A Refuge in the Dhamma (outdoors)

May 29, 2022

When Ajaan Foong would teach meditation, he’d ask people to think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha first, to think of them as refuge. And it wasn’t just a custom or a ceremony. It was to force you to think. You’re coming to meditate, you’re looking for happiness. Who are you going to take as your example? You decide you’re going to trust the example of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. That’s what it means to take refuge in them, on one level. There are actually three levels altogether. The first level is to think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as individuals out there in the world. The Buddha was an individual person. The Dhamma exists in books. The Sangha exists in an institution. Those things are outside you, even though you may remember them. Still, it’s possible to forget, and it’s possible for your attitudes to change. You want a refuge that’s a lot more secure than that. So what you decide to do is to follow their example, look at the qualities they developed, and then try to develop those same qualities within yourself, as with the Dhamma. You take the Dhamma as a refuge. The Buddha says you practice the establishing of mindfulness, the satya padana, keeping track of the body in and of itself, or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, mental qualities in and of themselves, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That’s the formula. What it means is you’re sitting here meditating. You try to stay with the breath. This is called the body in and of itself, in the sense that you’re not concerned with how the body functions in the world. It’s just the fact that you have a body sitting here right now. What is it like to have a body? What is it doing? What’s breathing? How is it breathing? Because the breath is one of those elements that you can adjust and you can experiment with. And you find that it has a potential to make this body here in the present moment, your experience of the body in the present moment, really, really pleasant. You try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. Think of the breath nourishing down into the heart. Think of the breath coming in the back of the neck, going down the spine. Think of it coming in and out the eyes. Think of it coming in and out the eyes and the ears and the nose, the back of the head, the top of the head. Realize that the breath here is the flow of energy in the body. And just by thinking, you can change the flow. If you survey the body, you find parts of the body that are not being nourished by good energy. Well, think of loosening them up, being aware of the fact that sometimes a pattern of tension in one part of the body may actually be caused by a blockage in the breath in another part of the body. So make a survey. Get to know the body. Get to know the breath here, right now. As for issues of the world, you put them aside. Let the birds chirp. Let the crickets chirp. Let your responsibilities on the world just let them go. You’re just here, right here, right now. Yes, so why should I stay here? It’s because the important things in life are happening right here. ’Cause your life is shaped by your intentions. Your past intentions, you cannot go back and change. As for your future intentions, you may make up your mind now that you want to do this, you want to do that. But what’s important is the decisions you’re making right now and how you’re making them. So you want to be here to watch that. That’s what the alertness is for, to see what you’re doing and to see what the results are. When you learn something good about what kind of breathing is good for the mind, what kind of mind states or pictures of the breath are good for the body, you try to remember that. That’s the function of mindfulness. So the next time you encounter a similar problem, if you encounter problems in your meditation, you can remember how you solved them in the past. If you remember a particular way of getting the mind to settle down, you remember that and apply that. Mindfulness is what takes what you’ve learned and keeps it at hand. But just on their own, mindfulness and alertness are not enough to get you on the right track, because you can be alert to anything. You can do anything at all, watch the results, and it still counts as alertness. You can remember all kinds of things. It still counts as mindfulness. But when you add the quality of ardency, you’re trying to do this well, trying to train the mind to be skillful, to abandon its unskillful habits. That’s what makes the mindfulness right, what makes the alertness right. It’s this principle that you want to do what’s skillful and abandon what’s unskillful. Mindfulness and mindfulness train your right effort so that it knows what it’s doing. This is why those three qualities work together. As for the principle of abandoning what’s unskillful and developing what’s skillful, that’s one of the few teachings the Buddha said are true across the board, what he called categorical teachings. Some of his teachings are true all the time, but they’re not beneficial all the time. Others are true and beneficial all the time, but the only ones that are true and beneficial all the time are two. One is his principle that skillful actions should be developed, and unskillful actions should be abandoned. The other one is the Four Noble Truths, which grow out of that first principle. In the Four Noble Truths, on the one hand, you have suffering or stress, dukkha, and then you have the cause of dukkha, which is three kinds of craving. The three kinds of craving should be abandoned. As for the suffering or stress itself, it should be comprehended, so you really understand it, understand it to the point where you have no more passion, no more aversion, no more delusion for it. As for the skillful side of the Four Noble Truths, you’ve got the path, the end of suffering. That should be developed, like all skillful qualities, so that you can realize the cessation of suffering, which is the ending of craving. These are the two teachings that you should keep in mind all the time. There are others that are useful sometimes and not always. For example, the teaching on what’s called the Three Characteristics. Everything that’s fabricated is inconstant, stressful, not self. That’s useful sometimes, but not always. When you’re trying to develop your precepts, anything that would pull you away from your precepts you should say, “Okay, that’s inconstant, stressful, not self.”I don’t need that. “Whatever happiness I may feel”or whatever obligation I may feel, “I would get satisfied out of those things.”I don’t need that because it’s unskillful.” So you apply those three characteristics to develop a sense of dispassion for these things. But for the act of holding the precepts itself, you don’t make that inconstant, stressful, not self, at least not quite yet. You focus on how you can make it as steady and continuous as possible. The same when you’re doing concentration practice. You’re pushing against those three characteristics. You’re trying to make a sense of ease in the body and the mind. Try to make a sense of constant ease. Bring your mind under control, which goes directly against the three characteristics. You apply the three characteristics to that point and anything that would pull you out of the concentration. The same with discernment. The activities, the questions you ask about how to understand this process of fabrication, how to develop dispassion for it, you hold on to those questions. As for any thoughts that would pull you away, you apply the three characteristics to those. You apply the three characteristics to everything only toward the end of the path. So that’s a teaching that’s true all the time, but it’s not always beneficial. The really special ones are the ones that are true and beneficial all the time. Those are the two that I mentioned. It’s in those two that you really establish your refuge. Because they’re not just truths that sit there on the page. They’re meant to be put into action. They basically tell you what to do. Because the mind is always doing things all the time as it is. It’s shaping its present experience. We have lots of potentials for how much you might want to shape your experience right now. There are potentials in the mind that you could think about all kinds of things. There are potential ways of breathing that can be either really painful or really refreshing. You want to pay attention to those. Those are the things you develop. Then you look at the way that you visualize the breath to yourself. A way of holding a picture in the mind would help you think of the breath going down the shoulders, working through any tension in the neck, tension in the shoulders, tension in the back. When you think of the breath coming in, does it come in from the back? Does it come in from the front? If breathing or a certain way of conceiving the breath is adding to your attention right now, can you reverse it? For example, if you have a sense that you’re pulling the breath in from the front of the body, what’s it like if you pull it in from the back? How would that change how you hold the body? How would that change which muscles are involved in the breathing process? This is what it means to be alert and mindful and ardent all at the same time. As you create a really good, solid foundation right here. And even though this is fabricated, it’s part of your raft to take you across. You’re building a good raft. You hold on to it and you keep on making the effort to get across the river. You finally get to the other side. You’ll arrive at something that doesn’t need to be put together at all. It’s there. That’s the third level of refuge. When you find that there’s something deathless that you can touch in the mind, it has nothing to do with sight, sound, smells, taste, tactile sensations, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body. Even the intellect is not involved. It’s outside of your ordinary range of experience, but it’s there. When you reach that, then you’re totally safe. As the Buddha said, it’s free from aging, free from illness, free from death, free from sorrow. It’s something human beings can attain. If human beings couldn’t attain it, the Buddha wouldn’t have taught it. At the same time, once you find it, you realize it’s the ultimate happiness. So what you’re doing when you’re taking refuge is learning how to be an adult in your pursuit of happiness, realizing that you have to take the consequences of your actions into account. You don’t want to harm anybody. There’s a scene in the Pali Canon. King Vasanadi is in his palace with his queen, Mallika, and in a tender moment he turns to her and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” You probably know what he’s thinking. He’s probably hoping that she’ll say, “Yes, I love you more than I love myself.” And if it were a Hollywood movie, that’s probably what she’d say. But this is the Pali Canon. Mallika is no fool. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself,”and how about you? “Is there anybody you love more than yourself?” The king has to admit that no, there’s nobody he loves more than himself. So that’s the end of that scene. The king goes down to see the Buddha, tells him what had happened, and the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right.”You could go the whole world over “and not find any one person”that you would love more than yourself.” In the same way, though, everybody else loves themselves just as much, or as the Buddha says, just as fiercely. So what to do? The Buddha doesn’t advise you to live in a dog-eat-dog world where it’s each person for himself. He says, “You have to think about other people.”Never harm anybody else “or get them to harm anybody else besides themselves.”Never get them to do harm.” He doesn’t explain his reasoning, but it’s pretty easy to see. If in your search for happiness you’re causing suffering, oppression to other people, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to destroy it. So if you want your happiness to last, you have to think of the happiness of others. Make sure, at the very least, that you’re not oppressing them. And all too often in our search for happiness, we look for things that precisely do oppress other people. The common ways for looking for happiness in the world are to look for material gain, status, praise, sensual pleasures. But with all those things you gain, you lose. You take, somebody else has to give. But if you look for happiness through generosity, virtue, meditation, everybody wins. Nobody gets oppressed. That’s called looking for happiness in a mature and adult way. You’re taking your happiness seriously. You would think that happiness is something we all want. We should take it seriously, but we don’t. We have half-baked ideas about what will make us happy, and our problem is that we tend to go for the short term, the quick fix. Then we find ourselves living with the consequences for a long time, and we’re miserable. And we wonder why we’re miserable. It’s because we didn’t think about the consequences of our actions. There is a way to look for happiness where nobody suffers, nobody’s harmed. That’s through the practice of the Dhamma. In this way, your search for happiness benefits not only you, but the other people around you. That’s a really special kind of happiness, a special kind of goodness that has no drawbacks at all. As Ajahn Mun once said, “The goodness that has no drawbacks, that’s genuine goodness.” That’s what we should be thinking, or the implications of what we think when we think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha at the beginning of the meditation. We’re to take their example, realize their qualities within ourselves, so ultimately we can get to the qualities beyond the qualities, the quality of the deathless. That’s the path to mature happiness that the Dhamma opens to us. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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