

A Refuge from Karma

July 26, 2020

When we're born, we sign onto the world without looking at the fine print. When you look at the fine print, you see what it says: The world is swept away, there's no one in charge; it offers no shelter, has nothing of its own, it's a slave to craving. It's a dangerous place, but we signed onto this world because we're dangerous people. Our minds are very undependable.

As I said last night, the Buddha said that even he couldn't think of an analogy for how fast the mind is to change direction, and yet it keeps making decisions, creating karma, again, and again, and again. This is what we need refuge from.

Now, karma comes in lots of different kinds, and it's dangerous in lots of different ways. There's our own karma, and there's the karma of other people; our own past karma, our own present karma; skillful karma, unskillful karma. We need refuge from all these things. We need a place of safety, and yet we're driven by bewilderment.

As the Buddha said, that's one of our reactions to suffering. We're bewildered inside, we don't know what's going on, and we look outside for help. So we need refuge in both dimensions, both inside and out—and the refuge provided by the Buddha takes care of both dimensions.

First, with regard to outside, the Buddha himself provides an example for how to live life in a way that actually puts an end to suffering and finds safety. He teaches the Dhamma to anyone who's interested. And we have the example of the noble Sangha, to show that it wasn't just the Buddha. People of all kinds, if they follow the practice, can find safety, too.

Now, all of this is external.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, if we hold to this refuge only on the external level, what have we got? The Buddha died more than two thousand five hundred years ago. The Dhamma's in books. As for the Sangha, you look around and you see that there are all kinds. What you've got to do is to take what's good in the external level and bring it inside. The external level is there to remind us not to listen to anything that goes against what the Dhamma has to say, because there are other external influences: lots of people, with lots of ideas, who act in lots of ways, that we could take as examples. So at the very least, he gives us an outside standard. Yet we can hear the outside standard, we can even recite the passages for taking refuge, but again,

the mind is still capable of changing so quickly.

This is why we have to internalize our refuge. We do that through the practice of mindfulness. We establish mindfulness, say, in the body in and of itself, or in an aspect of the body like the breath. We try to be ardent, alert, and mindful. We put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. This world outside that we've been taking as our standard: We've got to put that aside, at least for the time being, and just look inside.

The mindfulness is what remembers the Dhamma, the alertness is what watches what we're doing, and the ardency is what tries to bring that Dhamma into being inside. In other words, you're dealing with body, feelings, mind: things right here, things you've been identifying with. It's as if you're taking the qualities of the Buddha, the teachings of the Dhamma, and you're steeping your body, steeping your feelings, steeping your mind in those qualities, so that each time that you sense yourself breathing in, breathing out, you can remind yourself, "Oh right, there's the Buddha, there's Dhamma, there's the Sangha." These things become embedded in your breath; they become embedded in the way you deal with the feelings in the body, the way you deal with your mind.

This protects you from engaging in unskillful actions because it brings refuge one step inside. And it protects you from unskillful actions on two levels: both the things you might do now and the things you've done in the past. The immediate focus, of course, is on what you're doing right now, but you also begin to realize that the reason you're suffering right now comes from how you take things coming in from the past and relate to them. The Buddha's teaching you to relate to them in a skillful way.

Remember that image of the salt crystal: If you make your mind unlimited here in the present moment, then no matter how bad the karma is from the past, it doesn't have to have an impact on the mind. In other words, you may be experiencing the physical results of past actions that were unskillful, but the mind doesn't have to suffer from them.

As you enlarge your mind through the concentration, you make it unlimited through the practice of the brahmaviharas: goodwill for everybody, compassion for everybody, empathetic joy for everybody, equanimity for everybody when it's needed. That enlarges your mind, and the enlarged mind suffers a lot less than the narrow, constricted mind that's constantly worried about this, worried about that, overcome by pain. You train the mind in virtue, you train it in discernment, so that it doesn't have to suffer from things. You train it not to be overcome by pleasure or pain. You do that through the concentration.

You can sit here, and everybody has had this experience: You start out meditating and there's a pain here and a pain there. Your immediate impulse is to get up and run away. But instead, you learn to sit with it, and over time you become less and less afraid of the pain and also more skilled in dealing with it. You can breathe through the pain, breathe around the pain—all the various steps we've talked about for dealing with pain. And that way, your mind is not overcome by it.

At the same time, when the pleasure comes from the concentration, you have to learn how not to be overcome by the pleasure. If you just sit here wallowing in how good it feels, it's not going to feel good very long, because the cause for that good feeling comes from the fact that you're alert, paying careful attention to the breath. If you lose that foundation, either you go into delusion concentration, which is pleasant but it's like falling asleep, or else the feeling of pleasure dissipates. So to maintain that feeling of pleasure, you have to remember: Focus on the causes and don't just run off with the pleasure.

All too many meditators are like people who get a job, but when they get their first paycheck, they quit the job and go off to spend the money. Then they come back and ask for the job back. Fortunately the boss is kindhearted, so he lets them back, but if they keep this up they're never going to get an advance in the job.

Concentration teaches you how to be with pleasure and not be overcome by it. It's in this way that you have a refuge from your past karma, a refuge from your urges to create unskillful karma in the present moment. But even then, as the Buddha said, you're still in that world that goes up and down, and you're still subject to the fact that your mind could change. This is why you need something more solid.

This is what the noble eightfold path provides. It's the karma that leads to the end of karma. It takes the mind to a place that really is secure, where you step outside of time, step outside of space, and nothing is being done in that dimension. No old karma can reach you in there, no new karma is being created—and that's the ultimate happiness. It's the ultimate security, the ultimate safety, the ultimate refuge. It's a refuge that lies beyond not only unskillful karma, past and present, but also skillful karma. That's where you're really safe.

This possibility is open for everybody, whether there's a pandemic or no pandemic, social unrest or no social unrest. We can train the mind in this way and not let it be influenced by the things around us. This is the most important part of the training. As the Buddha said, the greatest blessing is a mind that, when touched by the dhammas of the world, remains

unshaken.

What are the dhammas of the world? Gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. Most people, when touched by these things, are bowled over. But a mind truly free of defilement doesn't quiver or shake at all.

Ven. Sona, one the Buddha's arahant disciples, gave the image of a stone column sixteen spans tall, eight spans buried in the ground, solidly established. No matter which direction the winds came from—the north, south, east, west, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest—that column didn't shake. And when you have a mind like that, you really are secure. That's where your true safety lies.

It's one of the reasons why one of the epithets for nibbana is refuge. It's refuge on the highest level. And we get there by starting with refuge on the external level, really listening to the Buddha, listening to the Dhamma, listening to the Sangha. As the Buddha said, in his second knowledge he saw beings of the world being reborn inline with their actions; their actions were shaped by their intentions; their intentions were shaped by their views; and their views were shaped by who they listened to, who they respected.

So be very careful about who you respect, who you listen to. Because there are a lot of "Dhamma" teachers out there who don't really respect the noble ones anymore. They have other ideas, other agendas—and that's among Dhamma teachers, to say nothing of the rest of the world. So tune in to the channel of the Triple Gem and listen well, and be careful about tuning in to other channels.

Always keep in mind the example set by the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Develop mindfulness to bring that example inside, to embed it within you, and you have hope for discovering that ultimate level of refuge where you no longer need help from anybody outside at all.