In meditation, we cultivate an inner space of openness and acceptance free of judgement. But this space should not remain private: sooner or later we have to extend it, and before we try to cover the entire world with an enlightened society, let’s start with smaller circles.

We can apply meditative attitudes in the circles of our friends, our family and our coworkers. Of course, we are not going to lecture them with everything Buddhist and nag them with whatever concept we last learned. As one teacher said – Jack Kornfield perhaps, but I’m not sure – you should go about your day as if you were the Dalai Lama in disguise.

But then there is another circle: the community of practice, or sangha. (And if it’s not there, go ahead and create it!) It’s made of friendships with whom the practice, unlike when we’re in disguise, is explicit and shared. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of community because, in this our age of individuality, this is what we tend to forget. And in recognising our conditioned tendencies, we gain the opportunity to cultivate circumstances that counteract them.

However, it is not obvious how to structure a practice group and its meetings so that it fulfils its goals and functions, which in themselves may not always be easy to identify. What is clear, though, is that a fundamental element of it is sharing our experiences. While a course or a class provides you with the practice, a community is where you bring your practice and share it although, ideally, both formats will cover those two functions to some extent.

In this post, I would like to explore the aspect of sharing the practice drawing from my experience of guiding a sangha as well as being part of several. It will not be exhaustive, but I hope it is useful. Your observations and experiences in the comments section would be most welcome, so we can converse and come up with future articles.
Nurture a receptive, non-judging space

A community needs to be a safe space, mirroring the non-judgement we practice internally. When it comes to sharing impressions, we need to create an atmosphere of trust that allows attendees to open up without fear of being judged or bombarded with advice. On retreats, it is made explicit that group interviews are not about practitioners replying to each other, but rather an occasion for each to share their experience and receive feedback from the teacher.

In a community, while exchanges between practitioners may take place, some sensitivity must be kept in mind so as not to jump in with opinions or judgements about what someone else has shared. This is, in itself, a practice of non-reactivity. Together, we have to create conditions that encourage participation, with speech that comes from the heart and from our own experience. This is fundamental, and I cannot think of any path of growth that does not sit on the basis of honesty.

Another essential ingredient for this is confidentiality: what others reveal in the group should not become material for gossip or conversations outside of it. We deserve the trust of others only if we too respect it.

Separate sharing and discussion

The instruction not to judge the content of our experience is not intended to abolish our ability to discern, reflect and come to conclusions. A Zen master was asked: ‘What is the secret of your happiness?’ ‘Good judgement,’ he replied. ‘How do I gain good judgement?’ ‘Experience.’ ‘And how do I gain experience?’ ‘Bad judgement.’ Erasing all discernment would eliminate the possibility of learning. In meditation, though, we suspend reactive judgements because they move us away from direct and concrete experience, instead fleeing to the plane of theories, abstractions and unconscious ideologies.

In the interpersonal context of the community, we apply the same principle. While it is true that debating about life and exchanging perspectives has its value, the voracity of opinion tends to eat the shy creature of mere sharing. When we articulate our experiences to others, how they make us feel and what we learn, this in itself helps us have more clarity around our own processes. And when listening to other practitioners, we see similarities –
our shared humanity – as well as differences, and we celebrate diversity without the compulsiveness of debate or needing to agree.

It is not uncommon for one person to share something and another to jump in with a ‘Well, but I think…’ Instead, listen openly, give space for that person’s process, and when your turn comes then share your experience. This is not at the expense of discussion, it isn’t either one or the other; but distinguishing sharing from discussion and discerning when each is appropriate allows for more richness, both for the participants and the group.

Sharing requires a lot of courage, while voicing opinions can be a way to avoid looking inside. In the well-worn and thought-out world of your opinions there is little possibility for change and waking up. It is rather a world of cement, ever-solidifying. To add a step where you notice these reactions and identify them, without being dragged by them, is crucial for self-knowledge.

**Bring the mind back – whatever mind**

Just as when we meditate the mind flies out to other worlds – and when you notice this you may choose to bring it back – so groups have collective minds that do the same. And just as with our own minds, we learn to identify where the collective mind frequently goes, what diverts it from the subject, why it flees, and so on. We gently notice that we have moved away from what guided the conversation, and with our intervention we bring it back, without punishing anyone but without shyness: ‘Going back to the earlier question, I have observed in me that…’

Having said that, there are times when a conversation takes unexpected but fruitful diversions and returning it to the marked path would be forced or inadequate. This is not about policing the debate, but about seeking a balance that respects an organic group discussion while not losing sight of our intention, the 'why we meet'. Yet another middle way...

A different form of (partial) avoidance is *swimming in surrounding waters*. That is, to address the issue but in an indirect or generalised manner, with little attention to the specifics of...
the question that has been suggested as an exploration. I have seen this in a multitude of environments – and I recognise it is my particular OCD.

A few months ago in a study retreat, we were divided into small groups to inquire and share. My group was assigned the question ‘How have you practiced with desire? What has worked and what hasn’t?’ Not only did the first intervention already set sail for ‘Is desire bad?’ – a textbook example of fleeing to the theoretical, as interesting as that question may be – but most of the conversation tiptoed vaguely around the subject. Only very exceptionally was the specific question of what had we found useful addressed.

This may happen if the topic raised has mostly not been part of our practice. A supportive environment should allow that admission with equally open arms: ‘I have not practiced this’, ‘I had never thought about it’, ‘I forgot to do the exercise’. In your community’s meditation sessions there should be no reason to pretend; a sitting group welcomes both the place where you are now in your life and your possibility to keep journeying. Sincerity opens up paths and invites excursions, though it may not always be comfortable; to pretend encourages denial, not full awareness.

**Mindfulness, experimentation and courage**

The awakening factors (*bojjhaṅga*) can be read in terms of what encourages good practice and good sangha, especially the first three. The seven factors of awakening are a list of positive qualities to cultivate. In Pali, they are literally the ‘legs of awakening’; what awakening walks on.

Heading the list, what a surprise, is mindfulness (*sati*). All practices require that we be present and exercise full awareness. But here the ‘recollecting’ meaning of *sati* takes on special relevance: if your community chooses to practice mindful communication in daily life, first of all you need to remember it and keep the topic in mind.

Secondly, the willingness to investigate (*dhammavicaya*) is essential. It’s the opposite of opinions, for these often sabotage true inquiry. For example: in various environments, I have noticed a common reaction to the suggestion of not speaking falsehoods. Since it sounds like a dogma – lying is bad and you will go to hell – an ideological mindset is
triggered: this clashes with your ideology, you do not think you will go to hell, therefore you cannot say that lying is bad, therefore it is good. Problem solved, there is nothing to examine any more.

But this is not about abstract positions, about disagreeing or agreeing. If I remember that the goal is not to moralise or reach a maxim, I relate to the exercise from a place curiosity, opening up and inquiring into why I lied about X or exaggerated when telling Y. In some cases you may conclude that it does not matter to say something untrue, while in others you may make some discoveries.

It was in an exercise of this kind that I realised that I was hiding something from people, and that I lied when asked. The exercise made me question why. ‘What if deep down I think I shouldn’t be doing this, and hiding it is a way of deceiving myself? Or maybe I lie for fear of rejection and this prevents me from really connecting to people.’ Whatever the conclusion in that particular case, the experimental approach put me on a fertile ground where things could happen.

Dharma practice includes challenging our patterns and self-images. Addressing them from moral dogma, absolutes or confrontation will not lead anywhere: we will close down. It is better to do it with a spirit of playfulness and experimentation: ‘what happens if I try this for a week, or give that up?’ This does not rule out reflection; quite the contrary, reflection will have more data to build on – experiences, not assumptions.

Such experimentation, of course, requires a lot of courage and honesty, which leads us to the third leg of awakening: viriya, usually translated as energy, or effort. The term, connected with the idea of ‘hero’, has the same etymological origin as ‘virility’ or ‘virtue’. So we can read it as ‘courage’ in this context. (Interestingly, courage is one of the cardinal virtues of stoicism.)

To contemplate the reality of our behaviour and our inner world, bare, with radical sincerity and acceptance, is not going to be Netflix & chill. But that’s what community is for; that’s why we need to support each other, to share difficulties and joys, doubts and discoveries, reminding us again and again that we are not alone on this path.
With every meeting we encourage each other, and every meeting serves as a much-needed reminder to reestablish our intentions. Moreover, shared intentions are much more powerful, they are a collective effort motivated by the aspiration to find wellbeing and contribute to a better society, the positive qualities that we cultivate being a gift both for ourselves and for all those with whom we interact.

In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, after a long retreat Nandiya asks the Buddha how to practice at home. He responds with a teaching known as the six recollections (*anussati*) – notice the *sati* in that word. But in this particular text, the third of these recollections contains a variation. While in the standard versions the third recollection refers to the community in the sense of realised beings – which in Theravada ends up as a synonym for just a monastic community – this text speaks of friendships in the practice.

*Nandiya, you have to remember your good friends: ‘I am fortunate, so fortunate, to have good friends that advise and instruct me out of empathy and compassion.’ This is how you should establish mindfulness internally based on good friends.  

*Nandiya Sutta, AN 11.13*

We live too much under the unkind ideology that we must face alone tasks worthy of the myth of Sisyphus; but there is no need to face the dharma in the same way. Individualism is suffocating, cutting the social fabric weakens rather than frees us, and the story of the Buddha abandoning his companions in order to pursue his awakening helps no-one.

I wonder whether that story is due to a certain heroic archetype that belittles collaboration as a sign of weakness, because surely the Buddha was too perfect to have needed any help…! But I’m not sure that archetype fits well with what he later taught. In the texts, the narrative of individual heroism coexists with the emphasis on community. In any case, I doubt it’s a useful narrative today. In an era where we mistake connectivity for connection, we need to be there with one another.