"I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha."

These three statements just about define a Buddhist: they affirm the centrality of the Buddha himself, the Buddha's teaching (the Dharma), and the community that follows the Buddha's teaching (the Sangha). In the Christian tradition, the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed both contain the clause, [I believe in . . .]

"the communion of saints" -- that is, the community of people who follow Jesus and his teaching. And one sight that never ceases to inspire me is that of Muslims at corporate prayer, standing (and prostrating themselves) shoulder-to-shoulder -- a very visual representation of the solidarity of the ummat al-mu'minin (the Community of Believers). All of these are communities of common purpose and support.

The notion of community reflected in our religious traditions is also central among all human societies (and many non-human societies, as represented by our meerkat friends above). One of the features, however, of our contemporary culture seems to be either an erosion of, or re-definition of, "community". Social networks, or other "virtual communities", clearly serve a wonderful purpose; I was just "friended" by an old grade/high school classmate who lives 1000 miles away. Given our mobile society, and the geographical diffusion of professional contacts and family/friends, the internet has been a great boon.

The downside of both our mobility and our ether-connectivity is the potential neglect of face-to-face community. I talk with folks who don't know their neighbors: "the community is so transient, why bother?" We text-message people in the next room rather than get up and go talk to them. We walk side-by-side down the street, apparently talking, but both of us plugged in to separate iPods, one of us listening to hip-hop, the other to Beethoven. So is this an erosion of community? Or a redefinition? Or a manifesto to independence (the old "I'll do my thing; you do yours")?

I've recently had cause to re-think my "community" involvements. I've been in a position of "need", but not known where to turn. Of course, I've not wanted to admit any dependence on others; I'm self-sufficient! But, sometimes, those comeuppances . . . come up! And I do need help. Where do I turn if I haven't nurtured the relationships, the communities? Facebook got me sympathy, but not direct help. And I ultimately had to reach out, forsaking my independence, and avail myself of the interdependence that truly characterizes us.

We are at a time when our various communities face dissolution: seniors graduate and disperse, faculty and staff retire or leave for other pastures, families choose the end-of-the-school year to move to a different city. Many of us will stay in touch through social networks; that's great! But, to all of us, let us not neglect gathering together personally! Let's claim (wherever we may go), or reclaim (if we're staying put), physical community and declare our interdependence!

Blessings,

Gary