

Refuge in the Dhamma

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When we say that we take refuge in the Dhamma, what does that mean? What kind of refuge or protection does the Dhamma offer?

It offers protection on three main levels. It's basically a protection from ourselves. They talk about equating taking the Dhamma as your refuge with taking yourself as your refuge, but it doesn't mean taking yourself as you are. You have to bring yourself in line with the Dhamma for that refuge to come inside, in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds. They said that Ajaan Mun's most frequent Dhamma topic was practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, not in accordance with your own preferences or with your old habits. You have to change your habits.

This is because your actions are important. In fact, that's one of the places where the Dhamma offers its greatest protection: by pointing out how important your actions are.

There's an interesting passage where the Buddha's talking about other people who taught in his time, who claimed either that everything that's happening to you is the result of the will of some creator god—and the will has already been set, it's not going to be changed; or it's based on your past actions—whatever you did in the past is going to come and get you and there's nothing you can do about it; or that there's no real pattern to cause and effect at all. Everything is very random. In each case, he said, those teachings give you no protection because they don't give you a sense of what should or shouldn't be done. In fact, they don't even allow for the concept of what should or shouldn't be done. If everything is predetermined, there's nothing you can do to change things. If everything is random, who's to say who's right and who's wrong—or what's going to give results in any way at all?

In terms of kamma, the Buddha teaches that what you experience right now is a combination of three things: results from your past actions, your current actions, and the results of your current actions. And those current actions give you a range of choice. The past actions that are ripening right now may limit how great that range may be, but you always have the freedom to try to do the most skillful thing possible with what you've got.

You see this as you meditate. The teachings on kamma are directly related to the meditation because, as they point out, kamma comes from the mind.

This is why you want to train the mind because our thoughts, words, and deeds are really going to have an impact on our lives. Even how we relate to things moment by moment has a big impact. You're sitting here with your eyes closed. Nobody's keeping watch on your mind. Nobody's keeping tabs on you. You could do anything at all. But you're choosing to stay with the breath—at least that's the initial intention. Now, other intentions may come up, but your

question then is, “What are you going to do with the other intentions? Are you going to maintain your original intention or are you going to let yourself get sideswiped and sent off to some other direction?” You’ve got the choice. Things come up and at first it seems that you have no recourse at all. Whatever’s going to come up is going to come up and sweep you away with it.

But as you get more observant, you begin to see that there are moments when the mind is making choices, either to go with a new thought or to stay with the breath. And it has a tendency to want to hide those choices from itself. The choice is made and then you pretend for a while that it hasn’t been made and, whoops, there you go. But if you can catch the choice being made, you can make a change. Breathe more comfortably. Find a point in the body where you can stay more firmly established.

In this way, you take advantage of the Buddha’s teachings on kamma. They may sound fairly abstract, but they’re not. They give you an option as to what you can do right now. If things haven’t been going well, you can change. You can learn to be more and more skillful in how you shape your experience. And it’s worth developing this skill because your actions have such a huge impact on your experience.

This is where the concept of heedfulness comes in—that you really do want to be careful. You want to be meticulous, even about little things. One of the teachings the Buddha gave on Magha Puja is of not doing any evil—anything, even the slightest bit of thought, word, or deed that’s unskillful—because it’s going to have an impact. You realize because you have the choice to act one way or another, and that those choices are important. That’s where the whole idea of heedfulness becomes possible and where it really makes sense.

As the Buddha said, “All skillful actions boil down to heedfulness.” Heedfulness contains them all. It’s the root of all of them. In other words, we do good things not because our nature compels us to be good. We do them because we realize the results of good actions are going to be desirable down the line—and if we don’t do the good, there’s going to be trouble.

So the Dhamma offers protection on the very first level, in just the possibility that there could be a “should” and a “should not.”

Then, of course, it then gives directions—exactly what you should and shouldn’t do. What qualities do you want to develop in the mind? Virtue, concentration, discernment, mindfulness, alertness, patience, endurance? This is where you develop another level of refuge, when you start to take the Dhamma inside and you turn yourself into a more reliable person.

If you work on developing your mind through mindfulness, you find over time that it really does make a difference in how you notice things—how much more careful you are in your intentions, and how the results get better and better. You find you really can rely on yourself. This is when the Dhamma as a refuge and your self as a refuge begin to come together. As you make yourself a more reliable person, you can depend on yourself more and more to do the right thing and not find yourself suddenly slipping off into something unskillful.

So each time your mind slips off, remind yourself that you do have the choice to come back. You want to make the most of that, because that's how you develop your internal refuge.

But as the Buddha discovered, even skillful actions have their limitations. They contain dangers, too. The goodness that comes from ordinary skillful actions lasts for a while and then it doesn't last anymore because the impact of those actions has an expiration date. We don't know what it is. It's not printed on the side of the action, but it's there.

So he asks us to work further at what he calls the fourth kind of kamma. There's kamma that's dark, kamma that's bright, kamma that's bright and dark, and then there's the fourth level: kamma that's neither bright nor dark, that leads to the end of kamma. The end of kamma is nibbana, where the ultimate refuge is. The Buddha has lots of names for nibbana. Nibbana's not the only one. It's the one he used most often, but he also describes it as security, island, harbor, refuge. And the kind of refuge is indicated by some of the names that indicate that it's really special: deathless, undecaying, ageless, the beyond, the ultimate. That's the refuge that lies beyond action.

It's something hard to comprehend because when the Buddha says that even the way an arahant would function in day to day life is beyond us. People of that sort can do actions, but they don't have any kamma. They may have intentions, but they don't have any karmic seed. They burn the seed, as he says, which is an interesting image, but it doesn't really tell you how to do it.

To learn how you do it, go back to working on developing the practice—internalizing the qualities of the Dhamma: virtue, concentration, discernment. Again and again and again. Try to be really active in developing these things. Be heedful in developing them. That's how you get to the ultimate refuge. You can't clone it by reading about it. It's always fascinating to read the ajaans, especially when some of them get very open about stages in their practice and realizations they had in their practice, but you can't take the information and clone it. You've got to go back to the actual practice itself.

This is where the Dhamma shows its real ability to be your refuge. It gives you guidance. This, as the Buddha said, is one of the duties of a good teacher. If the student is diligent, pays attention, tries hard to study, then the teacher's duty is to make sure the student is well taught. Beyond that, as he says, the teacher's duty is to offer protection in all directions—an interesting idea. What it means, of course, depends on the skill that the teacher imparts as to what that kind of protection would be. Now, in the Buddha's case, he trains you to be your own refuge, in knowing what should and shouldn't be done, and how to do it, until you develop the refuge that's beyond all directions. There's no time or space in nibbana, which is why there's no room for danger. That's the ultimate refuge of the Dhamma.

So the Buddha's fulfilled his duty as a teacher. It's up to us to fulfill our desire for a true happiness and to find refuge, to find safety. From what? Well, from bad influences outside, from people who tell us that true happiness is not possible or it's not possible through your own efforts; or people who tell us that everything is predetermined by science or by social

forces—that you have no real freedom of choice. They’re trying to impose their ideas on you, ideas that limit you, but you don’t have to listen to them. You’re taking refuge in the Dhamma, which says that you do have choices, that the choices really are important, and that and through developing your heedfulness and developing your virtue, concentration and discernment, you can gain freedom not only from bad outside influences, but also bad inside influences.

After all, you’ve got your own greed, aversion and delusion that you’ve got to protect yourself from. The Buddha says the mind is luminous, but that doesn’t mean that it’s innately good. It simply means that the mind has a quality of knowing. It can watch its own actions. It can watch the results of its actions. It can catch sight of when it’s giving into greed, aversion, or delusion, and it can train itself not to do that.

So we have the potential to see what we’re doing and to learn from it. The Dhamma gives us guidance in where to look, how to look, what to do in response when we see anything unskillful coming up in the mind. We have the protection of a teaching that gives us shoulds and shouldn’ts, and it’s up to us to take that teaching and bring it inside, because only when it’s brought inside can it really do its work.

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