

A Refuge in Quiescence

March 3, 2021

When there's a sudden storm like this, it reminds you of how much we need protection, physically. Of course, the Buddha would say we need even *more* protection for our minds. Because the danger is not only from outside. A lot of things we need protection from are inside the mind already. Our greed, aversion, and delusion present a lot of dangers. Our wrong views, wrong resolves, wrong actions: It's because of these things that we need refuge.

Traditionally, we talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. In the Buddha's time, it seems to have been a common pattern: People who knew nothing about the Buddha's teachings would come and listen to him once, and their first reaction was to want to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This may be related to a statement the Buddha made about a teacher's duties to his or her students, one of which is to provide protection in all directions. If we were talking about a theistic system, that would mean asking the god to provide the protection. But in the Buddha's system, it means teaching you how to be your own protection. The protection provided by the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—comes in taking them as examples for how we should provide protection for ourselves.

We get an idea of that protection from the times when the Buddha says there were certain teachers who did *not* provide protection, who left their students unprotected. Basically he meant that they gave the students no grounds for deciding what should and should not be done—or even that there would be such a thing as a “should” or a “should not be done.”

The Buddha cites three kinds of wrong view about action: One is that what you experience in the present moment is totally determined by fate; another is that it has already been determined by your past actions; in others, it was determined by the act of a creator god. Now, if the present moment were totally predetermined, then if you were killing, stealing, having illicit sex, it would be because of fate, or your past actions, or a creator god. You'd have no way out. There'd be no grounds for even saying that something should or should not be done, because it had to be that way. From the Buddha's point of view, that is the most dangerous position to be in.

In another passage he says that we provide a refuge for ourselves by practicing the Dhamma, and particularly by developing the establishing of mindfulness, but there's more to it than just that. First we have to have conviction in the Buddha's teachings about action: that what we experience in the present moment is partly determined by the past—but *largely* determined by our actions right now.

That's a point we can't prove yet, but we take it as a working hypothesis. It's part of having conviction in the Buddha and the Dhamma that we take it on. When that conviction be-

comes dominant in the mind, the Buddha calls that the *faculty* of conviction. The Pali word *indrīya*, which is commonly translated as faculty, means *dominant factor*. When that conviction is dominant in your mind, then you're protected, but the protection is not totally solid unless you develop the other faculties as well.

There's persistence, where you actually try to act on your knowledge about the possibilities of skillful and unskillful action. If any unskillful qualities come up in the mind, you try to get rid of them, and then you try to prevent them from coming back. As for skillful qualities, you try to give rise to them; once they're there, you try to maintain them. That's another way in which you provide protection or refuge for yourself.

Then that becomes the basis for the establishing of mindfulness. You focus on say, the breath in and of itself. You watch your mind as it's close to the breath. And whatever lessons you learn about what's skillful and unskillful, and how to encourage skillful qualities and discourage unskillful ones, you file them away right here. That way, whenever you focus on the breath, you're right next to where the file drawers are. So the simple act of taking a breath in, letting it go out allows you to connect with a reminder. You have these lessons right at your fingertips.

As you work on these qualities, applying the lessons you've learned, you're ardent, alert, and mindful. Those qualities turn into the factors of *jhāna*, which is the next faculty, or next dominant factor. You get the mind still. When the mind is still like this, it can see itself a lot more clearly, with a sense of balance—and this lies at the heart of your refuge.

I was talking with a botanist a while back. He was telling me about how plants have to have a part that's in a state of quiescence, unaffected by the environment around it. It may not be a very large part of the plant, but it has to be there for the plant to maintain its integrity, to maintain its health. Because it's from that quiescence that it develops its strength.

In the same way, getting the mind to settle in right here, having a sense of being at home right here: That's your shelter, your quiescence, your protection. So when storms come, outside or inside, you have a safe place to go. It may not solve all your problems, but it is your safe place.

Think of Ajaan Mun's instructions to Ajaan Maha Boowa: When anything comes up in your meditation that you're not sure about—it might be a unusual form of knowledge, an intuition, whatever, and you're not sure about it—just stay with the *knower*. That's the quiescent part of just being aware, right here. Then just watch whatever has arisen as it passes. No matter what, you'll be safe. And it may be that you develop some discernment, gaining some insight into what really is skillful and what really is not.

This is where you take the points that you've learned to adopt as working hypothesis and actually begin to see: what, when you do it, will lead to happiness; what, when you do it, will lead to suffering—not as a matter of conviction, but as a matter of knowledge. That's when this home inside becomes really solid.

The Buddha gives an analogy to building a house: You put up the rafters, especially the rafters for the roof, and then you place the ridgepole on top of the rafters. Until the ridgepole is up there, the rafters can still move around. But once the ridgepole is in place, everything is connected and all the other rafters become solid as well. Your conviction becomes solid, your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration all become solid. You've got this place where you can ride out the storm.

Think of those verses in the Theragāthā: A monk is in his hut and he says, "The hut is well sealed, the roof has no leaks, so if the rain god wants to rain, go ahead and rain." In other words, whatever happens inside or out, you've got your safe spot inside, your refuge inside. You know that as long as you don't do anything unskillful, nothing unskillful can come to you. At the same time, you develop the good qualities of the mind around that quiescent center inside. You can develop the skill where you don't have to suffer even from the unskillful things you've done in the past.

So this is where we look for refuge. We take these good qualities and try to make them dominant in the mind. When we gather them around this quiescent center, that'll protect us from any storms.