Refuge

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Decades back, when the U.S. government gave money to sociologists and anthropologists to study Buddhism in Thailand, the scholars reported that the Thai people didn’t seem to understand their religion. The scholars had been reading about how the Buddha taught all about suffering, suffering, suffering, aging, illness, death, separation. You know, Thai Buddhists were very happy. They went to the temple to become happy. They practiced meditation in a happy way. According to the scholars, these people didn’t understand the Buddha’s real message. So they came up with lots of different theories about Buddhism in the texts as opposed to Buddhism on the ground. And part of it, of course, was that they misunderstood the texts. They didn’t focus on the part that really is hopeful. The Buddha focused on the problem of suffering, not because he said life is miserable, but because suffering is a problem that can be solved. He talked about aging, illness, and death, not because he wanted to get you depressed and give up on life. He focused on things that are not touched by aging, illness, and death. And that’s the security. That’s the refuge we have in these things that are not touched by aging, illness, and death. They can be reached through our own actions. And that’s a very positive message. It’s a message that gives a lot of hope that what you do is your refuge. What gets done to you may be the result of past bad actions, but you don’t have to let yourself be overcome by those. After all, even if you have something bad in the past, as the Buddha said, how you experience the results of those past bad actions is going to depend on your present mind state. If you develop unlimited goodwill, your mind is like a large river. You throw a lump of salt in, and the river is still drinkable. You learn how to make your mind so that it’s not overcome by pleasure or overcome by pain. You work on developing virtue, you work on developing discernment. These things are your protection. And they’re available to all of us, whether you’re a scholar or just an ordinary person. These are things we can all do, all develop. And it’s important that we focus on these things as our refuge, so we can have confidence in the practice. Confidence, not completely complacency. We know that we may have some past bad actions. And the simple fact that we’re born into this body means that there’s going to be aging, illness, and death regardless. There’s going to be separation regardless. As the Buddha said, the wise are touched by aging, illness, and death, and the fools are touched by aging, illness, and death. So what’s the difference? In other words, why bother practicing if we’re all going to die in the end? It’s because the wise have learned not to let their minds be overcome by these things. And that’s because they’ve found something inside that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die. That’s our refuge. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha on the external level as examples for how we can act. In other words, we’re careful about whose opinions we let into the mind. The world is a dangerous place. We’re dangerous people. Sometimes they say that you’re basically good, but then it’s the influence of things outside that makes you suffer. Well, if you’re basically good, then nothing outside could influence you to suffer. But at the same time, you’re not just basically bad. The mind is basically neither. The mind is basically awareness. And it’s aware of what’s good and aware of what’s bad. It can develop what’s good and it can develop what’s bad. But ultimately, to find true happiness, it has to let go of both. So we have dangers inside in terms of our own defilements, dangers outside in terms of the weird opinions and ideas that we’re going to pick up from other people. And then there’s just the dangers of aging, illness, and death. The Buddha teaches us a way to have safety from all of these things. When we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge, we’re really serious about it. We try to interpret everything we experience in the world through the lens of how they would see it. So when you’re listening to the news or you’re reading online, talking to people, the information you take in from other people, think of it in terms of the teachings on karma. When you think about the prospects for the world, think of it in terms of the teachings on karma. But there’s something that’s larger than karma. Keep that in mind. Then, of course, when you’re sitting around meditating or just thinking on your own and things come up in the mind that disturb you or things come up in the mind that get you greedy or angry, fearful, remember there are ways of dealing with these emotions. You don’t have to identify with them. That right there, just knowing that fact, you don’t have to identify with them. It helps you stand apart a bit. And standing apart allows you to see them for what they are. As the Buddha said, we don’t see things because we meld them all together. But you have to learn how to see these things as something separate. Then ask yourself, “Is this worth going with?” This is why the image of the committee is useful. If we had a picture of the committee, all the members of the committee would look like you. They’d have different expressions. And they’d be different ages, but they’d still look like you, which makes it so easy for you to identify with them. But you have to realize that the things you’ve identified with in the past, you have the choice not to identify with them. This is one of the virtues of the Dhamma. It points out that we have choices that we didn’t realize we had. Sometimes when we think that we have to get worried about something, well, no, you don’t have to get worried. After all, the things that the world can harm, the harm that can come to you, are things that are subject to aging, illness, and death. And they’re going to age, grow ill, and die anyhow. Your treasures are your actions. That’s the point. The Dhamma talks about things being not-self, not-self, not-self. There’s one thing he doesn’t say is not-self, and that’s your actions. That phrase we chant often, “I’m the owner of my actions.” That’s where you hold on. That’s your refuge. Then you should develop the rest of the path beyond just good actions. In other words, write actions, write speech, but you’re going to write mindfulness. That’s where the Buddha says your true refuge is. And there’s the ability to notice what’s coming up in the mind and to deal with it effectively so you can let go of what’s unskillful and develop what’s skillful. Recognize the mind’s tendency to like to still dally around in unskillful things. That’s a huge waste of time. If you’re determined to find safety, you have to realize, “These are things I’m going to have to give up anyhow someday, so why don’t I give them up now?” Or at least try chipping away at them. As for the things that are not-self, those are the results of past actions. And as I said, they’re going to pass away anyhow. So rather than get caught in just trying to hang on, hang on, hang on to them, learn how to let go. Because it’s by trying to hang on that you get caught. If you learn how to let go, nobody can touch you. So this is where safety is found, and this is why we’re going to have confidence in the Buddhist teachings, confidence in the practice. And why it’s a joyful thing, the Dhamma. The Buddha talks about problems that other people sweep under the rug. He brings them out into the open and says, “These problems can be solved.” And the path to their solution is something that all human beings can follow, if they make up their mind that that’s what they want. So learn how to keep this fact in mind all the time. This is when we take the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha as refuge. The word refuge can also mean something you keep remembering. Things come up in the world, remember. What would the Buddha say? What does the Dhamma say? If you remember the Noble Sangha, how would you look at these things? Try to maintain that perspective, because that’s your refuge. When you do that, you see, on the one hand, the world is full of dangers, but there’s something inside that those dangers don’t touch. And if you haven’t reached that yet, the knowledge that it’s there, that wise people have confirmed that, yes, it’s there, that should give you confidence.

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