Make a Refuge for Yourself

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Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Notice where you feel the breath as it comes in, where you feel it as it goes out. Try to make it comfortable. Give the mind a good place to stay here in the present moment. It’s right here that the mind can find refuge. When we’re born into life, we’re born into danger. As we come into this world, we meet up with pain right away. And that’s not the end of it. It’s like we signed onto a contract and we didn’t look at that fine print. Wherever there’s breath, there’s going to be aging, illness, death. These things face all of us, and they don’t play around. Go down to a hospital, go to an old folks’ home, and you see what aging and illness do to people. You see what death does to people. Those things are lying in wait for all of us. The Buddha has his focus on these facts, not to get us depressed or pessimistic, but to encourage us to look for the way out. Look for refuge. He says, “Make yourself a refuge. Make your mind the refuge.” It’s interesting, there are many places in the Kammatthana. One where the word “self” means “mind.” You identify with it or latch onto it, but you use the mind as a refuge. How do you do that? You develop good qualities in mind to counteract the mind’s unfortunate tendency to often be its own enemy. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says sometimes you’re suffering from pain, yet the physical pain is not enough. You add mental pain on top of it. It’s like being shot with an arrow and then turning around and just shooting yourself with another arrow, and then another, and another, and another. The mind can often be its own worst enemy. It creates a lot of unnecessary suffering for itself. And that’s the suffering that weighs most heavily on the heart. And it’s precisely that suffering that we can do something about. In other words, there may be pain and stress and aging, illness and death, but the mind doesn’t have to be pained by things. It doesn’t have to suffer by these things if you develop the right mental qualities. That’s what we’re working on as we meditate. And even though this is serious business, you have to learn how to approach it. With a happy heart, in the sense that it really is a worthwhile project we’re working on here, and there’s real hope for our true happiness. When the Buddha taught the issue of suffering the first time around, he didn’t start with the first noble truth on suffering. He started with the fourth, on the fact that there is a path to the end of suffering, to notify us that even though his teachings focus on the issue of suffering, they focus on it because they offer a way out. It’s like a doctor who, very frankly, will discuss with you the dangers of a particular disease because he has a cure. He’ll often start out with the fact that there is a cure for this. And once you’re assured that there’s a cure, then you can listen to all the gory details and all the difficulties there may be. Particularly the difficulties if you don’t follow the cure. Now, the cure itself is not necessarily easy. It is difficult because it requires that we turn and look in the mind. For most of us, that’s something we don’t often do. We tend to look outside, the things we like outside, the things we don’t like outside. We very rarely look inside. And it’s often discouraging. The first thing you notice when you focus on the breath and make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath is that you don’t stay. The mind suddenly finds itself off way other places, way far away. So you have to very patiently bring it back, bring it back, and try to do it with a sense of good humor. Each time you come back, try to breathe in a way that’s really comfortable. Tell yourself, “At least for this one breath, I’ll take a breath that’s really, really comfortable. It feels good all the way down inside.” So that you can associate coming back with the breath with a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of gratification, that makes it easier and easier to come back. But in training the mind, you have to use both the carrot and the stick, the sense of well-being that can come simply by breathing in, thinking of the breath going all the way down inside, coming in and out every pore so that the whole body is engaged in a sense of comfortable energy exchange. That’s the carrot. The stick is reminding yourself that if you’re not careful here, if you’re not serious and concerned in what you’re doing, the mind’s going to wander off. And here it is. The body is healthy, you’re sitting here perfectly fine, and still the mind is wandering all over the place. What’s it going to be like when aging illness and death come? You’ve got to learn how to bring it under control, because otherwise the mind’s tendency to go out of control is really going to exacerbate the problem. One is faced with serious difficulties. This is why we have those chants before the meditation—reflection on aging, illness and death, and separation. Those are the stick to remind you that this is serious business. The pattern of life doesn’t follow the pattern, say, of a piece of art, a story that has a arc and comes to a nice conclusion. Everything just sort of unravels at the end. Many of the things that you accomplish in life just disappear. The things outside that you depend on for a sense of ease, well-being and happiness, you can’t depend on them forever. But then there’s the reflection, “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions.” That’s actually the carrot. This is the way out. It’s by learning how to be more skillful in how you act. And where do your actions come from? They come from your intentions. So you’ve got to train your intentions to be reliable. In other words, you realize that if you focus on the actions, on certain things, they’re going to cause trouble to the mind. For instance, when there’s pain in the body, if you focus on how long you’ve been in pain and you’re wondering how much longer it’s going to be, you’re just adding more and more suffering, piling more and more suffering onto the present moment to the point where the mind can’t take it. But if you’re careful just to focus on what you’re experiencing right now, right now, right now, don’t think about how long the pain has lasted, don’t think about how long it’s going to last. Just notice where there’s pain right now and which areas of the body are not in pain. Try to be fully aware of the present. And you find that you can train the mind in the skills it needs, that it’s going to need to use when pain comes, even though there may be physical pain. Even though there may be thoughts, things you don’t like to think about, you don’t have to suffer from them. There may be issues you have to think about and they’re unpleasant. Well, you think about them only as much as is necessary, and then you let them go. Otherwise, learn how to separate your sense of awareness from the things that it’s aware of. This is a skill you can develop through the meditation. It requires that you be very careful. You can’t be sloppy and complacent. This is why we keep hammering on this skill of being able to stay with the breath as continually and consistently as possible, because you want to get your mind under control. That’s how you make yourself your refuge. You focus simply on the breath, the body in and of itself. Then you learn how to look at feelings in and of themselves, simply as they arise, as they pass away. Try to develop as many comfortable feelings as you can in the body as an aid in getting settled down in the present. And to remind yourself that even though there may be pain in one part of the body, you don’t have to get stuck in the pain. You can be in one part of the body and let the pain be someplace else. That’s an important skill. You focus on the mind in and of itself, simply your sense of awareness. See it as something separate from the objects that it knows. And notice the qualities that come along with your awareness. There are times when it’s accompanied by passion, and there are times when there’s no passion. Sometimes there’s aversion, other times there’s no aversion. Sometimes there’s delusion, other times there’s no delusion. Learn to look for these things and then try to strengthen the states that are free from passion, aversion, and delusion. And learn how to see when the mind is out of balance. Sometimes it’s discouraged, upset. Well, how can you gladden your own mind? What ways of breathing, what ways of thinking can give you more energy, a sense of refreshment? Think about the good things you’ve done in the past. The good things here meaning the times you’ve been generous, the times you’ve been virtuous, held by your principles. When you’ve done things that you can be proud of, that gives energy to the mind. As you get to know the mind better, you begin to see more and more that there’s a whole committee in here—skillful traits, unskillful traits. How do you recognize the unskillful traits and how do you get past them? How do you recognize the skillful ones and learn how to encourage them? These are all things you can learn to observe. So as you read the mind, it’s not simply allowing it to stay stuck wherever it is. If you find that it’s in an unskillful place, you learn how to incline it to something more skillful. This way, the mind stops being its own enemy and starts being its own friend. So you do gain a sense of refuge inside, that regardless of what happens in the body, you keep the mind at peace and at ease. Now you find that the mind is going to have to let go of a lot of things to maintain that peace and ease. You say, “But what about my body? What about my possessions? What about my sense of identity, who I am?” Well, if you find that these things cause suffering, why would you want to hang on to them? Wouldn’t it be better just to stay with that sense of bright awareness and let go of all the narratives that create stress and suffering, all the attachments that weigh you down? This is how you create a sense of refuge inside. But it means working very seriously with the parts of the mind that are obstreperous, the parts of the mind that cause trouble. Often they’re the ones that we identify with the most. You have to learn how to let them go. And it’s a lot easier if you can develop this sense of well-being through the breath. Let your sense of what’s important in life, what’s important in your own mind, get some of it centered here, with this awareness in the present moment, allied by the comfort and sense of well-being that you can gain from the breath. So even though there are times when you look inside and it seems there’s nothing but a mess, you can hold on to the breath and realize that you can build up a sense of refuge around that. It’s not easy, but it’s good work. It’s something that’s really worth doing. So here we have a whole hour to work on this sense of refuge inside. Try to make the most of this opportunity.

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