

## *Refuge*

*January 5, 2017*

Nights like this are good for meditation. If your thoughts go wandering outside, you run into the drizzle and the rain, so you come back in. If you're going to find any warmth, any well-being, it's got to be inside. This is a good principle to remember all the time, though, not just when it's rainy and drizzly. Real happiness is found inside. Things outside, as Ajaan Lee said, are the decorations that you see along the side of the road, but they're not the real essence. The real essence lies in here. This is where we take refuge. It's expressed in terms of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but basically it means taking refuge in their qualities and developing those qualities inside yourself. And they're all qualities that are developed through the wise pursuit of happiness.

The Buddha has three main qualities that the tradition talks about: wisdom, purity, and compassion. Wisdom, as the Buddha said, starts with the questions, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What when I do it will lead to my long-term suffering and pain?" What's wise about those questions is the realization that happiness comes from your actions, long-term happiness is possible, and long-term is better than short-term. This is why we're meditating. We're looking for a long-term happiness, and we're willing to invest time and energy, put up with a little pain in the legs, a little bit of frustration in seeing the mind's not settling down quite like we want it to. But if we stick with it, we find that the habits of the mind can change, and there really is a good long-term well-being that comes from all this. Even at times when the meditation doesn't seem to be going all that well, you're getting to know your mind. As long as you stick with trying to figure it out, you'll have to come to an understanding. It's when you give up that there's no understanding.

From wisdom then comes purity. If you want long-term welfare and happiness, it's going to have to depend on your actions, and your actions have to really be in line with what you want—in other words, actions that don't harm yourself, actions that don't harm others. You have to look at your actions to make sure they really are in line with your principles.

This is the essence of what the Buddha taught his son about how to purify his thoughts, words, and deeds. It's basically examining what you're doing: examining your intention before you act and examining the results while you're acting and when you're done. If you see you've made a mistake, then if it was something in word or deed, you talk it over with someone who's more advanced on the path

and make up your mind not to repeat that mistake. If it's just a thought, simply be ashamed of having indulged in that thought, but then drop it and resolve not to fall into that type of thinking again. Keep on practicing. If you don't see any mistake, then the Buddha says to take joy in the fact that your training is going well, and to keep on training further. That's how you achieve purity inside yourself.

Then compassion, of course, come from realizing that if your happiness depends on other people's misery, it's not going to last. If you want that long-term happiness, you've got to think about the happiness of others. This means that your actions, your words, and your thoughts express goodwill toward them. This is what the precepts are: an expression of goodwill. No killing, no stealing, no lying, no illicit sex, no intoxicants: When you follow these precepts, you're protecting yourself and you set a good example for others.

It's interesting: The Buddha says if you want to harm somebody, you don't harm them so much by killing them or stealing from them or whatever. It's by getting them to kill or steal or lie. That's when you've really harmed somebody. And you can help people in the other way around: You give up drinking and maybe, as a result, your friends start to give up drinking. That's a good thing. You've actually helped your friends in a really deep way, because now they have good kamma. This is how you show compassion.

So these are the three qualities we're trying to work on—wisdom, purity, compassion—as we practice. With practice, these become our refuge. As you develop these qualities within yourself, you've got the qualities of the Buddha inside. Notice, though, that they're based on the desire for happiness. The Buddha never has us be embarrassed about the idea that we want to be happy. He simply recommends learning how to do it wisely. Think long-term.

Years back, I was up in Canada in a park near Lac La Ronge, and there were some First Nation teenagers who'd just graduated from high school. I happened to walk by them as they were having a picnic to celebrate their graduation. They called over to me, saying they wanted to talk about Buddhism. They were drunk, though, so there wasn't much I could get through, but what I could get through, I thought, was to think about your long-term happiness. Try to act skillfully for the sake of long-term well-being. Don't go just for the short-term. If you want to boil down the Buddha's message, that's basically what it comes to: Look for long-term happiness and then think about the implications.

As I said, this is one of the reasons why we're meditating, because sitting and meditating does require that you sit for long periods of time and keep with the practice. Hear that word: practice. It's like practicing the piano. You do it again

and again and again. It's not that the rewards will all be at the end. You get so that you can settle down with the breath and gain a sense of what kind of breathing really feels good. You've got an immediate visceral sense of well-being inside, and this is a huge support.

We live in a rough world. When we want to do good in the world, often we get thwarted, but you have to realize that the essence of your goodness doesn't get thwarted by things outside. The goodness is something that you have within, and working with the breath, getting the mind to settle down and be honest with itself about what's going on, is how goodness begins. In fact, that's what the Buddha looked for in his students. He basically wanted people who were, one, truthful and two, observant. He said, "Let someone who's observant, someone who's truthful, no deceiver come, and I will teach that person the Dhamma."

Those qualities are the beginning of goodness, so we develop them here as we meditate. You've got to be true to yourself about what's going on, true to your original intention to stick with the breath, and then observant to see what's getting in the way. Any worries about the world outside, just put them aside. Think of them as being on the other side of all that rain and drizzle. Any thoughts about the sensual pleasures you're missing right now, put those aside as well. When the mind doesn't have those to think about, where is it going to go? It's going to look for pleasure here.

This is the nature of the mind. It keeps looking for pleasure wherever it can, so you block off the unskillful avenues and say, okay, focus inside here because this is skillful. It's going to require developing a skill. It's going to take time, but after all, what are you being asked to do? Breathe. Breathe comfortably. Breathe in a way that feels nourishing. If your heart feels heavy, breathe in a way that lightens it. If your energy level feels down, breathe in a way that gives you energy. If you're feeling wired, breathe in a way that calms you—something very simple and very immediate. And one of the good things about this is that you can take it with you wherever you go.

You have to remember that the meditation is teaching you skills not only for sitting here with your eyes closed. They're skills you need all the time: how to breathe when things are getting difficult, how to breathe when things are nice, how to call your thoughts back when they're wandering off in directions they shouldn't go. As you develop these skills and can carry them into the day, you find that you relieve yourself of a lot of suffering that would have happened otherwise.

This is what the Buddha's teaching is all about. We live in a world of aging, illness, death, and separation, but he says we don't have to suffer from that.

I received a letter from someone today who had been reading a book saying that the Buddha didn't really teach that craving is a cause of suffering. Instead, he taught that suffering is the cause of craving. Of course, suffering is something that's going to happen all the time, so we have to learn how to accept our cravings and accept our sufferings. That's what the book said, but it's pretty miserable. One, it misrepresents the Buddha and two, it closes off all avenues. It's like saying, okay, nothing gets better than this, so you've just got to put up with it. Learn to embrace what you've got.

But how do you embrace aging? How do you embrace death? These things are hard. How do you embrace separation? These things really do pain the mind, and the more you embrace them, the more you're going to suffer. The Buddha's actual message is that there is an alternative. You don't have to invest all of your hopes for happiness in things that age, grow ill, die, and are going to suffer separation. You've got something better here inside. You invest your time and energy here, so that whatever the pains of the world, you don't have to suffer from them.

The body of knowledge that the Buddha left behind is a huge gift, and we can avail ourselves of it. Even with the suffering of death: It's interesting that when the Buddha is recommending how to talk to a person who's dying, it sounds very similar to basic meditation instructions. "Don't worry about the affairs of the world. Put your mind at ease about those. Don't worry about your relatives, and don't set your mind on sensual pleasures that you're leaving. There's something better. Set your mind there."

So as you meditate, you're getting practice in how not to suffer no matter what happens, even when death comes. This is how you handle it. Develop your concentration. Develop your discernment. Try to do good in the world, but realize that the real goodness is what comes from the mind. Ajaan Lee's analogy is that when you do good in the world, it's like squeezing juice out of fruit. You take the juice and you leave the remains behind. Even though the remains of the fruit are nourishing, still the juice is the best part.

So see this skill that we're working on as an essential skill, something in which you really can take refuge. The more solid you are in this, the truer and more observant you are in your practice, then the more you can become a refuge for other people too. We do take refuge in the noble Sangha, and if we become members of the noble Sangha, we can be a refuge for others. So this is a practice that's good all around.