

# Refuge (1 of 5) Becoming One's Own Refuge

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Greetings again. For this week starting today on Monday, I will offer talks on refuge, ***saraṇa***. In Buddhism, refuge is often associated with a strong religious movement in a person's heart. It's closely connected to the topic of faith, which not coincidentally, was the first week's topic at the beginning of “shelter in place,” when we started these morning sittings and talks. And we're still in the middle of the Coronavirus, but now we have a whole world, which is both in distress and in a state of transformation around racism.

It seems appropriate to touch into this issue of the heart, refuge, as a topic for this week. So I'll go through the week in five talks, different aspects of refuge, and

hopefully, it's supportive. I won't address these morning talks too explicitly to the tremendous suffering around racism that this country and the world is experiencing right now, but rather the transformation that we're beginning to see.

This Monday evening here at IMC, I will give a talk that addresses this topic explicitly. So for some of you who want to hear what I have to say on this, it's California time at 7:30 for the sitting, and then a talk.

Buddhists trace their practice, their religious life, mindfulness practice, and meditation, back to a man in ancient India named Gautama Buddha, who lived in the Bronze Age of ancient India. I like the idea that it was the Bronze Age – just to make us understand that this was a very different time and place than we have now. What arose in this rich culture is remarkable. Rituals and civilizations which arose in ancient India, and which not only allowed the Buddha to emerge, but also all kinds of wonderful religious teachers around that time.

The way the story is told, is that the Buddha had teachers who taught in meditation, different aspects of meditation, but he found that what they had to teach, didn't lead to the liberation that he hoped for, the liberation from suffering. It somehow left suffering still there present for him. And so he went off to practice on

his own. He did not have the support that many of us in the modern world have, or since then have had in practicing.

He did not have refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. He was Gotama; he was still not the Buddha before he was awakened. So there was no Buddha to take refuge in. He had no community of practitioners and disciples and monastics that he could be inspired by and take refuge in. And he hadn't discovered the Dharma yet. He hadn't discovered the teachings, the insights, the experiences – that transformation that is at the heart of the Dharma. In a sense, he had to make himself his own refuge; he had to rely on himself. And he actually said this very explicitly as he was dying, talking to his disciples who were there. He said, "I have made a refuge of myself. I've made myself my own refuge. And now I'll be leaving."

This idea that he had made himself his own refuge was in the word 'made.' He didn't say that he had found a refuge inside, as if there's some essential inner quality that we all have, which has been tapped into, and now he knew there was a refuge. But rather, he says he *made* it. Elsewhere he talks about how people have their actions as their refuge.

Both of these ideas. That the Dharma is not so much about discovering something – that's certainly part of it. But at its foundation, it is something different. Acting in a different way. And by acting differently, living differently, we create our own refuge. So most foundationally, this means that we live in an ethical way.

The way that ethics is described in Buddhism, the word, *sīla*, is not virtue as an inner quality. It really has to do with *conduct* – that we behave actively in ways that avoid harming others in any way. It's an action of avoiding harm, and action of bringing benefit to the world.

To do that is to make a refuge of oneself. To practice, to engage in the spiritual practices of Buddhism is a kind of action – even when, in certain meditation practices, the practices to not do, but just be, in a sense, don't have action. But in a way, not doing is a doing as well. And it's a choice we make. This idea of choosing how we are, and being in a way that's conducive, that allows for us to be a refuge is one of the movements of Buddhism. So this means that the focus here is that we are the refuge.

This idea that we are the refuge for ourselves was explicit in the days before the Buddha died, when he

was giving his last teachings. He knew he was dying. He was a man of 80, and he was sick.

Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center – when he was dying of pancreatic cancer in 1971 – said to his students, "A Zen master teaches best when they're dying."<sup>1</sup> Somehow, that's when everything gets maybe really focused on what's most important and most essential.

So here the Buddha knew he was dying, at the end of his life. And he gave teachings around refuge that resonate. I think they are still very important for today. He said, "Dwell, abide, with yourself as an island, with yourself as a refuge, with no other refuge." That's half the statement, but I just want to pause: dwell, live, abide, with yourself as an island, with yourself as a refuge, with no other refuge. It's a powerful statement of where a refuge is found. And this idea of an island in the Pāli word, *dīpa*, also means light. And so some people will translate this as, "Be a light unto yourself," or "Be a light; be your own light." But almost certainly the ancient meaning is 'island' in the way this word used in other contexts.

The metaphor of the island is that an island is a safe place from being swept away by the floods of the world.

<sup>1</sup> The exact text of what Suzuki-roshi said was, "But things, you know, teach best when they're dying." Source: David Chadwick, *Crooked Cucumber*, p 377.

In the ancient language, it's a metaphor for the floods – floods of attachment, clinging, grasping, hate. There are all these powerful things that can take over, where people lose their wisdom, lose their best sense. They do terrible things to each other. And we see in the world right now lots of examples of people who have been swept away by floods of passion and hatred. So: to create an island for yourself, to create a refuge for yourself with no other refuge.

And then in the second half of the statement, the Buddha says, "Dwell, abide, live with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as a refuge, with no other refuge." So this idea of no other refuge. These two statements, which are said together, I think only make sense if we see that the Dharma and oneself become the same thing. That there's no difference between the Dharma and yourself. To really discover yourself, to really be here with yourself, and to wake up to this life being that we are, is to wake up to the Dharma, is the Dharma.

The Dharma is here. It's not something external. You don't go and get a lot of books from the library and read everything you can about the Dharma -- unless you read those books as a mirror for yourself. Unless you read those books and you're seeing yourself in it. Then you're seeing the Dharma.

This teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center said that when we bow to the Buddha, we're bowing to ourselves. So it's kind of here - to oneself. This is where we find the refuge.

And then the Buddha goes on with the statement about the island, and being a refuge to yourself. The Buddha then asks, "How are you a refuge to yourself?" And this, for me, is even more important. This is the *how*. Where do we find this, to live as a refuge to ourselves? Where do we find that in ourselves? How do we act in a way, how do we *be* in a way that this becomes our refuge?

The Buddha says, "How do you dwell with yourself as your refuge? With yourself as your refuge? Yourself as an island? With the Dharma as your island, the Dharma as your refuge, with no other refuge? Here one dwells, one lives, observing the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. One dwells observing feelings as feelings, mind in mind, dhamma in dhamma – ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world."

That's a powerful statement, I think. Our capacity for awareness, our capacity to be attentive, to clearly see

what's happening moment by moment here in this subjective experience of our body – this is how we discover refuge. This is how we're safe from the floods of the world.

And the floods of the world are not really the floods out there. They're really the floods of greed, hatred and delusion in here. In some ways, the refuges are both a protection from the outer world, but more profoundly, and very significantly – and this is part of the big koan – the big question to discover for ourselves the answer, that the refuge is primarily a refuge from ourselves, from tendencies we have inside that undermine us, that destroy us, that cause suffering and harm.

And how is it that this inner refuge we discover from ourselves is also a refuge from being victimized by the world around us? What does that mean? Hopefully we'll look at as we go through this week.

So two more things I'll say here. The Buddha said,  
*I will teach you the refuge and the path leading to the refuge. And what is the refuge? The destruction of lust, passion, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is called the refuge. And what is the path leading to the refuge? Mindfulness directed to the body. This is called the path leading to refuge.*



Again, refuge is important. It's found through this awareness, through mindfulness, being settled – finding the refuge here in one's own body. It's quite an amazing statement.

So, this is the introductory talk, and I will continue these next days on discussing refuge and different aspects of it, and I hope that it becomes a mirror for you to understand and value something really important here in yourself.

Thank you.