

UNITED WISDOM

Being present in a small shared undertaking

Meaning and Direction

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

P-24-N01 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *look ye out among you*

Acts 6:3, short excerpt, King James Version. The source concerns choosing people for a particular task within an early Christian community; its religious criteria and organization remain in context.

What this article is about

A small shared undertaking begins simply: a few people want to hold a gathering, prepare a room, arrange a reading, or help with a clearly understood task. Questions then emerge that were missing from the first enthusiasm: who clarifies details, who decides, who stays afterward, and may someone decline next time? Being present involves more than being nearby or sharing a good intention. It means seeing the task, the participants, and one's own responsibility together. This article turns to Acts, Benedict's Rule, the Analects, a Buddhist discourse on admirable companionship, and the Bhagavad-Gita. Their communities, obligations, and ultimate purposes differ. We compare limited questions from these texts with contemporary voluntary participation without making a small group a universal model of fairness. The practical aim is to understand what makes a chosen undertaking truly shared and how a person wants to participate in it.

I. What is being called shared

A shared undertaking does not arise merely from having several people involved. People can sit in one room carrying out someone else's plan without access to its conditions. They can also participate from a distance in an agreed part of the work. Here, shared describes a limited relationship: several people recognize a task, know its important conditions, and can discuss their participation. This is a working definition, not a theory of every family, religious community, or organization. Different obligations and power relationships must be named separately where they exist. Shared should not conceal who chooses the aim or whose agreement is actually required. Without clarification, an agreeable name may leave the entire arrangement with one person while everybody else is expected simply to support that person's intentions.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Imagine neighbours arranging a gathering for shared reading. One sees it as discussing a text, another as meeting people, and a third is willing only to provide the room. These intentions may coexist without automatically being identical. If the difference stays unnamed, preparation can quickly become an argument about what everyone supposedly promised. A straightforward description helps: what will happen, for whom, when, and what has each person already agreed to do? It need not exhaust the gathering's meaning. It creates a place in which participants recognize their actual agreements. A person need not adopt someone else's entire plan to participate in an understandable part, or defend a limited commitment as though it were evidence of inadequate goodwill.

Small size guarantees no clarity. Even three people can have unequal influence, inaccessible information, and unspoken expectations. A small circle may depend especially strongly on personal relationships: it can be hard to question someone whose friendship matters. Discussing conditions before resentment develops can therefore help. This need not turn a gathering into a burdensome contractual process. A few conditions that affect participation may suffice: time, expenses, a way to decide disagreements, and freedom to revise a promise. Clearer conditions reduce the need to infer intentions from somebody's mood. Yet clarity remains shared work: one person's wording must be accessible to others, and their silence cannot automatically be treated as complete agreement with every future detail.

II. Presence begins with a task and a response

Presence can be confused with endless availability. Someone replies quickly to every request, remembers all the details, and becomes the first person everyone approaches. That may be a chosen role, but it may also be a workload that emerged gradually without explicit agreement. For a small undertaking, a particular response is more useful: what is being proposed now, what can I do, and what information am I missing? I can clarify tomorrow may be more attentive than an immediate yes with no capacity behind it. Presence is not measured by speed of agreement. It concerns whether participation fits an actual understanding of the task and enables others to plan from clear information instead of expecting another person's permanent enthusiasm.

In an imagined example, a participant offers to order materials without knowing the quantity or spending limit. Wanting to help, they regard questions as unnecessary delay. The purchase then fails to meet some participants' needs, and a dispute begins over payment. The issue may be omitted conditions rather than insufficient goodwill. Information and authority to decide were needed before acting. Examining the episode does not require declaring someone generally unreliable. A particular error, its consequences, and a revised arrangement can be discussed. A good relationship cannot replace information about the task. Nor must an error

destroy participation if the group can discuss correction without humiliation or requiring someone to accept any cost merely to preserve an agreeable image of togetherness.

Sometimes the needed response is declining a role while retaining the relationship. Someone may want to attend a reading without being able to lead it, or help once without promising a continuing shift. This can be stated directly without preparing a defence of one's whole life. Others may decide whether the proposed contribution fits the task; they need not accept every offer. Discussion should nevertheless concern the offer and its conditions, rather than the person's worth. Where a role is binding under a previously chosen agreement, the question concerns revision and handover instead of simply disappearing. Freedom to set a boundary then includes responsible communication, while responsibility remains attached to an actual agreement rather than the undefined expectation that a good participant will always be able to do more.

III. Confucius: capacity instead of demanding everything

In Analects 13.25, Legge contrasts ways of dealing with people: one employs them according to capacity, while another expects them to be equal to everything. This retains historical language about a superior and those serving, rather than a contemporary team of equals. We do not transfer that hierarchy to a voluntary group. For this subject, the question of matching a role to actual capacity is enough. Participation gains no precision by demanding that everybody simultaneously organize, know the subject, assist, and provide agreeable conversation. A limited contribution may be significant. Neighbouring 13.23 distinguishes affability from flattery in this translation; it likewise supplies no demand to accept every request for the sake of comfortable interaction. Analects 13.23–13.25, Legge translation.

Suppose one participant explains a text well, another creates understandable conditions for the gathering, and a third notices newcomers' questions. If the undertaking recognizes only the talk, the other contributions become invisible maintenance. Assigning everyone the same role also erases differences in capacity and desire. Parts of the work can be described separately and people asked which they are willing to take. This does not permanently confine anyone to familiar capacities. Someone may want to learn a new role, while another may not want always to perform the role they already do well. Time, support, and clear agreement are then needed. Attending to capacity does not make it destiny. Shared participation permits competence, learning, and declining to use a skill on every available occasion.

Different contributions need not become different levels of human worth. An organizer may receive more attention because their work is more visible. Someone maintaining the arrangement may instead begin to regard themselves as the only genuinely useful participant. Returning to the task can help in either case: which parts are needed, and what happens if one is missing? This names dependence without ranking whole persons. Payment or

acknowledgment, where involved, should be discussed directly. Words about equality cannot replace a fair decision about particular work. At the same time, every difference in conditions is not an insult: roles may require different time and responsibility. The relevant questions concern the grounds of those differences, access to discussion, and whether participants can actually agree to the proposed arrangement.

IV. Acts: noticing neglect within shared work

Acts 6:1–7 describes a complaint that widows belonging to one part of the community were neglected in the daily distribution. The response involves choosing people for that work and distinguishing ministry of the word from daily provision. This is an early Christian narrative in which prayer, faith, and religious criteria matter. It is no instruction for organizing every contemporary group or historical proof of every proposed solution's effectiveness. For comparison, the transition from complaint to examining an arrangement is important. The community's common name did not exclude neglect within its everyday work. Good intentions should therefore not be treated as proof that every necessary act occurred. A contemporary undertaking also needs a way to notice who was left outside its promised attention. Acts 6:1–7, KJV.

In a small group, neglect can look mundane. Information reaches only the familiar chat, which a newcomer has not joined. The chosen time suits the people selecting it but excludes someone for whom the gathering was partly intended. Materials come only in a format one invitee cannot use. Every such case need not be declared intentional cruelty. Yet absence of intention does not remove consequences. A particular message can be heard, the need clarified, and feasible changes considered. Unlimited accessibility should not be promised without resources. Naming a real limit is more honest than saying everyone is welcome without qualification. It allows another person to decide from actual conditions and seek another form of participation without feeling they misunderstood the promised hospitality.

A complaint does not necessarily contain a ready solution. Someone may know precisely what they did not receive without knowing how to repair the whole arrangement. They need not supply an organizational project before their report is acknowledged. A group can first distinguish three questions: what happened, whom it obstructed, and which part of the undertaking needs correction? Options can then be discussed with those affected. This is a contemporary suggestion for a limited task, not a verdict on the correctness of every assembly. Its purpose is to keep a problem from disappearing between defending intentions and blaming character. A correction may be small. Sometimes the aim must change or the group must admit that its initial promise cannot be fulfilled. Such acknowledgment also belongs to responsibility for shared work.

V. Benedict: counsel, rotation, and conditions of work

Chapter 3 of Benedict's Rule calls for counsel before important decisions; younger people are heard too, but the abbot retains the final decision. Chapter 35 describes rotating kitchen workers, help where needed, and utensils handed to the next server. In Doyle's translation, this is Christian monastic obedience, not voting among equals. Our comparison takes limited questions: who can say something important, how is the work supported, and what passes to the next person? A contemporary right to leave any role freely cannot be attributed to this source. In a voluntary group, such a right needs its own agreement. The source's household precision nevertheless recalls that shared work includes people, means, and the next day as well as intention. Benedict's Rule, chapters 3 and 35.

Rotation at a small gathering may be informal: one person leads today, another next time. Without a handover, the next participant inherits a mystery rather than a role. Where are the materials, whom should they contact, what was promised, and which expenses have already occurred? Presence can end with a clear transfer of this information. That should not make the former leader permanently responsible for later decisions. What further help they are willing to give and when the next person fully takes over can be defined. This boundary helps both: one truly completes their chosen work, while the other gains room to act independently. Shared work then retains memory without depending on a single person who must reconstruct everything whenever others want to continue.

Rotation alone does not repair workload. If a role requires too much, handover merely distributes overload in turns. Its contents need examination: which actions are necessary, which emerged from habit, and what can be reduced? More participants, another format, or a smaller promise may be needed. Nor should someone with less available time compensate through continual guilt. Their contribution may be smaller and still useful when agreed. Togetherness is not created through equal exhaustion. It comes through an arrangement in which necessary work has resources, a time, and a responsible person, while that person has access to support and revised conditions. This permits discussing work concretely instead of competing over who can endure inconvenience longest for a worthy cause.

VI. Buddhist companionship: the group is not its own purpose

In SN 45.2, Ananda calls admirable companionship half of the holy life, and the Buddha's answer gives it a much fuller significance. The discourse relates this to developing the noble eightfold path, dispassion, and liberation. We read a particular Thanissaro Bhikkhu translation, rather than a generic maxim about sociability. The passage cannot establish that every pleasant group necessarily leads a person toward good. Direction and the quality of relationships belong to its meaning. For our subject, a limited question remains: what does this companionship support, and how does it relate to the chosen undertaking? A contemporary small group does not become a Buddhist community through warm interaction alone. Its purpose and grounds must be named on their own terms. SN 45.2, Thanissaro Bhikkhu translation.

People may continue an undertaking because they enjoy being together after its original task has lost importance. This is not necessarily wrong. The purpose can honestly change: the gathering now exists for connection instead of its previously stated outcome. A problem arises when the old promise remains the public justification and requires work that the group no longer wants to do. Warmth may then conceal an awkward question. Which part of the task still matters, and who actually wants to continue it? If there is no answer, the undertaking can end while relationships remain. Togetherness need not prove its value through endless production. Yet an outcome promised to someone else cannot simply be replaced by participants' enjoyment without a new agreement involving the person affected.

Good companionship has room for clarification and disagreement. This is a contemporary criterion for our voluntary undertaking, not a complete rendering of the Buddhist concept. A report of error can be discussed on its substance. Someone declining to disclose personal experience need not have their silence explained spiritually. Choosing another form of participation does not necessarily reject every shared value. A group may have a definite purpose and boundaries, but these should be named before agreement is expected. Belonging then does not become compulsory payment for respect. People can do part of a task together while differing in convictions. Where a conviction is a condition of religious participation, that separate condition should be acknowledged rather than concealed behind a general description of a freely chosen circle.

VII. The Bhagavad-Gita: action and the limits of a pleasing outcome

Chapter III of the Bhagavad-Gita discusses action, duty, sacrifice, and relation to outcomes within Krishna's conversation with Arjuna. Edwin Arnold's translation retains religious cosmology and a battlefield situation. These cannot become a direct instruction for a contemporary volunteer to tolerate any workload. For comparison, the relevant question concerns action not reduced to a personally pleasing reward. In a small undertaking, that reward may be attention, gratitude, or feeling indispensable. Its absence does not necessarily empty a chosen action of significance. Yet fair conditions and agreed payment do not disappear through reflection on non-attachment. This contemporary limit to the analogy should be explicit, so a religious text does not become a convenient justification for using somebody else. Bhagavad-Gita, III, Arnold translation.

For example, someone helps hold a gathering and receives no expected thanks. Two questions can be examined separately: was acknowledgment part of the agreement, and what did they personally expect from participating? An unmet promised acknowledgment concerns the group. Where thanks were not promised, the expectation may still matter humanly, but it is better named as an expectation than as everybody else's hidden obligation. This distinction does not forbid requesting a response. It helps avoid declaring all the work pointless merely because another person did not confirm a desired image of the helper. It also prevents consoling systematically invisible work with an attractive idea of selflessness. Agreement, feeling, and interpretation require different responses; when they are mixed, participants often argue about different subjects.

The outcome may also be smaller than the plan. Few people attended, discussion did not happen, or some preparation proved unnecessary. The actual result and any remaining promises should then be named. Non-attachment in our contemporary analogy does not mean indifference toward a recipient. Someone can stop defending an image of themselves as a successful organizer while caring about what occurred. Explanation, repayment, another date, or ending the project may be needed. This is no legal instruction; actual obligations depend on actual agreements. The distinction prevents personal disappointment from obscuring remaining responsibility, and prevents responsibility from becoming an obligation to prove at any cost that the original plan was flawless and must continue even after its grounds have disappeared.

VIII. Disagreement and completion also belong to presence

A shared undertaking cannot guarantee in advance that all important interests coincide. One person needs a workable time, another accessible premises, and a third a spending limit. Every available decision may retain a significant disadvantage. Naming a conflict of conditions can help more than explaining it through participants' bad attitudes. Which conditions are necessary, which can change, and who decides can be discussed. Not every conflict can be resolved inside the original plan. Two gatherings or a smaller aim may be needed. Someone may be unable to participate without deserving a moral verdict. Presence includes seeing the limits of a shared decision. It does not require portraying unity where differences remain, or promise that an attentive conversation will satisfy everybody.

Disagreement needs a distinction between the task and relationships. Someone can oppose a purchase while respecting its proposer, or consider a format unsuitable while maintaining friendship. This does not prohibit discussing conduct: a broken promise or concealed information requires attention as a particular action. Comfortable language about preserving relationships should not remove participants' freedom to discuss what affected them. Naming the subject precisely helps. I disagree with this expense offers more clarity than we are no longer together. The terms changed after I agreed requires a different response from a general assessment of character. Such language guarantees no calm, but it helps identify the decision actually needed and which part of participation remains possible.

Completing a small undertaking may be a meaningful outcome. The gathering happened once, help was given, materials were handed over, and obligations were closed. A new task need not be invented merely because acknowledging an ending feels awkward. People can thank one another, keep necessary information, and leave future possibility without promising to arrange it. Where the undertaking did not happen, completion includes a clear message to those expecting a result. It may also involve returning what belongs to others and answering an outstanding question. Freedom to end is not freedom to disappear with an unmet promise. Yet after agreed work is completed, someone need not continually prove loyalty through further labour. Recognizing completion lets people choose again instead of automatically prolonging the previous arrangement.

IX. Remaining a participant rather than becoming a shared resource

The primary texts retain different worlds. Acts describes an early Christian community; Benedict a monastery under an abbot; the Analects a moral and political hierarchy; SN 45.2 companionship on a path of liberation; and the Bhagavad-Gita action within religious conversation and conflict. None should replace a contemporary voluntary project wholesale. Their limited questions illuminate the distribution of care, capacities, the direction of relationships, and attitudes toward outcomes. Conditions of participation must then be discussed independently. Comparison does not prove that every tradition long ago invented one correct team. It opens a conversation in which a source can clarify a question without removing participants' freedom to decide according to their circumstances and actual obligations.

A person remains a participant when their contribution has a clear subject and boundary. They know what they chose, promised, and can revise. Others know what to rely on instead of continually guessing whether earlier arrangements still hold. Such clarity permits warmth and spontaneity. A spontaneous offer simply does not become a lifelong role without agreement, and friendship does not replace explaining expenses. A small undertaking may feel light precisely because important conditions have been named. Where everything depends on one person, however, describing the whole group as relaxed is insufficient. Who pays for that ease through time and attention needs to be seen. That person's presence includes reporting the workload; everybody else's presence includes hearing it and changing the work substantively.

At the end, the smallest question can return: what participation is needed from me now, and can I actually choose it? The answer need not be large. Clarifying a condition, keeping a promise, noticing an omission, handing over a role, and finishing are different forms of presence. Sometimes refusal requires the group to revise its plan; sometimes the answer is agreement to a definite part. A good undertaking need not make everybody identical or indispensable. It can let people do what they actually agreed, recognize outcomes without enlargement, and retain relationships without endless indebtedness. Small scale does not diminish significance here. It keeps a promise within a scope where particular people remain visible and someone can still answer for the participation they chose.

What this means in practice

If you wish, choose one small undertaking you are joining or already participating in. This voluntary reflection does not assess your readiness to be useful. State the aim in one sentence and name those actually affected by the outcome. If participants understand the aim differently, note the difference for now; one person need not resolve it for everybody.

Describe your part: an action, a time, needed information, and the boundary of the promise. Separate what you already agreed from what was proposed and what others seem to expect. The last category especially needs clarification. Name one dependency too: which response or resource do you need, and who relies on your action? A particular question for discussion can then emerge rather than a general verdict on someone's organization.

Consider less visible work: preparation, communication, cleaning, expenses, and handing over materials. Who actually does it, and under which conditions? Do not assign obligations to absent people. Discussion can be proposed, or it can be acknowledged that the present plan exceeds available capacity. Also check who may decide a disagreement and how someone can report a change to their agreement.

Choose one small next action: clarify a condition, name a limitation, correct an omission, or prepare a handover. Do not turn the entire undertaking into an exercise conducted on other people. Afterward, note what became known and what remains open. Where an agreement concerns payment, safety, or another subject beyond this article, address that subject on its own terms. The exercise guarantees no harmony and establishes nobody else's obligations. It aims to make your participation clearer while preserving the freedom to continue, revise, or responsibly finish it.

Key quotation

> *he uses them according to their capacity.*

Analects 13.25, short excerpt, translated by James Legge. The historical passage concerns a superior's treatment of people; contemporary voluntary allocation of roles is a separate comparison made by this article.

Connections between traditions

Source	Question illuminated	Difference retained
Acts 6:1–7	A complaint reveals neglect in daily provision	Early Christian community and religious selection are not every project
Benedict's Rule 3, 35	Counsel, support, rotation, and handover	Abbot's judgement and obedience do not become contemporary voting
Analects 13.23–13.25	Roles fit capacity; affability differs from flattery	Historical hierarchy is not transferred to voluntary equal participation
SN 45.2	Companionship relates to the direction of a path	Liberation and the eightfold path are not pleasant company or a shared output
Bhagavad-Gita III	Action is not exhausted by personal pleasing reward	Duty and religious conflict do not justify contemporary exploitation
UW editorial frame	Aim, agreement, role, conditions, and completion	A practical suggestion establishes neither common doctrine nor guaranteed harmony

Primary sources

1. Acts 6:1–7, King James Version. The entire indicated narrative was read. The epigraph is a short 6:3 excerpt, translated into Russian by UW via KJV; religious selection criteria remain in context.

2. Benedict's Rule, chapters 3 and 35, translated by Leonard J. Doyle, 1948. Both chapters on counsel and kitchen rotation were read with title information. Original paraphrase retains the monastic hierarchy.

3. Analects 13.23–13.25, translated by James Legge, 1893. The indicated passages and displayed book XIII context were read; no whole-work reading is claimed. The short 13.25 quotation is translated into Russian by UW via Legge.

4. SN 45.2, Upaddha Sutta, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997. The entire displayed discourse was read. Admirable companionship remains related to the eightfold path and liberation rather than every pleasant group.

5. Bhagavad-Gita, chapter III, The Song Celestial, translated by Edwin Arnold. Chapter III was read in the historical poetic translation; contemporary agreements are not claimed as literal enactment of its prescriptions.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Tags

presence, shared undertaking, participation, togetherness, purpose, agreement, role, responsibility, possibilities, capacity, arrangement, clarity, information, support, workload, work, recognition, gratitude, outcome, complaint, accessibility, rotation, handover, completion, disagreement, boundaries, companionship, Acts, Benedict, Confucianism, Buddhism, Bhagavad-Gita, primary sources

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.