

Making a Refuge

October 28, 2012

Back when I was taking my exams—the *Nak Thamm* exams, they call them, the Dhamma expert exams—one of the sections of the exams would be a little Dhamma talk. They'd give you a quote from the Canon, and you were supposed to have memorized other quotes from the Canon. You'd write a little talk on the topic that they had set. The first year, you'd bring in one other quote. The second year, you'd bring in two. And the third year, you'd bring in three. You had to memorize them both in Pali and in Thai and give the citation.

There were a lot of novices who could just reel them off. There was a whole book they had of about 500 quotes that you could draw on. And the novices would reel them off—10, 20, or 30 at a time. I realized I was at a disadvantage because I couldn't memorize that many. But I figured I'd be better off if I just memorized a few that would be useful in all circumstances. Regardless of the topic, you could pull these in.

I've mentioned one of them before: "If you see there's a greater happiness that comes from abandoning the lesser happiness, the wise person will abandon the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater." There are a handful of others I memorized. Of the other two that I remember, one was, "The self is its own mainstay. Who else could be your mainstay?" The other one was, "Heedlessness is the path to death, and heedfulness is the path to the deathless." Those ideas stand you in good stead not only when writing Dhamma talks, but regardless of what's happening.

In other words, you realize you've got to depend on yourself, and heedfulness is what teaches you that point. You see there are dangers in the world around you and in your own mind. And one of the big dangers is the way you go for lesser kinds of happiness, the ones that are going to let you down.

So those are good principles to remember. Even though you may not be taking Dhamma expert tests, life itself is a test, and you need something to rely on. They talk about how having a good fund of Dhamma knowledge can hold you in good stead. Having listened to a lot and having remembered a lot: Those are the things that will come into your mind when you need them. That's much better than the things that normally come in our minds, like old commercial jingles, songs from who knows where, or random statements from who knows where.

It's useful to read the Dhamma and remember important principles. In fact, the Buddha listed that as one of the ways in which you can create a refuge for

yourself. This rains retreat, we've been having a series of Dhamma talks Sunday mornings on what the Buddha called the *Nātha Karana Dhammā*—the qualities that make you a refuge. And it's good to reflect on them. I mentioned them briefly this morning; it would be good to go over them again. There are ten altogether, five having to do with your relationships with other people, and five having to do with the qualities of mind you're developing as you practice.

With the relationships, you look for admirable friends, people who are a good example in terms of their conviction, their generosity, their virtue, and their discernment. These are people you want to associate with because if they're generous, they'll be happy to share their knowledge with you. You can see the Dhamma not only in their words, but also in their actions. That becomes an example for you that you can follow, that you can imitate.

You want to spend time with people like this because you pick up their habits—whatever good points they have. And bit by bit by bit, as in Dōgen's line—he says it's like walking through the mist and your robes get wet without your even realizing it—you pick up little droplets of Dhamma as you associate with good people.

In addition, you want to listen to what they have to say and remember it. Being eager to listen to the Dhamma and having this store of remembered Dhamma: That's an important refuge for yourself as well, because if you're not eager to listen, the person is not going to be eager to talk. You won't be hearing as much as you could.

When you remember what's been said, you can take it and think it over. This is one of the reasons why we memorize passages from the Pali. Even though it's not our own language, you can think about the meaning as you go over it in your mind. It's good to have it there in the background. Those chants we have in the evening with the translations: Those are especially good because given all the other things that are sloshing around in the back of the mind, it's good to have some Dhamma passages that teach you heedfulness sloshing around there as well.

Then there's the quality of being compliant, in which you take instruction well. Even though you may not 100 percent agree with it, you give it the benefit of the doubt, and then you put it into practice to see which part of the mind is the one that objects. Is it the part that knows something, or is it part of your defilement? You're not really going to know unless you just put the objection away and give it a try. You may find that it doesn't work. And ideally, if it doesn't work, you go back and ask the teacher.

But before you ask the teacher, you would try to think, "Why didn't it work? What was the problem then? What might be a better alternative?" In other

words, you're not throwing all the responsibility on the teacher. You've got to take some responsibility in figuring out what's going wrong and what might go right. That's what it means to be easy to instruct, not that you just do everything unquestioningly. You actually look and see: Is it working or is it not? This is how you develop your discernment, and how you open your mind to learning new things.

The final quality dealing with your relationships with other people is being helpful in the duties of the group. You see this here in the monastery all the time. There's always something that needs to be done. Something needs to be cleaned; things need to be straightened out. Storms come through, wind blows things all around, and we've got to clean it up. There's work everywhere. Now, you don't want it to be so oppressive that you're doing nothing but work all day. But when you see that something would be helpful to the group, you contribute.

You give a little time. And you try to develop the skills that are necessary, because some of the work that needs to be done is not just simple cleaning up. There's more skilled work that needs to be done, too, and if you have those skills, then you're welcome wherever you go. This is part of having an internal refuge or being your own refuge: the fact that you're welcome in all kinds of places. It's not only that you can live in all kinds of places, but you're also welcome there.

So it's good to think about your relationship with other people and see how it fits into these five categories of finding admirable friends, being eager to listen to the true Dhamma, remembering what you've heard, being easy to instruct, and being as helpful as you can. Not only are you going to be welcome in a relationship like that, but you also create a good environment for yourself and other people. That's a kind of protection right there.

As for the five internal qualities that you develop in the mind, the first one is virtue. You hold by your principles; you hold by your precepts. You hold by your determination not to harm anyone.

Of course, that means looking constantly into your mind. That's the next step: persistence. If you see anything that's going to be unskillful—that if you followed through with it, it would lead to unskillful behavior—you've got to figure out some way to abandon it. Replace it with something that would be more skillful: a better way of thinking, a better attitude. Keep at this all the time.

Then you're content with what you get in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. This is actually one of the traditions of the noble ones, that you're content with food, clothing, and shelter, and that you're very careful in your relationship to these things. This again means you can stay anywhere. And people can't threaten you. In other words, when they say, "If you don't do as I tell you,

I'm not going to feed you" or "If you don't do as I tell you, I'm not going to give you this, not going to give you that," you're immune to that kind of threat. That's a refuge right there.

We don't see it much here yet, but there are places in Thailand I've been where the lay people get upset at the monks for issues that have nothing to do with the Dhamma at all. They try to control the monks by withholding food. If you haven't learned how to do without and how to be content when doing without, you are, in Ajaan Fuang's phrase, like a water buffalo being led around by the nose. Wherever they pull you, that's where you've got to go. So learning how to be content is a very good form of refuge, both within and without.

Then there are the qualities of mindfulness and discernment. Mindfulness, of course, builds on right effort and informs right effort because you remember what's skillful and what's not. In terms of your practice, you remember what's worked and what hasn't worked. That's a protection right there.

Then finally, discernment is what enables you to make the distinctions you need to make between what's skillful and what's not, and how to make yourself eager and willing to do what's skillful.

All of these things provide you with refuge—protection not only from difficulties outside, but also more especially from problems inside. You've got to have protection from your own greed, aversion, and delusion because these things are a lot more dangerous than anything anyone else outside could do.

Sometimes we have people coming here to the monastery, and they're thrown off by the animals around: the coyotes, the snakes. I keep reminding them that the coyotes and snakes don't do much to you. Your mind is a lot more dangerous, a lot more poisonous. But if you train your mind, you can protect yourself from that danger and poison.

So these are the qualities with which you fulfill that statement, "The self is its own mainstay." You've got to train yourself to have these qualities, and that way, you can depend on yourself. That way, you've got yourself protected.

It's good to take an inventory every now and then—to go down the list and see in what areas you're still leaving yourself open to danger—because to be your own mainstay is not only a matter of protection. It's a matter of inner strength. You train yourself so that you can stay anywhere and you're welcome anywhere, anywhere there are good people.

In this way, you can take advantage of the protection that comes from being with good people, picking up their habits and having those habits firmly developed in your mind—in your thoughts and your words and your deeds.