

## *Refuge*

*September 4, 2020*

Five years after Ajaan Suwat founded this monastery, he went back to Thailand. Soon after his return to Thailand, he was in an automobile accident. Paralyzed from the base of the spine on down, he'd suffered lung damage, brain damage.

So his ability to give Dhamma talks was severely curtailed. When he *did* give Dhamma talks, either formally or informally, he realized he had to boil the message down to the most essential, most important points. And he always talked about refuge: taking the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha as refuge.

I think it's useful to consider why. It's not that we're expecting the Buddha to come and help us, or that the Dhamma's going to jump out of the books and help us, or that the noble Sangha will appear to us and help us solve our problems. They solved their problems and they showed us *how*. They also showed us the values we should hold to as we go through life, because they embodied these values in their actions.

One of the names the Buddha used for himself was *Tathagata*. It has many meanings, and one of them is that he acts as he speaks and he speaks as he acts. So it's not just that he taught useful things, but in his actions he also showed how. So as you go through life, it's always good to keep the Buddha in mind.

That's another meaning of the Pali word for refuge, *sarana*: It can also mean something you remember, something you hold in mind.

We need something good to hold in mind because the values of the world today are toxic. If you're looking for the well-being of your heart, the well-being of your mind, you need to remember that there are examples of other ways of living, other ways of giving priority to what's really of value in life.

As in that chant just now, the five recollections: They seem to present what was going through the Buddha's mind when he was not yet the Buddha, when he was a bodhisattva. On the one hand, he saw aging, illness, death, and separation. He had a great sense of samvega—which actually means terror—realizing that everywhere you go in life, this is what you run into if you don't find a way out.

Then the reflection on kamma: That's the way out. But it's a warning as well. That reflection is meant to give rise to heedfulness, because our actions really do make a difference, the choices you make, make a difference. Still, the teaching on kamma is also a source of confidence that it is within your power to find true

happiness. You don't have to settle for second, third, or fourth best. So you have to be very careful about your actions: what you do, what you say, what you think.

This is why we train the mind, so that we don't forget the standards for skillful actions. And why do we forget? We get provoked.

As the ajaans in Thailand noted, people in the West are really weak in two areas: endurance and equanimity. We lack endurance in not being able to stand harsh words; not being able to stand pain, unpleasant sensations. We also lack equanimity, the ability to maintain the mind on an even keel no matter what happens, good or bad. When you're on an even keel, you see things evenly, and it's a lot easier to do the right thing. But if you let your emotions get in the way, you fall into the four forms of bias.

It's interesting that the Thai word for bias, *lamiang*, is derived from the word for leaning, *iang*. You're leaning in the direction of being unfair either because you like somebody or because you hate somebody or because you're deluded or because you're afraid of somebody. If the mind can't maintain its evenness, it leans in these directions, and then topples over into bad destinations.

So think of the Buddha and his endurance. Think of the Buddha and his equanimity.

There's that story he tells of Prince Dighavu, whose parents had been killed by a king. First he swears revenge. He works his way into the palace, works his way into the king's confidence, and finally gets into a position where he could kill the king. But his father had told him, "Don't look too far, don't look close. Animosity is not stilled by animosity. Animosity is stilled by non-animosity." So Dighavu refrained from killing the king. He showed the king that he was in a position where he could kill him, and the king begged for his life. But Prince Dighavu said, "No, you give me my life." So they swore that they would protect each other and not harm each other. The story ended well.

If Dighavu had gone ahead and killed the king, then Dighavu would have been killed, and who knows who would have killed the people who killed Dighavu. These things just go on and on and on, like in links of a chain, and they bind you. You free yourself when you cut the link.

So you look around, and you can see that there are a lot of things that are really provoking in our society. But you have to remember: Society is not the gauge of what's important and what's not. It's your knowledge of the Dhamma. The fact that you've taken refuge means that you have a different set of values. So in a society that doesn't value endurance or equanimity, you've got to develop those qualities and keep reminding yourself of their importance.

It helps to think of the examples of the Buddha, the examples of the ajaans. You read about them enduring the heat, you read about them sitting through pain. And it's not that they were born less sensitive to pain than we are. It's simply that the ajaans were inspired by the example of the Buddha, inspired by the example of the great noble disciples of the past. The fact that they were inspired to follow those examples is what has kept these values alive.

It's that connection of the heart: You see somebody doing something really honorable, and something inside you says, "Yes, I want to be able to do that, too." No matter how many centuries ago it was, it doesn't matter. There's a connection. Something is transferred across time and the values are kept alive. If the ajaans did that, we can do that here, too.

Be inspired by their examples, and decide that it doesn't matter that they were over in another part of the world in another time, decades ago—or in the case of the Buddha, centuries ago. The values are still good, the values they represent, the values they embody.

So always keep them in mind. Remember that dual meaning of the word *sarana*—something you take refuge in, something you keep in mind—so that wherever you go, it's as if you have the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha inside you.

Years back, when we were starting Wat Metta, we'd get people coming up here and telling us, "Well, now that you're in America, you have to change the rules, you'll have to change the way you do things." My thinking was, "Here I am, far away from my teachers, far away from the place I was trained. If I abandon my training, I have nothing. If I hold to the training, it's as if I'm near to them."

In the same way, when you hold to the example of the Buddha and you're inspired by his example, you're near to him, in the same way that you're near to the Dhamma, you're near to the Sangha. That way, wherever you go, you're not alone. You've got a good set of values inside. And regardless of the values outside, when you stick to the values of the Triple Gem, you're secure, you're safe. This is why they're called a refuge.

One of the worst things that can happen to you is if you let the values of the world insinuate themselves into your mind and you start doing things and saying things and thinking things that will be for your long-term detriment. When you keep the Buddha in mind, the Dhamma in mind, the Sangha in mind, they protect you from that danger. And when you learn how to embody their qualities, the protection gets even more secure.