

Three Levels of Refuge

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One of the basic images of the practice is that we're taking refuge. The idea of refuge, of course, assumes that there are dangers. For us, primarily, the dangers are inside. Our greed, aversion, and delusion can cause us all kinds of trouble. But we can recognize that there is that trouble, but also there's an escape from the trouble through our own actions: That's what lies at the basis of what the Buddha said is the most basic quality for being skillful, which is heedfulness—realizing that you have to be careful in choosing what you're going to do and say and think. That means you have to train the mind, because the mind is what gives the orders for what you do and say and think. So the dangers come from within, but the potential for going beyond the dangers also comes from within.

There's a passage where the Buddha says the mind is bright, but it's defiled by incoming or visiting defilements. The brightness here doesn't mean purity. It simply means your ability to recognize what you're doing, your ability to recognize when you're making a mistake and doing something unskillful. That's where the beginning of refuge lies: in recognizing that you can see your own actions, you can see when there's something wrong with them, and you can do something about it.

It helps, of course, to have outside examples, outside advice, because one of our main problems inside is delusion, where white looks black, black looks white; right looks wrong, wrong looks right. This is why there's such an etiquette of respect around here. We find good examples in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, and the Sangha. We show our respect for them because that's the only way we're going to open up our hearts to be willing to learn from them and accept their standards—or give them a try at the very least. Respect doesn't mean total obedience. But it does mean giving the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha the benefit of the doubt, trying things on for a while, and really sincerely testing what the Buddha has to say.

In taking these things as a refuge, there are actually three levels. On the external level, you take the Buddha and the Sangha as external examples. We've got the Dhamma as instructions, but it's more than just instructions. You want to see and read of examples on how these principles are put into action, because they're not just general principles.

There's a theme you hear bandied around every now and then that when the Buddha talks about how admirable friendship is the entirety of the holy life, what he's talking about is friendship with admirable qualities in yourself. Well, of

course you want to be friendly with admirable qualities in yourself. But how are you going to recognize them unless you see them in someone else as well? And how are you going to know how to apply these general principles unless you see them in the example?

I know, in my own case, that most of what I learned about the Dhamma was not what I heard from Ajaan Fuang or Ajaan Suwat; it was being around them and watching them in action—watching them in different situations. I don't know if I can set the same level of example they did, but at the very least you can read in the Canon about how the Buddha would handle different situations. That was one of the signs of the genius of the people who put the suttas together: The Dhamma wasn't just about what the Buddha said. It was also about how he behaved, how he handled different problems.

You don't know how skillful human beings can be until you've seen someone who's really behaved skillfully in the face of difficulties, who knows how to put up with adversity, who knows how to defuse a really difficult situation, someone who can show patience and yet be decisive when it's time to be decisive. And someone who has that sense of time and place: That's one of those things you simply cannot pick up from reading books. So you need not only teachings in the Dhamma, but also the examples of people who are skillful. They give you an idea of what's possible, of what you can do, too. When you find a good friend like that, the whole point is to emulate that person's wisdom, generosity, virtue, conviction—what human beings can do. That's one level of refuge, the external level.

Then the next level is that you try to develop the qualities of that person or of those people within yourself. Take the example of the Buddha. His main virtues are three: discernment, purity, and compassion, and he gives instructions on how you can develop your own discernment, purity, and compassion.

Discernment starts with that question: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" You don't just ask the question in a floating way. You look for good people to put the question to, and they'll teach you about skillful behavior: avoiding things like killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter. They'll also teach you about learning how not to be greedy, how not to have ill will, and how to develop right view. These are the things that are skillful.

As for that question, though: The reason why that's the beginning of wisdom is that it embodies two principles. One is that your happiness is going to depend on your actions; you don't just sit around waiting for it to come. And secondly, long-term happiness is better than short-term, and you have to make that choice. Some people think the whole question of short-term versus long-term is so

obvious that you don't even have to talk about it. But people don't live their lives that way. It's very rare that you find someone who really is able to sacrifice short-term happiness for something in the long term. It's the beginning of wisdom.

Then there's the wisdom in knowing how to follow through. When you find that you're going to go for the short term, how do you dissuade yourself? When you don't feel inclined to go for the long term, how are you going to convince yourself that it's necessary? This is why heedfulness is so important. All too often, you hear that we're simply learning to open up to our innately good nature. But if our nature were innately good, why are there times when it's really difficult to do the skillful thing, and the mind finds it so easy to put up excuses? Here again, heedfulness is an important part of wisdom.

Heedfulness also informs the basis for developing purity in the Buddha's instructions to his son. You may take it as a general principle that you want to avoid harm, but then you really have to make sure that your actions are purely in line with that principle. That requires that you look at your intentions and ask yourself, when you're going to do something: What's your intention? What do you expect will come about as a result of this action? If you expect it's going to cause harm, then you don't do it regardless of how much you want to do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead.

While you're doing the action, you have to look carefully at the results you're giving rise to, because some results do come immediately. And again, even if you like doing the action, if you see that it's giving rise to harm either for yourself or for others, you stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

When you're done, you have to reflect on it again: Was there any long-term harm? If so, talk it over with someone who can give you good advice, and then resolve not to repeat that mistake again. If there's no long-term harm, then you can take joy in the fact that you're advancing in the training.

As with wisdom and discernment, the quest for purity is based on heedfulness, realizing that there are a lot of things you don't know and a lot of mistakes you can potentially make even when you have generally good intentions. After all, not all good intentions are skillful intentions. But you can develop skill by reflecting on your actions. This means that developing the mind, training the mind is not simply a matter of bringing it into the present moment. It's also training in how you approach the future and how you approach the past: i.e., the future in terms of what you intend to do, and the past in terms of judging the results of your actions—in terms of what you actually *learn* from your actions in the past. That's how you develop purity.

As for compassion, there's that famous story about King Pasenadi and Queen Mallika. They're in the bedroom and, in a tender moment, he turns to her and asks, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" Of course, he's expecting her to say, "Yes, Your Majesty—you!" Then the violins swell and the scene fades. But that's not what happens. She says, "Well, no. There's nobody I love more than myself. And how about you?" The King has to admit that, no, there's nobody he loves more than himself, either. So much for that.

He goes to report the conversation to the Buddha. The Buddha says, "You know, she's right. You could search the whole world, and you'd never find anyone that you love more than yourself. And you'd also find that each person loves him or herself just as fiercely as you love yourself." The conclusion the Buddha draws from that is that we should have compassion and never harm anybody.

Again, this is heedfulness speaking. If you harm other people in your search for happiness, they're not going to stand for your happiness; it's not going to last. So you have to look for a happiness that doesn't harm others. That's the beginning of compassion.

So these are the ways in which you can take the qualities of the Buddha and develop them in yourself through your sense of heedfulness. That's the second level of refuge.

The third level is when you actually attain the goal of the path. We're all used to hearing nibbana as being *the* name of the goal, but it's only one of many names that the Buddha gave to it. There are others like: the island, security, the secure, shelter, harbor, refuge. The goal is a place of total safety. There are no more defilements; there's nothing in your mind that can create suffering anymore. You realize that the only suffering that really weighed the mind down was the suffering the mind created for itself. When you reach that point, that's the ultimate level of refuge. You reached it through your own actions, but you trained your actions through the example and teachings of others. They showed how to examine your actions and gain good standards to judge them and correct them so that you could reach that ultimate level of refuge as well.

This is why there are three levels altogether. Examples from outside and instructions from outside: That's the first level. The second is developing the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha within the heart as you practice. The ultimate level is when you finally attain the goal. All three levels come out of heedfulness, seeing that there are dangers but being confident that if you're careful in how choose to act, you can avoid those dangers and ultimately take yourself to a place where there are no dangers anymore.

It's important to have conviction in this because you see heedlessness promoted so many times. I picked up a Buddhist magazine recently, and first it was in the editorial, which said the force of desire in human life is so strong that it's folly to try to master it. That was bad enough. Then you start looking through the different articles, and everybody seems to be saying the same thing: "There's no true safety that you can attain through your actions. Everything is about learning how to accept the difficulties of life, realizing that you can't go beyond them, but that's okay." Well, it's not okay, and it's certainly not what the Buddha taught. It *is* possible to go beyond them. We've got his example.

We want to make sure that modern Dhamma doesn't blind *us* to that example, because otherwise we'll never find the refuge the Buddha worked so hard to discover for himself and to teach to others.

So it's for our own good and for the good of everybody else that we try to keep that example alive.