

A Refuge Bigger than the World

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When Ajaan Suwat came to teach here in the States, he would go back to Thailand every year during the winter, and people would ask him about the wonders of America. He would always say that he didn't see anything here that lay beyond the Dhamma. No matter how amazing our feats of engineering, the progress of the country, still there was nothing nearly as amazing as the Dhamma—nothing that lay outside the Dhamma—because the Dhamma is bigger than the world.

He made a similar comment to me one time. He and a group of people had gone up to Yellowstone, and when they came back I asked him what he thought of Yellowstone. He said, “Well, there's nothing there that lies outside of the principle of *anicca*, inconstancy.”

Again the Dhamma is bigger than the world, more solid than the world. This is good to keep in mind as we look at the state of the world, which seems hell-bent on falling apart. We have to remember we don't say, *Lokam saranam gacchami*. In other words, we don't say that we take refuge in the world. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. As long as we take refuge in those values, we're safe. As long as we act in line with those values, we're safe—because worlds can come and go.

Think of those suttas where they talk about the expansion and contraction of the universe. The Buddha keeps saying that these things happen in line with the Dhamma, in line with the principles of kamma. They don't lie outside the principles, which means that the principles lie outside of them. If you hold by those principles, you're safe.

The nature of the world, as Ajaan Chah would say, is that it's already broken. You get a new cup and you have to remind yourself that someday it's going to be broken, but in the meantime, you take care of it—knowing however, that someday it will have to be broken. You don't want to be the one who breaks it, and you do your best to keep it in good shape. But you have to have that attitude—“It's already broken.” That way you can live with it and not suffer from it.

The world is like that. Everybody who's born is going to have to suffer aging, illness, and death. These things have already happened, and they're going to keep on happening.

Never mind how much they try to work at preventing people from aging and dying, they

keep on growing old. They keep on dying. The people who are working on these things keep growing old and dying.

There are certain things you can't stop, but that doesn't mean you give up. You think about helping the other people in the world, because you keep reminding yourself that civilizations rise and fall, and when they fall, there are a lot of people who get crushed—as long as they haven't found the Dhamma to hold on to. So try to hold onto the principles of the Dhamma, and realize that there are some losses that are serious, and some that are not. You try to teach that to other people too. That's your gift to them.

I have a student who wrote an essay about the *samvega* of parenting. You bring a child into the world, and what kind of world is this? It's a world where sometimes the parents go before the child has any chance to really be independent. There are a lot of things the parents can't protect the child from. But what you want to do is to make sure to teach the child not to be a danger to him or herself. That's the best gift you can give, the most valuable possession you can give.

The Buddha, as a teacher, said that it was his duty to provide protection to keep his students from being bewildered—to provide them with a sense of what was important in life, and particularly how not to suffer: how to see the importance of their actions, and to develop skillful actions, and to be convinced of the truth that there is such a thing as cause and effect. There are consequences to our actions, and we have the power to make those consequences good or bad. The best use of that power, of course, is to do things that give rise to good consequences.

Remember the Buddha's teachings on the five kinds of loss: There's loss of wealth, loss of health, loss of relatives. These three, he says, are not all that serious. You're going to lose them anyhow, but when you lose them you can get them back. Maybe not in this lifetime, but they keep coming back. As long as you keep coming back, these things will come along as well. What's really serious, he says, are the other two kinds of loss: loss of right view and loss of your virtue.

Right view teaches you that your actions are important, that you have to hold on to your actions no matter what's happening outside. No matter what other people are doing, you make sure that your actions are skillful, and to that extent you're safe.

That, of course, applies to your virtue as well. You think of all the ways in which you could harm yourself and harm others, and all the excuses you can give for doing those harmful acts,

and you realize that if you give in to those excuses, you've sold away your most valuable possessions. You're the one who squanders them. Because the world outside can take away your health, it can take away your wealth, it can take away your relatives. But you have to *let it* take away your right view, and *let it* take away your virtue.

You're the one who gives these things away. You're the one who smashes those treasures. If you don't smash them, they're in good shape. The world can do nothing to destroy them.

So remember, we live in a world where there are a lot of things that we love, that we care for, that we're concerned about, but that we're going to have to give up. That doesn't mean we don't do our best to help them while we can, but there has to be part of the mind that's held in reserve, knowing that anybody who's born is bound to grow ill, bound to age, bound to die. Any civilization that arises is bound to fall.

Maybe we can't help the world as a whole, but we can help individual people. The best help we can give, of course, is to get them on the path. Do what we can to convince them that their actions are important—whether they think of themselves as Buddhist or not. Help them at least to have a sense that actions are important, and they want to hold on to the principles of harmless action no matter how much other people may be harming them. Because where does that harm come from? It came from past bad actions, and so you don't want to create any more conditions like that.

So when we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, we're adjusting our values.

It's strange. There was a scholar one time who said, "You know, the Buddha never really went along with this idea of people taking refuge." It was part of Indian culture that people would take refuge in teachers. "But the Buddha himself," this person said, "never really encouraged that."

But I think again of Ajaan Suwat toward the end of his life, after he'd had some brain damage, and his abilities to communicate were limited. He knew that they were limited, so when he talked about the Dhamma, he went straight to the heart. And one of the themes he repeated again and again was the importance of refuge.

The principles of the Dhamma are bigger than the world, so they provide us safety when the world falls apart. They keep us from getting confused, bewildered by our defilements, by other people's actions, by other people's words.

We can have this strong sense of safety and protection knowing that what is of real value

will stay safe. As for things of lesser value, they're going to end anyhow, so don't place your hopes on them. Place your hopes on the Dhamma. Be helpful as you can. And make sure your priorities are already straight, *always* straight. That's what refuge is all about.