

The Buddha on Community

Notes provided by Eric Kolvig after January 2006 dharma talk on the topic.

The Six Concords from Upakkilesa Sutta

The nature of community is harmony, and harmony can be realized by the Six Concords:

first, sharing common space;

second, sharing the essentials of daily life;

third, observing the same precepts;

fourth, using only words that contribute to harmony;

fifth, sharing insights and understanding;

and sixth, respecting each other's viewpoints.

A community that follows these principles will live happily and in peace.

Advice as He was Dying from Mahaparinibbana Sutta

As long as practitioners hold regular and frequent assemblies;

as long as they meet in harmony, depart in harmony and carry on their affairs in harmony;

as long as they honor and respect the elders within the community;

as long as they do not fall under the influence of craving;

as long as they preserve their personal mindfulness, so that in the future the good among their companions will come to them, and those who have already come will feel at ease with them;

as long as the practitioners hold to these things and are seen to do so, they may be expected to prosper and not to decline.

The Seven Practices of Reconciliation

During the Buddha's lifetime monks in the monastery of Kosambi became entangled in a grave dispute. Afterward senior students of the Buddha met with the instigators of the conflict at Kosambi. Together they devised these seven practices of reconciliation, which the Buddha praised. Buddhist monastics have been using this method of resolving conflicts for more than 2500 years.

These practices appear in Vinaya Mahavagga Khudakka-nikaya 10 and are included among the precepts for monastics. The following version summarizes and borrows, sometimes word-for-word Thich Nhat Hanh's account of the seven practices in Old Path, White Clouds, pp 311-313.

1. The Practice of Face To Face Sitting

With both sides of the conflict present, the entire community hears the dispute. This practice limits private conversations about the conflict, where people are more likely to choose sides and are thereby more likely to create further discord and tension.

2. Practice of Remembrance

During this meeting of the whole community, both parties in the conflict try to

remember everything from the beginning that led up to the dispute and then sustained the dispute. Presenters should speak with as much accuracy and clarity as possible and should include evidence and witnesses if they are available. In this way the community attempts to gather adequate information about the dispute.

3. **Practice of Non-Stubbornness**

The community expects the disputants to reach reconciliation, resolving the conflict. The community encourages them to renounce stubbornness.

4. **The Practice of Voluntary Confession**

The community encourages each party voluntarily to admit her or his errors in speech or action. Each person should take as much time as necessary to speak about each error, no matter how minor it should seem. Did the harmful speech or action occur because of clear intention, or did it happen from ignorance or an unsettled heart? Admitting one's own encourages the other party to do the same and helps to ring the dispute toward reconciliation.

5. **The Practice of Decision by Consensus**

After hearing both sides and being assured of the wholehearted efforts by both sides to reach a settlement, the community reaches by consensus a verdict about the dispute.

6. **The Practice of Accepting the Verdict**

After the community reaches a verdict, it is read aloud three times. If no one in the community voices disagreement with it, the community considers the verdict final. Neither party in the dispute has the right to challenge the verdict once it has been reached by consensus. They have agreed beforehand to place their trust in the community's decision, and they will abide by it.

7. **The Practice of Covering Mud with Straw**

During the gathering the community appoints a senior member to represent each side in the conflict, someone to whom the community will listen with respect. These senior people listen carefully and say little, but when they do speak their words carry special weight. Their role is to soothe, to heal wounds, to call forth reconciliation and forgiveness, and through their words and personal example to help the disputants to release bitterness and petty concerns. They also help the community to reach a verdict acceptable to both sides. These elders serve like straw covering mud, allowing everyone to pass over the mud without dirtying their clothes.