

The Sangha of All Beings

by Rebecca Dixon

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Sangha is a Pali word meaning “spiritual friends.” The Buddha asked his new students to take Three Refuges: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We can take refuge, or supportive shelter, in knowing that the Buddha ended all his mental suffering, and that we can too. The Dharma is the Second Refuge. It consists of Buddhism’s teachings on how to do this, summed up in the Eightfold Path. The Third Refuge is Sangha, the support of others who share this Path with us.

Historically, refuges were in specific places. In the Middle Ages anyone in danger could take ‘sanctuary’ in churches, a refuge in the House of God. Hawaii had special, defined places in royal parks. In both cases, you had to go there and stay there because once outside, you lost refuge and could be pursued again.

When Pauletta first asked me in 2007 to teach in Alameda at a yoga studio, I insisted on having a long discussion period, about as long as my dharma talk. That way we would have the benefit of all three Refuges. The meditation period was when we got in touch with our potential to become Buddhas, my talk would offer the Dharma, and the discussion would be a time to build Sangha – and absorb the benefits of it.

I never felt that just a question-and-answer period about the dharma talk encourages the development of Sangha, or group cohesion. But I had seen in my Oakland sangha that orderly group discussion did. I always make a point of mentioning that when a meditation group meets, we are practicing *with the support of Sangha*. This is not something I’ve ever taken lightly. I believe we need to have some acquaintance with each other to generate and receive this sense of support.

The Buddha was horrified once to hear that monks who shared a dwelling with a sick monk were not taking care of him. He instructed them to go and do so, because mutual support is such an important part of Sangha.

We are here in order to be together, whether it’s physically or electronically. We see and hear and get to know each other during our discussions. Over the years, this sangha has developed a lot of cohesion. As I wrote in my message about retiring from this sangha, we have celebrated our connection with each other in many events outside the sangha’s meetings. I believe this strong sense of sangha is why we so immediately and enthusiastically took the Deaf community into our hearts.

Unlike churches or patches of land in Hawaii, the refuge of sangha isn’t a limited space. In fact, we don’t have to be in touch with sangha physically or electronically. We can also access the power of sangha mentally by reading, reflecting and practicing *with a sense of community*

with fellow practitioners. Sangha has no borders. A friend of mine who moved to Australia attended a sangha meeting where the teacher put on a recording – of me, teaching at IMC!

Sangha is not limited even to people we know. It can expand as widely as we are willing to extend it. I heard a teacher talk about being on retreat when a lot of difficult thoughts and emotions were coming up, and she sat crying in her room. She was reminded by her interview teacher that at any given time, many people around the world were sending metta to “all beings.” That goodwill is extended to us all, and any of us can tap into it at any time. Sangha is worldwide, continuous around the clock, and there for everyone.

Also, sangha doesn't need to be just people. I know many people who meditate with their pets. In fact, thanks to Zoom, I have seen this in action. Some pets participate in their people's practice more energetically than others, but the connection is obviously there. As I wrote this talk, I sat in front of a sliding glass door looking out on my garden, where a bird bath draws a large population of wildlife. Butterflies, squirrels and a wide assortment of birds entered my consciousness as I wrote, as they always do.

I go on self-retreats in the mountains to practice with chipmunks, fish, birds and more insects than I care to consider. I'm well aware of nearby bears and other predators. Many kinds of trees and bushes, flowers and grasses are part of my awareness too, along with the wind and changing weather that feeds us all. My sangha is truly huge and diverse. It is all of this planet, and beyond, into the whole universe that shares our elements and whose forces forged *this world* and its life.

So, my heart aches with the changes happening here on our special planet, this *living rock* spinning and rotating along with our galaxy. We are all interdependent, especially the varied species that live here on Planet Earth. None of us could live without what all the others contribute to the Earth. And we are all under threat. The irony is that we humans are such a big cause of that threat.

I have no desire to cause guilt in anyone. Guilt would be counterproductive, because we so often try to deny it, and that disables us from addressing what's really happening. We need, instead, to open our hearts compassionately to the plight of Planet Earth and the life upon it. But we do need to understand how humans have wreaked such destruction, while we hold compassion for all of life, human and others.

The destruction I mean isn't just the climate, although that's pretty severe, and humans have certainly contributed to it. But there's also the mass extinction event which we have caused all by ourselves. We probably started annihilating species before we were even fully human, as soon as we could gang up and scare animals over cliffs. From the moment homo sapiens appeared on Earth, large animals like mastodons began disappearing. We ate them.

Does anyone feel guilty about that, what was done so early in the archeological record? How about the fact that right now, almost all threatened species are endangered by three factors: 1) loss of habitat, 2) poaching and 3) the pet trade. Well, if we say it like that, it's pretty much guilt free. Again, that's good, because there's no benefit in feeling guilty.

Still, let's look at what those three factors really mean. The first factor, loss of habitat, means that natural ecosystems with an interdependent balance of soil, sunlight, plants and animals are being destroyed by humans.

Whenever ships drag anchors or nets across the sea floor, they destroy a *vast network* of life, including individuals from hundreds, to thousands, of species. "Habitat loss" also refers to wilderness that's been reduced to patches that are smaller than species need to find enough food, and each other, to reproduce.

Agriculture is a massive force in habitat loss. For countless millennia humans could encourage the growth of plants they ate without ruining the harmony of the existing ecosystem. We gave that up a few centuries ago. Now we bulldoze out the meadows, the woods or the rainforests where we want to raise a single kind of plant. The majestic Amazon basin is being replaced by row after row of palm oil trees, because so many industries these days use palm oil for so many things.

The second factor, poaching, sounds a bit innocuous, but it includes any reason someone has to go take an animal – or a part of one – out of its environment. Chinese medicine is a big motivator, for rhino horn, pangolin scales, and so many other nonsensical body parts.

Some rich people actually like to dine on highly endangered species just because they're so rare. A lot of poaching is to feed native people who don't have enough land to feed their village. This "bush meat" includes many protected species like gorillas and elephants.

The pet trade is the third factor, and it's heartbreaking. Babies of many species are so cute that a horrific industry of theft is generated by people who don't know or care how it impacts the animal or its families. Every kind of animal is poached: turtles, fish, birds, and mammals all the way to primates. Abducting babies from the wild is crippling countless populations by just cutting them off at the roots.

I could go on and on, but at this point you might be wondering what all this has to do with sangha. I don't buy animals on the illegal pet trade, and you probably don't either. My point is that sangha helps us understand our interconnection with all beings, from the plants we eat to the animals we relate to as food, pets and wildlife.

Sangha also helps us look at our fundamental belief in “self-and-other” – the deeply ingrained sense that there’s me and then there’s everything else. Our clinging to the notion of self is the core ignorance which the Buddha said was the cause of greed and hatred, and thus all dukkha.

So, when like-minded people come together to meditate, listen to the dharma and then exchange our thoughts with each other, we support each other in overcoming the whole chain of our suffering’s causation. That is what we’re here for.

People are so often unhappy with the way things are – and that’s dukkha, the First Noble Truth. That suffering is caused by our clinging (the Second Noble Truth), but there is a way out of this (the Third Noble Truth) and that’s the Eightfold Path (the Fourth Noble Truth), which is best traveled with good companions – and that’s Sangha.

Now, just imagine taking the support and camaraderie you find here, in sangha, and expanding it further and further until it encompasses the entire planet and beyond. Take a minute and explore how that might feel: Greeting a breeze as a spiritual friend. Smelling the dharma in a flower. Laughing with a humming bird that hovers before you, and wishing it well.

I haven’t suggested anything you should **do** about the fact that our Earth is catching fire and, in some places, slipping underwater. Or the fact that so many magnificent animals are disappearing from Life on Earth. First, we each have to face the very inconvenient fact that this rampant destruction is driven by humanity’s overpopulation. I started advocating for zero population growth in my teens. Since then, the human population has doubled.

We eat more, build more and crowd out more of everything in Nature. As practitioners we just have to *know* this, sit with the truth of what’s actually happening around us. And when it has sunk in, once we have relaxed and opened to this truth, then we will each in our own time know what we can actually *do* to help this Earth and the life that’s on it to survive.

Connecting with other species and our sick planet as if they were members of our sangha might help sidestep the guilt and grief that often overwhelms people. Maybe then we can reach out caringly to do what we *can* to help, the way the Buddha told those monks to go home and help their sick roommate. We just need to know that we are all of us in this together.