariharantu*

May the day be well,
And the night be well,
And the mid-day hours bring happiness too,
May both day and night always be well,
By the blessings of the Triple Gem, may all be auspicious.

A Few Random Thoughts concerning difficult situations

- No method of resolving conflict within a particular community is likely to be effective if, at that time, there are beings participating in the community who are not actively living the discipline or aspirations of the sangha. Sangha work can only manifest when the community actually is a community, at least at the practising/aspiration level, ideally with a few present from the realisation level.

- From time to time there is talk about creating 'safe environments' where beings who are feeling vulnerable and under threat, are able to express themselves. This implies that the form or structure of the environment will ensure the sense of safety. The issue of safety depends more on each person actually feeling that they are participating members of this sangha. When there is a community of friendship and shared aspiration there will always be a sense of support.

Safety is not inherent in the structure but arises when true lovingkindness or *metta* is present within oneself. In the absence of metta in an individual, sometimes the best will in the world on the part of the sangha members will not produce the ambiance of safety that the unsafe-feeling being is looking for. In situations where people are suffering, a dharma sangha can simply do the best it can and offer the best that it can be. It is a mistake to automatically assume that if someone doesn't feel safe in the community then there is something wrong with the community. The person may never have been a functioning member of the community in the first place. It takes time to grow into sangha.

A dharma sangha should not seek membership. It is not trying to market itself and gain converts or customers. However, a dharma community should be open and welcoming to any and all who aspire to live by its principles. The openness of the sangha is like offering a banquet of wholesome aspiration and skilful efforts to cultivate lovingkindness and deepening understanding in the midst of every situation. As long as such a sangha is there, the offering will be there. It's then up to others whether they wish to join in the feast, or not.

- If you have a functional, publicly visible sangha that is sure and confident in itself, it may be able to help people who are not members of the sangha. To try to sort out problems

experienced by beings outside the community, with a community that is not yet strong in itself is to invite great difficulties in growing the sangha-vessel.

- As to past hurts around Wangapeka. There are no community structures; families, businesses, churches, nations, races, and so forth, that don't have difficulties in their past history. Wangapeka or any other dharma community can be no different. The best thing to do is to acknowledge both collectively and within oneself that the problems existed and caused suffering. Then with clarity and goodwill arising in the present moment, having apologised, forgiven, and where appropriate made amends, then release from the past, let be into the present, and beginning anew, move on with the beings one is interacting with now.

Sangha Resources for Wangapeka

I would like to conclude this booklet on Sangha Work by presenting an idea to the community which probably needs some discussion and careful thought before it became manifest in the world. I think it could be very supportive to gradually compile a list of mature dharma practitioners, professional councillors, therapists, social workers and health care practitioners who are inspired by a vision of universal, non-sectarian buddhadharma and who would like to volunteer their time and energy to council or support or mentor sangha members living at Wangapeka if the need arises.

This list may grow to become a Community of Friends in Dharma Resource Directory that could be used by people throughout New Zealand and also for people in other countries.

Finally I think it would be very useful to draw up a list of skilled and competent support people and organizations throughout NZ who may be operating outside the framework of Buddhism to whom we can confidently send people who are looking for particular forms of guidance or help.

Such a directory would be an ongoing project which might be published in future editions of this booklet or be available by writing to the trust. Please write to me if you have ideas concerning this or would like to nominate people or organizations to be included in this list.

with good wishes to all
Tarchin

Sharing the Merit

May the ideas flowering forth as words and arranging themselves upon
these pages, nourish the seeds of wholesome activity
in ourselves and all beings.

Sarva Mangalam

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