

Reflections on Refuge & Responsibility

As Buddhists we use the word “refuge” every day, at least three times, perhaps many more: “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.” What do we mean by “refuge”?

Several sources I’ve consulted recently point out that the phrase “I take refuge” would be more accurately rendered as “I go for refuge.” Taking refuge is something we do, an act of will or intention, and it involves using our whole body and mind to turn around, to move toward, to go. The Three Treasures are the object of our refuge, our faith. A bumper sticker I found a few years ago expressed it well: Faith is a verb. Or as one of our senior masters puts it, “Trust is an activity.” Buddhism is based on practice, action, activity. It is fundamentally not about beliefs or creeds. It is the constant activity of turning within toward the True Heart in all circumstances, endeavoring to live from that place, and learning from our experience.

Refuge connotes safety. It brings to my mind the medieval castle where all the peasants would go when the lord or lady’s domain was attacked. We trust that the refuge is a safe, secure, protected place that we can go to in order to escape danger or harm. However, when we as Buddhists take refuge, it is not escaping or hiding from something, rather it’s going for something, in this case, a safe place for practice, but also for retreat, teaching, guidance, and sometimes consolation. It’s something we can depend on no matter what. And we can thrive there, just as animals can on a “wildlife refuge.”

Our first refuge is the Buddha. On one level this is the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the “wise one of the Shakya clan.” However, we take refuge not in the old Gautama, the prince of Kapilavastu, but rather the enlightened remainder, if I may put it that way, of his life in training. Great Master Keizan emphasizes this point in the first chapter of *Denkoroku*, and Rev. Master Jiyu reiterates it in her introduction to Rev. Hubert’s translation (pp. xvii-xviii, Shasta Abbey Press, 1993). The Buddha’s enlightenment is our enlightenment. When we take refuge in that enlightenment, we take refuge in our own awakened Buddha nature or Buddhahood. His True na-

ture is our True nature. The real Buddha did not die 2550 years ago. He still lives in the hearts and minds of all beings, and should we choose to train, we can realize this. We are not fundamentally apart from It, even though we are separated by time and space from that person who first realized It. That's what we mean by "eternal" – beyond form, time, and space. Since training and enlightenment are one, it is our meditation itself, the training, that we go to for refuge.

What is our responsibility for this refuge? We endeavor to guard and protect our practice of meditation, we make sure we allow time for it every day. In a busy householder life we may not be able to sit as much or as regularly as we like. And we keep the intent to find some time each day, even if it's only the "thirty second minimum," as one of our senior masters says.

"Guarding" and "protecting" are not done in a dualistic way with one's self opposed to the world out there. It's more determining one's priorities and purpose in life and continuing to endeavor to live accordingly (right effort). That may mean simplifying our life, letting go of some activity or attachment in order to have the time and energy to focus on spiritual matters. Training often calls for hard choices. As Rev. Master Jiyu often said, "Buddhism is for spiritual adults." There are consequences for all we do, and time is at a premium. No one knows how long they have, and even the lengthiest life is still just a flash in a pan. What are we doing to guard and protect this refuge in our life?

I find that if I do not keep up my meditation practice or do not make sure I don't exhaust myself with other activities, my life quickly goes haywire. Even in a priory or monastery one can convince oneself that other activities are more important than meditation! Without the regular practice I don't have the necessary stillness and mindfulness to respond wisely and compassionately to arising circumstances. So it's actually enlightened self-interest to keep up one's practice!

The second refuge is the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching. Dharma can be equated with Truth. It's not intellectual knowledge, although a basic understanding of the main tenets of the practice is helpful. Dharma spelled with a lower case "d" means "phenomenon" or "thing." So Dharma is

“what is” – the way things are – the truth. We endeavor to live in harmony with, to go for refuge to, the ways things really and truly are. Who wants to take refuge in a fantasy? Even the best one is merely smoke and clouds that quickly blow away or dissipate.

Responsibility for the Dharma refuge means making time to study the Buddha’s teaching. In our tradition we use the word “study” in an applied sense. To study is to apply the teachings, especially the precepts, to our life, to be guided by them in daily activities of body, speech, and mind, and to reflect on how our actions are or are not in accord with the way things truly are. The time to do this will not magically appear just because we wish for it. Here, too, we need to make an effort to reserve a few minutes in our busy day. Something may need to be given up: a magazine, the newspaper, the *TV Guide*, a cup of coffee? Fortunately in our tradition we don’t place a lot of emphasis on wide reading of the scriptures. After all, this is “peasant zen.” Just work on the scriptures we use at the temple for daily ceremonies and special occasions, along with various commentaries found in the Order’s *Journal* or various temples’ websites or Dharma tapes. And just a few lines or a paragraph before retiring or at another quiet time can give the mind and heart a plentiful meal to work on.

Some people may hold that since all things teach, and that life is karmic consequence arising from past actions to learn from, we don’t need to study the traditional teachings. This view has been put forth for at least as long ago as Great Master Dogen’s time in the 13th century, and he addresses it in his *Shobogenzo* discourse “On What the Buddha Taught” (*Bukkyo*). Yes, we learn from our experience, and we still need to keep returning to the formal teachings as a reference point. That’s why in our temples we use the same Scriptures every day, every week, year in and year out. Twice monthly we listen to the “same” Precepts. However, because life and training are ongoing, we are never the same person twice, so each reading or listening is a fresh experience if we will keep a bright mind and positive outlook. We all need to continually go for refuge to the Buddha’s teaching, whether we train as a monastic or a householder, whether we are a beginner or one advanced in training years. The Dharma is a treasure, of incredible value, obtained at enormous cost, and offered to us freely and compassionately by our great teacher Shakyamuni. Why are we sometimes so obstinate and insist on wanting to figure it out all on our own – “I want

my experience” – and not avail ourselves of others’ advice and guidance? Can we really afford that luxury?

The third Refuge is the Sangha, those who practice the Buddha’s Way. The Buddha’s teaching has always depended on human beings for its transmission. You can only get so far with a book, then you need that personal, heart-to-heart connection. In particular, we need to take refuge in the monastic sangha, those who have devoted themselves fully, 24-7, to practicing and teaching the Dharma. As with the other refuges, this isn’t always easy, comfortable, or convenient. (Monks face these same challenges in taking refuge, too, by the way.) For mature spiritual practice we need to take responsibility for keeping this relationship to our teachers alive and vibrant.

Taking refuge in the Sangha can be a broad practice, however, if we are not taking refuge in the monastics, we are not taking adequate refuge. The Buddha set up a four-fold sangha – male and female monks, and male and female laity. The entire sangha is our refuge, not just part of it. To cling to any one part or avoid another is to helplessly allow the discriminatory mind to push and pull us at the mercy of our karmic conditioning. And we rob ourselves of this treasure.

Like any relationship, refuge in the Sangha benefits from and flourishes through frequent contact and intimate time together – intimate in the sense of close, transparent, and trusting. Each trainee is responsible for maintaining this relationship. Masters don’t chase after disciples. The student’s love/trust needs to be freely given, else it is neither love nor trust. Often a teacher will stretch us beyond our comfortable boundaries, but that is his or her responsibility and duty – and is what a trainee asks for, implicitly if not explicitly, when one walks through the gate of a temple.

Our responsibility is to keep the heart open and willing and to place ourselves in a training situation with monastic teachers. This can be scary, especially if we have trust issues, but why else do we come to a temple unless we want to change ourselves? Who wants to hang on to suffering? And try not to pull the teaching down to your own level, instead continually make the effort to rise to its height. To be born as a human being and to encounter the Dharma are considered opportunities most rare in this suf-

fering world of cyclical birth-and-death. Let us not waste this precious human birth and the merit of meeting the Dharma. Merit runs out in time if we don't keep creating more.

Taking refuge in the Sangha also entails endeavoring to put the Dharma refuge into practice. Otherwise we are like the medieval peasants who get to the door of the castle and then won't go in. Commitment to the Sangha treasure entails not only asking, but also following as best we can the teaching given. In the beginning we may not do so well at this, but like other aspects of practice, we grow in our trust and skill in listening and allowing ourselves to be guided by the teacher's Dharma. It's also usually not a good idea to compare and weigh and measure the sangha's advice along with the opinions and views of our friends and relatives or professionals, especially if they don't practice. If you treat the Dharma and Sangha as commonplace and ordinary, they will not develop into something that seems worth cherishing.

Three Treasures, Three Refuges, Three Jewels—what we value most in life. Are we treating them as such? The more confidence and trust we can place in them, the more they come alive for us and enrich our lives. And it's always up to us. As Rev. Master Jiyu taught us in "Perfect Faith", "There's absolute free will in [this practice]" (from *Introduction to the Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition*, Shasta Abbey). The Unborn has and is infinite patience and love, but how long does each of us have? And how long can we sit selfishly and idly by watching those we love and our world destroyed by the karma of birth, disease, old age, death, grief, lamentation, pain, terror, despair, fear, and worry?

Every moment we can take responsibility for our lives by turning to the Three Refuges. This turning is an act of will or intention, or better, willingness, to stay true to the heart. We speak of them as three, but actually they are the one Heart-mind. It's already present within each of us. What will we do? What choice will we make? Endless training awaits us gladly.

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