

Running Tide

The Voice of Amida Shu:

Pureland Buddhism

Absolute Grace

Total Engagement

Issue 41 Summer/Fall 2020



RUNNING TIDE

Running Tide offers a voice for faith and practice, as well as critical, existential and socially engaged enquiry within the broad framework of Pureland Buddhism. We publish short articles, poetry, pictures, interviews, comment and Buddhist resource materials. Opinions expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Amida Order, Amida Trust, or other associated organisations. Running Tide is distributed by:

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Amida Order & School

The Amida Order and Amida School are a religious order and community, respectively, following the Pureland tradition, established under the auspices of the Amida Trust. In this periodical the letters OAB after a name indicate membership of the Order of Amida Buddha and the letters MAS indicate membership of the Amida School. The Amida School is also referred to as Amida Shu. All Order members are also School members.

Amida Trust

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Editorial

Dear Readers,

As many people have come to realize during the pandemic, community is very important for social beings such as ourselves. This issue will discuss the concept of Sangha and the value of the social side of the spiritual life.

Much gratitude to Dharmavidya, Satyavani, Jan Wizinowich, Sangeetashraddha, Kaspalita and Dayamay for your contributions.

As always, I hope you enjoy this issue and I look forward to future submissions.

Namo Amida Bu,
Johnathan Robertson



Editions and Themes

Summer/Fall – Sangha

With the events of the COVID 19 pandemic, may we reflect on the importance of community.

Winter– Impermanence

Winter is a time of that may remind us of the reality of impermanence. Let's consider the role of impermanence as we witness change in the world.

Submissions are welcome.

Sangha

Dharmavidya

The term sangha originally referred to the leading council of elders in a tribe or country. At the time of the Buddha, in India, some countries were oligarchic republics and some were monarchies. The monarchies were gradually displacing the republics. It is interesting, therefore, that Buddha chose this term to refer to his company of monks.

We know that the Buddha was in some degree motivated by a desire to establish a cadre of monks who were more genuinely worthy of respect than the priests who enriched themselves by conducting sacrifices. Perhaps he also wanted to create a group who were worthy of more respect than the politicians of his day too. There can be little doubt that he was not simply offering a path of salvation for the individual, but intended that his disciples, well trained and restrained by faith, wisdom and compassion, would collectively exercise an influence for good upon society as a whole. They brought a spirit of unconditional goodness - love - into a world that was greatly in need.

The early history of the movement following the Buddha's death is somewhat shrouded in mystery. We know that eighteen schools emerged, but we do not know exactly how nor much about the relations between them. We do know that Shakyamuni's immediate disciples were men and women of great diversity of character, and that different ones were renowned for different things - this one for meditation, that one for ethics, the other for discipline, another for good works and so on. The Buddha taught for five decades and acquired, in that time, a very large number of followers, so it was not practical for him to teach them all directly. When he had sixty arhats he sent them forth to spread the Dharma and they traveled widely, many of them acquiring disciples along the way. Putting these two factors together we can see that there would, in effect, have been differing schools of Buddhism even within the lifetime of Buddha himself.

In the West we are accustomed to the idea that different schools arise out of dispute and division. There has certainly been some of this in the history of Buddhism, but it is likely that the main way in which different schools came into being was simply a function of the different characters of different teachers, who were all disciples of Buddha, but who had, as it were, different specialisms. In many periods of history it has been customary for seekers to do the rounds and spend a period with one teacher after another in order to acquire different perspectives, different practices and different forms of exemplary inspiration.

In China, where many great monasteries came to be established, it was an established custom for monks to travel, generally on foot, and to make much of their training into a pilgrimage. Arriving at a new monastery, an itinerant monk would be met by the guest master who would interview him and find out what he was good for. He would be given a place in the meditation

hall and duties in the work schedule of the monastery. Qualifications were not demanded. If a person could get up at four in the morning and recite the sutras, then it was accepted that he was a monk. If he showed promise the monastery might, after a trial period, offer him a more permanent position. Some would take up the offer. Others would go on their way, walking and begging their way to the next monastery. This custom meant that even a high ranking monk could sometimes take to the road incognito and spend a time going from centre to centre, being treated as a junior, and thus both deepening his own training and having a break from administrative responsibilities back in his home monastery.

In the modern world, the term sangha has taken on a broader meaning. When we say sangha nowadays we are generally referring to the whole Buddhist community including lay people as well as priests and monks and a good deal of experimentation with different forms of organisation is going on as Buddhism becomes established in a modern cultural setting. The fundamental principles remain the same however. The sangha is a fellowship of people intent upon practising and transmitting the Dharma in a variety of ways and styles so that people today and future generations shall have the possibility of liberation.

In our Amida Shu we have gathered people who have a karmic affinity with Amitabha Buddha, whose practice is nembutsu, and who follow the other power. Within the Shu we have the Order of those who dedicate themselves to leading and organising this community; and within the Order we now have the Lotus Sangha of teachers. Thus we are creating a structure to support the practice. We should not think that such structures have ultimate value, but they do provide an auxiliary support that helps to convey the message of Buddha in the present and future. All this is a work of love. No doubt the form will change over the years; what matters is that the loving spirit continue. There is no less need for this spirit today than there was in the time of Buddha himself.

Namo Amida Bu



Dharmavidya David Brazier, Buddhist priest and devotee of Amitabha Buddha, is head of the Amida Order. He currently stays at a hermitage in France. He is the author of a dozen books and many teachings via youtube, e-mail podcasts and his own website at eleusis.ning.com. He is the chairperson of the international Zen Therapy Institute and an authority on Buddhist psychology.

Why Extinction Rebellion is a Sangha

Satyavani

I was talking to a friend last week about the various conflicts in our local Extinction Rebellion group when the penny finally dropped. I realised how much Extinction Rebellion reminded me of two other groups I belong to: my Amida sangha, and my IFS therapy training cohort. The conflicts were arising because the people in the group were important to each other, and because they were getting close enough to rub each other up the wrong way. This is because Extinction Rebellion, like these other groups I belong to, is a family.

What makes a family a family? I'd suggest that there are two ingredients. The first is that something brings us together – our golden thread. We decide to join or form a group because something is important to us. In my Amida sangha, this thread is that we have all been inspired by Amida's vow. In my therapy cohort, we all have a passion for working with IFS. In Extinction Rebellion, we have all woken up to the urgency of our dear Earth's predicament, and our grief has led us to take action.

The second is that something that keeps us together – our sticky silver web. We make a decision to commit to each other and to work together. Buddhism tells us to take refuge in the sangha so we can support each other on a spiritual path, which can be at odds with the broader culture. In my therapy cohort we committed to helping each other to learn a new way of being in the world, which included showing each other our vulnerabilities as we learnt. In Extinction Rebellion we know that, as those who have woken up, we have a joint responsibility to do what we can to try and turn things around.

When these two ingredients are present – when a group is united by a common cause, and when it commits to staying together for a period of time – the individuals in the group gradually change from saying 'me' to 'we'. However, these two ingredients don't necessarily lead to healthy families. We don't have to look very far to see examples of dysfunction in family-like groups. Groups often contain bullying, prejudices, co-dependency and mutual shaming. Loyalty to the group can tip over into a hatred of the Other. There can be strict and arbitrary rules which, if not followed, can lead to expulsion from the group. In ancient times being expelled from a group meant possible death, and so how we behave in groups and whether we are 'in' or 'out' takes on great psychological significance for most of us.

Groups are difficult because, when we've committed to staying with a particular bunch of people, we inevitably begin to experience each other's sharp defences poking into our sore spots. We all keep ourselves psychologically safe in different ways. One group member might feel safe when everything is discussed openly in the group, whilst another stays safe by keeping things private. This person deals with his climate grief by getting on with planning actions, and

this one needs to prioritise slowly processing their grief before they can imagine acting. Problematic behaviour always comes from our attempts to keep our psychological systems safe and stable, but knowing this doesn't necessarily make it any less infuriating to encounter!

Luckily, a third magic ingredient is also present in Extinction Rebellion, as well as my Buddhist and therapy groups. These groups have developed cultures which are grounded in compassion. I have found compassion to be embedded in the DNA of Extinction Rebellion. The ten principles and values, which are intended to guide us through the tricky territory of close relationship, speak of accepting all parts of all people, and of valuing reflection, autonomy, and non-violent practices. Crucially, these principles are embodied by those in the movement. Again and again I have encountered XR members who have inspired me with their commitment to compassion.

Of course, families are also made up of human beings. In Buddhist monasteries there is a saying that, if you are beginning to feel pleased with your progress as an ethical, grounded, spiritual human being, the antidote is to go home and spend a week with your family. This will promptly uncover all sorts of dysfunctions in you that remain untouched! However lofty our group ideals in Extinction Rebellion, and however much work is done to embed these group ideals in practice, there is an inevitability to our failing each other – in small and big ways, we will continue harm each other.



The best way to deal with this fact is to acknowledge it, and when we do hurt people we can take responsibility, learn from it, and make amends. Extinction Rebellion are still learning how to be a healthier family. We need to continue attending to conflicts as they arise. We need to be more inclusive, and to continue identifying the insidious prejudices that we all carry – to look at our white privilege, at the subtle violence we do to each other through our language and our assumptions, and to face the shame of our long history of oppressing others. We need to keep carefully distinguishing between action driven by anger or fear, and action driven by love. Looking at ourselves with radical honesty takes courage, and it takes time. Growing and healing in this way takes many many lifetimes!

I also think that we are doing okay, loving each other as best we can. One of my fondest memories from the October rebellion is walking around Trafalgar Square in the early morning, greeting strangers as if they were my brothers and sisters. We were cold, we were wet, and we were in it together.

We are in it together. We are demonstrating to the rest of the world that there is a different way of being together – based on cooperation, trust and mutual respect rather than competition and fear. This embodying of compassionate family life may be the single most valuable legacy of our work as a movement. I hope that, over time, we will welcome more and more of our fellow human beings (and the rest of the Earth's sentient beings) into our family. It's a wonderful place to be.



Rev. Satyavani Robyn runs the Amida Mandala Buddhist Temple in Malvern in the UK with her husband Kasper. She has published novels and Buddhist books, and works as a psychotherapist using Internal Family Systems. She is an Extinction Rebellion rebel. She enjoys walks with her dogs Aiko and Ralph, and vegan cake.

At Sea Together

Jan Wizinowich

A few months ago, Dharmavidya began what he calls Amida Friendship Groups. These weekly friendship group meetings have taken the definition of Sangha to an entirely new level. When we first started I had no idea what the group was going to entail. Right away I wanted to find a convenient description or category. But simply put, they are explorations between people who are spread out all over the globe with vastly different experiences. In Hawai'i we'd be considered a canoe crew with our weekly conversations keeping us afloat as we sail between islands of discovery. We touch on the lives of each individual, just as each crew member has something unique to contribute, yet those lives are woven into a new pattern of understanding that I believe somehow feeds the cosmic flow of things. Most meetings involve a designated purpose to solve some problem, create an agenda or a protocol of actions. But a sangha just is. No need to get something from it or to give anything but reflections of the light that is invited in though simply being together.



Jan Wizinowich lives on Hawai'i Island and has been a Shu member for a number of years. She is a freelance writer and gardener.

Considering Sangha

Sangeetashraddha

Everything I encounter is a part of my life. Here I am paraphrasing Uchiyama Roshi, but I think it is true, at least for me and my feeling about it. I can put a bag over my head to avoid encountering things but then I am avoiding my life. I can peer through a telescope to avoid the things which surround me here and now, but again, I am avoiding my actual life, here and now, if I do this. I am aware that as I type this, my focus is on this screen, not on the life I can hear, if I pay a little attention, passing me by outside the window by me.

My neighbours are whoever I encounter in the here and now, and here I am paraphrasing Jesus of Nazareth, and for 'good neighbours to become good friends' I need to put away the bag and the telescope and be open to encounter, right here, right now. What is Sangha but good friends. However, in encountering the beings around me I also need to be prepared to walk away. There are also unhealthy social situations and these I do not want to get hooked into, hence the bag and the telescope – but could I ditch these and still be able to walk away? I would rather wear the bag and imagine good friends or look through the telescope and focus on good friends somewhere else, some time else, rather than risk the more unpredictable here and now. And the irony of submitting this piece of writing via the telescope of the Internet does not escape me (but it is raining outside, after all – or does this show a lack of imagination on my part, or more safety seeking?).



Born of the Cosmos, there is that of the Cosmos in each of us, and here I paraphrase Quakerism. Touching that of the Cosmos in all my encounters in the here and now, I touch the Sangha, a true and only refuge. Taking refuge in that of the Cosmos in each encounter, I take refuge in the Sangha rather than in delusion.

To Uchiyama Roshi and Alexander Technique practitioners, 'refraining' is the key. 'Refrain from evil,' says the Buddhist precept; 'Refrain from habitual reactions,' says the Alexander Technique precept. Every encounter has the potential for freshness, completely newness, the never-concreted Cosmos. In both Zen and Alexander, this freeing can be located in the body, and, body and mind not being separate, the freeing of body has the potential of completeness.

Then there are the invisible encounters in the here and now, and I am no more in control of who turns up in these encounters than in the more mundane encounters with physical neighbours and Sangha members. I cannot ring-fence my Sangha and put up keep out signs. I can chant the name of a particular Cosmic being, but if they turn up, I cannot prevent them from bringing along surprising friends of theirs, or maybe it will be the friend who turns up, alone – 'I'm a friend of Lucien,' the gate-crasher at the party might say, and though Lucien was invited, he may not come, leaving the host with his uninvited friend instead. It is as if we are perpetual party hosts, sending out invitations but powerless as to who actually turns up at our door.

For taking refuge in Sangha to be opening up to the Cosmos, rather than trying to control and limit encounter, I need a certain awareness of my motives when I take refuge. I would like to avoid things I do not like and encounter lots of what I do like, but the four noble truths tell me that this is a limited ambition. Can I actively take refuge in the Cosmos in all my encounters? The dog walker passing by; the neighbour in want of a chat; cyclists; walkers; people at the bus stop; shoppers; co-workers when I am lucky enough to encounter work; partners when I am lucky enough to find connection; plants and animals; pebbles and streams; hills and valleys; planets and stars; and invisible Cosmic beings, walking towards me, holding out their arms in welcome. Who does the ultimate choosing – is it the Cosmos, or me?

Sangeetashraddha grew up on a working farm on the Lincolnshire Marsh in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. On Sunday evenings Shraddha sometimes played the harmonium at the Methodist Chapel along the lane. He went on to study Indian Classical Singing and Community Music at Dartington College of Arts (inspired by Indian religious music he heard on BBC2 when a small child - where was the TV? He can't remember). After a long time working with music, religion and other arts in Leicester in community settings, he moved with his partner, Ian, to Bournville in October 2019 and is now working on finding a path forward with local Buddhists and Quakers. From 2017 he has led the Malvern Temple Community Choir at Amida Mandala Temple, Malvern and is in the process of making a hymn book.

No to Moral Sainthood

Kaspalita

It's another scorching hot today here in Malvern. I came into my office earlier and immediately closed the blinds, but the temperature was already too high for comfort. The weather forecast keeps promising thunder storms but none have arrived yet.

The dogs are lying in the coolest places they can find and, of course, I find myself thinking of the climate crisis.

At the beginning of September the UK Parliament begins to sit again, and I'll be joining other XR Buddhists in non-violent demonstrations outside the Houses of Parliament. Last night I attended training on the law around protests, demonstrations and the process of being arrested.

There are times when the suffering of the world and the predicted future suffering feels like a great weight that I must carry. If the crisis is as serious as I think it is, I find myself wondering, what I am I doing watching the 1970's animated Star Trek series late at night? If I'm awake I should be doing something to make a difference, right?

And yet, on a deep intuitive level that kind of moralistic thinking does not feel like the noble life of the Buddha.



I've recently been exploring where that tendency in me to feel responsible for everything comes from. Tracing back that feeling to family circumstances and events in my own childhood has offered some release from it, and now I find that I'm more able to enjoy the lighter moments in life as well as responding to the troubles of the world.

This morning I read an article by Daniel Callcut called *Against Moral Sainthood*, a commentary on Susan Wolf's 1982 essay *Moral Saints*. In that essay, as Callcut recounts, Wolf explores the different kinds of moral sainthood and concludes that, "The aspiration to be a moral saint... might turn someone into a nightmare to live with and be around."

The moral saint is boring, unable to enjoy life's pleasures, and perhaps even creates guilt trips for the rest of us. You can be 'perfectly wonderful' Wolf suggests 'without being perfectly moral'.

What does perfectly wonderful look like? It is a life with space for pleasure, for appreciation, and for relationships that are not obviously about helping or reducing suffering. Reading Callcut and Wolf's descriptions remind me a life powered by love.

We are embodied beings: we love particular people, and particular places and particular things. Whilst we might choose a cause to champion, many of the best things that we do are not driven by calculation but by relationship.

I fall in love with a particular landscape and am inspired to tend to it and protect it. I fall in love with a person and move across the country. I fall in love with the Buddha and help create a temple.

Sometimes love leads us to celebration and enjoyment, and sometimes it leads us into social and environmental activism.

When I was looking for a Sangha to join, I asked a few different groups, "How socially engaged are you?" It was something important that I was looking for.

Some communities were a little socially engaged; some were not at all socially engaged. Amida Shu had very good credentials on that account.

Social engagement should be wise, and there are times when it's important to ask morally useful questions like 'Who benefits from this?', 'How can we support the most people?', or 'What is the virtuous action here?'

And a life that is lived solely from this places misses something out. This is one of the great lessons that I have learnt from Sangha. That there are many different ways of being a wonderful person, and that good actions of all shapes and sizes will spring naturally from lives filled with love.

Acharya Kaspalita, known as Kaspas, is a teacher and Head of Ministry in the Amida Order, he is a psychotherapist and Buddhist activist. He facilitates Buddhist Action Month, and is a member of XR Buddhists.

Extolling the Virtues of Sangha

Dayamay

Sangha is the word that describes the spiritual community which manifests when Buddhists come together to practice and live together in a way that reflects the principles of the Dharma as taught by Shakyamuni Buddha 2,500 years ago. At that time the membership was quite exclusive in that only very serious practitioners and disciples of the Buddha were invited to take part. In my experience of Sangha, these conditions have greatly relaxed to include a wide variety of people with varying levels of interest in the Buddhist culture who all share a common interest in and desire for a more healthy and fulfilling way of life than that which seems to be on offer in secular society.

The Sangha can function on different levels and there are different ways in which people can come and take part. Although all of the parts seem to contribute to the same harmonious effects, they are not necessarily grounded in the same beliefs, or, they don't necessarily need to be in order for the results to be good. For example, there are people who live in our community here in Malvern who have no specific religious beliefs and no desire to live an explicitly religious life but who enjoy the benefits of the gentle container that the Temple provides and live relatively comfortably alongside some of the more formal aspects of the religious life. In Sangha there is a sense of sanctuary that is formed from an attitude of compassion and understanding and a firm but fair degree of discipline that protects us from some of the more insidiously intoxicating ways of the everyday world. Sometimes this is exactly what people need.

A lot of the Buddhist teachings are centered around some basic Universal truths that many people feel intuitively as important but have no context in which to express them. And so, many "ordinary" people seem to understand the sentiment behind the Sangha even before they have come into contact with any formal Buddhist teachings or practices. This seems to be a basis for the motivation by which some non-denominationally spiritual people become involved in Sangha. They like the idea of Sangha.

The Holy life is not for everyone. I have learned over time not to expect other people to experience and enjoy the same parts of the religious life as I do. Where I once would have experienced a lack of mutual passion as a rejection of sorts, I can now see that others just don't experience this way of life in the same way as I do. Just as I might not appreciate the joys of their passions, they are not necessarily moved or inspired by mine. But this doesn't mean that we can't all enjoy a degree of freedom together in an environment that elevates compassion, wisdom and respect as its core values.

One of the precepts that we take as Amitaryas is about preserving the integrity of the Sangha, especially in difficult times. We are encouraged to think of the Community as a boat, adrift in

the ocean of Samsara, keeping us from drowning in greed, hatred and delusion, and any rifts between members represents a leak in the vessel, which threatens to sink us. I always get a sense from this that a certain amount of cooperation is required from all participants, and my experience is that even though other members might not feel the same sense of importance that I do about this issue, everybody is usually prepared to take the time and apply themselves enough so that a reasonable solution can be achieved. With a little bit of humility and a willingness to understand ourselves and others, things seem to work themselves out pretty well.

So Sangha, to me, is the home of homes. But I believe that there is something here for everybody who is prepared to open up to a fresh take on social conventions and conditioning. Here, as core members, we are bonded in our common practice of Nembutsu and everybody else who takes refuge here will be in some positive way affected by association.

Namo Amida Bu(:



Dayamay is a Pureland Buddhist priest and Novice Amitarya, which is a bit like a monk. He lives and practices at Amida Mandala Buddhist Temple in Great Malvern. Furthermore, he works as a cafe assistant and has many interests and hobbies, including, writing, making electronic music and reading and studying religious and philosophical literature.

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We have an international sangha especially for those who want to practice but who don't live close to an Amida Shu group. Join us at

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Visit the audio page on our website, or our YouTube Channel.

<http://www.amidamandala.com/audio-teachings/>

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Dharmavidya's podcast can be accessed by emailing him at dharmavidya@fastmail.fm

Online Study

Join Dayamay's monthly Skype study group. Email Dayamay for joining instructions through following link.

<http://www.amidamandala.com/connect-from-wherever-you-are/>

Zoom Groups

Contact Dharmavidya at dharmavidya@fastmail.fm to join the Amida Shu Interest Group or the Amida Shu Friendship Group.

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<http://www.amidashu.org/groups-centres/>

General Information

Upon activities and on line resources

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Prefer to read

Buy Kasper & Satya's introduction to Amida Shu Buddhism 'Just As You Are', Buddhism for Foolish Beings or buy one of the many books from our teacher Dharmavidya David Brazier.



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