Refuge (5 of 5) Being A Refuge to Others

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Now we come to the fifth of the five talks about refuge, *saraṇa*. And so the concluding thoughts about this topic. One of the strong emphases I've made in these first four talks is how much the Buddha himself did not emphasize refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, especially not as something external. But rather he kept pointing more often than not back to one's own experience, and in oneself. When, in oneself one finds refuge or one makes a refuge for oneself, that refuge is found essentially, the most deeply, in the absence, in the letting go, and the destruction of these human tendencies for greed and hatred and delusion.

And one of the ideas that is associated with refuge in this focus on discovering refuge, is a compound word in Pāli, *avecca-pasāda*. Some translators will translate it as "unshakable confidence" or "unwavering faith." And it's kind of powerful the idea of unshakable or unwavering, like we know something so clearly, that it can't be taken away. This is what the basis of our life is. The word *avecca* that's translated as ‘unshakable’ means “what is known for oneself.” What one knows. What one has come to know. And so, even though unshakeable maybe speaks to what it feels like, it again points to what is known.

When the Buddha was most clear about what's known is that we know the difference between a mind or a heart that is caught up in greed, hatred and delusion, with avariciousness or conceit or resentments or envy – and a mind that is not. He goes through a list of a whole bunch of unhealthy mind states, painfully. The word is afflictive. It hurts us to have these mind states. We don't like to have them, and we really know what it's like not to have them – to have them drop away, to know it in such a strong, qualitative way. Now I know this is possible, and this is worthwhile to base one's life on, to go in this direction, this freedom. And now one knows what the Buddha Dharma Sangha is about. The unshakable faith in Buddha Dharma Sangha comes

from knowing in oneself, what those three are really pointing to or what they really represent.

So I've been emphasizing how much it's here in oneself. However, it is at the same time a radical, letting go of self so that we're not really self-centered. But we become, in a sense, situation-centered. It's not really right to say that instead of being self-centered, we're other-centered. That lends itself to some of the same problems that can exist with being self-centered, just in a very different way. But the idea of self-centered or situation-centered, is to understand it is the conceit of self – the attachments to self, and all the complicated ways we get entangled with ideas of who we are – that interferes with our ability to see clearly, and feel clearly, and participate in the world in a clean way. We let go of the self-preoccupation, which is itself stressful and suffering. You can feel that it doesn't feel good to be in it if you're really sensitive.

But instead of being other-centered, it's to still be centered here in this situation. So we really take into account what's happening here in this body of ours. We're conscious, responsible, clear about what we feel, what we believe, what we're thinking. And we are clear and aware of what's happening around us. There isn't this sharp line or wall or barrier between self and other, but there is clear awareness of both. So we can find our way, and be in a healthy relationship with all things.

What I want to point to when I say that this notion of going for refuge in Buddha Dharma Saṅgha represents one of the deep experiences or expressions of Buddhist faith is that in its essence, it is also a way of saying, “I trust something; I have faith in something that is different than my little self, my self-preoccupation, my conceit” – all these problematic ways in which we construct a sense of self and defend it and assert it, and do all these things. Many people, whether it's conscious or unconscious, have so much focus on themselves that it's almost like that's what they have faith in. In our culture, sometimes family and schools will often reinforce this faith we have, this sense of importance of the self.

I remember when a friend of mine moved here from Japan, and put her child in kindergarten, she was horrified at the ways in which the kindergarten was immediately trying to create kids who all thought that they were special, and highlight their specialness. It's certainly a wonderful thing in some ways for people to feel like they're special. But to have it solidify as a way of viewing oneself, and needing to be a certain way can cause suffering. And so this practice of meditation, this practice of going for refuge, is to trust something that's other than the small self, other than the contracted, constricted self. To trust nature, to trust something, some people might say that's larger than self, more

glorious than this little self. It's not a diminishment of who we are. It's an enhancement. It's heightened, what it looks like from the outside; it's real confidence. It's a real willingness to show up and be present, and intentional, and engaged in the world. It's not disappearing from being in the world, but it is a disappearing of this small, little contracted self that somehow gets in the way of things.

So when we chant or go for refuge, it's also a reminder that there's something else that's supporting us here than our own efforts. In practice, of course, we have to make our effort. But we're being supported by so much more. We're being supported by nature. We're being supported by the Dharma. We have amazing healing capacities. We have amazing capacities within for human development and growth. We don't just stop growing and developing as human beings when we turn 18 or 21. There is psychological growth and continuation of human development that happens that if everything is normal and healthy, and it keeps growing into old age. If we practice the Dharma, it's a way of supporting this natural phenomenon of growth, healing, development, liberation, which is inherent in our whole system.

There's an inherency in this movement of wanting to be free. And to take refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha is to trust this inherency that something more than

myself is supporting me. And by trusting that, we allow what's more than self to operate. If we're the only one responsible, the only one who has to figure out how to make it work, we actually, at some point start interfering with a deeper process happening. So part of what it means to go for refuge is to trust something, to trust nature in a deep way.

As we trust ourselves, as we trust the situation-centered world, at some point in this developmental process, at least that the Buddha talks about, the refuge gets turned inside out. Rather than being the one who receives refuge, or experiences refuge, we become the kind of person who offers refuge to others. And the orientation becomes much more being a person of refuge rather than being a person who has refuge or receives refuge.

The Buddha talks about it as making oneself safe for all beings. What a gift! He said that with the gift of safety, the gift of fearlessness, we can live in such a way that other people have nothing to fear from us. It might take a long time to develop and grow in confidence, skills and freedom to feel that we're ready to be a refuge for others, or to offer people the gift of our fearlessness so that they don't have to fear us whatsoever. So that's the direction of refuge – it isn't just I go for refuge, but it's also at some point, I offer refuge. I will become now a refuge for all beings. And this way of going for refuge in

the Buddha, going for refuge in the Dharma, going for refuge in the Sangha, is going to that space, that place of refuge where we ourselves can be a refuge for all beings.

And this is what the world needs, maybe more now than ever. It certainly feels like we've come to a point where, really, let's be a refuge for all beings. Let's be a refuge for Black lives – people who for centuries have not felt safe, to say it mildly. Now is the time to offer them safety so that they can be supported. It's their turn. So thank you for doing this.

And I will see you on Monday, and we'll start a new theme on Monday.

Q & A

I'll stay here for a little while if you'd like. And I'll try to look at the chats. If anyone has any questions you'd like to make, I'll try to answer.

The question here I see is, "*Why are you talking about emptiness?*" Emptiness is a very profound topic in Buddhism. Maybe one of these weeks I can make that the topic, the theme of the talks. But certainly I'm talking about the emptiness of self, the emptiness of self-concern self-preoccupation, self-attachment.

"*Was the retreat tomorrow canceled?*" Yes. So maybe I didn't cancel it on the website. I'm sorry, if it's still up there. But yeah, that's not happening.

"*How to meditate with pain?*" Well, that's a good question. That question requires a lot of respect. Pain can be quite difficult and challenging. I've known people who've learned to meditate with very severe pain. So it is possible. And to say just one word briefly about it, is that one of the things that's helpful with pain is to really study our relationship to the pain, because sometimes there's a second arrow that we add to it. We make it worse than it needs to be. It can be bad enough to have pain, but then there's a lot of reactivity that can happen. And the practice can help us a lot with the reactivity. Sometimes as the reactivity settles down, the pain can be much more bearable. So that's just one thing. I'm sorry that we don't really have time to talk a lot about pain, but maybe another time we can spend more time on it.

"*SN Goenka talked about vipassanā being body scanning. And I think ānāpāna, breathing meditation. Can you comment?*" Yes. SN Goenka was an Indian vipassanā teacher, insight meditation teacher, who had a very particular technique for doing vipassanā. The word *vipassanā* is not a name for a practice. It is a name for insight – the insights we have as we do deeper and deeper Buddhist meditation practice. In the

modern world, in part because of SN Goenka and others, *vipassanā* has now become the name of a technique – the practices that lead to insights. There are many different ways and techniques of practicing mindfulness which lead to these insights of *vipassanā*. And SN Goenka had one. He taught body scanning, just really staying and scanning through the body and feeling the sensations of the body. And then *ānāpāna* means mindfulness of breathing. It's a powerful way of practicing. It takes a limited range of our human experiences and really goes deep with it. The way we practice vipassanā here is leading to the same goal, to the same purpose and the same insights. But we have a little different approach, which is to not take such a narrow bandwidth of our human experience as the focus, but to be much more broad – to include all of what we're experiencing. As a result we're sometimes a little bit slower to go deep, but then at the same time, it's sometimes broader and more stable. But the Goenka practice is quite effective and wonderful.

"*Why is it not a good thing to make a child feel special or that he or she has special qualities?*" When my children were growing up, when they did something wonderful like draw a nice drawing, we did not say, "Oh, what a good boy!" We said, "Oh, you had so much fun doing that," or "It's so much fun to watch you do that." We wanted to celebrate the activity that the child was doing, because as soon as we started saying, "You're a

good boy; you're a special boy," it reifies the expectation that they're supposed to get that kind of approval, and they deserve that kind of approval. And then they start looking for it and wanting it – and they become more fragile if they don't get it. They feel upset if they don't get it. So what we were trying to do with our kids was to have them really engage vigorously, fully confidently in the world – but without needing to define themselves by the idea of being special. Researchers in education have found that this whole movement of developing self-esteem in children was certainly pointing to some kind of need, but that emphasizing self-esteem led to children who felt they deserved to be privileged. They deserved to kind of be able to be provided with things, rather than work for things.

"*Can you say something about how witnessing and having our hearts broken can change in ourselves?*" I think that it's very important to be a witness of what's happening in the world, and to be a witness of suffering. I think that without really seeing and recognizing what's there, we can't be changed by it. We can't really see what's true in the world. *Vipassanā*, which we talked about earlier, literally means “clear seeing.” And the ability to see clearly is what you know, partly a witness. And it's really helpful for others that other people know, feel, and experience their suffering. People have suffered in isolation. Our society has caused a lot of suffering to so many people, and they look around, and

no one seems to understand their suffering, or understand *how* the oppression of society has caused them suffering. And when they bring it up and talk about that suffering, they're told they're wrong, or it's not that way or, that wasn't the intention or something. But when people really have their hearts broken, it actually makes it easier if other people let them know that they're not suffering alone. It's also just a very human, natural thing for a heart to break. It shouldn't be a problem to have a broken heart. It's painful for sure. But a broken heart is how we grow, and how we develop. And if we can learn to use this mindfulness practice, to learn how to not have second arrows, how not to add reactivity, then a broken heart does not have to be a tragedy. It can actually be something through which we grow and develop. To witness and experience the suffering of the world supports growth for all of us. It's how to find freedom and peace. In Buddhism the idea is that, as we experience a broken heart, as we experience the suffering of the world, we want to change ourselves. We don't just wait and expect someone else to change things. The more we're distressed, the more the heart is broken, the more important is for us to do something to make the world better. For us to be changed by the experience, it doesn't mean we go out and fix the particular problem that broke our heart if it's a social problem. But we change ourselves so that we become someone who's part of the greater solution – part of what makes a difference. It could be as simple as

making a donation someplace, or volunteering someplace to make a difference, or having stronger connections and care for our neighbors, or having work that is meaningful and we devote ourselves more to that work to really help society even more.

"*How are equanimity and detachment different*?" Detachment is a closing down, a constricting. Detachment, if you're really mindful and attentive to it, has qualities of tension and suffering within it. It's not comfortable to be detached. Equanimity might look the same, but equanimity is not aloof; it's not removed; it's not contracted; it's not a shutting down. It's really an inability to stay open to the situation – to be a witness without reactivity, second arrows.

"*Is it the experience of the absence of clinging that dissolves the stickiness of self?*" It's a great question. I'm not sure exactly. I'd like to say yes. But the particular kind of formation of self that we're looking at in Buddhism is not all ideas of self, but rather the attachment to self, the clinging to it. So discovering the absence of the clinging to self dissolves the stickiness of self. And sometimes we can have very clear experiences where that self-attachment, self-preoccupation, completely falls away. And we even can see that there's no self here – just life being lived. Self will come back later, with the stickiness and the attachment, but we know this other place so clearly,

that we have a very different perspective on the self that comes back. Now we can really recognize, "A lot of what I thought I was is a construction. It's a convention. It's a learned behavior and the idea of who I am that's been taken on by my culture and my family, my religion, all kinds of things is provisional. It's conditional, and whatever is useful about it, maybe I'll participate in. And whatever is not useful and painful, maybe I can let it be."

So thank you for participating, and I hope my answers were adequate in response. They're great questions, and very important issues – not always so easy to answer, especially in this format without getting much of the context for the questions.

I look forward to being together next week. Thank you.