

Refuge in the Dhamma

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We've all had the experience of having nightmares where there are very few options and every option seems horrible. Then suddenly you remember that this story line can't be true. You alert yourself to the fact that you're dreaming. And because you see that the dream is unnecessary suffering, you make the effort to wake up. That gets you out.

That's the way in which the Dhamma functions as a refuge. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. We've talked about how taking refuge in the Buddha means developing his qualities, taking him as an example in terms of wisdom, compassion, and purity. The same with the Sangha. You take the Sangha as an example. They practice well. They practice straightforwardly. For the sake of knowledge. They practice masterfully. You think about their example and it gives you inspiration.

But what about the Dhamma? The Dhamma's not a person whom you can emulate. But it is something you remember. In fact, that's one of the meanings of the word Dhamma: something to be remembered.

When the Buddha talks about taking the Dhamma as a refuge, he specifically talks about developing the four establishings of mindfulness. In other words, developing your powers of memory so that they're useful on the path, providing you with the right framework for looking at states of mind, remembering how to be alert to what you're doing, and how to focus your ardency to stop suffering. That way, when you get in a bad state of mind—and it seems to settle in and everything around you confirms that, yes, what you're thinking is true, that things are miserable, or you're miserable, or the world is conspiring against you, or your body's conspiring against you—remembering the right frame of reference helps pull you out.

Remember that this is a state of becoming that you've immersed yourself in. And what does the Buddha say about states of becoming? There are skillful ones and unskillful ones. The skillful ones are to be developed; the unskillful ones, abandoned. That's what the establishings of mindfulness are for: to look at your mind states in a more impersonal way, to step back from them and ask yourself, "If this mind state were in somebody else's mind, what would you recommend that they do?—especially, knowing the Buddha's teachings about what we should do with unskillful states: how to abandon them; how to take them apart; how to take apart the suffering that goes along with them.

You notice when the Buddha talks about suffering or stress, he starts out with lots of examples that we can identify with in the narratives of our lives: illness, aging, death, being separated from those you love, having to stay with those you don't like at all, not getting what you want. We all have lots of stories about those things.

But then he points out what's common to the suffering in all those things: the five clinging aggregates. Now, those are not personal things. When you think about your thoughts, or your mind states in terms of aggregates, that way of thinking helps to pull you out of your narratives. You see the mind state as an activity. There's a feeling going into it, a way of breathing that goes into it, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. Seeing things in those terms helps pull you out.

So there's the alertness to see what you're doing, and the mindfulness to remind yourself, "Okay, this is a mind state." That puts it in a framework. Then, recognizing what mind state it is, you remember what should be done with that kind of mind state. Based on that, you develop ardency, with the thought that you really do want to get out of it.

This is where you sometimes run against a part of the mind that likes to stay and stew around in its juices. You have to take that apart as well. What kind of mind state is that? Why would you want to identify with it?

So when you learn to see these moods and mind states in impersonal terms, that's how the Dhamma becomes your refuge because it gives you advice on what to do. That list of mind states under the third frame of reference: It's not just there for you to notice, "Oh, there's this mind state. There's that mind state. We're going to watch it come and go." There are skillful and unskillful mind states. The skillful ones are to be developed; the unskillful ones, abandoned. That's the purpose of the list. It's meant to remind you where and how you have to be ardent.

Ardency is the same thing as right effort. It means learning how to motivate yourself to *want* to abandon the unskillful state, rather than just wallowing around in it or being a slave to it. Seeing yourself being enslaved: That's one way of getting perspective on it. Our thoughts are there for us to use. They should be our tools. We should be the masters of the tools. But it's almost as if the tools take on a life of their own. In some sort of bewitched workshop, the tools turn on the carpenter—like that Twilight Zone episode in which all the machines and appliances in the house conspire to kill the owner. Watch out that your thoughts don't kill you, that they don't conspire against you. Learn how to step out of them. It's when you step out of them that they lose their power. As long as you're in the state of

becoming created by those thoughts and you see everything in the world in line with that state of becoming, they can turn on you whenever they want.

So learn how to step out, remembering that no matter how real a state of becoming may seem, it's not the true story. It's a state of mind, based on a desire, and the desire will skew things in its direction. Sometimes the desire is hard to ferret out because the mind state becomes so negative. You ask yourself, "What kind of desire could have started this mind state?" Well, it's a desire that's gotten thwarted. Learn to look for that, so that even though it seems very real—and you know that when you're here, you're not in a dream—remind yourself: Your mind state has a lot of dream-like qualities, one of which is that it can really distort the way things are. When you're in a dream, everything seems so real, in the same way that, when you're in a negative mind state, it seems to have the real take on everything.

But there are other ways of looking at it. And the best way to get out of it is to be alert to it simply as an act. It's a type of karma and it's unskillful. Then remember what you do with unskillful mind states: They're things to be abandoned. If you can remember that, if you've worked on the establishings of mindfulness long enough so that you're good at pulling yourself out of distractions while you're meditating, then you can use the same skill to pull yourself out of a negative mood, no matter how long and deeply entrenched the mood may be.

Remember Ajaan Suwat's example. He says when insight arises, it's like a light taken into the darkness. No matter how long that place has been dark, the darkness can't say to the light, "You have no right to come in here. We've been here for a long, long time. And you're brand new." As soon as the light comes, it can chase the darkness away. In the same way, the Dhamma as a refuge can chase away a lot of your bad moods, no matter how deeply entrenched they may seem.

So remember that it's in your powers of memory, your remembrance of the Dhamma, that your refuge is going to be. In fact, they are what enable you to take the Buddha and the Sangha as a refuge, too. All too often it happens that you forget about them. You get in a mind state and it's as if the Buddha never existed. The great ajaans never existed. It's just you and your mind state. But if you can remember them and remember the Dhamma that they practiced, that can help pull you out and take you to safety.