

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #5-B: Taking Refuge and Resting

Dear Thay, dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

Taking Refuge

Students of the Buddha take refuge in the Three Jewels, also known as the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. I remember clearly my first Order of Interbeing retreat for order members and aspirants. I was sitting on a couch looking out a window of the Oregon House down through a line of tall douglas firs to the shoreline of the Oregon coast at Yachats. As we began chanting the Refuge Chant, tears welled up inside of me. I was taking refuge. I was coming home.

Every Buddhist tradition has its own version of the Refuge Chant. The Plum Village version goes like this:

I take refuge in the Buddha,
the one who shows me the way in this life.
I take refuge in the Dharma,
the way of understanding and of love.
I take refuge in the Sangha,
the community that lives in harmony and awareness.
[bell]

Dwelling in the refuge of Buddha,
I clearly see the path of light and beauty in the world.
Dwelling in the refuge of Dharma,
I learn to open many doors on the path of transformation.
Dwelling in the refuge of Sangha,
shining light that supports me, keeping my practice free of obstruction.
[bell]

Taking refuge in the Buddha in myself,
I aspire to help all people recognize their own awakened nature,
realizing the Mind of Love.
Taking refuge in the Dharma in myself,
I aspire to help all people fully master the ways of practice
and walk together on the path of liberation.
Taking refuge in the Sangha in myself,
I aspire to help all people build Fourfold Communities,
to embrace all beings and support their transformation.
[bell, bell]

Taking refuge: Phap Hai¹ also called the Three Jewels the Three Refuges. What does it mean to take refuge? Phap Hai said in the Chinese language, when we speak of taking refuge, we don't just say "I take refuge," we say, "I return to and I rely upon the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha."

We recognize the presence of our refuge in each moment of our daily life.
Dwelling in the recollection of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha has a profound effect on our mind.

Dwelling in: When we first come to the practice, taking refuge may manifest as taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha outside of ourselves. Perhaps this was my experience at Yachats. There is nothing at all wrong with that. We have a deep aspiration that leads us to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and we are quite joyful. The brightness of our aspiration shines through, but we may not yet realize that the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are realities inside of us and around us, not just objects outside of ourselves.

According to Phap Hai, **dwelling means that our body, speech, and mind are all there.** In Buddhist meditation, concentration means "dwelling with"—our mind is settling down and able to rest with one point. It is the dwelling place of our attention. When we are "dwelling with" the object of our mindfulness and concentration, "There is no struggle anymore. It's like sitting down under the shade of a tree on a scorching day." Thay has spoken of dwelling in peace and mindfulness, dwelling in a good environment, dwelling in the refuge of the three jewels, dwelling in nirvana, etc. All of these dwellings have the characteristics of mindfulness and concentration.

Phap Hai offered **ten ways to develop appropriate attention**,² to encourage the focus of our dwelling, and these ten ways are called the Ten Recollections.³ The Ten Recollections are:

...a traditional set of meditation themes that we contemplate throughout the day, which we set our heart upon. It's almost like a visualization practice.
Each of these recollections plays a specific role in our practice life.

The first six recollections "help us cultivate a sense of delight and confidence, *pasada* in the Pali language." Delight and confidence support concentration (*samadhi*) to develop within us. Phap Hai said it is extremely rare for a fruitful meditative concentration to develop without the supporting factor of *pasada*. The first three recollections are recollections of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Recollecting the Buddha as an object of our attention and contemplation, we recollect the qualities manifested by the Buddha, and the qualities that he awakened in others. We begin to see these qualities within ourselves and in those we encounter in our daily life. The Buddha's energy of awakening becomes something real and tangible to us. Phap Hai shared many ways to recollect the qualities of the Buddha.

Recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha help us to develop our awareness of them throughout our daily lives. We can ask ourselves: what are the positive qualities of the Buddha?...the Dharma?...the Sangha? Where do I see and experience them? As we recall the qualities of the Three Jewels, we begin to recognize and recall their qualities in our mind. We see how we manifest these qualities in our daily life and how they present themselves to us. When we begin dwelling in the refuge of the Three Jewels, we begin to bring them inside of ourselves and we see that we can do it.

Taking refuge in myself: Thay has said, “Buddha is our mindfulness, Dharma is our conscious breathing, Sangha is our Five Aggregates⁴ working in harmony.” This explanation can help us see concretely how taking refuge in our practice and ourselves opens a door to bodhicitta, the mind of love, which nourishes our aspiration (in concrete ways) to realize our ideal of helping all beings deepen our well-being.

Phap Hai asked:

What do you take refuge in? Where do you seek shelter? There’s an easy way to find out. If we begin to pay attention to the habitual thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that manifest in us throughout the day, then we will see clearly that most often we “return and rely” not upon the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, but rather our anger, resentment, our mistaken perceptions, and the “holy trinity” of I, Me, and My.

Taking refuge in ourselves means we become more familiar with ourselves. We can be more honest with ourselves. Taking refuge in ourselves, moment by moment in our daily lives, we realize we have the capacity to realize, not only our patterns of suffering but, more and more, our own awakened nature. The phenomenal dimension touches the ultimate.

Out of the Shadows

Years ago I drew a picture of a red door that closed to a closet or small shed. Outside I drew non-descript gray bodies with heads on them. So many forgotten people. And I captioned the image, “Let the children OUT.” I thought I was drawing about all the cousins from my father’s family who had suffered from mistreatment. And on one level that was true. But as I practiced and worked with a therapist I realized that the image also represented parts of me that had been kept hidden—perhaps abandoned—in the realms of my mind. One time after a meditation I realized that I had been worried about the monsters in that closet but, in reality, the monsters were nothing more than crying children who needed attention and love.

Last summer I had the opportunity to look directly into the face of my dad’s grandmother Josie—an old photo of her surrounded by her daughters—named after

precious stones: Opal, Ruby, Emerald, Pearl. She died several months after that photo was taken. I knew a lot about the suffering caused by my great-grandfather, grandfather and uncles. I have long stayed away from that side of my family, too much is unspoken when they get together. But here I was looking into the faces of my great-grandmother and the young women who were her daughters. Trying to see into the suffering behind their smiling faces. Josie's smile could have been the smile of my own sister. Her forehead, eyes, eyebrows, and cheeks were just like mine. All of a sudden I realized that I couldn't cut myself off from that family completely—I felt Josie's body inside my very own body. We were not separate—she was right there with me. I realized that the suffering and pain of our great grandparents touches all of us, our lives are intricately entwined.

That which we cannot face, we push away from us. We hover around the edges of the dark shadows, not daring to move into them. And yet the unhealed traumas of childhood live on—generation after generation. We can't avoid or escape anything. They live deep inside of us. We know them in our bones, the cells of our bodies, our nervous system, and our heart. And there I was last summer, viscerally and consciously realizing what I had known all my life, deep within my body.

Generational trauma may seem vague, but we know it very well.⁵ Years ago, when I began practicing, I saw in my mind's eye a small me, standing at the edge of a huge black crater that was like a bottomless pit—all that I was scared of, and all that was unknown to me in my conscious mind. My therapist early on told me that we can't go around or under what scares us—we have to go straight through. Our practice is not about being safe. Or okay. It is about going into those places that scare us and discovering the treasure. The practice itself creates a safe container for facing what scares us—but only as much as we can handle. We are wise to go slowly, with a lot of space, love, compassion, and support from others.⁶ As we gradually heal and deepen our practice over time, we learn to have faith in it and allow it to guide us gently through the dark shadows, and to the treasure trove that holds the jewels of our ancestors.

Meeting the Shadow: Mara⁷...As I was studying and practicing with the *Lotus Sutra* last summer, I kept thinking that I was destined to practice the *Lotus Sutra* since before I was born—it so resonated with me. But then I realized that **I had been practicing** the *Lotus Sutra* for generations back. A *Lotus Sutra* thread runs through me from my Catholic roots on my mom's side of the family: chanting, praying the rosary, being asked by a catechism teacher if I could sacrifice my life for someone I loved, devotion, tending to the poor, connecting with the saints and mystics, etc. These are manifestations of the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* in me. What I wrote in my journal was that I felt a most intimate connection with the *Lotus Sutra*. So familiar. So alive in me.

I have always loved Thay's introductory gatha to the Universal Door chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*:⁸

Chanting the Lotus Sutra by night,
the sound shook the galaxies.
The next morning when planet Earth woke up,
her lap was full of flowers.

Late in the summer, his poem stirred something in me. It began as a phrase, arose in a dream, stirred in meditation, became a poem, then a practice and, finally, a realization. I called it My Living Poem:

Mara comes to me.
Like a thief in the night
In dreams
I cannot turn away.

Her breath, her look, her voice
I know so well
to the core
of my being.

Hidden faults
rumble beneath the surface
of conscious awareness
unsettling, distasteful, jagged, raw
Sometimes from deep fissures
they escape
Where does anguish melt?

In the dark, frozen
regions of my heart
From the quivering spaces
between
A storm rises in me
“Who are you?
Who ARE you?”

A beautiful smile
breaks her open
The sweet scent of compassion
perfumes the air

Her eyes catch mine
in a look that goes on forever
We have been together
from beginningless time

Her voice echoes forest birdsong,

tumbling waterfalls,
a child's laugh of delight

"Let's hold hands," she whispers
"Embrace. I have been
so lonely without you."

A great smile breaks me open.
The petals of a million roses,
glistening in the rays
of the morning sun
rain down upon the earth.

Not two—one.

Like the children locked away in the closet of my mind, Mara, once seen and embraced, is not so frightening after all. Rather, she is a source of healing and freedom.

Resting

Can you remember a time when you were able to let go of everything and relax completely? If you wish, take a moment to visualize it. Go back to that experience. Where were you? Were you indoors or outdoors? Were you standing, walking, sitting, or lying down? What did the air around you feel like? Was the place quiet or teeming with life? What sounds did you notice? What sensations do you notice inside your body as you recall that experience? Perhaps no memory comes to mind, and that is completely fine.

I recall one time on retreat during a session of deep relaxation led by one of the retreat leaders. The meditation room was quiet, but I could hear the sounds of birds outside. The person's voice was soft but not necessarily quiet. The bells were resonant and beautiful. I could feel my body melting into the floor as she guided my attention first to my breath and then to various parts of my body. I felt my breath as a vessel—receiving well-being, letting it pass through, offering it outward. It was a gift of the moment and the practice of deep relaxation.⁹ Even now, thinking of it, my body relaxes and I feel a deep sigh of contentment. When we are able to rest in this way, we allow all sorts of energy to be released from inside us.

One of my favorite chapters from **The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching** is the chapter called "Stopping, Calming, Resting, Healing." In this chapter Thay talked about the three functions of stopping (*shamatha*). The first function of stopping is to Stop! Stop our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, and the strong emotions that rule us. "When a strong emotion rushes through us like a storm, we have no peace. We are in a war with ourselves and can easily start a war with others." With our mindful breathing, walking, smiling, etc. we are deeply in touch

with the present moment, and we have a chance to stop before we are caught in the grips of such a war.

The second function of shamatha is calming. We learn how to not act when we are triggered by strong emotions or habit energies. “We have to learn to become solid and stable like an oak tree, and not be blown from side to side by the storm.” Using the example of anger, Thay summarized the five stages of calming as:

1. Recognition—If we are angry, we say, “I know that anger is in me.”
2. Acceptance—When we are angry, we do not deny it. We accept what is present.
3. Embracing—We hold our anger in our two arms like a mother holding her crying baby. Our mindfulness embraces our emotion, and this alone can calm our anger and ourselves.
4. Looking deeply—When we are calm enough, we can look deeply to understand what has brought this anger to be, what is causing our baby’s discomfort.
5. Insight—The fruit of looking deeply is understanding the many causes and conditions, primary and secondary, that have brought about our anger, that are causing our baby to cry. Perhaps our baby is hungry. Our anger was triggered when our friend spoke to us meanly, and suddenly we remember that he was not at his best today because his father is dying. We reflect like this until we have some insights into what caused our suffering. With insight, we know what to do and what not to do to change the situation.

The third function of shamatha is the subject of this post—**resting**. Thay used the example of a pebble thrown into the air and, as it falls down into the river, it allows itself to sink slowly and reach the riverbed without any effort. Once it is at the bottom, it continues to rest, allowing the water to pass by. It feels no need to struggle against the current. It doesn’t try to push the water away. That would do it no good.

When we practice sitting meditation, or walking meditation, or at home, or even at work, we can practice the art of resting. Thay said we have to learn the art of resting, allowing our body and mind to rest. “If we have wounds in our body or in our mind, we find a way to rest completely so they can heal themselves. Like an animal in the forest who is injured, we have to practice resting so that we can heal. Worry, fear and busy-ness are not forms of resting and are not conditions for healing ☺ Stopping allows see what is going on, calming allows us to rest, and resting is a pre-condition for healing. Our practice does not need to be harsh. Sister The Nghiem said the practice of Plum Village is a gentle practice. Gently stopping, calming and resting can help us heal. Thay said, “If we cannot stop, the course of our destruction will just continue. Individuals, communities and nations need healing.”

Resting Along the Way: The Conjured City

In the Parable of the Conjured City chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha shares a parable meant to illustrate the path to freedom. The parable of the conjured, or magic, city tells of a group of people wishing to traverse a road that will lead them to a cache of precious jewels. The group starts out on a steep, difficult, very bad road, empty and devoid of human beings—“a frightful place.” There is a wise, perceptive guide “of penetrating clarity” who knows the hard road and its passable and impassable features, and wishes to guide the group through these hardships to the cache of precious jewels. As they progress along the road, the group becomes exhausted, weary and frightened, and they want to turn back. They feel they cannot go on any further. Does this sound familiar? Perhaps there are times when we too feel discouraged or disheartened by the difficulties we may be experiencing in our life or in our practice.

But the guide, being a person of insight and skillful means, wishes to encourage the group onward. The guide sees that they may need to rest before going further, so s/he conjures a beautiful, pleasant city and tells the group:

Have no fear! There is no need to turn back! Here is this great city. You may stop in it and do as you please. If you enter the city, you can quickly regain your composure. If you then feel able to proceed to the jewel cache, you will also be free to leave.

The Buddha goes on:

At that time, the exhausted multitude, overjoyed at heart, sigh at something they have never heard before, saying, ‘We have escaped that bad road, and shall quickly regain composure.’ Thereupon the multitude proceed to enter the conjured city, having the notion that they are saved and evincing a feeling of composure. At that time, the guide, knowing that the multitude have rested and are no longer fatigued, straightaway dissolves the conjured city and says to the multitude, ‘Come away! The jewel cache is near. The great city of a while ago was conjured up by me for the purpose of giving you a rest, nothing more.’

Still, many of the people wanted to stay in the comfortable city. They were happy enough, why travel any further when there might be even more hardships ahead? They had forgotten that their aim wasn’t just to enjoy the comfort of the conjured city but to find the treasure storehouse of precious jewels. Our dharma teacher, Barbara Casey, in teaching about the conjured city, said that maybe first we come to practice to get relief, this is important. Then we feel good, and we just stay there. But this is the path, not of feeling good, but of true liberation. So we encourage one another to keep walking, to keep committing to being present, and that energy of presence takes us to glimpses of true freedom. She offered some practices to help us along the sometimes difficult path:

- We practice generosity and notice how much happiness it gives us.

- We are able to be present for a friend who is suffering and notice how much comfort it gives us.
- Our hearts start opening and we experience our connection with all beings.
- The bodhisattva path is inevitable because we understand that true joy lies in cultivating bodhicitta, in living in the reality that we are all connected.

Thay suggested¹⁰ that underlying this “I am fine staying where I am” attitude is a kind of inferiority complex. We cannot ourselves become a Buddha, we cannot be equal to a Buddha, because the Buddha is too great. Along with this feeling, perhaps, is that there is no need to cultivate bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain Buddhahood, in order to help others. “You have a lot of suffering and you want to stop your suffering, so you concern yourself only with your own safety and liberation. You are satisfied with a small path, a small nirvana”:

The Buddha reminds us of our ultimate goal: to arrive at the shore of freedom and well-being and then extend a hand to others so that they may cross over to liberation. From the path of shravakayana [that is, individual liberation], we continue onto the bodhisattva path of the Mahayana and continue our journey to the end.

We are encouraged by our teacher to rest as a function of shamatha (stopping), as part of the journey. In fact, resting like this is an integral part of transformation and healing. We have stopped. We have calmed ourselves, and we can rest. DaeHaeng¹¹ spoke of resting in terms of **letting go**. If we keep letting go of everything as it arrives and as it leaves, observing, then “karma will collapse, habits will melt down, your true self will be revealed, and every kind of hindrance will surrender to you.” She said that when we let go, we can truly live:

Unenlightened people believe that it is necessary to plan and think carefully about every single thing. However, awakened people don’t raise thoughts for each little thing they do. Instead, they just rest deeply. Yet everything they do is in accord with the Dharma, without even the slightest error. Because they let go, their actions are more harmonious, natural, profound, sincere, beautiful, and more beneficial than any actions that are done by relying on intellect or planning. Thus, for a true practitioner, everything in daily life is itself the path. Because they let go and rest, every single thing they do, whether moving, standing, sitting or lying down, is all naturally in accord with the Dharma.

DaeHaeng said that practice is resting...Rest deeply and it comes naturally. This is the magic of spiritual practice. We learn how to rest, and we learn to encourage others in the same way. But the resting taught by Thay and the Buddha does not mean to stop practicing once we have reached a comfortable place. On the contrary, it is at this point that we are called to explore our practice more deeply. And, as we learn to rest, our actions of body, speech and mind manifest as right actions which

have the power to heal ourselves, our families, our communities, our nation, the world, and our precious Mother Earth.

Our late dharma sister, Jayna Warm Nest Gieber, once asked if we couldn't just act with our bodies in small ways. She said that all she did, many times, was bring a bell with her to gatherings of eco-activists. She would sit on the stage, or on the steps of a sidewalk in the midst of crowds, large and small, invite a bell, and ask the people present to come back to their breath and body, and feel their contact with Mother Earth. She said the crowd would calm immediately, and the calmness of the entire crowd breathing in and out created a palpable field of mindful energy. Have you ever felt this yourself—at sangha, on a day of mindfulness or on retreat, practicing with others? Such energy is the ground for mindful action that has the power to change the world.

¹ From **Nothing to It: ten ways to be at home with yourself**, Phap Hai.

² For more on appropriate attention (*yoniso manaskara*) see my dharma post 5-A, or **Nothing to It: ten ways to be at home with yourself**, Phap Hai.

³ For more on the Ten Recollections, see **Nothing to It: ten ways to be at home with yourself**, Phap Hai.

⁴ The Five Aggregates (or *skandhas*) are body/form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—the components of what we think of our our “self.” For more on the Five Aggregates, see **The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching**, Thich Nhat Hanh.

⁵ Two great resources about generational trauma and how to work with it are: **The Body Keeps the Score**, by Bessel Van Der Kolk, and **Reconciliation**, by Thich Nhat Hanh.

⁶ Many times this work is best done with the support of a good therapist. Unresolved trauma can trigger unhealthy reactions in us as our mind and body try to protect us from traumatic memories. Spiritual teachers and friends, though helpful, are not always trained or equipped to be our sole support in such situations.

⁷ According to Thay, Mara is the Tempter, the Evil One, the Killer, the opposite of the Buddha nature in each person. Sometimes personalized as a deity.

⁸ Found in **Chanting From the Heart**.

⁹ For more information on Deep Relaxation, you may want to search the Plum Village website, or our chanting book, **Chanting From the Heart**, Thich Nhat Hanh.

¹⁰ In **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**

¹¹ Korean Chan dharma teacher, in her book, **No River to Cross**