

Refuge (2 of 5) The Internal Refuge

June 9, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS *gacchāmi*, *bhikkhus*, Ananda, *Vinaya*, Buddha, Sangha, Dharma, going, walking, wholeness, conventional, worldly, ultimate, transcendent, caught up, clinging, craving, hostility, hatred, anxiety, fear, conceit, selfishness, deluded, confused, doubt, absence, trust, non-clinging, non-harming, skillful, goodwill, care, connectedness, relatedness, beneficial, nourishing, understanding, faith, connection, inspiration, external

Gil Fronsdal

Today I'll continue the talks on refuge. I'm fond of the idea that the usual expression for “refuge” is *gacchāmi*, the Pali word for “going.” We say: “Going for refuge.”

In Pali, the word “going” literally means “to walk.” Walking suggests that you bring all of yourself when you walk. You don't leave part of yourself back at home when you go out for a walk. When we go for refuge we bring all of ourselves. We bring along, engage in, commit to, and are involved in the wholeness of who we are.

As I continue these thoughts, building on what I said yesterday, in the last days of the Buddha's life, he said that he had not appointed anyone to be the leader of the Sangha. There was no successor to be in charge of the community of monastics. The idea that this great world religious leader explicitly did not appoint someone else to be the leader is quite a phenomenal thing.

What he said instead was: Now you have the Dharma and the Vinaya (the discipline or ethical rules for monastics) as your leader, as your teacher. It is almost as if he was saying that you have to become your own teacher. You have to know what the Dharma is, what the teachings are, and where the Dharma is found within. But that's where it's found: within. Whether it's found or not today, that is the direction we're going – rather than having an external leader, to become our own leader and our own teacher in a sense.

After he died, someone did ask his disciple Ananda if the Buddha had assigned anyone to be the refuge. The person said to Ananda, "Now that your teacher is gone, has he appointed someone else to be the refuge?" (since we often say that we go for refuge in the Buddha.) Ananda said, "No." The Buddha did not do that." And the man said, "Was anyone appointed by the *bhikkhus* (the monastics) to be the leader, to be the

refuge?" Ananda said, "No, the community of monks and nuns has not appointed someone to be the refuge now." Then the man said, "If you have no refuge, how do the monastics live together peacefully and in harmony when there's no person they can go to?" Ananda said, "Now we have the Dharma as the refuge."

Here again, this points back to the Dharma. In its essence, the Dharma is something internal, something we discover for ourselves. It lives in us, and it becomes us. We are the Dharma.

In this regard, the tradition distinguishes between two kinds of refuge. In the language of the ancient texts, there is the conventional refuge – the worldly refuge – and then there's the ultimate refuge or the transcendent refuge that a person can take. In modern language, I understand this to mean there is the external refuge, and there's the internal refuge. The conventional refuge is the external refuge. The refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is external to oneself. The ultimate refuge is in a sense internal, found here within us.

So what is the internal Buddha that we take refuge in? The internal Buddha is the capacity we have to dwell without being caught up in clinging, craving, hostility, or hatred; without being caught up in anxiety, lost in fear, or holding on to fear; without holding onto or being

preoccupied with conceit and selfishness; and without being indecisive, deluded, or confused; and without being filled with doubt and caught in that.

This capacity is really about the absence of something – a potential we have to not be caught up in greed, hate, and delusion. This refuge of really knowing the value of the absence of clinging and craving might seem like a poor, insignificant kind of refuge. Maybe that's kind of a small thing.

However, the idea is to take refuge in the Buddha so that we don't succumb to craving, clinging, or hostility, and to know that there's no hostility worth being involved in. There's no craving, grasping, or tightening up that's worth doing. There's no anxiety that's worth dedicating one's life to, being caught up in, or really trusting and staying involved in.

Of course, as human beings, there can be craving, hostility, fear, and doubt. Of course, we can have those things. It's not as if it is a crime to be this way. We're human. These things come with human life. But we don't have to stay that way. We can discover something else, which is also in our human nature. Perhaps this can be something deeper, more reliable, and more trustworthy – the capacity to not cling, to not hold on.

To really trust and take refuge in that absence means that we're less likely to trust clinging and grasping again. Slowly, bit by bit, in small little increments perhaps, we can discover the value of not clinging. We learn that we don't have to be caught up in all these things that many people get caught up in and concerned with. We begin to find tremendous value in non-clinging. This is the refuge in the inner Buddha.

As I see it, the essence of the internal Dharma is the ability, the sensibility, the understanding, and the practice of non-harming. It is said in the ancient texts that the primary characteristic or manifestation of the Dharma is non-harming. The practice of non-harming means not harming oneself and not harming others.

The understanding and sensitivity of non-harming come from the first refuge – the refuge of non-clinging and non-grasping. We see that everything about the Dharma teachings arises from, supports, and is connected to all the things in the world that involve not harming. We also see the opposite – that the Dharma teachings are connected to what's beneficial, skillful, and nourishing for us, and to that which helps us to thrive internally.

Internal refuge means to begin taking refuge in that place inside where we don't want to harm anything – the place inside where we are ready to not invest in hostility

or cause harm. We understand what is harmful and what's not harmful, what's skillful and not skillful. Understanding this for ourselves is the refuge in the Dharma.

The internal Sangha is our capacity for goodwill, care, and connectedness – our feelings of really being kin to each other, together in this human world. We have a completely natural capacity for caring for each other, without which we would not have survived as a species. We care for our children, our relatives, our neighbors, and our tribe.

Practicing to take refuge in the inner Sangha means expanding this notion of care beyond the usual circles where it's pretty natural to care until it becomes natural to care for all beings. This means anyone we encounter – the stranger, the neighbor, the traveler from far away.

We have the capacity for caring for our relatedness. We have the capacity to create bridges of relationships between ourselves that are inspiring, meaningful, and wonderful. We can do that especially with people we are challenged by and people we have difficulty with, so that no one is left out of our hearts, while we work for justice and other things that need to be done.

This is the internal refuge. These are all things that we come to understand. Initially, this might be a provisional understanding, or we might understand them in small

ways or only in very big terms. There are all kinds of ways to understand the internal refuge.

I use the word “understanding” purposefully because in the ancient commentaries of our tradition, one of the ways that the teachers understand the idea of refuge is that it is an understanding. It is not something we take on faith blindly, a tenet or belief that we should trust because the source is good. Rather, it is something we've come to understand for ourselves. To go for refuge means to go with, or to go into what we've come to understand. It means to allow what we understand to be integrated into us and become who we are.

So internal refuge is one of the meanings of going for refuge. It is one way of harmonizing the idea of refuge with the meaning that the Buddha and his disciples gave it in the ancient world – that when the Buddha is dead, the refuge is found in the Dharma that is in us, the internal refuge.

Tomorrow I'll talk about the external refuge. The external refuge is that which resonates externally with the internal refuge. It is also very important for Buddhists to have faith, connection, and inspiration. An external refuge is a great support for our practice. Thank you very much for being here and listening. I hope that this is something that you can reflect on. I do regret a little bit that during this shelter-in-place time, there isn't any

chance to meet with you in person to discuss these topics that I think are so important.