A Refuge in Meditation

March 6, 2018

We chant repeatedly that we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. What does that mean, especially as you’re sitting here right now? It means you take them as an example. It’s not that they’re going to come down and help you or come into your mind and give you meditation instructions. Or help you in any other way. What they do is they set a good example. We take refuge in that example because we believe it’s going to bring us happiness when we follow that example. For example, the Buddha was a person of wisdom and discernment. He was a person of compassion. He was a person of purity. We try to develop these qualities within ourselves as ways of finding true happiness, because that’s what it comes down to. For Buddhists, the basic question is, “How do you find true happiness?” That’s what practice is all about. As the Buddha said when he started out his quest, he was looking for what was skillful. Skillful in the sense of providing happiness that was harmless and was lasting. Those two qualities go together–harmless and lasting. You see this in the connection between discernment on the one hand and compassion on the other. The basic question, the Buddha says, that lies at the basis of discernment is asking, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term suffering?” The wisdom there lies in understanding and seeing that there is such a thing as long-term happiness. It’s not something that just comes and goes, but there’s a type of happiness that lasts. And it’s better than short-term. And it comes about through your actions. It doesn’t just come floating your way. You have to do certain things. And those things that you do are skillful. Like right now, we’re trying to develop the mind in concentration. That’s a skill. Because when the mind gets settled down, when it can be still, it can see itself clearly. It can sort itself out. It can know what’s going on. So there’s wisdom in this activity. Then there’s compassion. The basis for compassion can be seen in a story that’s told in the canon. King Vasanadi is in his palace with his queen, Mallika, and they’re alone in their bedroom. He turns to her in a tender moment and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” You know what he’s expecting. He’s expecting her to say, “Yes, Your Majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” That’s what every king would want to hear. But Mallika is no fool. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And the king has to admit, “Well, there’s nobody he loves more than himself.” So that’s the end of that scene. So he leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, and reports the conversation. And the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You could search the whole world over and never find anyone that you love more than yourself. At the same time, everyone else loves themselves just as fiercely as you do.” Now, the Buddha doesn’t draw the conclusion from that that it’s a dog-eat-dog world and you just have to grab what you can. Instead, he says, “Because of this, never harm anyone or get anyone else to harm other people.” The reasoning here, of course, is twofold. One is that if your happiness harms other people, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to destroy it. So if you’re looking for long-term welfare and happiness, you have to take other people’s well-being into consideration. Of course, it’s only fair. We’re all struggling for happiness. And what’s the fair way to live? Well, it’s to find a happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. And here we are as we meditate. We’re focusing on the breath, trying to find well-being just by being focused on the breath. And this is not taking anything away from anyone. It’s not harming anyone. It’s one of those rare pleasures in the world where nobody’s harmed. Even things as basic as eating, there’s harm done. The fact that we have to eat food means that somebody has to die someplace. Either it’s an animal that has to die or the bug on the vegetable that has to die. And it’s all the labor that goes into bringing food to us. We’re so dependent on other people just for our survival. But here as we meditate, nobody’s harmed. We’re laying claim to a part of the world, as I said last night, that is totally ours. Our body and our mind as we sense it from within. And so whatever resources we can find here and whatever skill we can develop in using them so we can have a sense of well-being coming from within, it’s totally harmless. And it’s an act of compassion for others, because as you get your mind more under control, your greed, aversion, and delusion are no longer prowling around. You suffer less, and the people around you suffer less as well. That’s compassion. And finally, purity. As the Buddha said, you develop purity by looking at your actions before you act. You ask yourself, “What kind of results do you expect from this action?” And if you expect any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t expect harm, you can go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, if you see any harm being caused, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you continue until it’s done. Then once it’s done, you look at the long term. What were the actual results? Sometimes you find out that even though you didn’t intend harm, harm was caused. So you admit it to yourself, and if it seems appropriate, you go talk it over with someone else so you can learn from their wisdom. If you don’t see any harm, you can take joy in the fact that you’re progressing on your path. In other words, our goodwill and compassion for others is not just an idle thought. We can’t say that just because we have good intentions that everything we do is going to be okay. We actually have to check the real results of our actions, because there are a lot of well-meaning people out there who can create a lot of trouble. The Buddha talks about checking your actions like this. It’s not just your actions in terms of your body or your speech, but it’s also actions in terms of your mind. This, again, applies to what we’re doing right now. You check on how you’re focusing on the breath. We talk about harm here. We’re not talking about gross harm. We’re talking about very subtle things, like you’re focusing in a way that the mind will not settle down, it doesn’t want to settle down. You have to figure out what to do. Change your tactics. There are some meditation techniques that simply say, “Do what you’re told to do and don’t ask any questions,” and the result is guaranteed. But that’s not how the Buddha taught meditation. He taught you meditation so you can be observant, ask questions, use your ingenuity to figure out what’s going on in the mind. Because if you have only one technique, your greed and aversion and delusion are going to figure that one out pretty quickly. They’ll get around it. Like that story of the cannons in Singapore prior to World War II. The British thought the Japanese would come by the ocean, so they cast their cannons in concrete, pointing out to the ocean. And then the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula and the cannons were useless. In the same way, if you have only one technique, it can be used against some of your defilements, but not all. You have to have a more all-around approach to check on what you’re doing right now, what the results actually are, and then make changes when the results are not good. We have this ability to learn. It’s why we can develop skills to begin with. So let’s make the most of it. You focus on the breath right now. What kind of perception do you have of the breath? Because that, too, is an action. If you think of it just as the air coming in through the nose, it’s hard to think of the breath refreshing the entire body that way. But if you think of it just as being a huge sponge, and you breathe in, the breath energy can come in from all directions. Not air from all directions, but energy from all directions. And John Lee talks about visualizing good energy coming in, bad energy going out. Or you can remind yourself that the breath as energy actually originates in the body. It doesn’t originate outside. So ask yourself, when you start breathing in, where does the energy start? Where does the flow start? And is there anything getting in the way of it spreading easily through the body? Any tension, say, in the stomach? Any tension in the chest? Any tension in the back? Any tension in your shoulders? Can you relax that? This is how you treat your mind well. You’re developing that quality of purity. You intend to sit down and meditate and get the mind in a good condition, and you can actually do it. So it’s not just an idea that you would like to do, but it’s a skill you actually develop. So it’s in this way that, as we’re meditating here, we are taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. After all, it was the Buddha who found this path to begin with. He taught us how to focus on the breath in such a way that you can take the mind to higher and higher and deeper and deeper levels of true well-being. So he set the example. He taught us how to do it. And he taught many other people how to do it, and they’ve all got good results. That’s why it’s been passed down to us for all these many, many generations. So we’re taking refuge in a long tradition of people of integrity, of a teaching of integrity that teaches wisdom, compassion, and purity, not simply as qualities of the Buddha, but also qualities that we can develop within ourselves. And you notice, with all those ways of developing wisdom, compassion, and purity, they all come down to trying to find happiness in a way that’s responsible. That means looking at the right place and looking for a happiness that harms no one, doesn’t harm you, doesn’t harm anybody else. There are some teachings that say you shouldn’t be concerned about your own happiness, you have to think about the happiness of others. And the Buddha doesn’t say that you ignore the happiness of others, but he does say that you think of their happiness in the context of your trying to find true happiness. Because no one else can find happiness for you. If happiness was something we could give to somebody else, the Buddha would have been happy to give it to everybody in the world. But it’s something we have to find. Remember that question of wisdom, “What when I do will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” It has to come from your actions. The same with other people’s happiness. It has to come from their actions. But you want to find your happiness in a way that doesn’t add any burdens to them. And if you’re in a position where you can help make it easier, help them find that happiness for themselves, you’re happy to do it. This is why we spread goodwill in all directions. To remind ourselves that we want to act in a way that doesn’t get in the way of other people’s happiness. And it’s a protection for us. If your actions don’t harm other people, they’re very unlikely to want to harm you. And the best way to make sure that your actions are harmless is to remind yourself that you want all beings to be happy. “May they look after themselves with ease.” Notice that phrase. We’re not saying that we’re going to be there for them. May they be there for themselves. But we don’t want to get in the way of that. If there’s anything we can do to help them, we’re happy to do it. If not, we have to accept the fact that each of us is responsible for our own happiness. And the Buddha and the Dhamma Sangha show us how it’s done.

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