

Refuge

September 12, 2007

In the Pali phrases for taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, the word *sarana*, which we translate as refuge, can also mean something you remember, something you hold in mind, something you keep in mind. This is part of the way in which it becomes your refuge.

You try to keep the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha in mind as you go through life. Try to remember the example of the Buddha, remember his teachings, and keep asking yourself, “How do those apply to what I’m doing right now? How do they help me overcome suffering right now?”

Because that’s what the teachings are all designed for: to help you find ways of untangling all the knots of suffering you create for yourself. They point to the fact that these knots come from within. You take some bits and pieces from outside, you take the rope from outside, say, but the knot with which you hang yourself, with which you create a noose out of the rope: That’s your doing. So you have to keep looking back at your own mind to see in what ways the mind is being unskillful. That means you take a special relationship to your thoughts.

The point where the Buddha’s life and his teachings come together is in his very last teaching. In those days, some teachers liked to save their really special teachings for the last moment. They didn’t want to hand over everything to their students beforehand, for otherwise the students might outshine them. But as the Buddha kept saying, he was not that kind of teacher. Instead of holding something new and unexpected for his last teaching, he simply summarized everything he’d taught, “All fabricated things are subject to arising and passing away. Try to become consummate through heedfulness.”

“Consummate” means here consummately skillful in the way you act and think and speak—in other words, bringing the mind to a point where it creates no more suffering. And it’s through heedfulness that you do this. Heedfulness means that you see there are definite dangers, but you also see that if you’re careful, you can get around them.

The big dangers are the ones that come bubbling up from within your own mind. One of the terms the Buddha uses is *asava*, which means effluent or fermentation. Sensual desire comes bubbling up in your mind; certain views come bubbling up. Desire to take on states of being, ignorance comes bubbling up all the time. You have to develop a detached attitude toward these things. You can’t simply go along with the flow. Because after all, it is the flow of effluents. It’s not the flow of a nice clear stream.

So when things come bubbling up in the mind, you have to ask yourself, “Is that really so?” You might put a “Really?” next to every thought that comes up and see what reasons the mind

tries to give you to persuade you that, yes, this really is so. Learn how to take a detached, somewhat skeptical attitude toward what they have to say. Don't believe everything you think.

Yet at the same time, have trust in the ability of your mind get past the unskillful stuff. This is important as well. We don't have only unskillful habits in the mind. We do have some skillful habits that we've developed over time. If we didn't have any skillful habits, we wouldn't have been born as human beings. We'd be out there with the dogs and the cats and all the other animals wandering around. We do have a sense of right and wrong; we do have a certain amount of sensitivity. It's simply that we have to learn how to develop it further.

Our society and culture don't help in this area, because they try to develop our sensitivities in areas that are really not helpful at all: sensitive to what other people think, what's stylish right now, what's popular right now, what they can get you to spend your money for right now. So you have to ask, "Really?" when you look at those things as well. They can't get at you unless your mind has a tendency in that direction—where it wants to be popular, wants to be stylish, wants to get new things to distract itself with.

So the real problem is inside. Sometimes you hear that our problem is our social conditioning, that if we could get back to our preconditioned state we'd be perfectly happy. But look at babies. They're preconditioned and they're miserable, crying all the time because they don't understand anything. They're operating under a lot of ignorance as well. If they didn't have the seeds created by these outflows, these effluents, then social pressures and social conditioning wouldn't have any effect on them at all.

So it's not that things outside are at fault. The germs for our suffering are all in here. But the potentials for developing skill are all in here as well. The teaching on heedfulness reflects that. If there were nothing we could do about this situation, there'd be no use in being heedful. You'd just accept the situation and go along with it because that's the best that could be done. But we do have the potential for acting skillfully, we do have the potential for learning new habits. This is where heedfulness comes in.

They've done studies of people who are really skillful in external skills, and they've found that one of the essential ingredients is having a very strong sense of the dangers that come when you're not skillful. People, for instance, who are really good at being surgeons have a strong sense of the damage they can do if they're not skillful. So they try to get as skillful as possible, practicing hours and hours and hours on all their delicate techniques.

So we as Dhamma practitioners should have the same sense of danger as well.

There's that chant we had just now: "those who see danger and respect being heedful." The two things go together. You realize there are dangers in the mind and you have to be very careful about them. The only way to get past them is to practice for hours and hours and hours—sitting, standing, walking, lying down—all the time being very careful about what's coming up in the mind, whether you're here at the monastery or out someplace else. It's easier when you're at the monastery because you have fewer distractions, fewer things pressing in on you all

the time. But it's no less true that you can create a lot of danger out there as well if you're not careful in how you react to social pressure.

So you've really got to ride herd on the mind. At the same time, have confidence that you *can* develop skills by being observant. This is your main tool: learning how to watch. If something seems unclear, just watch it for a while. If you're forced to take action, take whatever seems to be the most skillful action. Again, keep the Buddha in mind, his instructions to Rahula on being careful that you don't cause harm, and his constant return to this issue of being skillful.

There was once a layperson who was accused by a member of some other sect that "This Buddha of yours," they said, "doesn't give a straight answer to any of the really big issues of the day. He's a nihilist, he has no teaching at all." The lay disciple replied, "No, that's not the case. There is one issue on which he's very clear, that's on the issue of what's skillful and what's not." Afterwards the lay disciple went to see the Buddha, reported the conversation, and the Buddha said, "Yes, that was a good answer." This is *the* important distinction.

So as you're trying to keep the Buddha in mind, your question should always be that old question, "What would the Buddha do? What would the Buddha say?" Well, one of the things he would say is to ask you a question: "What's the most skillful thing to do right now?" Make that your determination, that no matter how difficult the situation, there's always a skillful response, and you want to find it.

In some cases, it may require more sacrifice on your part than part of you is willing to give. But remember, there's not just one of you in there. The mind is a whole committee. And the Buddha's teachings take advantage of that fact. If you had only one self in there, how could your self do anything to improve itself? But the fact is that you've got lots of different selves and they can look at issues from different angles. Some of them have better ideas about what's skillful right now than others. So try to listen to the most skillful voice you can find inside.

This is one of the reasons why we don't have to depend on an outside power. The one dependence is, again, just keeping the Buddha in mind, keeping the Dhamma, keeping the Sangha in mind.

Years back, when I was taking a course in ethics, one of the main points that came across was that when you try to analyze a particular action, your idea of what's right and wrong will come from your picture of what other elements in this situation are relevant and which ones are irrelevant. And that's a lot of what ethics comes down to: deciding what's relevant and what's not.

In our case, what's always relevant is that there was a person who sat under a tree 2,600 years ago and was able to put an end to suffering. And then he taught for 45 years. The fact that he as a human being and could attain awakening: That's our main element of conviction. And that's a fact that we keep bringing to bear on all of our decisions.

Because as he said, his awakening didn't come through any special quality that only he had. He didn't claim to be a divine being or a son of a divine being. He was a human being who was able to develop certain qualities of mind that we all have in potential form, and through them he was able to put an end to suffering. Which means that that event is relevant to what we're doing right now, whatever it is we're doing right now, whether right now means meditating, or right now means washing the dishes, or right now means going to work. Whatever the right now is, the Buddha's insight into how to put an end to suffering is always relevant.

So try to keep that always in mind. Always be heedful of the dangers of giving in to the unskillful outflows or effluents of the mind. And always be heedful of the fact that you *can* step back and choose to do the most skillful thing you can think of. With that determination, we start moving from taking the Buddha as our refuge to learning how to depend on ourselves.

As these qualities become more and more developed within us, then our refuge becomes ultimately something we don't have to recollect because it's right there always. But until that point, keep the Buddha in mind. Keep his last teaching in mind to be heedful, along with all the dangers that teaching warns you about, and all the promise that it entails.