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SPEAKERS

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This morning I would like to talk about the Buddhist practice of refuge. It's a very important part of traditional Buddhism is that people who feel connected to the Dharma to the Buddha to the Sangha, will do something that's called going for refuge or literally the word is walking for refuge, and entering into this place that's safe. Where we're one of the things that said we're safe from that kind of is kind of overcome when we go for refuge is fear. And so this powerful movement of going for refuge, which is closely connected to the Buddhist idea of faith, or might not be the best word in English, to translate, sada, but to be the place where we put our heart on, or the place where we put ourselves on our heart, kind of placing ourselves in our heart and our heartfelt place, and the place that we become safe. And sometimes, the idea of refuge is called the three triple refuge, the refuge in Buddha Dharma Sangha, is called the triple jewels. And the word is a Ratana. And it's a jewel, because it's a treasure, it's quite precious. And also because it brings to light. And the word for delight is harati, and rattana, rotti. They don't know if it's a real etymology. But Buddhists will shamelessly use it anything for etymology. And so the idea of refuge also thought of it today, given how so many people in our society feel challenged with the post election with what's going on all kinds of ways. And so the idea of refuge is meant to be also refuge from the challenges of our wider world that we live in someplace that we can be sheltered, be supported. But it's not meant to be a place where we hide, but rather a place that rather than being bounded by, by a place of shelter, or hearth become sheltered, so that we can carry ourselves forward into the world everywhere we go. It's not meant to be withdrawal from the world to go for refuge. But it's meant to be a way of being in the world, an orientation that guides us and supports us in a certain kind of way, give a gives orientation to world which is often chaotic and difficult to be in challenges of our life. And thinking about it today, remember the story. The time of the Buddha of a king, who had a conversation with the Buddha came to see the Buddha and his king was apparently somewhat to one of the of the kings of the time, the person who was closest to the Buddha, his name was personality. And some of the suttas describe him as being a little bit. Living an indulgent life at some point, the Buddha gave him advice about how to lose weight. And so he, so he comes to see the Buddha and the Buddha asks him, how are you? And the king says, Oh, I'm really busy. I'm busy conquering neighboring countries. And indulging in lots of sensual pleasures. And so, and then Buddha said, to give some middle teaching, and maybe the teaching has to do with the context in which this conversation is going and who he's talking to. But he says to the king, imagine that one of your ministers, agents, when your people is, comes from the east thing, these huge cloud high mountains are rolling from the east towards you, destroying everything in its path.

And there's sharp cliffs, just walls mountain coming. And someone else comes from the south and tells you these mountains coming rolling, destroying everything on its path towards you and from the west and from the east, from the north. So, you know, these huge, huge mountains are coming bearing down. Remember, Buddha lived close to the Himalayas. So you know The size of mountains are big.

And so this is like, you know, you don't you don't just put up a little your your your arms up the mountains, usually, I mean this was going to be serious. And so the Buddha asked him, What would you do? And it's, you know, hopeless to save your life, you know you can be crushed. And so the king says, oh, if that was happening, I would live the Dharma. And so quite an evocative statement also for the kings are live the Dharma. So in the last moments you have before the mountains, find the crusher, would you still live the Dharma? What would you do? And then the Buddha goes on to say, Well, actually, old age and death is rolling towards you, from all directions, it's going to come and get you some point. And, you know, don't forget this. This this idea of, of, even in the context of these great existential issues of our life that all of us have to face, all of us have to live with old age and death. Some people avoid it, don't think about it. Some people, it's very close to them, they understand it all too well. Is Dharma relevant, is it something that makes sense to live the Dharma? Does it make sense to take refuge in the Dharma, in the context of these great dangers that our lives live in. So in thinking about these walls and mountains coming towards us, I remembered that I've kind of reviewed the year, this last year for myself, different different situations I was in where somehow I was reminded of walls that people live in what's going on and the first one that came to mind was a friend of mine, who died this year of cancer, and she'd been kind of dealing with this for many years, finally, became clear that she was going to die. And the last time I talked to her on the phone, was I think a day or so before she admitted herself to hospice, she lived alone. And so I talked to her on the phone, and she told me what she was going to do. And it I'd never known her more happy. In fact, I would say that was probably among the top five happy conversations of my life. The fact that she was going into hospice, and she was resolved and clear and at ease and kind of, you know, let go and this was always happening. She was accepting it. And then I went to see her maybe a week or 10 days later in hospice, and what struck me was, how small the room was, the walls had come closer. And it was a lovely hospice and Kester district in San Francisco. And the rooms were relatively small, smaller than the rooms at IRC. And so she was laying in bed and I don't think she really even noticed the walls. But for me, I kind of clear out their whole life. This is the end of her electrical became it moved into this room. It was going to last room brass door, she was gonna go through last room she was going to be in and so I visited her twice there. And each time she was less capable of having conversation. Second time I went last time I went to think was last or last day of her life. It wasn't clear that she could even hear what was going on. But she was at a time she was she was kind of restless, a little bit distressed. And so I chanted the refuges for her. And as long as I chanted the refuges for her, she would relax and her body would come Oh, she can hear and that was you know, that she would relax and be peaceful for a while and that I do it again.

It was quite lovely. I left and then I guess she died later that evening. And I think people who were there said that made it they claimed they made a big difference that she did the refuges with her. So that came to mind this you know life you know the end of life. The walls come in the walls come in. I thought of the fire in Oakland. The walls that kept people in the fire and 36 people died. We never know when it's gonna happen. That aging and death comes in rolls in. Did they take refuge? What would they do? What would you do? When it seems like there's no way out. I thought about going to St. Anthony's kitchen in San Francisco is a kind of a soup kitchen that offers meals to people in the tenderloin in San Francisco. And I think they offer something like a couple of thousand meals a day. And 700 run by volunteers. So we have a crew of volunteers well oiled system, and people come in and they're offered trays of food and they go out. And the first shift that comes in is are the elderly. And so I went with the chaplains were training here at IMC and, and also with my 18 year old son, then we're gonna show him a little bit of that part of the world. And so our job was to take the trays of food, and the people receiving the food, we're sitting at tables, and big dining area, and we'd go carry the food to the tables and put it down front of them and offer it to them and have a little conversation. And then we would go get more trays. And if they wanted more food, they could just raise their hand and they can get more much as they wanted. And many of them brought with them little containers, and they would take more takes

food with them take home. And again, there's no walls, you know, the walls were quite expensive, but is still inside this place, how it comes to this. And it struck me that when I was there, and I don't know if my thinking was very accurate or appropriate, even but this is how I thought and therefore how I felt in my heart was many of the people came many of the elderly who came, you know, reverse, certainly very poor. But they had lives as far as I could tell, that were not consciously connected to the great events of our society and the world around them. They weren't thinking about the election, back then it was back in May. They weren't thinking about what goes on in Iraq or Syria, or they weren't thinking about what goes on across the bay, or it seemed like a very, that they were just trying to cope, they're just trying to survive. And it's very, it was very clear that their life was very close into survival issues. And there was a whole table lined up with people who have been wheelchairs, because there was lots of room behind those tables. So they come up. And so they're in you know, life bounded by poverty, a bounded by disability bounded by, you know, health club, you know, or aging and death, disability comes in and holds us makes our world kind of small, perhaps something. And that can happen to any of us. And so is refuge going for refuge irrelevant? Is it it is something that brings the light can it bring the light for you, those of you in the knowing those of you know about the Dharma, can it be a source of delight in times of great challenge of times when things get close in the walls come in for you. I thought about also going this year to San Quentin, also with my 18 year old son to show him that part of the world. Also with the chocolates that we're trading. And being in a room and again, the room was kind of, you know, out of space and the walls. Now there was a low ceiling, this place because it was a, I guess a modular building kind of these trailers put together right in the yard in San Quentin, they had had it into a classroom, and San Quentin in many places have it, it's a really tough place. And some places just feel so hostile in all directions. You can go into some of these places where there's prisoners are and the guards are and just kind of it's hard to believe that we put people in places that feel like done feels like dungeons.

And, but this classroom is like, I don't know if they would say that. But for me, I've been there now a number of times kind of sacred space, very special. Because here is a place where among other things, there's a group of about 30 prisoners of different races. And here's a place for the safe for the different races to become friends with each other. It's not safe in San Quentin outside of an yard or in everyone Where else there's where they kick themselves very segregated, and kind of safe, unsafe to not to integrate themselves. But there they become friends. And they're they're doing deep work based on mindfulness practice, but a lot of other approaches really have them look deeply at their deep pain, their hurt, their violence, what they've done, what they've done in the world. And so we sat there with room of almost 30 people, most of them who murdered someone, and they've gone through this incredible deep program of healing, of opening the hearts of love, of honesty of looking at themselves, all in this room, you know, this bounded room, this place of safety and create a place of safety appropriate a place where people can really look at themselves and be with them. And it's a place where I felt it was safe to bring an 18 year old son. And not that often you can bring your 18 year old to a room full of murderers, and feel safe, and more than your space safe. But I felt, you know, I tried, I tried a little bit to raise him with some of these wisdom, ideas that I have from Buddhism in my practice. I have no idea what impact it had, because especially when he was a teenager, there were certain other kind of walls. But we went there to that, you know, modular room with these men in San Quentin. And he sat them on them and talk with them and, and other things that he heard things talked about. Were kind of like a dream come true for me as a father, hearing wisdom, hearing about practice hearing what can happen how people can be transformed? It was you know, so Wow, just in time before he left home. And saw these, you know, safety walls boundaries. We know where do we find ourselves in this world of challenges, and that we have many people, we don't many people in our society now. Too many people feels like the walls are closing in on them. They're worried about at a lot of immigrants. A lot of people here as illegal immigrants are really, really afraid. Because the Immigration Service, the

border customs, people are going to come and take them soon. That's what they think that's what I've been told is going to happen. And they're afraid the walls are closing in. The amount of hostility and hate and racism that's reared its head in this country has frightened a lot of people who for a long time, felt the impact of it, but now feels so much stronger and kinda like they don't feel like they can go out. It was this year right when we had here Sunday, a mom come and speak here. And Muslim cleric. And who's a cleric in in San Jose. And he said that in San Jose, that as a Muslim, he doesn't want to go to certain places in public like the gas stations at night, because he doesn't feel safe at night to go to a place like that. So the walls come in, for either the walls are closer. So we live in a world so where do we find our safety? Where do we find our inspiration? What brings us joy and gladness, and that's the function of refuge. refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha. And the formula that people chant Buddhists chant, is I walk for refuge I go for refuge literally says, I walk for refuge. To the Buddha, I walk for refuge to the Dharma, I walk for refuge to the Sangha. I love the idea of walking, rather than saying, Go, because go is a little bit abstract. But walk means you bring all of yourself along, you don't hold yourself back. Everything is involved in concluded and the word for going walking. In this ancient language, also means to understand, to know something. So to go for refuge, it means to understand the refuge is to understand the Buddha and the Dharma and the Sangha. So it's something hopefully something inside of us that resonates with what the Buddha Dharma Sangha represent for us with the it speaks to something in our hearts, we see ourselves in those things.

So they're not something external, so much as a residence we already have. And it said that there are three aspects of going for refuge or this understanding test. It's kind of an orientation. Well, isn't orientation, so there's understanding and there's also intentionality It's the intentions we have to put what what motivates us. So going for refuge is not a passive movement. It's not a movement of you know, you know, going someplace and being safe and not acting, but going for refuge as, as a decision intention about how to live a life, what we understand how we orient ourselves, and also, it's what we're devoted to. The idea of faith. And the idea of devotion is, I think, is a beautiful word, beautiful concept, may be difficult for some people to relate to because of the associations they have with the word. But you know, what we're willing to do with our whole heart, you know, that which we feel is worthwhile and meaningful, to enter into wholeheartedly. And this we know, willing to give ourselves over as an act of devotion or, or dedication. And so what is it about the Buddha Dharma Sangha, that brings joy? What does it bring safety? What is it that something that we can feel devoted to? What is it about it, what's going on? Part of the clue, I think, is that sometimes in Theravada, Buddhism, they talk about a fourth refuge, that you take refuge in as well, besides the Buddha, Dharma Sangha, and the fourth refuge is yourself. Because it's you that have to do the walking. It's actually it's an intentional act, it's a you're important, and you're valuable. And so to this is something we do, we take refuge in our ability to respond in a certain way we take refuge in our ability to live a life, that's wise, we take refuge in our capacity, to be free to big cat cap our capacity not to be caught, by fear not to be caught by hate, not to be caught by distress and, you know, the spinning mind. And so, you know, it speaks very a points that refuge points back to ourselves. And it isn't something we just rely on that that which is out there, they're going to take care of us now, the Buddha Dharma gonna take care of us might take refuge and relax, you know, I'll be taken care of. There's a reciprocal mutual relationship between the refuges in oneself. And when the more we take refuge in ourselves, the more it makes sense to take refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha. Because in taking refuge in ourselves, what it means is we will learn how to be at home and ourselves, we learn how to be settled, relax, we learn how to take care of ourselves, we learn how not to rely on something else, someone else, to take care of us or to make us happy or safe. We learn not to take refuge, in money, in jobs, in relationships, in governments, in homes. You know, there's always a refuge place that people go for refuge, which are not really refuges. And I've told the story many times when I was in Burma, I was there an eight month retreat. So I wasn't out and about, but I had a little bit of the Burmese money to cat, but not a lot that I just had there for just in case something happened. So I woke up one morning, and it was told that all the all or most of the

denominations of paper money in Burma had been made invalid by the government overnight in America says God with trust. So you know, you know, I thought that that was like a you know, used a lot of things you can trust in the world, but I thought currency is my delusion. And that was quite impressive. And I just read recently that they did a similar thing in India. They certain a lot of people in India, keep their money don't trust the banks or the system, they want to pay taxes. So they didn't keep a lot of low denomination bills at home, like you know, suitcases of them. And so the government basically they didn't look more sophisticated with Burma did that there was kind of a way of if you pay your taxes, you can turn your doctor you can turn your all the money into the banks by January 1.

But that's quite something, you know, you trust it and suddenly your your money is like what? So the idea that we protect we have we have some of us we don't think of it take refuge in these things. But there's a way in which we trust or we rely on things which may be doing ultimately, offer are not reliable. And so if we don't rely on them hundred percent, if we don't have our happiness and not dependent on them, the idea of refuge is to find happiness, find well being find peace. Find safety in something which is reliable. And that which is reliable has to do with what's in our hearts, in our minds, that's that's ultimately, in the face of old age and death, the face of your death coming along, you know, you know, you're not going to hopefully you're not going to find your happiness in the last minutes of your life, because of your bank account, or the house you're in, because you might be in a small room in hospice, who knows what's going to happen? Are you able to find happiness in yourself, have you discovered what that is? where that is for yourself, and so on. So to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha is to understand that those, the Buddha Dharma Sangha represents something in yourself a capacity. And you're not going to Buddhists are not required to go for refuge and do it. But there's often a strong tendency for people to want to do it at some point, when they began to begin recognizing that what they're taking refuge in is already in them, is an understanding, a capacity, a direction, a way of being. It said that, when a person has gone for refuge, or really understands refuge, they have no reason anymore to ever complain. Isn't that powerful. That's a powerful statement, you can say you can, you can say that things are not going well in the world without complaining. But you know, I can write you doesn't mean you can turn your blind eye and say nothing's, you know, everything's rosy and nice. But the idea that we no longer complaining no more. The The, the first person I read, who wrote about this idea of being sick, complaining, he wrote, I can't rail against the world. And so I don't know how you how you hear the idea of no longer complaining.

But if you first think about some of the people around you who complain, it'd be nice if they went for refuge. And then you might understand that maybe it's relevant for you too. Because complaining means there's something about the act of complaining, that is giving away our power, giving away our freedom. It's a little bit like, like giving up something and seeing the problems out there and someone should do something, something's wrong out there. Of course, there's a lot of things wrong out there. But our peace or well being or happiness, shouldn't be dependent on what's out there. It's possible they're discovered here within. So the second of the refuges is maybe in some ways, the most important one for most people. And that is the Dharma. And the Dharma is as many meet, we weren't as many meetings. But in the context of the refuges. It refers to that which is liberating. And there's three things that are liberating. There are teachings, which point to liberation. There are practices that point to liberation. And there are realizations of liberation. And all those three things, the teachings, the practices, and the realizations are all called the Dharma. And down through the centuries, the thing that kind of Buddhist teaching that encapsulates all three, that symbolizes all three, is the Four Noble Truths. And the Buddha said that those are reliable refuges the Four Noble Truths, that somehow if we can understand how, when we crave or cling, or tighten up or contract in our hearts and our minds, how that gives birth to suffering, to distress, to anxiety, to misery, to stress, if we can really understand that for ourselves, what the mechanism with the movement is within ourselves of how that works. And then

know that when you recognize that craving or that contraction that we have, we recognize it is possible to release it and live without it. Then we've discovered the Four Noble Truths that we've discovered a powerful thing within us a refuge within ourselves. It means that in theory, then you can go in any place at all. And if you start contracting, if you start getting afraid if you started getting angry, it's possible to turn the attention to your own heart, see what you're doing, and release the forces of fear and anger and greed and These things it's possible to relax and open up. And to do so it makes you safer rather than less safe. Some people don't want to give up their hate and their anger and their fear because they feel that can be less safe if they give it up. But the idea is, you're actually safer without it, you're more protected without it. So the Four Noble Truths is the mindfulness practice of looking deeply into ourselves being still in watching, and no longer spinning outwards, centrifugal force, outward, looking outside, for the solution, looking outside, where to blame, looking outside for any place, but within ourselves, but to turn had the ability to enter it to turn around and really discover the possibility of freedom and happiness within. And it's a beautiful thing to do that, it's a fantastic thing to have them have that teaching that points to that direction. It's kind of like a shorthand to happiness. Because the long, the long route to happiness that is very unreliable, is to rearrange the world, to be just right. And, you know, and some people spend a lot of years rearranging things, just getting everything all lined up, all lined up, all lined up. And I remember one woman hadn't, I knew here in this local woman who worked hard for many years was all lined up to all dependent on stock options. And then the company tanked. And then their stock papers became toilet paper for her. And maybe toilet paper is more valuable, because maybe it was worth better than what the paper that she had. So you know, rearranging the world, or rearranging your heart.

And if we can rearrange our heart, then we know something deep, about freedom, about love about peace, which is one of the most important offerings we can offer to others. Someone has to know how to be at peace in this world, not to be kind of all caught up in anxiety and running around like a chicken without its head. Someone has to notice deep abiding possibility of freedom and kind of show it to other people. And that's what the Buddha was. So we take refuge in the Buddha, we take refuge as an example, of someone who has done this, who's lived this way. Who could look a king right in the face and say, you know, the mountains are coming. The so it said that sometimes we take refuge in the Buddha, we take refuge in his example. A powerful example. And it's very inspiring. For some people, it's very, to know that it's to have an example for some people makes it possible to do for themselves or inspiring to do for themselves. Maybe it's a little bit like the four minute mile 1950s, it was said no one could break the four minute mile, then someone did. And after that, many, many, not many is the right word with lots, you know, relatively many did it. So the Buddha did this four minute freedom thing, you know, I'd show it shorter as possible. And then many people have done it after that. And so the refuge in the Sangha is take refuge in a community of people who are orienting their lives around the teachings, orienting life around the practices, and orienting their life around the realizations that come from doing those practices, oriented life around the Dharma. And it's very helpful to have the knows other people who are doing this, and to be in communities of supportive people, kind people, good people who, you know, show it is possible. I know that 100% that I could not have practiced as much as I did, without the community of people around me, without people who supported me without teachers who mirrored the practice for me, who encouraged me from other practitioners. I feel, you know, art I feel like in some ways, who I've become is in part because of being in the community as I've been in for 40 years, and been inspired by them and formed by then guided by them. It's wonderful thing. The Buddha, but so as we begin deepening the practice in that third part of Dharma becomes real for us the realization of the Dharma realization of freedom of the truth. Then we understand that when we take refuge in the Buddha, we don't take refuge in the Buddha as the example anymore, but we take refuge In the Buddhas, Bodhi, Bodhi means awakening. And it's very explicit in this tradition of ours, that as the practice deepens, the place to put refuge is not in the Buddha, but in the Buddha's awakening, and

the experience of release the experience of waking up the experience of freedom that the Buddha experienced, because it's ours as well. And at first we have hints of it. First, we have small tastes of it, we drop into that some kind of greater freedom, then, you know, in small ways, and then over time, it's something we grow in. But it's helpful to take refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha. Because even though he might have a little taste of it, life is challenging. It's full of challenges. And it's not easy for to really find our peace or freedom. As the mountains roll in, the walls come in whatever the walls in that you're struggling with, or dealing with. It's not easy to live this life, human life. And so we might be able to go and touch the freedom, sometimes, not a few people will go to meditation retreats, and feel the touch something very precious, very valuable, that they've never known before. I mean, deep something, opening some some deeper intimacy, and that wholeness of them ever experienced. And so this is great. And then leave the retreats and day later, it's like, what happened? Where is it and feel discouraged and feel like, well, it's not worth it, if I could only have been on retreat, it's not worth it, it has no meaning.

But what it what the retreat does, it shows a possibility, that then after that, we can take refuge or be inspired by the Buddha, Dharma Sangha, it is possible to live this way. That's the direction I'm going. That's my choice. That's where I'm going to align myself. That's what I wanted my life to be about. And that, you know, and it doesn't matter how far I get in this lifetime, this is a beautiful and important and valuable and purposeful life to live, the life of kind of developing and growing this freedom, this compassion, this liberation, so awakening, more and more into my life. And so the idea of going for refuge in Buddha Dharma Sangha is also to the purposeful life, a life that now is understood. It's not chaotic. It's not not without meaning. It's not without purpose. It's not without guidance. But it's very clear what it's about. And some people who do this going for refuge do it such a way that the Dharma becomes central in their life, this movement of liberation or freedom of movement of heart becomes the purpose of their life. And so I'll end with I studied with Zen teacher for a while named Robert Aiken are pretty good, he can rushing. And he was kind of like the grandfather of American zen, wonderful man. And he started to notice that many of his students would come to him and said, I want to learn how to integrate the practice into my life. And the minute people they go on retreat, they start discovering this, oh, this is great being on retreat. It's great to practice, but it has to, I want to apply it to my life and integrated my life. So beautiful sentiments, a great motivation. But then he said, he said, there's another option. Rather than integrating your practice into your life, why don't you integrate your life into your practice. So when we go for refuge, it's like the practice or the Dharma becomes the center. And then everything else orient around that or is guided by that. That's an option. And I think that if we're as we settle in the practice and discover the refuge inside, that that becomes, in fact, what happens, everything then, is related to our freedom. Everything then is is associated to the possibility of practicing to become free. And in doing so, we hopefully become a contribution of benefit to our wider society, because our society needs us. And I hope that people who go for refuge, in in turn, become a refuge for others. So may each of you find a refuge That can be your book, whether it's Buddhist refuge or something else, that the refuge that can be the reliable support, reliable place of safety that can help you as the walls come bearing down Thank you