Refuge (outdoors)

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When you meditate, you’re developing three qualities. There’s mindfulness, which at the moment is what’s reminding you to stay with the breath. Alertness is what you’re watching the mind to make sure that it does stay with the breath, watching the breath to see what’s comfortable, see what it’s doing, and then ardent and relaxing when you’re trying to do this well. In other words, if you see the mind is wandering off, you bring it back. If the mind is staying with the breath, you’re trying to make the mind more and more sensitive to subtleties in the breath so you can figure out what kind of breath is a good breath to stay with. You’re trying to build a safe space inside, and you need these three qualities. Otherwise, if you don’t have them, you can learn all kinds of good Dhamma lessons. But then if you don’t have the mindfulness to remember them, or if you’re not alert enough to see what you’re actually doing, or if you know what you’re doing but you don’t really care to do it well, then all the Dhamma you’ve learned is not going to do any good at all. In fact, you might start criticizing the Dhamma because it’s not helping you. The Dhamma can’t come running to help you. You have to practice the Dhamma. That’s when it looks after you. There’s a phrase in Pali, tamo hove rakati tamaccharing. The Dhamma looks after those who practice the Dhamma. So you’ve got to practice it. That’s when it can protect you. This is why the Buddha said that you make yourself a refuge by making the Dhamma a refuge. And you make the Dhamma a refuge by developing right mindfulness, which is basically these three qualities brought to the breath. You know when the breath is coming in; you know when the breath is going out. You develop these three qualities around the breath. It does several things. One, it develops the qualities so that you can use them in other situations as well. You have mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. The work is bound to go well. But at the same time, the fact that these qualities have been developed together with the breath means that they’re buried deep inside you. There’s a science fiction novel, The Sirens of Titan. In one part of the novel, the main character is kidnapped to become part of an army on Mars. He and another soldier begin to figure things out. There’s something wrong with this group that’s kidnapped him. But then the people in charge of the army realize that this guy’s getting wise to them. So they decide they have to erase his memory. Now they can’t erase all of his memory because otherwise he wouldn’t be functional. But they erase what they think are the most important parts. This has happened to him a couple times and he’s realized that there’s a part of his mind that doesn’t forget. So each time he goes in to have his memory erased, before he goes in, he writes himself a letter, puts it in a secret place, and then is sure to make sure that that memory gets placed inside the part of his memory that doesn’t get erased. So when he comes out from the operation, he can go find the letter and read up on what he feels he should know. In the same way, when you get these three qualities buried together in the breath, the breath is always there. It’s there to remind you. Because all too often, when an emotion comes on really strong, it’s very easy to forget the message of the Dhamma. When people around you are getting hysterical or trying to manipulate your thoughts, it’s very easy to forget what the Dhamma teaches. But then the breath is there, coming in, going out, reminding you of mindfulness, alertness, ardency, reminding you that what you do is what’s really important in life. The media tell you that what somebody else is doing is important. You have to have the time to listen to them, which means that your time is not important. But the Buddha’s message is something else entirely, saying, “No, your choices that you’re making in the present moment determine where your life is going to go.” So this is what you have to pay most careful attention to. Make sure that you keep these lessons in mind, the importance of being mindful, alert, ardent. So you remind yourself of the importance of your actions. When you see that your actions are important, that shifts the balance of your concern, where danger lies in the world and where things need to be protected. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about different ways you can suffer loss in your life. You can suffer loss of relatives, loss of wealth, loss of your health. He says those losses are not really important. Because the loss is not permanent. The things that are serious about losing, one, is your virtue, and two, is your right view. The right view teaches you, again, that your actions are important, that you have to act on skillful intentions if you want to be happy. If you lose that view, then you can start doing anything. If you think that your actions don’t matter, or you can get away with things, then you’re going to be very careless. And then what happens is this possession you have, your ability to choose what to do, gets thrown away or gets taken over by other people’s agendas. Same with your virtue. You have to see that your virtue is so important that you would be willing to suffer loss of health, loss of wealth, even loss of relatives, to maintain the precepts, to be truthful, to be harmless. If you maintain the precepts, then you’re safe. If you decide the precepts don’t matter, or you give yourself excuses for not observing them, that’s when you’re really opening yourself to danger. So these are some of the principles that the Buddha would have you keep in mind. And you keep them in mind, and you use them, and you bring them to apply to your actions. The application is where you use the alertness and the ardency. Keeping in mind is the mindfulness. When you have these things going for you, then you can protect yourself. You can be your own refuge. There’s a story in the canon of a quail. The quail is caught by a hawk because the quail was off wandering where it shouldn’t be wandering. And as it’s being carried away, it says, “Oh, if only I had stayed in my own ancestral home, this hawk would have been no match for me.” The hawk hears this and figures, “What kind of quail is this?” It says, “Okay, where is your ancestral home?” And the quail says, “In a field that’s been plowed, and the stones are turned up.” The hawk says, “Okay, I’ll let you go. You can go there, but you still will not be safe from me.” So the quail goes down, stands on a stone, and taunts the hawk, “Come get me, you hawk! Come get me, you hawk!” So the hawk swoops down, and as the quail sees the hawk is coming at it at full speed, it hides behind the stone. It’s too late for the hawk to change direction, so it crashes into the stone and dies. Then the Buddha says to the monks, “If you stay in the practice of right mindfulness, you’re staying in your ancestral grounds, and the forces of death can’t get you. If you go wandering outside of this area, you’re not safe.” So safety lies in developing these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. That way, the lessons you’ve learned of the Dhamma are there for you to apply. You have the wherewithal to apply them. As you look at the world around you, who can you depend on? The world is not really concerned about your true safety. They’re more concerned about what they can get out of you or get you to do. But you have to realize that the dangers that come from outside, the big danger is when someone else can get you to do or say or think something unscathed. The other things they can do to you are not nearly as serious as this. So you’ve got to keep the Dhamma in mind so you have a standard of reference to judge when other people are telling you that you should do this or should do that. How does that fit in with what the Buddha taught? The Buddha is the only person out there who really knows what true happiness is. He and the members of the Sangha who have passed on his knowledge. He said, “You need someone you can trust because he doesn’t want anything from you.” He’d already taken care of his own needs as he gained awakening. So for the rest of his life, he offered the Dhamma as a free gift. So here’s something freely offered, no strings attached, no ulterior motives. So the lessons for true happiness are all there. It’s simply a matter of remembering them and remembering to apply them in your actions, in your thoughts, your words, and deeds. And it’s through developing these three qualities that they do become embodied in you as a person so that you can become your own refuge. And be an inspiring example to others.

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