

Refuge (1 of 5) An Introduction

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With this talk, I begin a new five-part series. In some ways, it continues from the long series on mindfulness of breathing meditation.

To settle in and discover the value of meditation, we discover that it is not all about me, myself, and mine. In fact, being involved in thoughts and ideations of me, myself, and mine limit our ability to settle deeply into meditation. They get in the way of our meditative process and the natural process of the Dharma moving through us. At some point, we begin to appreciate how powerful it is to no longer interfere unnecessarily with the natural process of the Dharma within.

There may be unnatural or unhealthy ways in which we get caught up or lost in our thoughts and preoccupations. We might be caught in what often are

the motivating factors for preoccupation. It could be greed, resentment, ill will, or doubt. It could be anxiety, fear, or conceit. A high percentage of many people's thoughts has at its center concerns about themselves – me, myself, and mine.

Of course, we want to make ourselves safe. We want the best for ourselves. It is a paradox that the less self-preoccupation we have, the more happiness and well-being are available for us. We slowly begin to learn that there is another way of living, which is not centered on self. It might be centered on our body/mind. We do not discount this being that we are. But we begin to see that the ideations, ideas, and identities we take on as me, myself, and mine – which are true enough and even useful at times – interfere with our deep well-being.

When I have been in the natural world like I am now, I often become acutely aware of how some of the preoccupations and concerns of living in an urban environment seem to fall away. Many things I get concerned with don't matter so much. Perhaps, living in an urban environment, there are more ongoing concerns with how people think about us. "How do people think about me?"

If I spilled breakfast all over my shirt, I probably would not feel very comfortable walking around my neighborhood. But if I spilled breakfast on my shirt while

camping, that is kind of unfortunate. When I am camping, there are all kinds of preoccupations I do not have about me, myself, and mine, or what other people are thinking. Rather, I stay in touch with or connected to ease, peacefulness, and openness – feelings that more closely relate to the natural world than what I might feel in a social time or an urban environment.

If you are following what I'm saying, we start feeling that there is safety, support, and guidance. There is profound wisdom in letting go of self-preoccupation, distractions, greed, hatred, and delusion.

What results from this letting go is vitality, wisdom, safety, and inspiration that we want to make part of our lives. "This is the center of my life. This is what makes sense. This is how I want to live. I don't want to get swept away again in distractions, greed, and fear – all the things I get caught up in. I want to live in this natural mind and heart, which is at ease with itself and allows operating without contracting, recoiling, or constantly being for or against everything."

This strong orientation – a strong, heartfelt wish to stay close to and make this the center of our lives – for Buddhists is often represented by or expressed through the notion of going for refuge. It is sometimes represented by going for refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha – where the Buddha, most

simply, is the exemplar. The Dharma is the teachings that arise out of his awakening. The Sangha are the witnesses who have discovered and seen for themselves that he is the exemplar and that what he teaches is true. The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is one traditional way of understanding refuge.

The Buddha also taught about refuge in other ways. One way – which is a big surprise for some people to hear – is that we become our own refuge in this process. Another is that our actions and choices become a refuge. The Four Noble Truths can also be a refuge. The last refuge the Buddha talks about is the refuge of deeply letting go of greed, hatred, and delusion – ending them.

During this week, I would like to talk about refuge. For many people, this is a topic of deep faith. It certainly is for me. In the ancient Theravādan tradition, the commentators talk about refuge as existing in the seat of our emotions, which is said to be the heart. Refuge is a heartfelt phenomenon. It is an element of the heart. Maybe it has more to do with a feeling or an inspiration than almost anything else.

But refuge is not only a feeling, an inspiration, or a religious sentiment. It is intimately connected to the understanding and wisdom that unfold as we practice.

This is why the more people practice, the more understanding they have of where true refuge is.

Refuge is also closely connected to our motivations and sense of purpose. Refuge is an orientation that provides direction and purpose for our lives. Having all these together – deep faith, heartfelnness, understanding, a sense of orientation and purpose that we trust – means that when Buddhists go for refuge, they often feel reminded of this. There is trust, faith, and knowing, which they immediately feel. “Oh there is safety here.” They immediately feel a sense of safety as the context for their lives. “There is order and lawfulness in this life. There is a natural process that I can trust.”

Going for refuge is an affirmation – but not of blind faith or adherence to a religion. It is an affirmation of what we are growing into and what is growing and developing within us. We begin understanding and having faith in it – a connection that is so meaningful. For some people, it becomes the center of their lives.

People might even say that going for refuge is the most important thing in their lives. It is not more important because other important things have become less important. If those things are really important, keep them as just as important.

Because refuge in the Dharma is so heart-based and is bigger than any self-preoccupation or self-concern, it feels almost like the world. It feels like we are part of something bigger than ourselves – which connects us to all the other things that are important to us.

In fact, as we become freer and more compassionate through practice, this inner freedom and compassion benefit all the other things we take as important in our lives. Taking the Dharma as the most important actually improves the quality of our relationship to all the other worthy things in our lives.

To have refuge at the center of our lives. Sometimes there is the idea that refuge is a passive thing. It is not passive. It has to do with how we live our lives and how we engage in the world around us. In Buddhism, this is said to be a gem, a treasure.

So, refuge will be the topic this week, and today's talk was an introduction. I will not spend much time on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, which will be the topic for tomorrow. Some of you have heard lots of talks on this. While I would love to do a whole series of talks on it, I want to cover the different areas of refuge that the Buddha pointed to as a way of understanding the full depth and range of something that can be at the heart of our lives in a way that we become a refuge for others. We are not making others into Buddhists. Rather, we

are people with whom others feel safe. They may feel inspired to see that there is another way to live that is not based on greed, hatred, or fear.

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts from this beautiful place where I am today. Being in the natural world is a nice coincidence for talking about refuge in the Dharma. I think of the natural world and refuge as being closely connected.

Thank you very much and I look forward to continuing tomorrow at IMC.