Refuge

October 10, 2017

Fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods—the earth has to shrug only a little bit. It can cause a lot of damage. Having been born here, as the Chan said, aging, illness, and death are inevitable. Or as in the Thai translation, “These things are normal. This is a normal way of life.” The king once came to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha said, “Where are you coming from, king?” And the king said, in a remarkable display of frankness, “I’ve been engaging in the sort of things that people obsessed with power engage in.” The Buddha said, “Suppose a reliable man were to come from the east and say there’s a huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its wake. Another reliable man coming from the south said there’s a similar mountain coming in from the south. And you get reports, again reliable, that there are mountains moving in from the west and the north. Considering that human life is so fragile and hard to gain, what would you do?” The king said, “Well, what else could I do but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?” Then the Buddha said, “I announce to you, great king, aging, illness, and death are rolling in. So what are you going to do?” The king said, “Well, what else could I do but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?” Because as that chant continued just now, it doesn’t end just with aging, illness, and death. We have our actions as our refuge, as our arbitrary creators. It means that there are things we can do as we get past the experience of aging, illness, and death and move on. We’ll have something good to move on to. In the meantime, we can guarantee that our minds don’t go crazy, i.e., don’t start doing things that otherwise we normally wouldn’t do. This is one of the scary things about being a human being. When conditions are good, you can be relatively good. But you can’t be sure unless you’ve really trained your mind. Then when things get really bad, you’ll continue holding to your precepts, holding to your goodness. This is why we have to train the mind, so we can have a refuge inside. Like right now, as you’re focusing on the breath, you’re trying to keep the mind with one object. It’s a training in how to make the mind unshakable. You’re not shaken by thoughts as they come through. You’re not shaken by noises and disturbances. You just stay with the breath coming in and going out, trying to make it comfortable so it’s a good place to stay. You can start with a couple of good long deep in- and out-breaths. Notice how that feels. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it starts getting tiring, you can change. You can shorten the breath, make it more shallow, softer, heavier if you want, faster, slower. Experiment with different ways of breathing to see what feels good right now. And do your best to stay with the breath. Other thoughts may come in, but for the time being you don’t want them. You’re trying to develop good, reliable qualities in mind so that when you make up your mind you’re going to think about something, you think about it, and when you’re not going to think about it, you’ve made up your mind not to think about it, you don’t. That way you gain some control over the mind. So when temptations come to do things that you know are not in line with the precepts, not in line with the principle of harmlessness, you can say “no” and you can make the “no” stick. So right now I want to make your determination to stay with the breath stick and have something inside that you can rely on. We talk about taking refuge in the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha. It’s not the case that the Buddha’s going to protect us from hurricanes and fires and floods. But he provides us with an example. This is how someone who finds reliable happiness acts. This is how they train themselves. The Buddha was someone with wisdom, compassion, purity. We try to develop those qualities within ourselves. Mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. These are qualities he developed. He became his own refuge in that way. And we can become our own refuge in this way as well, because there’s that other saying of the Buddha’s, attahyatano nato, “The self is its own mainstay.” In other words, you have to rely on yourself. Who else can you rely on? You can rely on other people for various things. You relied on your parents when you were young. You relied on your teachers. You relied on your friends. But when it comes to making a decision as to what’s skillful and what’s not, and sticking with the decision to do only what’s skillful, that’s something you have to depend on yourself for. You have to develop the discernment that when there’s something that you like to do but you begin to realize that it’s going to lead to long-term harm, that you know how to say no. When there’s something you don’t like to do but it’s going to lead to long-term welfare and happiness, you learn how to say, “Yes, you’ve got to do it.” You know how to psych yourself out. So as you get the mind more reliable in this way, then no matter what comes, you’re safe. Because, as the Buddha noticed, the real dangers aren’t the dangers outside. They start from dangers inside, actually. Your own greed, your own aversion, your own delusion. These things can make you do actions and say things and think thoughts that you’re later going to regret. And these inner storms are a lot more violent sometimes than the outer storms. They can sometimes destroy all the goodness you’ve worked so hard to develop. So this is a good skill to master, how to rely on yourself, how to be your own mainstay, be your own refuge. In the same way that we take the Dhamma as our refuge, we read the Dhamma, but the books aren’t going to protect us, or simply chanting the Dhamma is not going to protect us. We actually have to put it into practice and begin to see that the ways you used to act and think and speak cause suffering in ways that you may not have noticed before. But as you get more sensitive, you begin to realize that these things are actually harmful. And as you practice the Dhamma, you free yourself from that harm. Taking the Sangha as our refuge, again, it’s not that they’re going to pull us out of the flood. They’ll protect our belongings from fire. They show that this is how people follow the example of the Buddha. It’s not just the Buddha who can do these things. Other people, all kinds of people—men, women, children, lay, ordained, old, young—are able to follow the Buddha’s example and become their own mainstay. And in this way, they become our mainstay as well. In the same way, as you become more reliable in yourself, other people find that they can rely on you as well. You set a good example for others in this way that the goodness that you do gets spread around. Sometimes it’s claimed that Buddhists are concerned only about their own well-being. That’s not the case. They simply realize that in order to help with the well-being of others, you have to learn how to do it yourself inside. Because it is a do-it-yourself kind of project. You can’t make other people more skillful. You can set a good example. You can give them advice if they’re willing to listen. But their willingness to listen and then their willingness to follow through, that’s something they have to decide on. But if you can’t set a good example, then your words are not going to have much power. This is a case where the goodness you do for your own sake also becomes goodness for others. And the more reliable people we have in the world, the safer things in general are going to be. But we can’t wait for other people to set the example first. We have the Buddha already setting the example, but it’s up to us now to follow that. So see if you can make your mind unshakable with the breath. If you make up your mind you’re going to stay here and then stick with it. Show yourself that you can be reliable. And if the mind happens to slip up, don’t get upset. Just keep coming back, coming back. It’s because it’s in that coming back repeatedly that the mind learns new habits. You get to the point where things that would have knocked you off balance don’t. Because you’ve got something reliable inside.

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