The Value of Refuge

September 19, 2024

When newcomers would come to practice meditation with Ajahn Phuong, he’d give them Ajahn Lee’s “Seven Steps” and “Method Two,” have them read it, and then he’d have them pay homage to the Buddha and Dhamma and Sangha in sit meditation. The question is, why would he have them pay homage? And the answer is, because they represent the values we want to bring to the practice, especially if we’ve been immersed in the world outside. We want to remind ourselves that our true values lie here. In fact, it’s one of the meanings of the word “sanana,” refuge. It also means something you keep in mind. You want to keep in mind the qualities of the Buddha, what he represented. True goodness, true happiness, wise and wisdom, compassion, purity. Notice that happiness lies there. This is not the sort of teaching that says you have to sacrifice yourself for other people’s happiness. You want to find happiness by training yourself. And then whatever you have to share with others is perfectly fine. So training yourself, you will be sharing. But the primary emphasis is on the search for happiness. If you do it wisely, it’s a good thing. The Buddha’s wisdom, his compassion, his purity, all come from searching for happiness in a wise way. So as you sit down to meditate with him, remind yourself you’re here for happiness, a true happiness, a happiness that lasts, a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody, doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm people around you. It’s a happiness that’s truly blameless. Think of the Buddha after six years of torture, self-torture. He realized that if he kept on torturing himself, he was going to die, and he wouldn’t have attained anything at all. So he asked himself, was there another path? He thought of the time he sat under a tree as a child, spontaneously entered the first jhana. A sense of happiness that didn’t depend on sights and smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Something that started within the mind and then spread to the body. The happiness of form. The pleasure of form. There was pleasure, there was rapture. So he asked himself, could this be the way? And the answer that came was yes. So he asked himself again, why am I afraid of that pleasure? Why am I afraid of that happiness? Because for six years he had been running away from happiness. What was there to be feared in that pleasure? He realized there was nothing to be feared. It didn’t intoxicate the mind, didn’t come from doing anything unskillful or harmful. So he decided to pursue that path. And as he developed right concentration, he learned that there were other factors as well. But they all circle around this question of how to find true happiness, and the qualities that the Buddha developed. In terms of wisdom, compassion and purity came from answering that question. Wisdom, of course, starts with the question, what will I do to lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? You have to stop and think. What kind of happiness would be long-term? What kind of actions would lead to it? That’s part of the wisdom there. Seeing that it’s going to have to come from your actions. That long-term is possible. And it’s better than short-term. And then to contemplate even further, what kind of happiness lasts? He realized there has to be happiness that doesn’t harm anybody else. As the Buddha said, you switch the whole world over. And you won’t find anybody that you love more than yourself. At the same time, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely. So the wise response to that realization is not to harm others, and not to harm yourself, and not to get others to do harm. That’s an important point. As the Buddha said, if we break the precepts, we’re harming ourselves. If we get others to break the precepts, we’re harming them. So you don’t try to get other people to do anything that would be bad karma for them. And in this way, compassion comes not from being selfless, but from wisely searching for happiness. You have to take other people’s happiness into consideration if you want your happiness to be true and long-lasting. And finally, purity, the third quality of the Buddha, comes from actually acting in ways that follow through with what your wisdom and your compassion tell you. Before you do anything, you ask yourself, what do you expect the results of that action to be? If you expect any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t expect any harm, you go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, you check to see what are the actual results that come. And you realize that you are causing harm, either to yourself or to others, you stop. If you’re not causing harm, you can continue with the action. Then when you’re done, you look at the long term. What were the actual results over time? You realize that even though you didn’t anticipate any harm, you actually did cause harm. You make up your mind not to repeat that mistake. You learn from it, then you go talk it over with others who are more advanced on the path to see what advice they can give you. But if you see that you didn’t cause any harm, then you take joy in that fact and you can continue training. So you don’t go just on good intentions. You try to make wise intentions. Act on wise intentions. In Western ethics, there’s a question whether a person’s actions should be judged by the person’s intentions or by the actual results. The question comes from courts of law. When you’re trying to figure out who’s guilty, who’s not guilty, what kind of punishment is deserved, if any. But the Buddhist approach is more that of a craftsman looking at, say, a chair that he’s made or a dish that he’s cooked and learning from it. So both the intention and the results go into the equation. You’re not trying to establish guilt, you’re trying to develop a skill. Which is why the Buddha used so many images of skill. Cooks, carpenters, archers, people who worked on their skills by looking at their intentions, looking at their actions, looking at the results, and learning. So it’s in this way that you develop your purity. In other words, your actions really are in line with your intentions. Your wise intentions to find true happiness, a happiness that causes no harm. So this is how the Buddha developed his own wisdom, compassion, purity. And how he recommends that we do it too. So when we take refuge in him, we make up our minds we’re going to follow his example. It’s not that he’s going to come and straighten things out for us. We have to straighten our own minds out, our own thoughts, our words, our deeds. He shows us how. The fact that we have this example in the world, that’s something to be cherished. As you look at places where people are not taking that example to heart, you see how much harm can be caused. So when we take refuge, we’re taking refuge in the values of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Taking them as our example for how to find true happiness. The qualities of the Buddha, wisdom, compassion, and purity come from following the quest for happiness in a wise and effective way. Do you think about that as you sit down to meditate? That you’re here to learn a skill? You’re going to be making mistakes, but you’re going to try to learn from them. You’re going to look for happiness in the way you train your mind. Because that’s what the Buddhist teachings are. They’re a course of training. They’re not just a theory or worldview. They’re instructions on how to act, how to speak, how to think. So you can find the same happiness that the Buddha found. He trained himself. That’s up to us to train ourselves. When you think in those ways, then you’re bringing the right attitude to the practice. Which is probably why John Fuhring would have people pay homage to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. As a way of orienting you on the path. And it’s something always to keep in mind as a refuge. Sarana in both meanings of the term.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/240919_The_Value_of_Refuge.mp3>