

[Taking Refuge](#) - Brad Warner, *September 23, 2016*

I'm here in Hebden Bridge, England leading a four day Zen retreat. Right now it's work period, so I've decided my work is to write this blog.

Last night someone at the lecture asked about the concept of "taking refuge."

This is a phrase that's often used by Buddhists today in the West who generally see it as a metaphorical thing. But for the first couple thousand years that Buddhism existed — and still today in many places — taking refuge was not just a metaphor.

I've been reading a lot about the time and place the founder of Soto style Zen, Dogen, lived. Japan 800 years ago was essentially a lawless land. Justice only came to those rich or powerful enough to afford it. If you'd been wronged by someone the very best you could do would be to convince the local samurai to go and teach that person a lesson. It must have been like making a deal with the Mafia. There was always a price.

Taking refuge in a Buddhist monastery in those days was literally taking refuge, like a real refugee. Generally — but certainly not always — monks and the monasteries they lived in were accorded a special place in Japanese society. As long as they kept out of the business of the rest of society, they were mostly left alone. It was a safe space.

These days in America we're seeing a lot of protests against inequality and injustice. That's great. That indicates real social progress. I think that if we want to protest against the way things are, we should protest. But first I believe we should take time to examine the way things are and how they got that way.

A lot of Americans have the impression that we have a broken system that needs fixing. But I wonder if that's really true. Now before you get your pantaloons in a bunch, please understand that I'm not saying that things are perfectly fine as they are. They aren't.

Yet to me it seems less like we have a broken system that needs fixing and more like we are trying to build a system that is absolutely without historical precedent, a system that would be amazing if we could ever get it set up.

Sometimes we as Americans are quick to say things like, "Our country was built on a lie!" I know because I have said this stuff myself a lot. We hear about "liberty and justice for all" in school and imagine that's the way things are. But it's not that way and it never has been, in America or anywhere else. I think that our country was built less on a lie than on an almost utopian ideal.

It's terrible that people are unequal. It's terrible that minorities are singled out and treated unfairly. It's terrible that people are killed because they look different. It's terrible that some have privilege while others do not. But it has always been that way.

The rich have always been in charge. Minorities are persecuted everywhere in the world and have been throughout human history. In Belfast, where I was about a week ago, it used to be important for white people not to let other white people know their family names since it

might identify their lineage and get them beaten up or even killed. What we are experiencing now in the USA is not unusual at all nor, in comparison to what's gone before and what is still going on in many places, is it even close to being among the worst of such societal abuses.

We are asking for the USA to live up to ideals that have never, in all of human history, been lived up to by any society as large and as complex as ours. That is a tall order. I think it's crucial that we realize what it is we are asking for. And note that I say "we" here because I am also asking for it. I think it can happen. But I also think it would be a miracle for it to be realized in my lifetime or even in the lifetimes of the next several generations.

This is where taking refuge comes in for me. When I'm in the USA I am part of the privileged class, a white male heterosexual. But I've lived much of my life in places where being white meant not being in the privileged class — 4 years in Kenya and 11 years in Japan. So while I can't claim to know what it's like to be Black or Latino or any other brand of non-white in the USA, I do know what it's like to be an immigrant and a racial minority in other societies. As such, my sympathies generally lie with those who don't get the privileges I am accorded when I'm on American soil.

I think much of my interest in taking refuge in Buddhism stems from a childhood in which being white meant something very different from what it would have meant if my family had stayed in Wadsworth, Ohio rather than moving to Nairobi, Kenya. Much of my continued interest stems from spending over a decade in Japan where I was an immigrant and where my race often made me an object of fear and suspicion, where I could not trust the police to treat me fairly.

It also stems from having a deep interest in history, particularly when it comes to racism. I tend not to see humanity as failing to live up to what it ought to be, but as a species of animal trying to do something no other species of animal has ever managed to do. I believe we can do this. But only if we are willing to look very deeply into what we actually are.

I want to be part of this change. But it requires that I be fully honest with myself and with my motivations at all times. It also requires me to know that I do not know. I do not know what circumstances really led up to whatever everybody's sharing on social media today. I do not know what went on in situations I was not a part of. I do not even know fully what went on in situations I was part of.

I do not know, for example, why a pair of young black men tried to beat me and a friend of mine to death on the streets of Akron in the early 1990's. I do not know why the only people who came to our rescue in the racially mixed neighborhood where it happened were also black. Was there some shared karma between us that went back thousands of lifetimes as many Buddhists would say? I often wonder what became of those guys later in life and what we would say to each other if we could meet again.

But even though I don't know any of this, I do know that America has a long way to go before these kinds of incidents cease forever. I want us to get there. I want to be a part of us getting there. I want us to find realistic ways of making that happen.

And so I take refuge in a philosophy whose goal is to live a life not governed by hate and fear, not governed by a false belief that I am right or that my life is any more or any less important

than anyone else's, a life in which I do not accept the status quo as given, where I do not accept that change is impossible.

And so I take refuge in Buddha. I take refuge in dharma. And I take refuge in the great sangha that is the entire human species.