

## **Could The Goodenough Community Be Considered A Dharma Community?**

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Recently a friend made reference in an email to his need of a dharma group. His comment crystallized some thinking for me about the nature of the dharma community. The purpose of the dharma has to do with orienting one's self to the whole system of the Buddha's teachings. The dharma has to do with "supporting and upholding" all beings. The Dharma Community is a world-conscious gathering that offers to that world both wisdom and compassion. Within most dharma communities, supporting and upholding each other involves moving beyond criticism in order to be mutually supportive to each other as you would fellow travelers on a journey. On this journey our inner work is to learn from our mistakes and to forgive ourselves our own frailties. We do this in order to become more accepting of others' mistakes and understand how to forgive them so that we may all live in peace and harmony. A dharma community encourages members to meditate deeply on their own experiences so they can become more responsible for their own weaknesses and more intentional in expressing their strengths. It must also be seen that this inner work helps to strengthen the social fabric as each person offers respect and compassion to others. And, this results in the dharma community's capacity, as a whole system of energy and intention, to uphold its own members yet also to act with wisdom in the surrounding society.

I think that most people would agree that a primary activity of a dharma community is meditation. Meditation involves the intention to be awake to one's own mentation—to notice one's own thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The word *meditation* refers to a process of familiarizing yourself with whatever is happening within you. Personally, I get the image of allowing myself to hold a strange object with both of my hands, turning it this way and that, considering all aspects. In such observation, I can watch myself in action while noticing what I am thinking and feeling about my own performance. I call this a meditation knowing that I can do this no matter what activity I engage in. Similarly, I can be aware of myself, in a helpful meditation of sorts, when I am thinking about others or with others and want to deepen my feeling for them by being more fully aware of what they are doing, saying, and feeling.

So, meditation is a process of coming to terms with my real existence, to participate in it from a feeling connection. It involves a choice to accept what is through becoming well acquainted with it. The promise made by ancients in the Buddhist tradition is that if we will approach things and people in this manner, they will become pleasant to us, even valuable—jewels! As you can see, meditation is not only a matter of withdrawal to inward stillness. Meditation involves the active working with whatever presents itself to our attention, and acting upon it in such a way that it becomes of its own accord, improved. Meditation cannot be coerced. Also, the process of meditation is not coercive, not causal in the sense that it is another word for prayer for things to change. Instead, meditation allows change, which needs to happen to appear in the compassionate presence of the meditator. I once heard an elderly Buddhist Roshi, herself a grandmother,

said that she compared her meditation during the routines of her life to watching her grandchildren at play. She acknowledged that a minimum of interference enabled the fullest enjoyment in everyone.

In a dharma community, the strength of the community comes from the way its members coach each other more and more toward peace and harmony through forgiveness and everyday acts of compassion. The energy or grace that builds in each life accrues to the community as the capacity, as a community, to “support and uphold all beings.”

As a doctoral student in my mid and late 20s I found many of the truths I was longing to know about came from the study of other religious traditions. Buddhism quickly became my favorite. For years I considered leaving the Christian tradition for Buddhism. It was Buddhism that helped me become aware that I was wanting to leave more than Christianity, I was needing to be free of religion, that is, free of answers that appeared to be more dogma and superstition. Without verbally confessing to be of Buddhist persuasion I simply valued the importance of learning from a teacher who was obviously impassioned by their own practice. I aspired to be such a teacher as well, remembering the Buddha’s own preference to explain himself simply as one who was awakened. An awakened Teacher was a Jewel I searched for and found from time to time in educators and trainers and frequently in mature and “present” persons. I still love to see people awakened to their own “simple feeling of being” as Ken Wilber refers to it.

As I have experienced dharma communities, that is, groups of people learning together from Buddhist teachings and attempting to apply them to current issues, I have learned the importance of being present in transparent conversations. It happened that during this period of time, I was also teaching in universities and seminaries which were oriented toward activism in social change. The contrast between a Buddhist community of practice, the practice having to do with meditation and reflection on one’s own life, was in sharp contrast to the way graduate education encouraged us to change the world. I became disappointed that academia was ignoring the importance of inner peace than world peace. I have participated in several activist organizations that called themselves communities yet did not practice self-reflection or compassion for others.

The 1970s I chose to be trained by the National Training Laboratory (NTL Institute) and, following that training worked for NTL for 3 years in the area of community development. I worked with many organizations and geographical communities in order to help them work through their difficulties and unite behind some common goals. Reflecting back on it, it seems clear that the work was understood as talking people into making changes:

- Changes in their understanding of community.
- Changes in the way they related to each other.
- Changes in behavior—becoming more skillful.

It was in 1970 that I created a model for experiential, laboratory learning in the Seattle area. I was interested in focusing on using the principles and guidelines for human

relations training to enable people to have more insight about their own inner workings and to have more skills for intimate relationships and straight forward communication. For years the human relations laboratory was used to explore the hot buttons of the period: male/female relationships, conflict, personal empowerment, leadership, and power and intimacy. By 1978, I was drawing together a learning community and by 1981 the tension between activist-oriented training and a more inwardly oriented community of practice became intense. The Goodenough Community was formed against the backdrop of this conflict. Since 1983, the Goodenough Community, as a *learning* community, was focusing on personal transformation that blended spiritual teachings with psychological insights and training in skills that made both possible. We borrowed the concept of *lifeways* from communitarian tradition and a lifeway has come to denote an intentional process, requiring discipline and practice. The goal of such practice is a deepened understanding of humanity—our own and others. By 1984, our learning community had at its core, a group interested in spiritual deepening. This enabled me to share more of my spiritual insight and growth with others. By 1987, we had incorporated as Convocation: A Church and Ministry. In 2008, we celebrated our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an inter-faith church. Throughout these years, some of us have shared deeply while studying a variety of religious traditions. Buddhist teachings and practice have shaped our life more fully than any other tradition. There is now a significant interest in this learning community to gather, study, and understand a variety of core teachings from the Perennial Wisdom. Further, there is an openness to both support the spiritual practices of people involved and to become a community of practice, a community that shares a set of practices that we agree have the greatest value. To illustrate, I am quite sure that we will be learning a variety of forms of meditation.

Since the first Human Relations Lab, 40 years ago, I have worked to create the Goodenough Community, have developed the American Association for the Furtherance of Community, and have consulted extensively with a dozen communities in the U.S. and Canada. Throughout this period I have functioned as a teacher interested in awakening people to lifelong learning. Integrating ancient spiritual truths and modern methods of behavioral training has also been a focus. In the Goodenough Community I have encouraged a *community of practice* to live by a covenant (which members participated in creating) and lifeways that enabled the application of the covenant. For at least 20 years I have attempted to teach Buddhism as a way of life without calling it Buddhism or, for that matter, calling it anything else other than community. In the last 15 or so years I have watched what I have termed *secular Buddhism* become an acceptable umbrella under which people accepted responsibility for doing *inner work* and as a support for healthy habits such as meditation. During this time I have experienced the value of teaching **the Four Noble Truths**, of which I interpret to be:

- 1) All persons will experience dissatisfaction in life (*dukkha*). Denying the sufferings of life, or for instance, raising children to think that they can avoid any of the various versions of suffering is harmful. We mature through dealing with our difficulties and character is shaped when we proactively work with life's problems. As the saying goes, "a good life is not measured by the absence of problems but by our way of handling the problems we have." **I have found people helped the most by learning about their own stages of development.** The idea is that each of us fulfills ourself

by accomplishing developmental tasks. These tasks are presented as difficulties to surmount and accomplishing these developmental tasks a person develops the capacity to grow and to learn and to perform well. Each developmental task has a physical aspect and an inner aspect requiring morality, courage, and compassion.

- 2) When you look closely at your own mind, you can see that **dissatisfaction comes from having expectations and desires**. In this viewpoint, our suffering comes from our very human habits of clinging to old ideas, craving after what we think we currently need and want, and some very childish ideas that life shouldn't be difficult. When we peek into our own minds, we often a voice chattering, "This shouldn't be this way." "I told these folks this would happen." "You shouldn't have done that." "She always has this miserable attitude." "I just hate being here when it's like this."
- 3) **Have hope! There is an end to all dissatisfaction**. This does not mean that there is an end to growth or the need to learn. This does not mean there is no pain. *Nirvana*, which is the Sanskrit word for the end to suffering, will be your experience when you come to accept life as it is, including growth, pain, and death. Rather accept that to live is to suffer. However, there is an end to this suffering that begins by accepting suffering as universal and liberation from it as possible. The beginning of the end to all dissatisfaction involves a decision to cease adding pain to suffering and anger against yourself for human frailties.
- 4) The original Buddha and a lineage of teachers down to the present time, all tell us that it is right to work for our happiness. **This is a path that encourages you to practice loving kindness** (*metta*), **compassion** (*karuna*), **sympathetic joy** (*mudita*), and **equanimity** (*upekkha*). These are the four Brahmaviharas or sublime states that encourage us to seek ways to care for others and in so doing to embody them within our own experience. So this is a path (*maggha*) toward happiness, and the path-to-happiness is increasingly full of happiness. For instance, to behave with loving kindness toward someone, to make them dear to you, is right to do. Yet, it will be hard for you to do because you will be tempted to attachment to this dear one. And because they mean so much to you, you will find selfishness in your behavior. Actually, you will find selfishness in their behavior first, you will find yourself acting in dependency or co-dependency. As this is lived out over time the conflict between selfish people will build a hatred there. So the Buddha taught that if you want to avoid the pain of hatred and the despair of selfishness, then take on the task of being loving-kindness. And what happens to you on that path will teach you about selfishness so that you can love more maturely. And the path will teach you sometimes about hatred to help you become fully committed to the path of loving-kindness, which is always a right way.

The Buddha said that the end of suffering was a path one can choose yet this path is a way of life. You will need to commit to conduct yourself according to certain principles, the central principle being that you will learn from what you do. In other words, by doing loving-kindness one learns to love unselfishly and happily. By doing

compassionate deeds, one overcomes the tendency to pity and contempt, and through service one gains a truly compassionate heart.

The Buddha suggested four vows that can serve as a kind of compass by which to find our way (south, west, east, and north):

**South:** the universe is alive with numberless beings. Holons, within holons, within holons. From the vastness of planetary space to the infinitely small sub-particles, there is energy, there is being-ness, some sense of purpose to evolve. This universe is in its essence alive and conscious.

**Vow:** *I vow with my conscious life to bless and care for all the beings, of which I am one.*

**West:** I acknowledge that I am to my core deluded about my own nature and about the world. My delusions are excuses for going back to unconscious sleep; for feeling that life is unfair to me and therefore I should give up; that I am flawed and unable, therefore I can rightfully conclude life is futile. Since my mind provides me many excuses, I can conclude there is some truth to my doubts.

**Vow:** *I vow to end these delusions by knowing the truth each delusion denies.*

**North:** The truth is that many awakening people exist and in their hearts they seek to gather with each other and to seek the truth about living toward fulfillment and happiness. I am not on this journey alone and I choose this journey with others.

**Vow:** *The opportunities to enter the dharma gates are boundless so I vow to enter them.*

**East:** The people of this way embody it in their lives, and appreciating the happiness of this path, declare the path need no improvement. Yet still people on this way will try to make it even easier to those who come behind. This path is not thought of as difficult, meaningless, or futile. It is found to be learningful and wonderful.

**Vow:** *Since the Buddha's way is unsurpassable. I vow to become it.*

I am sharing with you my reliance on Buddhist teaching and practices for my own development and for the development of this community. I have been reminding you that to learn from each other is the best way to learn quickly and joyfully. A dharma community is enlivened by much joyful sharing, ongoing challenge, and experiential learning. In the Goodenough Community the dharma, as it is followed by women, focuses on the development; that is, the full-flowering of feminine aspects of life. Similarly, the dharma path for men takes them through developmental stages to become mature, wise, and compassionate. In the Goodenough Community there is also a dharma path, principles and lifeways, for intentionally committed couples, for parents and their children, and for groups of people in shared housing.

We have made vows in this community through constructing a covenant with nine elements. I arrange them here on the **Medicine Wheel** as an acknowledgment of the impact of Native American influences on our community's life. The stem sentence of our covenant or vow is:

*As a member of the Goodenough Community, I commit to being the best version of my self: (as an awake and compassionate being)*

*My prayers to the South are:*

*Help me trust the good intentions of others*

*Help me take responsibility for my unique and significant role in the world.*

*My prayers to the West are:*

*Help me give myself fully to the process of transformation through the expression of love.*

*Help me relate to others with respect and acceptance.*

*Help me to be constant through conflict.*

*My prayers to the North are:*

*Help me enter fully into life's experiences.*

*Help me honor the leadership in others as a method to develop the leader in myself.*

*My prayers to the East are:*

*Help me make and keep agreements with great care.*

*Help me acknowledge the inner and interconnectedness of all creation, thus being safe and at home in the universe.     *So be it!**

One final matter needs to be clear—the overall method that Colette and I have employed here has involved our living as transparently as we could in our Pathwork as a man, as a woman, as a couple, in our family, and as leaders. In doing this, we have attempted to deal with the issues that come up as opportunities to learn qualities such as compassion and equanimity. Looking back, it is our sense that the process works, **learning by doing is effective** and playing the game of community is a somewhat useful way to help others see their path and engage in Pathwork.

My good friend Max speaks often of the three jewels that are here in our life together, and I appreciate him for doing that. Why? Because I also experience the three jewels, that is, the Awakened One is frequently in our midst when **we** are awake. When we awaken, there is a stronger sense that what we have been learning has been learned from the Buddha or the Perennial Wisdom, and that we fulfill the definition of a dharma community as one where truth is living in persons and transforming culture. There is also a growing community of practice, of a sense of being a sangha as we recognize the importance of meditation, prayer, and heartfelt conversation among us. Perhaps it will be helpful to you in your own thinking to reflect on how we have all shaped this community, more or less consciously, over a long time. My hope is that this brief paper will help us have some good conversations and that many people will contribute to its content, style and format.