Refuge in an Admirable Friend

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It was traditional in India at the time of the Buddha that people would take refuge in religious teachers. Some of the teachers would claim to be affiliated with a god of some kind, in which case refuge meant that they would come and protect you. And the Buddha agreed that protection was something that a teacher should give, but his idea of how the teacher would give it was different. He presented himself as an admirable friend, someone you could enter into a friendship with, and the admirable friendship was that you would try to understand his good qualities and then emulate them in your own behavior. And in that case it was your own good behavior that was going to protect you. The Buddha’s not around to shield us against evil forces, but his teachings are there and his example is there. And if we follow his example we find that we do protect ourselves. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma protects those who practice the Dhamma. And he exemplified the Dhamma in the way he acted and taught. There are three main qualities that are associated with the Buddha. And what’s interesting about them is the way he explains how they get started, how they get developed. They’re all based on trying to find happiness in a wise and skillful way. He doesn’t have you be embarrassed that you want happiness or make you feel that you’re selfish because you want to find happiness. Because as we’ll see, the kind of happiness that he’s recommending, the kind of happiness that he exemplified, doesn’t just stop with you or stop with him. The first quality is wisdom and discernment. In a sense, the question that lies at the beginning of discernment is going to someone who is knowledgeable and asking what is skillful, what is unskillful, what, when I do, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? The wisdom there isn’t seeing that if you’re going to find happiness, it has to depend on your actions. And that long-term is better than short-term. And long-term is possible. All too often we’re told that everything is fleeting and just watch the waves come in off the shore and don’t try to get attached to the big waves, don’t get upset about the small waves. They’re just little waves coming and coming and coming and coming. But that’s not an image you find in the Buddhist teachings. We’re going someplace. We’re on a path. The path will take us to a place where we finally can put down this burden of having to create happiness, because we’ve found a happiness that doesn’t have to be maintained. It’s outside of space, outside of time, totally unconditioned. In fact, that question, what, when I do, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness, sets up the parameters for the three perceptions that are going to be useful for figuring whether you attain the goal or not. If something is not long-term, if something is anicca, inconstant, it’s not what you want. If it’s not happiness, if it’s stressful, it’s not what you want. If it’s inconstant and stressful, it’s not worth claiming as yours. So the wisdom is hidden in that question. It was pretty deep. And it is based on the desire for happiness, the happiness that lasts. In terms of compassion, the second quality that the Buddha exemplifies. The basic principle is well illustrated by a story in the Canon. King Pasenadi is in his private apartments, one-on-one with his queen, Mallika. And in a tender moment he turns to her and he says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Now you know what he’s thinking. He wants her to say, “Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” But this is the Pali Canon. There’s no room for foolishness in the Pali Canon. She says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anyone 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 from his private apartments, goes to see the Buddha, reports the conversation to the Buddha. And the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You could search the whole world over and not find anyone that you love more than yourself. But at the same time, everybody else in the world loves themselves just as fiercely.” So the conclusion that the Buddha draws is that you shouldn’t harm anybody or get them to do harm. Because if your happiness harms them, they’re not going to stand for it. If it requires that they do harm, they’re going to reap the bad karma from that and they’re going to hate you. So your long-term welfare and happiness is going to have to depend on compassion, taking the happiness of others into account. Refuge in the Buddha at the same time. You look for happiness that’s long-term. You take into consideration the happiness of others as you do that. And finally there’s the quality of purity. As the Buddha said, you purify your actions by examining them. This is where the principle of metacognition comes into practice. Where you step back and look at what you’re doing. Look at your mind in action. And it’s that ability to step out of yourself that’s going to carry you all the way through. It starts out with pretty basic things. You want to do something. You want to say something. You want to think something. You ask yourself, “What do you expect the results to be?” If you expect that there’s going to be any harm, you don’t do it. You don’t have the callous attitude that you don’t care. You don’t have ill will for others, wanting them to suffer. So you have to work on your intention to begin with. Purify your intention this way. If you don’t foresee any harm, go ahead and do the action. While you’re doing it, you look at the actual results that are coming out. This teaches you one of the basic principles of causality as the Buddha taught it. That some causes give their results right away. You stick your finger into a fire, and it’s going to burn right now. It’s not going to burn in the next lifetime. So if you see that any harm is coming up in the action you’re doing, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you go ahead and continue with it. When the action is done, then you look at the long-term results. You ask yourself, “This action that I did, what were the results?” Notice, you take responsibility for this. But this underlies all the questions. This action that I plan to do, this action that I’m doing, this action that I’ve done, I, I, I. You are responsible for your actions. If you see that there was harm over the long term, you’ve learned another important principle, that some causes do wait for a while before they show their results. If there was harm, you make up your mind you don’t want to repeat that harm. And then you go talk it over with someone who’s more advanced in the path. This is where the admirable friend comes in again. Someone you go to for advice. Now the Buddha’s not around to give advice, but he certainly left a lot of teachings. You can take advice from them. Now if you saw that you didn’t cause any harm, then he says to take joy in that fact. And to continue training. In other words, you learn to find joy in the fact that you’re getting more and more skillful. But at the same time, you realize that as long as your skills are not on the ultimate level, there’s more to do. So it’s this combination of taking joy, but then saying, “Okay, I’ve got to work harder next time.” You use the joy to encourage yourself to get better. So this is the basic principle of metacognition. You step back from your actions, what you’re doing, what you’re saying, what you’re thinking, and look at them. Look at the long term. Look at the results. So that your desire for happiness is not just an idle desire. You actually learn how to implement it in what you’re doing and saying and thinking. Now I want to talk about other qualities that you want to emulate in an admirable friend. He talks about conviction, generosity, virtue. There’s even a passage where he adds the qualities of discernment and then adds the qualities of learning. And it’s good to read about the Buddha on a regular basis. To remind yourself that we live in a world where there has been a Buddha. You go out into the world outside. Most people don’t live in that world. They live in other worlds, even though you’re maybe right next to them physically. You’re in a different world, or at least you want to maintain this other world, the world where the Buddha actually did gain awakening. And he did teach, and he set a good example. That may seem far away, but maintaining this learning in your mind. Brings it up close. Because that’s one of the meanings of the word refuge in Pali. Sonana. It also means someone you remember. Someone you call to mind. You have to ask yourself, if I were to do something, what would the Buddha think? If they have to think, what would Jesus think? Well, what would the Buddha think? At the very least, that helps keep you in line with the path that leads to the end of suffering. John Suwan tells of the time when he was trying to start a monastery near Los Angeles. Not the one they have in Ontario, but another one. The monks who were part of it came up with all kinds of clever ideas to raise money. And as he said, it’s not that he couldn’t think of it, of clever ideas for raising money, but every time he thought of them, he thought about John Munn. He felt embarrassed. And John Munn wouldn’t do things that way. Don’t try to have somebody in your mind who plays that same role. Someone that would like to look good in their eyes. Now this may seem imaginary. Well, a lot of people find happiness in imaginary friends. I think it’s the Buddha’s not just imaginary. He really lived. He really taught. We’re talking about a real human being here. He shows what human beings can do. He’s meant to expand our ideas of what our possibilities are. So you want to keep that in mind. Keep in mind his wisdom. Keep in mind his compassion. Keep in mind his purity. And notice that he taught you how to develop those qualities in yourself. There’s a point that Ajaan Lee liked to make a lot, was that when we take refuge in the Buddha, we’re also taking refuge in the Dhamma. We’re taking refuge in the Sangha all at once. Because it’s the Sangha who has maintained this tradition. And the Noble Sangha has shown that what the Buddha taught is true. His teachings do lead to the end of suffering. That’s something you can find out for yourself by following his example, by taking him as an admirable friend and entering into admirable friendship. Which means that not only is he your friend, but also he’s your role model. You can stop and think about your life. To what extent have you modeled your life on other people? You saw somebody did something, somebody had a particular career, or pursued a particular skill, and you thought, “That would be good. I’d like to spend my life that way.” Well, the Buddha is asking you to take him as that role model. It may seem a little bit much to ask yourself to do all the things that he did. But at the very least, think of his qualities, wisdom, compassion, purity. And realize that they’re based on trying to find happiness in a wise and skillful way. This is all for your happiness. There’s that political advertisement years back, where someone is saying she was inspired by a particular president, and he was doing everything he could to protect her personally. It was a cheap and tawdry advertisement. But the funny thing is, with the Buddha, he really was concerned about people’s happiness. He gained awakening. He could have spent all this time just enjoying the bliss of release. There’s a passage where he’s thinking he may not teach, because it’s just so subtle, and it’s going to be so difficult to set up a religion. Which shows that even though he had developed all the perfections to become a teaching Buddha, he wasn’t compelled to teach. Nobody could force him. Nothing could force him. He was totally free. But then he saw that there were beings who were suffering, and they could benefit from the teaching. You’re one of those beings. Where you were at that time, you don’t know. But you’re one of those beings. You’re still around. And his teachings are still around. They’re not going to be around forever. But you have this chance right here, right now, this lifetime. You’ve met with the Dhamma. You can benefit from it. The Buddha’s offering his friendship. It’ll be good to take him up on it.

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