

YOU'RE NOT ALONE: THE PATH OF SANGHA

In Buddhist tradition, the three jewels of the path are buddha (the enlightened nature), dharma (the teachings) and sangha - the group or community of like-minded people with whom we travel the path. More and more, in our western culture, people are coming out of their sense of isolation and discovering that they are not alone- in their pain, in their fears, in their needs and hopes, and in their need for a sense of belonging.

The twelve step groups alone provide sangha for millions of people around the world. Well known as a non-demonational spiritual support group for people in recovery from substance abuse issues, the twelve step programs include Alcoholics Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and AIAnon, plus dozens of other programs. In terms of sheer numbers of active members, there are said to be more people in twelve step programs than in any other spiritually focused group in the western world. For many of the members, these groups offer their first experience of acceptance and belonging, as well as of healthy spirituality.

One of the reasons that the twelve step groups and other programs like them work so well for people in recovery from addiction-related issues is that the feelings of shame around such issues, current or historical, leads to the denial and dishonesty which keeps people stuck. When it becomes safe to be honest, with oneself and with others, it is possible to reach out for help. Such groups ideally provide the kind of mirroring, understanding, and acceptance that nurture the spirit and encourages creative choices as an alternative to old, self-destructive behaviors. In a caring community of people who see through our defenses and recognize the vulnerability and the beauty within each of us, we can risk sharing our truth and baring our soul.

This western culture has been busy for generations building a society of individuals. We grow up here, most of us, feeling a strong sense of personal freedom and the right to live as we choose. We may or may not experience this, but we certainly organize our lives around it as if we deserve it. Other cultures emphasize the importance of the community, and of sacrificing personal needs for the greater whole. Here, we rebel against personal sacrifice, and struggle to become self-sufficient and independent.

There is a price tag to the focus on individuality and independence in our system. One of the losses is the feeling of belonging, of being part of a greater whole. Sometimes this is provided by the family or by the workplace. What's happening more and more is that the family system is breaking down. Small businesses and self-employment are replacing the large workplace job settings for many people. One result of these changes is that there are a lot more lonely people.

We humans are social creatures. Relationships are the web of life. When people feel separate, they may translate this into a belief in unworthiness. "There must be something wrong with me." From early childhood, we are so concerned with acceptance and approval because in our earliest years, for much longer than most species, we need to be taken care of by others. If our lives depend on someone else, it

is essential that they want to care for us. We need to be loved: our survival depends on it. Or seems to.

The development of our independence is the gradual and natural shift from being taken care of by others to taking care of ourselves and then our children. Since we are so impressionable as children, however, we can sometimes imagine that this growing independence comes at the cost of relationship and love. We struggle with the paradox of relationship and freedom, love without needing to be taken care of, separateness and belonging. If the separateness is accompanied by doubts about our lovability, or with a conscious or unconscious sense of shame, we can only react in two ways: either we punish ourselves with self-destructive behavior and prove to ourselves that we are unlovable; or we over-compensate and go to great lengths to prove ourselves to be worthy. Either choice leads to addictive behaviors and to a growing sense of loneliness and fear.

One of the main teachings of buddhism is that the root of our suffering is attachment. It is our addictions (unhealthy attachments) that grow out of our pain as an attempt to find relief. And yet, paradoxically, these coping attachments cause our greatest suffering. They can move us into more and more feelings of isolation and aloneness, shame and unworthiness, numbness and loss of creative aliveness. Whatever seems to offer temporary relief, or even euphoria, becomes an insidious trap, built on the lie that we either deserve the pain, or cannot possibly handle it. Addictions perpetuate the worst lie, which is that there is something fundamentally wrong with us. As long as we live and act as if this were true, we stay unhealthy, disconnected from our own wholeness.

The doorway to health, to remembering our wholeness is found in recovering our belongingness. Through finding ourselves to be part of a greater whole, we can rediscover the truth of our own wholeness. Through loving others and letting others love us, we can heal the suffering of shame and abandonment. Through helping others with compassion and respect, we find the courage to let others help us, weaving together the tapestry of human relationships and community. This is the healing path of the group, of sangha.