

# Building Blocks of Belonging

 [lionsroar.com/building-blocks-of-belonging](https://lionsroar.com/building-blocks-of-belonging)

By Willa Blythe Baker

October 1, 2021

**According to Willa Blythe Baker, making a strong, healthy community starts with understanding how it is constructed.**



“Days of Spring,” 2021. Painting by Yeachin Tsai. © Yeachin Tsai

The first practice the Buddha taught his disciples was the practice of refuge. For 2,600 years, Buddhists have engaged in a ritual of reliance on buddha (the enlightened guides), dharma (the teachings), and sangha (spiritual community). Taking up this basic practice is the act of entering the dharma community. It's how we step inside.

These sources of refuge—buddha, dharma, and sangha—are likened to three jewels. The teacher, the teachings, and the community of practitioners are jewel-like in the sense of being valuable and magnetic sources of safety and support. They are jewel-like in that they refract the light of truth into a thousand colors. In buddha, we seek refuge from instability. In dharma, we seek refuge from ignorance. In sangha, we seek refuge from fear and loneliness; we discover that no matter who we are, no matter what we have done, we can find belonging.

Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary, social scientists who do research on the psychology and behaviors of groups, have concluded that humans share a need to belong, “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and impactful interpersonal relationships.” Put another way, we need one another in order to thrive and grow. We are safer and happier when we bond together.

It has even been demonstrated that when humans feel lonely, their brain circuits light up in the same regions that register physical pain. Loneliness literally hurts. Is it any wonder that many who end up at the doorway to community come to assuage the pain of loneliness? From our isolation, we are drawn to belong.

I lived in a Buddhist monastery for over a decade. I arrived feeling fearful and fractured, having just lost my mother to a sudden aneurism. I remember a conversation from my first visit there. I was in the dining hall, speaking to a monk and nun, and I brought up the subject of my mother's passing. I braced myself for a change of subject, which is what I had become used to—the awkward silence, the “I'm so sorry for your loss,” the pivot to lighter matters. Instead, these two people leaned in. “Tell me what happened. How did she die?”

There, the subject of death was not unwelcome. I was relieved. It felt, as if for the first time, like someone was mirroring back to me that what happened was not a tragedy. It is part of being human, this mortality. You can learn from it—a lot. In that monastery, I found a culture of reflecting on death as a practice.

All communities harbor their own cultures, for better and for worse. A community's culture is a shared perspective that surrounds our sanghas like an aura, emerging from what we think, believe, feel, and do. It is by nature invisible, intangible. The death culture found in Buddhist sanghas is an example of a shared perspective, one that opens up a new vista of understanding for those of us who live in a death-denying society. This might be one of the better parts of sangha culture, when we find that subjects that are taboo elsewhere are welcomed here. That can produce healing. We find ourselves making friends with people who can support us in ways that others cannot, or will not.

## Seeding Culture

---

One chilly day in a moment of pandemic-lockdown fever, I decided to pursue bread baking. My sourdough guru, Elaine, looked me in the eye through the screen of my laptop and said sternly, “It all comes down to the culture.”

Elaine meant “culture” in the sense of an organic catalyst, the combination of a living organism (yeast) and a nurturing environment conducive to its growth, but she could just as well have been talking about sangha. Community is a living, breathing, embodied ecosystem, and our intentions and attitudes provide a culture that is either conducive or detrimental to the growth of the individuals who find refuge there. Dimensions of our community culture can be nurturing or toxic—and often, despite our best intentions, they are both. The quality of our sangha comes down to its culture, yet rarely do we step back to evaluate what it is—or why.

Most dharma communities, though strong in values, are weak in structures. This is overlooked by most people walking in the door. They are looking for a dharma that fits. They rarely look at the contours of power.

In sangha, we inherit a live culture passed down to us by our spiritual ancestors. There are dimensions of this culture—art, music, rituals, chanting, practices of meditation, both the material culture and the non-material culture—that are beautiful and compelling. But Buddhist culture also includes practices, attitudes, and beliefs that clash radically with our local customs, assumptions, and education. At its best, this clash is productive, inviting countercultural ideas that enhance our lives, our community, and our families. But the clash also reveals dimensions of this inherited culture as unsuitable for our time and place.

It has taken some decades of Buddhism’s presence in the West for practitioners to gradually entertain the possibility that there are dimensions of this inherited tradition that can be prejudicial. For example, we might inherit sectarianism, a tribal culture where only initiates feel welcome. This vibe of exclusivity can be poison. It sets up the group to define itself against others who are “outsiders.”

Patriarchy, too, has saturated Buddhist institutions in Asia for millennia; its stain has become mixed with the practice, with source texts, and with power structures. It too is a toxin. If we don’t recognize and name patriarchy, it will infect our minds, hearts, and spirit, here in North America and specifically in your sangha.

This clash doesn’t have to be a crash. It can be an invitation to discern what is right, fair, true, and useful. For the dharma to thrive, it must fit the culture it is in—it must become a seed that can thrive in the soil of this particular time and place. How will the dharma manifest here? Who will have access to it? What values will we teach the next generation?

## Feeding Culture

---

To maintain a sourdough starter, you need to feed it. The white froth of starter in its jar in the fridge is healthy and strong, but you need to add water and flour every day to keep it that way, or your yeast will run out of food and ultimately die.

Daily feeding is what keeps a culture strong. Cultures are fed by small acts of communication, gestures of kindness, statements of inclusion. Sometimes, it's just one word or a smile. Those of us who carry the mantle of sangha, who are community members, would do well to feed our culture consciously. This means starting to ask what we want to see in our communities. A culture of inclusion? A culture of compassion, of kindness? Of planetary thinking? A culture of transparency? Collaboration?

Sangha cultures are seeded by the dharma, and by the ideas and values of the people who arrive at the door. They are also seeded by our wider culture's shadows and strengths: racism, sexism, democracy, technology. All kinds of cultural influences are in play. You can be passive about these influences, or you can collectively name the kind of culture you want to support and create. Once you name it, as much as possible, you have to begin to hold yourself to that standard. Holding yourself to that standard, again and again, changes your culture.

Cultures need time to change. Change happens when you spend time together while holding yourself and each other to the standard set by your conscious culture. Change allows for fermentation: time spent together, feeding your culture through action and ongoing collaboration gradually shifts the interpersonal dynamics.

Fermentation is organic, but it isn't passive. You can influence your community's fermentation. You can intentionally nurture attitudes, values, goals, and practices. When others visit your community, they will not just be bathed in the dharma—they will also taste its fermentation. So feed your culture well.

## **The Shape of Community**

---

A community's culture is profoundly influenced by its structure, by how it is shaped; most dharma communities, though strong in values, are weak in structure. This is overlooked by most people walking into the door of a center. They are looking for a dharma that fits. They rarely look at the contours of power. But a community's health is directly tied to its power structure. The loci of control in an organization are reflected in the map of how information flows and how decisions are made.

The most common shape utilized in conventional organizational charts is a pyramid, with power concentrated at the apex, representing the leader (or in a company, the CEO). In sanghas, that leader is a single teacher or guide, and the broad base is the community providing financial and labor support; the board of directors and committees come somewhere in between.

In the pyramid structure, decisions can be made and implemented swiftly because control and power flow down from a single point. Little or no communal discussion is needed to make things happen. Such structures can function with stability and ease for years. But there are issues endemic in such an arrangement.

First is the problem of the peak itself. The single person who sits at the peak of an organization is but one mind and experiential field. This person, no matter how intelligent or awake, cannot see every dimension of a problem or issue. Their solution will be limited to their own circumscribed view. The decisions that flow down from the apex are therefore out of sync with the realities further down, where tension and stress become concentrated. This is why pyramid structures are unstable and eventually collapse.

The peak also points to a problem of human nature. Power has a way of intoxicating and corrupting; no human being can thrive when offered total power. The teachings of Buddha also affirm that we do not thrive when the ego is in charge.

When an entire community turns attention to but one single person, that person becomes isolated and vulnerable to ethical myopia. Is it any wonder that so many communities dissolve due to the mistakes of one person?

Perhaps it is time to consider new shapes for Buddhist communities.

Imagine a mandala, with its concentric and overlapping geometrical shapes and patterns, the many circles, triangles, and squares. The mandala was originally meant to represent wholeness. It is a model for the organizational fabric of life itself, a cosmic diagram that shows the relationship to the infinite and the world that extends beyond, and within, our minds and bodies.

The mandala also provides an alternative shape for community in a postpatriarchal world. By the principle of mandala, decision-making happens in circles, in the sense of collaborations and conversations. The circle model is one of relational wisdom, a shape that centralizes the wisdom of the group.

At times these circles become literal, as in the practice of council, a nonhierarchical practice of sitting in a circle and sharing voices with a “talking stick.” The talking stick ensures that everyone in the circle is invited to speak and that everyone must listen deeply to everyone else.

Tension helps a community keep its shape. Tension, specifically in the form of dissent, keeps a community healthy.

At Natural Dharma Fellowship, where I teach, we host multiple Ecosattva Councils that are explicitly designed to invite reflection on the plight of the planet and climate, as well as our community’s impact on the environment.

These councils reflect the overall principle of mandala: it is a community of circles.

Another shape we have found helpful in our community is the “root structure.” This is a diagram that attempts to capture the flow of information, conversation, and decision-making that happens organically in sangha. In other words, this is a map structure that is arrived at by reflection and inquiry into how things are actually happening, as opposed to how we’d like them to happen in theory.

We examine root structures not to superimpose a structure via assumed roles and responsibilities, but rather to describe what is already present via deep inquiry into how decisions are arrived at and implemented. The result is a diagram showing how individuals, committees, and groups form nodules and intersections. Sometimes the result of this mapping is revealing. It demonstrates distributions of power that are unexpected and not what anyone thought.

## **Divine Dissent**

---

Many people who are drawn to Buddhist sanghas are introverts. Many of us are conflict-averse; we don’t appreciate tension. But in fact, tension helps a community keep its shape. Tension, specifically in the form of dissent, keeps community healthy.

About a year ago, I was chatting with a friend who had recently accepted a position on a dharma center board of directors. One of the other members of this board seemed to be a bit challenging. As my friend told it, “Every time something comes up for a vote, the president asks, ‘Are there any objections?’ Maude always has an objection! It drives me crazy. We spend so much extra time.”

Recently, I asked her how the board work was going. She said, “Thank goodness for Maude! She is always holding us to task. I think every decision we have made has been better because of her.”

I reminded her of the previous chat, and it led us to reflect on the value of dissent. Dissent is tension—it pushes and pulls us to keep second-guessing our initiatives. That second-guessing is necessary to avoid heading down the path of herd mentality. It keeps organizations from bending to pressures of centrifugal force that surround a community’s leaders.

Embracing tension is the practice of remembering the wrathful mandala—the principle that we sometimes need to be shaken in order to wake up. When someone challenges a community, it does not mean things are going wrong, but rather that we are being called to consider how we have been asleep. It’s a wake-up call to inquire into what has gone unseen and unrecognized. It is a call to become more aware.

Another tension in community is around individual agency. In a group with shared values, you feel as if you are among your people in community, as if you have found companions on your path. But that feeling can prioritize the group, lending it an importance of its own that

usurps the welfare of any one individual. Being a member of a group, while rewarding, can erode personal power, especially if ongoing sacrifices are required to remain connected to the community. Humans need a sense of agency.

Compromise and surrender are required for communities to work. But in order not to do things that you don't believe in, you need agency to challenge. That's the paradox. It's a tension you can never entirely escape. Simply naming the need for balance between group harmony and individual agency can help each of us discern when to compromise and when to challenge, when to be generous with one's energy or to practice self-care, when to engage and when to recharge.

How do we guard against the loss of agency? First, by becoming mindful of this tension between group and individual, and second, by putting structures into place that protect the agency of individuals. Every member of the sangha is one face of the community. Everyone must have some voice or forum in which to be heard and have influence. Everyone must feel seen not only for how they contribute to the welfare of the group, but also for how they embody their own unique personhood.

Especially in a residential setting, we should ask: do individuals have vehicles for creativity and self-expression? Are they getting sufficient rest? Do they have time away from the community? Are there outlets for individuals to express their unique perspectives, ideas, and visions?

Communities also need the uncomfortable tension of receiving feedback. In some Tibetan Buddhist empowerments, there is a moment when the ritualist shows the community a mirror—that moment symbolizes how the mind reflects all of phenomena and, at the same time, how all phenomena is a mirror of the mind. Soliciting and taking in feedback is one way for communities to hold up their own mirrors.

At times, it is impossible to see ourselves or our own community clearly. The mirror might come in the shape of an anonymous feedback form after a retreat, or a comment or reflection from a family member who comes to visit us in community. It might be a friend who sits at the back of the dharma hall and tells us how the teaching went for them.

Whatever the shape of the mirror, one of the most important things we can do in community is to normalize reflection and feedback. It is challenging to look in the mirror; we are often afraid of what we might see. But it's only by looking that we can see and recognize what needs to be changed or improved.

## **Cross-Fertilization**

---

Communities need cross-fertilization to guard against becoming isolated. If a community only hosts teachers or ministers from within its own ranks, that is a red flag. Cross-fertilization happens by inviting teachers as well as by extending members and leaders out



into other communities. This is how a community stays fresh and relevant; it's how to maintain a sense of humility and curiosity within leadership and sangha.

When you hang out only with people who share your beliefs, those beliefs go unchallenged. And yes, doctrines should be continually challenged, or we fall into systems of belief that harm or enslave. Just by introducing new teachers, new lineage connections, connections outside your denomination or even outside your home religion, your home dharma culture becomes enriched.

In some Buddhist texts, the primal elements of water and fire align with compassion and wisdom. Once the shape of a community has formed, the water of compassion and the fire of wisdom are our protection. Compassion is the only medium in which deep and meaningful relationships with others can grow and flourish. Compassion communicates beyond words and doctrine. It protects a community from falling into judgment and reductive thinking. It is the mother of patience and tolerance. This can be felt by everyone, the bottom line for a viable Buddhist community.

Wisdom, the fire of community, is the second protection. Yes, there is the ultimate wisdom of enlightenment. But until then, there are discernment, empirical awareness, and critical thinking. These relative wisdoms can burn up obstacles, provide illumination of a community's shared path, and forge bonds based on a collective vision of compassion rather than doctrine. With the water of compassion and fire of wisdom as a community's protection, collective awakening is not only possible, it might be inevitable.

### **About Willa Blythe Baker**

---

Willa Blythe Baker is the founder and spiritual director of Natural Dharma Fellowship in Boston as well as its retreat center, Wonderwell Mountain Refuge, in Springfield, New Hampshire. She is an authorized teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, having completed two three-year retreats, and the author of *The Arts of Contemplative Care*, *Everyday Dharma*, and *Essence of Ambrosia*. Her forthcoming book explores the body's natural wisdom.