

Ruben Habito
We Are All Refugees: Seeking a True Home
Week Four: “Embracing the Spiritual Community”
June 26, 2017



I take refuge in the sangha. What does it mean to take refuge in the sangha? The word *sangha* literally means assembly, gathering, or collection. In many ways it is analogous to the word “church” that is used in the Christian context, which comes from “iglesia,” also meaning gathering or assembly. Sangha can also be understood as: those who are bonded together with the good news of hearing the words of liberation. In that regard, sangha is a community of those who are walking the path of awakening. Those of us who are already in a practice community that supports us in our path, in our spiritual practice, are already able to identify our sangha.

You might say, “I belong to this spiritual community. My sangha is this Zen center or this Tibetan Buddhist center or this other group.” Looking beyond the Buddhist community, you might have a spiritual community in the Christian tradition that nourishes you, such as your local church or a small group practicing prayer or other forms of devotion. If you are a part of a group engaging in that kind of practice, then you are one of those who can identify a sangha or a spiritual community as your community of support.

But let us look deeper and more broadly at what this term “sangha” means. If I consider my sangha to be that community which supports and sustains me in my path of awakening, then we can say that really no one is excluded from this sangha.

Again, if we look at our personal origins, we regard our parents as the first persons that we owe this debt of life to. They were my pillars of support in bringing me forth into this world. And whatever way I may relate to them, whether I never knew my parents or whether I am in a very difficult relationship with them, the fact that they were the ones who gave me this life gives me an invitation to consider them as the pillars of my own sangha. Of course foster parents, siblings, relatives, and all of those who have enabled me to become who I am through their personal support are members of the sangha that I owe my allegiance and gratitude to. Their connections make me who I am. This perspective provides an invitation to regard such people with gratitude.

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Further, look at the people we surround ourselves with at work or in the community. For example, we go to a grocery store and there is the grocery clerk who helps us check out our items. They are all part of the community of beings that help me become more fully who I am—my sangha—and I need to acknowledge that.

Now let us look wider. There are many people who I don't know, but sometimes I see them on the streets or I'll read about them in newspapers. We know that there are about seven and a half billion people living on this earth. Each and every one of them is a living breathing human being, whether they may be newborn, in the middle of life or in their old age. Each and every living and breathing being is connected to me and my sangha.

Extending the reach beyond human beings, all sentient beings—all who live in this universe—make me who I am. Whether I recognize it or not, they are my sangha. This is an invitation to acknowledge and recognize who our true sangha is, not just the small circle that I practice with, but the circle of all beings who constitute who I am in this universe. When I say I take refuge in the sangha, it is simply my acknowledgement that I owe my life and my well-being to everyone of these beings around me. I am connected with them in a very, very intimate way.

Have you ever felt that sense when you are sitting in silence that somehow there is a cosmic affirmation that tells you, "I'm okay just as I am?" If you haven't had that sense yet, please go on and try to give yourself more time to be in stillness. Listen to that inner voice and it might just come to you. Yes, you're okay just as you are. The whole universe is what it is and that whole universe being what it is affirms you in being who you are. That's the affirmation from the universal sangha. If we acknowledge the wide sangha that makes us who we are, there is therefore the invitation to look at everyone as within our circle of concern.

Every child dying of hunger on this earth is my sangha, and there are 21,000 children dying daily of hunger and malnutrition. How does my life become affected if I

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consider them as my sangha? The people dying of violence in incidents that I read in the papers or hear about in the media—they too are my sangha. And that includes the people who are perpetrators of violence. What would it mean in my life if I recognize them as part of my sangha?

The venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Buddhist master, has this poem called “Please Call Me by My True Names.” In it he writes that each being in this universe—whether it be a mayfly, a snake, a frog, a victim of violence or the perpetrator of that violence—is me. As I recognize that everyone is my sangha, I feel a sense of awe and a sense of responsibility for what goes on in this world. And with that realization, there are certain questions that I need to ask in order to lead a life that gives due acknowledgment to my sangha. This acknowledgement has to be done in a way that is awakened, liberated and free, and in a way that returns the sangha’s embrace.

What does that entail? One question is: is there anyone or any group in this world that I am leaving out of my field of concern? Are there people that I really have not thought or cared about? As long as there are people who are left out of my field of concern, then I am truncating my own view and I’m truncating my own self.

In a previous week, we talked about refugees. So many people are seeking a home where they will be welcomed as human beings. If they are my sangha, what can I do in my own local community to recognize that they are my sangha and I am connected with them? Or, again, what can I do for those children who are dying of hunger, those who are being oppressed, or those who are being discriminated upon? If I really acknowledge them as my sangha, I cannot but feel the pain that they are experiencing in their lives. So how can I live my life in way that may contribute a little bit to the alleviation of that pain? That is what taking refuge in the sangha entails. As I realize that I am embraced by this global sangha, I am called upon to open my heart in generosity.

To take refuge in the sangha is to live in a way whereby my kinship with everything and everyone becomes a beacon of light that guides my way of relating with

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the world.

Another question to ask is: is there anyone in my circle that I need to seek reconciliation with? For example, there may be a family member or close friend who I have not talked to in years because of a misunderstanding. I don't know where they are and what they are doing, but in that separation there is a connection that was lost. If we recognize that, we are invited to take steps to reach out again and connect with such persons before we die. If they die before I am able to do so, I may regret that for the rest of my life.

Those are some questions that might come up as we recognize that sangha is not just this small practice community that we go to on a regular basis, but that it is instead the circle of living beings that embrace me for who I am.

I take refuge in the sangha. This is a proclamation and acknowledgement of a debt of gratitude to each and every being in this universe, not just in an abstract way, but to each and everyone I meet. In doing so, I am enabled to shift my life away from actions centered only on my own well-being. I am now naturally empowered and inspired to live a way of life wherein I can live and give the gifts of my life to everyone as my kin because their well-being is my well-being.

If everyone lived in this way, what a wonderful and different world this would be. Imagine the kinds of things that would happen if everyone were able to live in this way, not just living for my own welfare but living with the understanding that everyone is my sangha and that I am called to give life as a gift to them. What a totally different world this would be. There would be no more violence. There would be no more animosities, no more quarreling, no more dysfunction. Instead, there would be a sense of saying it is truly good for us to be.

Perhaps I am only dreaming, but it's an invitation. Let's all dream together and let our lives be directed in a way that day after day, as we continue in our spiritual practice and as we continue in our ways of relating with one another, we might come closer to

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making that dream a reality. If we opened our hearts to one another in hospitality, again, what a different world this would be.

I take refuge in Buddha. I take refuge in dharma. I take refuge in sangha.