

Refuge

Tonight I want to talk about refuge - what does it mean when we take refuge? What are the three jewels and how do they relate to our practice?

Often, at the beginning and ending of a retreat, we take the three refuges as a way of setting an intention for the container of the retreat, but also to remind ourselves of the relevance of Buddhist practice to our lives in retreat and in the world. Sometimes, we don't take the time to consider what it means - it becomes a ritual - an external form that we recite and chant.

What is refuge?

Webster's Dictionary defines refuge as "shelter or protection from danger or distress."

The American Heritage® Dictionary defines refuge as:

- 1. Protection or shelter, as from danger or hardship.*
- 2. A place providing protection or shelter.*
- 3. A source of help, relief, or comfort in times of trouble.*

Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged defines refuge as:

- 1. shelter or protection, as from the weather or danger*
- 2. any place, person, action, or thing that offers or appears to offer protection, help, or relief*

In the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary, the root for the word used in the refuges, *saranam* comes from:

Saraṇa (nt.) [cp. Vedic *śaraṇa* protection, shelter, house, *śarman* id.; *śālā* hall; to Idj. **kel* to hide, as in Lat. *celo*, Gr. *kalu/ptw* to conceal, Oir. *celim*, Ohg. Ags. *helan*, Goth. *huljan* to envelop; Ohg. *hella*=E. *hell*; also E. *hall*, and others] shelter, house Sn 591; refuge, protection D iii.187; Sn 503; J ii.28; DA i. 229; especially the three refuges -- the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Brotherhood

What are the occasions when we would need to seek refuge or protection? Storms, bad weather, what else?

As we practice and are more mindful and aware, we begin to see the truth of *dukkha* - that there is this sense of dis-satisfaction, discontent, dis-ease - that is experienced - and can be quite oppressive. Steve Armstrong often teaches about the first Noble Truth in this way: when we're born, our parents take care of us, they feed us, clothe us, protect us, entertain us - and as we get older, we suddenly find that we have to take up this burden - our bodies need feeding, caring, bathing, clothing, our minds need to be entertained, we have to find work to provide money for the food for our bodies, etc. - and this is a 24/7 job that we have to do... for however long we live. I can see where having refuge from this would be nice! Wouldn't it be nice to take a vacation and have someone do all those chores? especially, if someone could take care of this mind, too!

So, we begin to see a need for refuge as we begin to see things more clearly.

"In Buddhism, refuge is a metaphor for wakefulness or presence. It is reminder of the basic orientation in Buddhist practice, namely, that suffering comes to end only through being awake and present. ... Another way to think about refuge is that you become a refugee. A refugee is someone who leaves a country or homeland because life is no longer tenable there. When you take refuge, you are

acknowledging that a life based on habituated patterns is no longer tenable for you. You are prepared to set out into the mystery and rely on awareness, wherever it may lead you." -- Ken McLeod

Refuge is based on three qualities:

- renunciation - giving up our old way of being
- orientation - recognizing that nothing else can provide refuge
- determination - willingness to go where this path will take you (going forth/homeless)

There are many citations in the suttas in which someone would declare:

'As if someone were to set upright what had been knocked down, or reveal what had been hidden, or point out the way to someone who was lost, or hold a lamp up in the dark so that those with eyes could see -- just so the Blessed One has made the Truth clear in various ways. Sir, I go to the Blessed One for refuge, and to the Teaching and the Community of monks.'

various citations in the suttas

We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha - often called the Triple Gem or Three Jewels. They can be understood on an external level and an internal level.

On an external level, we might think of the Buddha as this person who attained enlightenment and as a person who taught and pointed the way out of suffering. We might think of the Dharma as the body of teachings from the Buddha or the way the Buddha taught, and the Sangha as the community of enlightened practitioners, or the people who are in our community of practitioners - those who are seeking to find enlightenment.

On an internal level, we can look within, to our own experience - where the Buddha is that which is awake or the capacity for being awake; the Dharma as our experiential understanding of the way things are - the nature of things as they are; the Sangha then becomes the compassionate expression to our experience in the world - how we relate to our experience.

So, the external level might give us cause for inspiration - to see the Buddha as a being who attained freedom from suffering, to acknowledge the lineage of practitioners who have also attained freedom, and the teachings that have been passed down over 2500 years, but we would fall short if we only saw the refuges in this superficial way.

Joseph Goldstein says in his book *One Dharma*, "...in their deeper meaning, the refuges always point back to our own actions and mind states. Although there may be many false starts and dead ends as we begin our journey, if our interest is sincere, we soon make a life-changing discovery: what we are seeking is within us."

Taking refuge is a means to an end, but also a practice - where the means and the end are one and the same.

"When you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others." -- Peace Pilgrim

'So, Ananda, you should live with yourselves as your island of refuge and not someone else, with the Truth as your island of refuge and not something else. And how does one live with oneself as one's island of refuge, with the Truth as one's island of refuge? A monk should live mindfully, with full awareness. This is my instruction to you. How does a monk live mindfully? in this case a monk lives watching the body as body; he is determined, fully aware, mindful, overcoming his

longing for and discontent with the world. He lives watching feelings as feelings...mind as mind...qualities as qualities; he is determined, fully aware, mindful, overcoming his longing for and discontent with the world. It is in this way that a monk lives mindfully. This is how one lives with oneself as one's island of refuge, with the Truth as one's island of refuge.'

*Mahaparinibbana Sutta - Digha Nikaya
(translated by Rupert Gettin)*

Through our own practice in meditation, we begin to see that awareness can bring us refuge - being a Buddha, being awake is a refuge. Ajahn Amaro speaks of this in his book, Small Boat, Great Mountain:

"The untrained heart chases the delightful, runs away from the painful, and as a result, finds itself struggling, alienated, and miserable. By contemplating our own experience, we can make a clear distinction between the mind that knows (citta) and the sense impressions that flow through it. By refusing to get entangled with any sense impressions, we find refuge in that quality of stillness, silence, and spaciousness, which is the mind's own nature. This policy of noninterference allows everything and is disturbed by nothing.

...

Usually when we walk, we're going someplace; this can complicate the picture. Actually there's no essential difference in walking somewhere and going nowhere. Walking meditation is very helpful in this way; it simplifies things a lot. We know we're going absolutely nowhere. It's deliberately a completely pointless exercise on the level of trying to get someplace. By working with the moving body in meditation, we can use it as an opportunity to witness the body walking without going anywhere. As the body walks along at a gentle pace, we begin to see that even though the body is moving, the mind that knows the body is not moving. Movement does not apply to awareness. There are movements of the body, but the mind that knows the movements aren't moving. There's stillness, but there's flow. The body flows, perceptions flow, but there is stillness. As soon as the mind grabs it and we think we are going somewhere, then the oil and water are mixed up. There's a "me" going some "place." But in that moment of recognizing—"Oh, look, the stillness of the mind is utterly unaffected by the movement in the body"—we know that quality of still, flowing water. There's an appreciation of freedom. That which is moving is not-self. That which is moving is the aspect of flow and change. And the heart naturally takes refuge in that quality of spaciousness, stillness, and openness that knows but is unentangled."

This awareness, this mindfulness allows us to see the Dharma - the way things are. We begin to see that things are impermanent and that clinging to things with the misperception of permanence causes us dukkha - when things go away and we act as if things are permanent, we suffer. We begin to realize that there is nothing in this world that can be reliable - because things change, we can't hold on to them for stability. When we try to hold on, suffering arises. We also begin to see that things don't have an inherent identity - when we cling to something as my self, or as mine or as me,

suffering ensues when they change. Instead of taking things personally, we can begin to let go. We can find refuge in knowing that we are not these things, things change, and that nothing is reliable.

And, as we begin to see the way things are, we also begin to see the universality of experience - that others, just as ourselves experience this life in similar ways. We are not so separate. We are unique, but our experiences are common; we are interconnected - our peace of mind comes in relationship to the world - if we act in harmful ways, we create unrest and dis-ease in our own hearts and minds. We begin to see that how we act in the world has consequence for ourselves and others in our community. We express the teachings through the Eight-fold Path: Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood.

We can see how awareness (Buddha) is cultivated through Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, and Right Effort; the understanding of the way things are (Dharma) is cultivated through Right View and Right Intention. And, that the Dharma is also the teachings of the Buddha: the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold path. These are interwoven...

We find Sangha through our interconnectedness and our relationship to experience. How are we in relationship to our experience? How does that ripple outward into the world? I think Jack Kornfield would talk about the difference between being a Buddhist and being a Buddha - that when you are a Buddhist, you can be insufferable, but when you are a Buddha, then your actions in the world are harmonious.

When we see the deeper context in which the refuges become our own understanding of the Buddha's teachings, we become a refuge unto ourselves.

"Buddhist practice is not about forcing ourselves to be natural. It is about being ourselves. When we take the vows of refuge, we are also pledging to find the refuge that exists within our own lives. This taking of refuge is not some kind of evasion or escape, but is the planting of our "selves" deeply in the nature of what surrounds us. We lodge ourselves in the deep waves and in the shallow pools, in the crests and depressions of our lives. Sometimes, even wreckage can make a temporary resting place. A person whose life is in tatters might have nothing much else left to do but relax and look at the pieces of what's left."

-Gary Thorp

Or Ajahn Amaro puts it this way:

"When there is resting in the knowing, then nothing can touch the heart. It's this resting in the knowing that makes that Buddha a refuge. That knowing nature is invulnerable, inviolable. What happens to the body, emotions, and perceptions is secondary, because that knowing is beyond the phenomenal world. So that is the true refuge. Whether we experience pleasure or pain, success or failure, praise or criticism, that knowing nature of the mind is utterly serene. It is undisturbed and incorruptible. Just as a mirror is unembellished and untainted by the images it reflects, the knowing cannot be touched by any sense perception, any thought, any emotion, any mood, any feeling. It's of a transcendent order....That is why awareness is a refuge; awareness is the very heart of our nature.

....

I find this a very helpful way of talking about it: the Buddha is that which is awake, that which knows, so taking refuge in

the Buddha is taking refuge in the awareness of the mind. The Buddha arises from the Dharma. The Buddha is an attribute, knowing is an attribute of that fundamental reality. The Dharma is the ultimate object, the way things are. Its characteristic is emptiness. The Buddha is the ultimate subject, that which knows, that which is awake. So when the ultimate subject knows the ultimate object, when the mind that knows is aware of the way things are, what comes forth is Sangha, compassionate action. Sangha intrinsically flows forth from that quality. When there's awareness of the way things are, then compassionate skillful means naturally arise and flow from that. The three refuges, as you can see, are all interwoven.

....

A way of holding this all together is reflected in a phrase often used by Ajahn Chah: "Inside is Dharma. Outside is Dharma. Everything is Dharma." Whether we can see it or not, it is all Dharma. It is like saying of the sea: "This is water. Inside is water. Outside is water. Everything is water." The mind is Dharma. The knowing is Dharma. The physical world around us is Dharma. All the beings around us, every one, are all a part of nature. "Nature," by the way, is another translation for Dharma.

from Small Boat, Great Mountain by Amaro Bhikkhu

The Buddha taught:

"In this very one-fathom long body along with its perceptions and thoughts, do I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world." -- Rohitassa Sutta AN 4.45

Bhikkhu Bodhi interprets the Buddha's meaning for world as "the world of experience" - how we experience the external world - the world as we experience it.

[A Brahmin asked,] "Is there, Master Ananda, any single monk who was appointed by Master Gotama thus: 'He will be your refuge when I am gone,' and whom you now have recourse to?"

[Ananda replied,] There is not single monk, Brahmin, who was appointed by Master Gotama thus: 'He will be your refuge when I am gone,' and whom we now have recourse to."

"But if you have no refuge (patisarana), what is the cause for your concord?" We are not without a refuge, Brahmin. We have a refuge; we have the Dhamma as our refuge."

*Majjhima Nikaya 108.7-10
(Bhikkhu Bodhi translation)*

Taking refuge then becomes an acknowledgement of our taking responsibility of our awakening, to declare our intention or confidence that finding an end to suffering lies within our own practice.

Internally, such confirmed confidence is not just a new belief or fleeting faith that arises in the heart of the practitioner. It is a radical change, a going beyond-doubt that the external world and the internal universe are not a suitable refuge for one seeking an end to suffering. The faith in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is based on a clear understanding of the benefits of relinquishing desire

and ignorance and truly relying on awakened knowing, truth and virtue. The full implications of this faith may not be totally understood at this entry point, but the heart has seen and knows that this is the way forward and that the stream of Dhamma being entered is true.

*from The Island: An Anthology of the Buddha's Teachings on Nibbana
Edited and with Commentary by Ajahn Pasanno & Ajahn Amaro*

So, the expression of taking the refuges is really a reflection of the path of practice. The Dhammapada states it this way:

*People threatened by fear
Go to many refuges:
To mountains, to forests,
Parks, trees, and shrines.
None of these is a secure refuge;
None is a supreme refuge.
Not by going to such a refuge
Is one released from all suffering.*

*But when someone going to refuge
To the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha
Sees, with the right insight,
The Four Noble Truths:
Suffering,
The arising of suffering,
The overcoming of suffering,
And The Eightfold Path
Leading to the ending of suffering,
Then this is the secure refuge;
This is the supreme refuge.
By going to such a refuge,
One is released from all suffering. (188-192).*

I'd like to end with this quote from the Phena Sutta, translated by Rupert Gethin:

*'Whether by day or night, fully aware, always mindful.
He should give up all that ties him, making himself his refuge.
He should act as if his head was burning away, and aim for the place that is imperishable.'*

*Phena Sutta: Foam - SN 22.95
(translated by Rupert Gethin)*