

## *Instructions for a New Monk*

*January 10, 2015*

You may have noticed during the ordination ceremony today that the preceptor had to give instructions to the new monk. You may wonder what those instructions were. Actually, the beginning instructions and the closing instructions were all pretty basic. But often it's good to go back to the basics and remind yourself where you are, where you're going, what the whole purpose of this practice is, and how you can arrive at that purpose. It helps keep things in the big picture. These are instructions that apply not only to new monks but also to everybody who's serious about finding true happiness. So I thought I'd recap a few of the instructions.

The first set of instructions had to do with the act of taking refuge. We take refuge in what's called the Triple Gem. This is related to the fact that back in the time of the Buddha, they thought that gems had protective powers. In this case, though, the protective powers are the protection that comes from learning how to act in a skillful way. You need the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—first as external refuges in the sense that they give you good examples to follow as to what kind of behavior is really good. Then there are teachings on how you internalize the virtues of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha so that they become your genuine refuge inside.

The Buddha on the external level is the individual, the Buddha, who was born more than 2,600 years ago into a very wealthy family. As he said, he lived in three palaces: one for the rainy season, one for the cold season, one for the dry season. He had access to exquisite food and all kinds of pleasures. But then he realized that all those pleasures were subject to aging, illness, and death. And the question was: Is there something that's not subject to those things?

That was the question that drove him to leave home and to find something that was ageless, free from illness, free from death. It took him a long time to find it. But he was determined that this was what really would give meaning to life. If you count your achievements in terms of things that can melt away, what have

you got left? He wanted something that wasn't going to change. And he found that he was able to do it: He found a way and attained the deathless element inside, the release from all suffering—and also release from what they call the effluents. These are qualities that come bubbling up in the mind and lead you to flow along with them and create more suffering and stress as you keep coming back and back and back. He was able to end all of those things in the mind.

Then he went on to teach for 45 years. He set out the Dhamma, set out the Vinaya, the monastic rules, in such a way that his teaching has been able to survive up until now.

When you look at his life, there are three qualities that stand out. The first is wisdom or discernment, his ability to realize what needed to be done, his ability to gauge what he had learned about how to find the ultimate happiness and realizing, when it was not enough, that he had to go on beyond that. At the end of his period of austerities, he had the wisdom to realize that there must be some other way. He was willing to abandon the pride that develops around the practice of austerities and was able to find the middle way. That was his wisdom.

His purity lay in the fact that once he had seen what had to be done, he actually did it. He looked at his thoughts, words, and deeds, and kept bringing them into line with the things he had learned by examining them and realizing what was skillful, what was not, abandoning what was not skillful, developing what was skillful. Regardless of whether they were actions that he liked or not, he was able to look at the long-term results of his actions and bring his actions into line with what he had learned from observing what he'd been doing and saying and thinking.

Then there was his compassion in the fact that he taught for 45 years, going all over Northern India, every day, teaching the people who were ready to learn the Dhamma, even up to the day he was dying. There was one more person he had to teach, so he walked for several hours, even after having a bad case of dysentery, and taught that one last person.

So these were the qualities that we see in the Buddha's life and these are the qualities we want to internalize. We want to develop his wisdom, both about the means to true happiness and about what true happiness actually is; to purify our

actions in line with what we've learned; and then to be compassionate.

Compassion, though, is not the last of the virtues, because the fact that we want to find a true happiness that's harmless means that we're showing compassion for ourselves and compassion for other people all along the way.

How we find a true happiness that's harmless is taught in the Dhamma. Now, again, the Dhamma has an external and an internal dimension. The external Dhamma is the Dhamma you read, the Dhamma you hear, the Dhamma that's been written down, that people have memorized for generations and generations. That's called the Dhamma of study, *pariyatti-dhamma*. Then you take those teachings and you put them into practice. This is how you take your external refuge and begin to internalize it through the noble eightfold path, which can be divided into three main sections: virtue, concentration, and discernment. That's called *patipatti-dhamma*, the Dhamma of the practice. Finally, there's *pativedha-dhamma*, which is the Dhamma of attainment, when you actually attain release within yourself. That's when the Dhamma is fully internalized, and your refuge is really secure.

The third refuge, the Sangha, also exists on an external and an internal level. The external level has two types. There are the members of the monastic order. That's called the conventional Sangha, which is a refuge in the sense that they've been able to maintain the customs and the teachings for 2,600 years now, keeping the Dhamma alive so it's not just old musty books in a dead language.

You may have noticed part of the ceremony today when the person requesting ordination requested dependence. The word for dependence in Pali, *nissaya*, has turned into *nisai* in Thai, which means habits. In other words, the candidate for ordination wants to learn the habits of being a good monk: not just the words but also what it means to embody these things. The conventional Sangha has been able to keep a lot of that alive—but not as well as the second level of Sangha, which is the noble Sangha. These are people, whether ordained or not, who have actually, at the very least, attained the first level of awakening. They're even more reliable guides as to what the Buddha was talking about because they've seen within their own hearts and minds that what the Buddha said was true: There really is the deathless dimension of release that can be found through the practice.

But the fact that they say that, though, still doesn't prove anything. You have to internalize it. You have to do the practice until you, too, attain the levels of what they call stream entry, once returning, non returning, arahantship: the four levels of awakening—having a direct experience of the deathless, realizing that this dimension really is there, the Buddha knew what he was talking about. Then you become a member of the noble Sangha yourself, and a refuge for others.

So that was the first teaching at the beginning of the ceremony.

The teaching at the end it goes back to the central part of the act of taking refuge, i.e., the practice. This teaching is related to what are called the four noble Dhammas. They start out first with virtue, concentration, and discernment, saying that when your concentration is nurtured through virtue or fostered through virtue it bears great fruit; discernment nurtured through concentration bears great fruit.

Some people misinterpret this, thinking that if you don't have any virtue, or if your virtue isn't yet pure, you can't do concentration; or if your concentration isn't yet pure, you can't develop discernment. That's not the case. It's just that when you have concentration and it's also nurtured by virtue, it's going to bear great fruit. Now, it is possible to attain concentration and to have pretty sloppy virtue, but it's not going to go very far. There's a lot of misunderstanding around this. I've known some people whose concentration is strong and their virtue's pretty lousy, and they've decided that virtue must not matter because here the concentration is strong and you can't have concentration without virtue: That's their thought. But what that does is that it develops dishonesty. The mind starts lying to itself, thinking that it's not being damaged. That idea really impairs your ability to develop discernment, which is the fruit of concentration.

The same with discernment: You can have some discernment without strong concentration. You can read the books and can apply the teachings to your life and gain some benefit from that. But it's all very limited. Because there are many levels in the mind, and many levels of self deception in the mind, that you're not going to detect unless you get really, really strong stillness based on the honesty of virtue. That's when you can see things clearly.

This was why the Buddha said that when concentration is nurtured by virtue it has great fruit, when discernment is nurtured by concentration it has great fruit. And then when the mind is nurtured through discernment, it reaches the fourth noble Dhamma: It gains release from the effluents—the effluents of becoming, sensuality, and ignorance. If you know anything about Buddhist doctrine, you know that those three effluents are the things that have to be abandoned after the first glimpse of awakening.

Seeing the four noble truths around suffering and stress is basically the way to the first level of awakening. Then learning how to see one of these effluents, becoming, and learning how to abandon it gets rid of ignorance takes you to full awakening.

Becoming is basically your sense of identity in a world of experience, which can either be here in this human world on the macro scale, or in the worlds of the mind on a micro scale. You can see this clearly when you drift off to sleep. If you're observant, you notice that a picture that may appear in the mind, and all of a sudden you find yourself in the picture. It's like going into a TV set. Then you inhabit that world for a while and then it dissipates or disappears or just moves into another one. That way, you go from one level of becoming to another, to another, to another. And there's always stress involved with that. That's one of the effluents.

Another one is sensuality, the fascination we have with thinking about sensual pleasures. The pleasures themselves are not a problem. It's our fascination with just thinking about them over and over and over again: how you want this, how you want that, what you're going to do to get this, what you're going to do to get that. You can think about that for a long time, and it ties the mind down. As the Buddha said, these are fetters.

Then finally there's ignorance, which in this case means not having fully completed the duties with regard to the four noble truths. In other words, you haven't fully comprehended stress, you haven't fully abandoned the cause, you haven't fully realized the cessation of stress and suffering, and you haven't fully developed the path to the end.

But when you go beyond these things—sensuality, becoming, and ignorance—that’s when the awakening is full. And that’s when the mind is released—on many levels. There’s release from stress and suffering; there’s release from anything inside the mind that would churn up more stuff in the future. And at that point, you’re even released from the dimensions of space and time. Total release is something totally other, totally unconditioned.

Then the instructions end by reminding the new monk, one, to work on developing what’s called heightened virtue, heightened mind, and heightened discernment. In other words, go back to those three parts of the path and bring them to a heightened level. For most of us, virtue, concentration, and discernment are things that develop to some extent and then we lose them, or we have them in some areas but not in other areas. To heighten them means that you develop them all the time and they’re all-around.

Then the instruction ends with the Buddha’s last words, which were to attain consummation by being heedful. Heedfulness is the quality that realizes how your actions make a big difference as to whether you’re going to be suffering or whether you’re going to experience happiness, so you have to be very careful about what you do. As for the consummation: You bring all the factors of the path to consummation, and then they deliver you to something that’s even beyond them. Because, after all, they are conditions. They are fabrications: They’re things you intend to do. But they can take you to something that’s beyond them. It’s like the road going to the Grand Canyon or the act of going to the Grand Canyon. The act of going to the Grand Canyon doesn’t cause the Grand Canyon to be, but it gets you there.

This is why the Buddha called this a path. And when you’ve reached the end of the path, your refuge is really secure. You’ve found something totally free from the conditions of space and time—something that, once you’ve attained it, you’ll never lose.