A Genuine Refuge Inside

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There are some poems in the Theragatha where monks are out in the wilderness and they’re either sick or they’re cold or afraid. And the question is, “Where do I go for refuge?” And the answer is, you go for refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It sounds like an almost too simple-minded answer, but for anyone who’s lived in the forest, practiced in the forest, you realize that it’s very real. You’re surrounded by dangers. And what enables you to stay there? It’s your sense that, as the Buddha says, the Dhamma protects those who practice the Dhamma. You go for refuge in developing the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha inside. In one case, the monk says, “I’ll develop the factors for awakening. I’ll establish mindfulness. I’ll try to develop the inner strengths. And that’s how I’ll deal with my illness.” The one who’s cold decides to spread thoughts of goodwill to create an immeasurable state of mind. These are the things that give you protection. These are the things that give you strength. This applies to us as well. We may not be out in the wilderness, but we deal with the wilderness of our own minds. And like the monks, they had the choice. They could run back into the city and find somebody to help them. But they said, “No, I’m going to take the potentials that lie inside and turn them into strengths.” So as you’re meditating and you find yourself assailed by thoughts and emotions, look inside for where your strengths are, what you can take refuge in. Start with the breath. It’s something you can control. Find a spot in the body that may not be comfortable to start out with, but if it seems right to focus there and the mind wants to settle down there, okay, try to make it as comfortable as you can. And even if you can’t spread that sense of well-being throughout the body, at least you’ve got one spot where you can hold on. Make that your refuge and develop the qualities of mind that allow you to stay with that spot and not get pulled off by your other thoughts. That’s going to require mindfulness and alertness and enough discernment so you can recognize that here’s a thought that’s going to pull me away. And you’ll find that there are a lot of thoughts that used to go too willingly, but you begin to recognize that they’re not really your friends. So you need discernment to sort these things out. As for the monk who was cold, he was the one who developed the Brahma-viharas. This, too, is a strength. You’ll find that as you’re dealing with emotions coming up, a lot of them are voices that you begin to recognize. This is someone who used to yell at you. This is someone who used to criticize you. This is someone who used to try to lure you. And you can find yourself easily getting tangled in ill-will. So one of your protections is to develop goodwill for whatever, wherever these people were. After all, if it’s your karma to have been dealing with these people, who knows what you were like? In a previous lifetime? There’s probably been a lot of back-and-forth. There’s that story of the women who were trying to kill each other’s children over many, many, many lifetimes, to the point where you lose track of who was the first one to kill the child of the other. It gets to a point where it doesn’t really matter. There’s been so much back-and-forth. So you try to treat the past with equanimity and have goodwill. You don’t mean anybody any harm. You’re not going to try to settle old scores, because who knows when the score-keeping started and how many of those scores got settled. So you just let things be. And that takes a huge weight off the mind and also takes a lot of the hooks out of these thoughts. So when they talk about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as a refuge, it’s not a nice platitude or a vague abstraction. It’s a very real quality. You find that you’ve got strengths in your mind that you can develop. And they really do protect you, first from yourself, and then from whatever else comes up that would tempt you to behave in an unskillful way, think in an unskillful way, speak, act in an unskillful way. So these qualities of concentration, goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, these are your strengths. They can become your refuge if you stick with them. For the monks staying out in the forest, out in the wilderness, it does become a matter of life and death. Sometimes they find themselves surrounded by dangerous beasts. There are also bandits who live in the forest who are suspicious of the monks sometimes. The stories of the Ajahns who were up in the Northeast when there was a communist threat. There’s an Ajahn visiting here talking about how he was living halfway between an army base and a communist-held village, and had to be on good terms with both. So it’s in cases like that that you really have to be confident that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are going to see us through, and not that the Buddha’s going to come down and make the problems go away. It’s just that he gives you an example. So this is how it’s done. And if you’re confident in the power of your actions, you want to act in a good way, in a skillful way, and you want to develop the qualities of mind that allow you to depend on yourself so you don’t become your own worst enemy. This is why the refuge has to be ultimately developed inside, because the main issues are coming inside. As the Four Noble Truths keep pointing out, the cause of suffering is your own clinging and craving. It’s not what anybody else does. So with the danger inside, you’ve got to develop a refuge inside. And this is where you start. Just have confidence in it that this really does work. There have been many people, many men, many women, lay and ordained, who found it. The refuge of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha really is a secure refuge. I noticed with the John Suwat, after he’d had his automobile accident, his ability to give Dhamma talks was severely curtailed. And so in a case like that, when you want to convey the Dhamma, you focus on the things that really are important. You cut aside all the frills, and so what are you focused on? Refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. You say, “This is the most important thing to hold on to, these qualities you can develop in mind.” So have confidence that you’ve got the basis for a secure refuge inside. Learn to develop the right attitude so you can continue to protect it so ultimately it protects you. next video.

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