

Spiritual Support Group

*Sarah Powers and Dave Nelson on the practical importance of
belonging to a community of like-minded souls*

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THE IDEA OF SANGHA, from the Sanskrit word meaning “collection” or “community,” is firmly rooted in Buddhism, where along with the Buddha and the dharma, sangha is considered one of the three refuges from suffering. The concept of community is less established in classical yoga philosophy. Though ashrams, where students live together under the guidance of a guru, are certainly yoga communities, walking the yogic path is often a solitary pursuit, especially in our times, when students routinely squeeze in a yoga class after a long day at the office before rushing home for what remains of the evening. Though yoga classes can be fertile soil for community, it takes effort and intention to create and sustain a sangha. We asked yoga teachers David Nelson and Sarah Powers to share what steps they’ve taken in their own yoga studios to foster the support and shared vision of community.

After receiving certification from Ganga White and Tracey Rich of the White Lotus Foundation in 1988, David Nelson opened Castro Yoga as a service to his San Francisco neighborhood, which had no yoga studio. Currently a student of Advanced Senior Iyengar Instructor Manouso Manos, Nelson has also studied Bikram and Ashtanga Yoga.

Sarah Powers offers classes at the Deer Run Zendo in Corte Madera, California, where she teaches a blend of yoga styles and Buddhist meditation techniques. A yoga teacher for 15 years, Powers presents workshops internationally. Featured in the 2001 Yoga Journal calendar, Powers recently released a video, Yin Vinyasa Yoga (available from www.SarahPowers.com).

Yoga Journal: What does the word “sangha” mean to you?

Sarah Powers: I learned about sangha when I entered the dharma community of Buddhism. I’m sure sangha existed in yoga too, but in the 12 years I had spent practicing asana, it wasn’t emphasized. I did have a vague idea that sangha referred to the kinship of people practicing yoga, but actually the term refers to those who make the practice the focus of their life. It’s a monastic community. In a modern context sangha broadly represents that huge

umbrella under which people who delve into the mystery of being can find refuge and obtain a sense of belonging.

David Nelson: Because of its monastic connotations, I wouldn't use the word sangha. I use the word community instead. What characterizes the yoga community beyond what we do on the sticky mat is lifestyle: It's what we eat, read, consume, and don't consume, and generally how we treat one another. It's the way yoga practice permeates our lives. When this attitude finds expression among a group of people, you have a modern sangha—a community centered on yoga.

YJ: What does being part of a yoga community require?

SP: It requires becoming available to your spiritual family outside of the formal practice. It requires taking time at the beginning or end of a class to get to know one another or to share a moment of friendliness when we meet at the market, not to rush and treat each other like businessmen who believe time is money. It requires connecting on a regular basis until you feel like you've become part of a larger whole.

DN: I grew up in a small town in Iowa, where I learned that even though each one of us has a private life, there's also a fabric woven by the community. When the need arrives, people show up. Death, illness, birth, and joyful events occur in life, and the community shows up to either lend support or enjoy the party. Each one knows it's his or her responsibility to be there. I see this small-town quality of community care at the core of a modern sangha.

YJ: How successful have you been at creating community?

SP: Since the yoga teachers I knew in San Francisco only saw one another at conferences, I decided to start a group that met more regularly about four years ago. A few female yoga teachers I knew started to participate in what I called a "Yoga Woman's Circle." Now we meet once a month to unravel our heartaches, hopes, and insights. This group of six to 10 women has become the core of my sangha. There's community among my yoga students too. We gather monthly for a potluck. But unlike the typical party, we sit in a circle and individually introduce ourselves. This way if you need an architect or a lawyer, perhaps you can find the right person in yoga class. It's another way of building relationships beyond the studio.

DN: My partner and I established Castro Yoga with the intention of providing a community service. It wasn't a business so much as a gathering place.

Everything we do is geared toward building community. At the beginning of class, I ask students to introduce themselves to someone new. It's simple but effective. Within minutes the class becomes more sociable and friendships develop. At times we do partner poses; I'm not a big fan of these as a yoga teacher, but working together helps people get to know one another. When students meet on the street, they remember each other and identify themselves as part of the local yoga community. We often have potlucks and three-day intensives, and we use the Internet to stay in touch. The community created by a yoga studio can be very strong. I met my wife through yoga, and most of my friends.

YJ: Does community necessitate a shared philosophical frame, or can it simply evolve among a group of asana practitioners?

SP: It can start wherever you enter the path. Asana seems a likely doorway for the larger community because people from all different backgrounds feel safe doing asana—it doesn't ask them to question their underlying beliefs. But even so, when people enter the path of yoga, they begin to change. Sometimes this makes them feel lonely because no one else they know is watching their breath and becoming more mindful. Sharing their discoveries with family and friends can be alienating. And that's where sangha comes in. I always suggest that new students begin making friends in yoga class to support one another through the changes that inevitably take place.

DN: A traditional sangha certainly requires a philosophical basis, but a sense of community can start with asana. You just have to provide venues outside of class for yogis to meet. Through parties and weekend intensives, we provide a setting for relationships to develop. Intensives work especially well because when students delve deeply into themselves, the relationships they establish in this state of mind tend to run deeper.

YJ: Yoga is a path to self-realization. How does being part of a community help us through this process?

SP: Community can be a mirror. When we practice in isolation, we get feelings of grandeur, explosions of insight and spiritual expansion—but then these don't hold up off the mat. Insight becomes wisdom only when it is rooted in the stream of your being, and that comes across in the way you relate. Without interaction, you really don't know who you are. It's especially important to have this reflection when you get confused and delusional. I think the yoga community could certainly benefit from this. We could become a stronger group of people if we build a sangha that helps those who stray get

back on the path?rather than damning them behind their backs. The Buddhist community does this, and it works.

DN: Many problems can take us away from yoga. Few of us can go it alone for very long. A community of practitioners exerts positive peer pressure that helps us keep going. For example, students attending a retreat have the opportunity to experience what it's like to develop relationships centered on personal growth. These relationships become the benchmark for other relationships in their personal lives. The community becomes an extension of practice and integral to it.

YJ: So much of what we learn in yoga is the fruit of turning inward and tuning into our deepest self. Doesn't community ask us to turn outward? Is there a balance to strike between the two?

SP: That's the flip side, and it could be the subject of a whole separate dialogue. I've had to learn to strike a balance to remain healthy. I have my own practice space, and when I'm there, no one knocks on the door or enters uninvited. Delimiting your privacy and finding time to cultivate the inner ear is as important as cultivating community. I am always watching to make sure that I don't stray into too much social life or too much silence. It's a pendulum that swings both ways, so you have to monitor it constantly.

DN: Our home is a block from the yoga school, and we open our doors to students as a part of the program. We try to demonstrate by example a lifestyle commensurate with yoga practice. This makes it very difficult to balance community with privacy. But the success of my teaching depends on how deeply I've delved into myself. I've had to learn to put my practice and family relationships first. Introspection is at the core of yoga. Without personal boundaries, there's no way to draw from that core and hence nothing to share with the community.

YJ: Aren't problems of the ego—such as pride, competition, and envy—more likely to crop up in a community, when people are in relationships with one another?

SP: Ego problems come from being unenlightened. They're there whether you're alone or with people. It's just easier to ignore the ego by yourself. In a community of practitioners, the conflicts may be more obvious, but you can also learn to model your actions after those who are farther on the path. Their example helps guide you. Then again, competition is indeed a special problem for yogis because the asana practice is outward. Buddhists can't compare the

relative depth of each one's meditation in the same way yogis can compare asanas. That's where the teacher steps in to tone down the level of classroom competition. Unwittingly we share both our confusion and clarity, and that's the benefit and difficulty of a sangha. It makes the practice a gift to those around us, as well as to ourselves.

DN: I don't see the ego or competition as a major obstacle to creating community, but rather our busy, ever changing lives, especially in cities like San Francisco, where people come and go in droves. For 20 years HIV has been decimating our population. We've now lost legions to the dot-com meltdown. Any community requires continuity—for people to mature and grow through years of living together—and that's the real challenge.

YJ: So how do you maintain and strengthen the personal bonds with your sangha?

DN: We've made some progress by staying in touch through the Internet. I write a weekly newsletter. We have parties. We provide intensive yoga retreats on holidays, which gives us time to deepen ties. We focus yoga offerings on specific populations, with prenatal and postnatal classes and programs for those suffering with HIV. Perhaps even more than asana and pranayama, students benefit from building relationships with like-minded people living through similar experiences. It provides a reason to stick together.

SP: One of the ironies of our community is that when people redefine themselves and try to center their lives on yoga, they often start to struggle financially. This creates more stress and less time for community building. That's why I started the circle of women yoga teachers; we make it a point to gather, in spite of our busy lives.

YJ: What steps can you suggest for a lonely yogi who would like to develop sangha?

SP: I tell my students to write sangha time into their calendars. Schedule time to gather with people who have the same interests, to share ideas, recommend books, eat together, and bare the joys and difficulties of life. Make this a priority and an important part of your practice. Find a yoga center, like David's Castro Yoga, where you feel included. Read the bulletin board and participate in some events. It's usually in these gatherings outside of class that friendships develop. Buddhists see sangha as vital to the spiritual life. I would like this idea to grow in the yoga community. I'd like to see less

cattiness about the differences among various schools and greater interest in joining hands as a force to help transform society for the better.

DN: Building community requires perseverance and discipline, like asana. Take the initiative to start a group and see who shows up. Reach out to people in your class; you'll find they are developing similar insights and have similar needs. As you change, some old friendships fall away, but new and better ones form. When you teach with the purpose of supporting the local community, you'll eventually succeed in building sangha, a community built upon yoga practice, and a better place to live.