Refuge in Saṅgha with Andrea Fella and Amana Brembry Johnson

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:46

So this afternoon we want to talk a bit about the third of the three refuges or jewels, the Sangha jewel.

I sometimes think of this as the lost jewel. We've been talking about how Buddhism, or convert Buddhism, as it moves from one country to another and has landed in the United States, picks up the flavor of the culture or cultures that it comes to. And we've talked a bit about the impact of capitalism and democracy on the tone and shape of convert Buddhism here. There is another dimension of this culture, which maybe simply put is a very heightened kind of individualism in American culture, that has also influenced to some degree how Buddhism, convert Buddhism, was initially translated into our culture. We have this kind of myth, perhaps, of ultra-independence. So this Sangha jewel is pointing us to something quite different than that.

There's a story in the Pali Canon of a dialogue between the Buddha and his attendant, Ananda. I love Ananda. He is, in my reading of these stories, kind of like this slightly bumbling, friendly, warm, but not super smart, nice guy. And he acts in many ways as the interface between the Buddha and his community, his Sangha. I always imagine it might have been kind of intimidating to bump into the Buddha. But if I might be afraid to talk to the Buddha, then there's Ananda. And Ananda's like this sweetheart. So he kind of helped in that interface.

So there's a story in which Ananda—who's not the sharpest tool in the shed—comes to the Buddha and says, "I had this big insight." It doesn't actually say that in the Pali Canon; I'm riffing a little here. So he had this big insight, and the Buddha says, "What is it?" And Ananda says, "Well, I realized that Sangha is fully half of the holy life." In other words, he realized how important Sangha was. And the Buddha reprimands him, as is often the case in these dialogues between the Buddha and Ananda, and he says, "Don't say that, Ananda, don't say that. You got it wrong again." And Ananda wants to know, "Well, how is it then?" And the Buddha says, "The Sangha is the whole of the holy life."

It's a strong statement. There is, at the very center of Buddhist teaching, this understanding of our interconnectedness, this teaching of what's sometimes called paṭicca-samuppāda, the interdependent web of being. That's really at the heart, in some way, of what the Buddha woke up to, what he saw. We could understand this as a description of what he realized in what I spoke about the other night as the third watch of the night—the truth of this dynamic, interdependent web of being.

Now, the Buddha did something quite radical in establishing his community, which is that 2,600 years ago

in northern India, it was a very stratified class and caste system. Andrea was reminding me of this piece—how there was hierarchy within the Buddhist Sangha, but it wasn't based on one's prior position. So you could be a king or a merchant or a soldier or whatever, and that didn't determine your standing in the community. It was based on how long you'd practiced, how long you'd been there. That's an interesting reframing of how things were set up.

I think it's important to name that even though the Buddha opened the doors of the community to all different classes, there was one big category that got left out. And that was women. So in the beginning, women were not invited into the community. It was all monks and laymen, mostly monks.

And so there's another story that also features Ananda. This is a story in which Pajapati—the Buddha's mother died within a week of his being born, and he was raised by her sister—at some point comes and basically petitions the Buddha to allow women into the Sangha. And she comes, the story says, three times. Three times in Buddhist mythology is understood as a lot; three is many. So she came many times to visit the Buddha and to ask to be received, for her and women to be received. And the third time that she came—oh, he said no. She was not deterred. She came again. He said no. She comes a third time, and this time she brings her friends. This is another way of talking about sangha. So she brings this big group of women with her.

And coming to visit the Buddha was not an easy thing. They had to travel over dusty roads for many miles. So they show up, this whole gathering of women, outside the area where the monks are staying. They're in tattered robes, with swollen feet covered in sores from walking all that distance.

Ananda sees them and hears them, and he intercedes. Pajapati goes in and asks again, and the Buddha says no. The women—not yet nuns—are outside wailing and crying out. Ananda goes to them and asks, "What's going on? Why are you so upset?" And they say, "We want to be able to join the Sangha, to become part of the holy life."

So Ananda—the "not so smart guy"—goes in and, in my reading of it, he tricks the Buddha a little bit. He says, "Isn't it the case that women are equally able to attain enlightenment as men?" And the Buddha says yes. Ananda says, "Then you have to let them in. You have to do this." He kind of pins the Buddha in a corner. And so the Buddha says okay. And he does.

I love this story as a way of understanding this piece of Sangha: that we need each other. We need all of our voices. We might understand Ananda in this story as a kind of ally figure. He's speaking up for, giving voice to, a group of people whose voices aren't being heard. It's a beautiful expression of that.

And I think it's important to say that the misogyny you hear in this story has continued in the Buddhist tradition. It's not gone, but it is changing. It's changing in large part because of courageous voices like Ananda's, who are willing to stand up and offer support. And it's changing because of courageous voices like Pajapati's, who didn't give up. She was told no once, twice, three times. She didn't give up or let go or

go away.

So this is a living aspect of our teaching—the full integration of Sangha as alive, essential, whole of the holy life, part of our practice, and the extension of including all of our voices in the various languages that we speak. There are important changes happening in the context of Buddhist teaching and Buddhism and Buddhist Sangha that we are sitting right in the middle of now. This is a way of inviting you and me and all of us to wholeheartedly engage, to bring our care and our love and our voice to expressing, to becoming the fullness of the teachings as they continue to land here.

I had the opportunity to spend some time at the end of last year in Bhutan, which is a Buddhist country. There were many extraordinary things about that experience, but it had a profound impact on me in terms of what I'm talking about here. When I was in a culture in which the teachings were completely embedded in daily life, it was so moving. Buddhist teaching wasn't something rarefied that happened only in monasteries or retreat centers. It was expressed as a completely relational practice. It was expressed in how people took care of the temples and the statues and so on, but much more, it was completely infiltrated into how people related to each other, how they took care of each other. There was a kind of ethical purity that didn't come from trying to be good. It came from a deep understanding that we are deeply connected. And the same thing was true in the way the culture and community related not just to the human community, but to the animal community and to the earth itself.

For me, it helped me understand that there's a whole dimension of our nascent integration of convert Buddhism in America that is ours to be realized, ours to be expressed, ours to be fully embodied and fleshed out.

Maybe that's enough place to stop for now. We're going to share this talk in the spirit of Sangha. I was reflecting about the Sangha from the perspective of the analogy that is offered about the refuge in the Sangha being like the support of attendants who help us when we are ill, when we're needing to take our medicine. Yesterday I offered the analogy of the Buddha being like the doctor diagnosing the illness, the Dharma like the prescription—what we have to do, the actions we have to take to cure ourselves—and the Sangha like the attendants who help us and support us while we are taking the medicine. We need each other, as Pam was pointing to. We really need each other, as the story she's telling points to. And we see this in our own practice here.

We are a Sangha, and we support each other—not only in our practice, but quite literally in the preparing of food, the cleaning of dishes, the washing of bathrooms. Everything we do supports each other so that we can live with ease together. We have created this community of external support, and the internal work we do is also sustained by having like-minded people walking the path alongside us.

Because this is hard work. I think you've all felt that—the courage it takes to meet our own minds, the courage it takes to open to our struggles, our suffering, to really open to all of that messiness inside. It takes personal courage, and that courage is supported by having a community of practitioners with us.

I remember on one early retreat feeling like I was in the midst of some major meltdown, sitting there with my eyes closed. Then I opened my eyes and saw people sitting around me very quietly, just as you are sitting now. I had no idea what was going on in their minds, but simply looking at people sitting there, I thought, "If they can sit with whatever's going on in their minds, I can do it too." Some of you may have felt this flavor of Sangha support here in our community together.

This is a real part of our practice—that we support each other. When we find it challenging, when our courage is flagging, we might just look up and see somebody walking mindfully across the room, and our courage rises in that moment. We support each other in this way. We take refuge in the Sangha. We borrow the courage of others to help us.

In the texts, this is described as the beginning of refuge. In my exploration of the Pali Canon and the suttas around refuge, it feels like there are three layers. The first layer is this going for refuge—going for refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This involves taking on trust that these will be supportive, using the support of the community, perhaps taking a leap of faith that the teachings make sense, and trusting what the Buddha said: "Yes, this seems like something useful to try." This going for refuge is almost like borrowing the confidence of others to begin our journey.

Then that deepens over time. There's a phrase that says as we practice, as we engage in these teachings, as we have enough confidence in them to actually practice, we ultimately gain full confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This is the place where we have learned enough, where we have had understandings that transform us, where that shift of perspective allows us to see the teachings directly for ourselves at a very deep level.

This shift of perspective lands us into the third aspect of refuge, where we can become a refuge for others. The teachings explore this possibility—that we can understand the teachings deeply enough that we enter into the Sangha. Pam mentioned a couple of days ago the technical definition of refuge in Sangha: those beings who have had a deep understanding of what the Buddha taught, whether laymen or laywomen, monks or nuns. The Sangha of refuge is the community of people who have had this understanding. When we gain such understanding, we step into the place of becoming a refuge ourselves.

I'd like to explore that a little. There's one place where the Buddha encourages us to become a refuge for all beings, and the first aspect of that is ethics—engaging in harmlessness. Amana mentioned the other day, when talking about the precepts, that in engaging in harmlessness and ethical conduct, we are offering the gift of fearlessness to all beings. This is that refuge. When we are committed to non-harming, beings can feel safe in our presence. This commitment to ethical conduct is one form of becoming a refuge.

So we walk the path. We engage in the inner journey ourselves. Much of what we learn in this setting is how to look internally, how to look at our own hearts and minds, how to see the way our own hearts and minds create such a mess in there. It takes the Sangha to support us in doing that, to have the courage for

it. As we walk the path, we cultivate the qualities of heart and mind that the Buddha encouraged us to cultivate, cultivating that refuge in the Dharma.

One of the analogies I appreciate about the path comes from Stephen Batchelor, who pointed out something essential about following the path of the Buddhist teachings. Looking at the analogy of a path through the woods: in order for there to be a path, many, many people must have walked on it.

And so we are seeing the Sangha as we're walking on a path. We may not see them right in front of us, but the existence of that path through the woods is evidence of that community that has walked there. And then as we follow in that path, we in turn are keeping it clear for people following us. This is also a way in which the Sangha works—that we become a refuge by engaging in the path. We can't help but be a refuge because we are keeping the path alive for people to follow.

So there's this inner side of the practice, looking internally at our own mess and the suffering that's inside. And yet there's also a whole area of our relationship to the world, our relationship to the suffering in our world. I believe that the same tools that help us to meet the messiness of our own minds can support us in meeting, opening to, and engaging with the suffering in the world. To me, this too is a part of being a refuge—that we don't simply limit our exploration of suffering to our inner struggles, but we open our hearts to the world and explore what it means to meet that suffering, the external suffering, the outer world.

This is looking at practice internally and externally, the inner practice and the outer practice. Now, one of the reasons I think that the tools of our inner practice work so well in the outer world is because essentially our communities and cultures are created by a bunch of human minds interacting. And we ourselves are shaped by a bunch of human minds that have gone before. This is really spoken about in the teaching that Pam mentioned about dependent origination—this shaping of our minds by intentions and actions. It's not just about how it's happening inside, because we are not shaped in isolation. It's not just an individual thing. We are a collective. We are a community. And the shaping that happens here is a result of so much shaping that came before—my engagement with my parents and their parents, and the cultures that they were shaped by. All the views, the ideas, the opinions, everything that has shaped me—I didn't make it all up. It was conditioned into me through the cultures. And so all of this mess that's in here has been shaped by a lot of mess that's come before. If I'm not waking up to this mess, then probably what's going to happen is I'll perpetuate the mess.

This speaks to the inner work, the waking up, the seeing of how the patterns and habits work. We see it's not just about me. We see it's a human thing. This is what we're learning when we see our own minds. Initially, it really feels very personal. It's like, "Oh, these are my struggles. This was my conditioning. These are my difficulties and problems." And eventually we begin to recognize, no, these are human problems. These are human patterns. That recognition begins to turn us outward also.

I remember on one retreat, I was sitting there recognizing that this quality of suffering happening in here

was a reflection of suffering in the world. And I was like, "Oh my gosh." I had had a really privileged life—my parents loved me and cared for me—and I'm experiencing a lot of messy, yucky stuff in my mind. No wonder the world is so painful. No wonder. It's just seeing this confusion multiplied by eight billion. No wonder it's so challenging out there.

This opens our heart to some extent to compassion for the messiness of the world. We see in our own hearts the struggles that we have, and we recognize, "Oh yeah, other people too." When we're meeting suffering in the world, we are meeting greed, aversion, and delusion at work, habits and patterns at work. We start to see this. We start to see that the way our own mind works—just as one example, we see a thought arising in our mind and an impact, an effect of that thought. Whether or not the thought is true is kind of irrelevant in a way. My own belief, my own thought that I was a failure and was unworthy—those beliefs, those thoughts had an effect on how I engaged in the world, even when I could see them and think, "Wow, I don't even actually believe that." But still there was this effect. We see that our thoughts have a tremendous power.

The truth of a thought doesn't actually necessarily mitigate its effect. And likewise in the world—the beliefs we have, the views we carry about other people, about all the fake news that's out there. In some ways, the effect of fake news, the effect of views and opinions, even if they are not at all based in reality—the effect is real. Just like the effect of our own thoughts on our hearts and minds is real. And we see that. We wake up to that.

Some of this exploration around bringing mindfulness to the ways our minds work helps us see into how suffering is created, and gives us perhaps a little bit of capacity to hold some of the messiness in the world. Now, this isn't about non-action. My sense is that engagement with the world can become a refuge. I do think that the tools of mindfulness, of balance, of equanimity, of compassion can be applied in meeting the suffering of the world.

And yet, what does it mean to meet injustice in the world with equanimity? My sense of that is not that it means we sit back and say, "Oh yeah, things as they are. People being slaughtered. That's what's happening." That's not the way equanimity expresses itself, in my understanding.

Equanimity expresses in a kind of recognition that this is what is happening. So there's a true acknowledgment: yes, this is the condition. And rather than trying to deny that it's the condition, we come into alignment with this is what's happening. The heart that is able to hold that is not one of passivity. That heart that is not pushing away or holding onto, that is in that place of "this is what's happening"—it has a kind of movement to respond. To respond with compassion, not with anger, not with hatred, but with compassion.

And that's another way that this practice, the inner practice that we do, unfolds. We've talked about holding all of our messiness and seeing that a transformation happens because our hearts and minds can hold that with balance. The compassionate response to that, the inner compassionate response, is a

releasing of suffering. Externally, it may look more like taking action, not simply holding it with equanimity and it magically releasing. It probably looks more like stepping into action through compassion.

Refuge. Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I want to enter this from one of the perspectives of what dukkha is. And what's come up throughout the retreat, for me, has been the delusion of separation. This is one of the aspects of dukkha—that there are separate individual whole pieces, when in fact we are all just aggregates of each other, pieces of each other.

I wish I had brought this quote from Martin Luther King. I haven't memorized it, and I should, because I like to refer to it a lot. So I'm going to just talk about it a little bit. He said that we are part of a single garment, and each of us are individual threads of that garment. Without each thread, there would be no garment. And so this illusion of separateness creates a lot of suffering.

To go back a little bit further to refuge: refuge is a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble. From dukkha. Refuge is an asylum. It is a sanctuary. It's a safe haven and a port in the storm. And so when we take refuge in sangha, we're really taking refuge in beloved community.

I remember in my twenties and thirties, I used to fast a lot because I thought that was really the healthy thing to do—to detox the body and cleanse. And a lot of times I felt like I was looking through a peephole out at the world, by myself, because I really didn't have a lot of people around me who were also doing that.

And I found it very difficult to do it on my own. People were asking me, "Well, why are you doing that? Why are you eating like that?" They were questioning me and challenging me and not supporting me, really.

And to fall into community, to fall into sangha, where we can rest and be supported in our journey towards liberation, to go up against the conditioning that is out there—the conditioning of unsafety, of not being sheltered, of not being cared for, of not being considered, of not being included.

I love the story that Pam brought of Ananda and giving you a bit of Ananda's personality in it. And the Buddha saying, Sangha is the whole of the Dharma. The whole of the Dharma. How far can we get without each other?

I want to bring up another thing that Pam was touching on throughout the retreat when she spoke of seeing the sky through a straw. How much of the whole picture can you get from seeing through that straw? And she followed it up with: it is only together that we see the whole sky. And it's only together that we are whole.

So as we undertake this journey towards liberation, we are weaving ourselves back together, recognizing

that there's no space between you and I, that we are all of this. And also understanding the importance of creating safety by developing the moral compass, the ethics that Andrea was just talking about. Not to harm, not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to violate other people's bodies sexually, not to violate ourselves sensually—taking in too much visually, through hearing, touch, taste, smell.

It's challenging to walk this path. Though we may seek the fruit of liberation, we're wading through a lot of murky water. There has been a path, as Andrea pointed out, trod down where we can see it, but it's still a dense forest growing all the time, every day. And it takes beloved community to traverse this territory. This is taking refuge in the sangha.

I wish I could remember those words of Martin Luther King—just the intricate web that we are with each other.

I think of my children. I have a bunch of grandchildren. And I think of how deeply, tenderly I love them, because I take them as my own, as a part of me. And in that, I provide a refuge for them. I protect them. I keep them safe. I harbor them. I give them a port in the storm. And if we could all take refuge in each other in that same way, we begin to create the conditions of this world in the way we want to live—in harmony and peace and compassion, kindness, care for each other.

So I don't have much more to say about refuge in the sangha, except that it is a beloved community that supports us and floats us in a tumultuous world, a world on fire. And the very process and act of practicing is a radical act today. It is so radical. It is so against the stream. And community is so necessary to be able to paddle upstream.

As you were speaking, I'm remembering this African proverb that says: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

So this is a long path. As you described, the forest keeps intruding, growing back, getting messier. And this truth of our connection—it's not a metaphor. It's not an analogy. It's not an image. It is really what the Buddha woke up to.

So often in the teachings, we talk about the absence side—this sort of emptiness side of the truth of how things are—that there is an absence of a separate, solid, permanent self.

The Buddha called this Anatta, which was later expanded to be understood as a teaching that there is no separate, solid, unchanging anything. This is the teaching of Sunyata.

And sometimes when we meet that side of the teaching, it can feel scary. It can feel kind of cold, if that's a word to use—like, yikes, nothing. Which of course doesn't mean nihilism; I don't mean that. But still, there's the letting go side of the practice, there's the shedding, there's that.

But that's not the only side. There's another way of going in. I think of that sometimes as the wisdom side of the teaching. But there's another side, which is what we're talking about here. One side is: no, there's no separate solid me. That's one way of saying it. There is an absence of that. But what is there a presence of? What there is a presence of is this web of connection. That's what there is, not what there isn't. This web of connection that we are made of.

It's interesting because we have this metaphor—some of you may have heard it—of the two wings of the bird. One wing is compassion and the other wing is wisdom. And you need both wings to fly. That's where freedom comes from. If we have too much wisdom without compassion, it gets kind of scary, cold, sharp. If we have too much compassion or kindness without wisdom, we have what Pema Chödrön calls idiot compassion. We're trying to do well—this speaks to our efforts of engaging in the messy world—but we don't have the wisdom to actually do well without either doing more harm or harming ourselves. So we need both.

But I've been enjoying actually intentionally using this other side, this interconnected side, as a way to talk not just about compassion but about love, which is not a word we use that much. And I don't mean love as a feeling. This is a really important thing. But love as a force.

This is from Maya Angelou. She says, "Love recognizes no barriers." Love is what breaks down that illusion of separation. She says it jumps hurdles, leaps fences, and arrives at its destination full of hope. If we only see the wisdom emptiness side, the absence-of side of our practice, it's easy to lose hope. We need to keep filling ourselves with love in order to be able to stay in it—to go far, not just to go fast.

And this is embedded in the teaching of refuge in Sangha. It's the truth of the fact that we are actually joined at the hip—that there's no way, in fact, for me to wake up and be free while other people suffer. If I am a sensitive human being and there are people suffering, I feel it.

And so just as Andrea was saying in such a beautiful way, we have this opportunity in the context of a supportive community to cultivate this capacity to be with our own suffering, which frankly feels like just about enough sometimes, doesn't it? Like okay, that's about as much as I can handle. No more. But we don't get that, because pretty soon we're going to walk out the door and there are going to be a few other people there, and they probably won't be in silence. And they may not have taken up these ethical precepts that Amana recited on the first night.

So we have to understand how it is that we extend that out. And we don't extend it out by walking around saying, "Oh, there's not really a me here. No self, no me here, stomp, stomp, stomp." No. We can understand it by understanding and feeling the truth of how to be with this universal suffering that's ours as human beings. And to do our best. One of my old teachers used to say the whole of our practice can be summed up like this: not making things worse. It sounds sort of simplistic, but pretty good actually, right?

So we move back into the world tenderized. We move back into the world, hopefully with some wisdom,

with some insight that we've gained into how we work and how to work with our own suffering. But we don't stop there. We take that because we understand our connectedness, and because it's not just wisdom but also love that is shot right through the center of this practice.

do our best to meet ourselves and each other and the earth itself with this understanding of interdependence, this understanding of needing each other.

And we can begin not just to tolerate various other people, just like we're not just going to tolerate our own boredom or sleepiness or restlessness or anger or grief. It's not good enough to tolerate. We actually have to be interested. We have to reach across the aisle and say, "Who are you? Tell me. I want to understand. I want to know."

We have to be willing to be with and listen deeply so that we are touched by, so that we are shaped by, so that we begin to feel those threads. Because that's what we are anyway. It's just a matter of sliding in, you know? If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. We are together. I paraphrase, but that's what the Buddha said. And because of that, we have the capacity to go a long, long way.

We continue to not just be impacted, but to also impact the world—to love what we see, which doesn't mean saying, "Oh yes, everything is fine." Sometimes that love is fierce. But it comes from love, you know? A fierce love that says no is still coming from love. It's not coming from greed or hatred or delusion.

So, just in case what I'm saying sounds like, "Oh no, I'm not like that"—actually, you are. And the fact that you've been here sitting with yourself for all of these days is an enormous act of love. So please don't miss that. You could not think so, but that's just what you think.

So let's sit for just a minute together.

Thank you for listening.

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