

Refuge (4 of 5) Trusting Refuge

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GI Fronsdal

Today is the fourth day of the five-part series on refuge. Refuge is probably the central religious emotion that Buddhists engage in. Classically, it's also a kind of ritual or movement of commitment and involvement that expresses the deep trust and faith that Buddhists have. In fact, sometimes a person is defined as a Buddhist when they've gone for refuge.

No one can say who and who is not a Buddhist, so everyone is welcome to self-identify as they wish. I know people who have been dedicated Buddhist practitioners and students for decades who happily do not call themselves Buddhists. I've also known people who, the first time they hear Buddhist teachings, say, "I'm a Buddhist. This is it." It's not that important whether you're a Buddhist or not, but I want to emphasize the importance of refuge for many. Maybe refuge is what makes a person a Buddhist in a kind of formal way.

As I've been saying, the Buddha actually didn't really encourage people to go for refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha. When he emphasized refuge, it was in the context of finding a refuge within. In one passage, the Buddha said, "I will teach you the refuge and the path leading to the refuge."

What is refuge? Here's a very clear definition of what the Buddha defined as the refuge. It is a triple refuge, and maybe not coincidentally. He said, "The refuge is the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion. This is called 'the refuge.'"

Talking about the destruction of these things is powerful language. It means they have really been uprooted. It implies the possibility of really being finished with them once and for all. This is the great potential that Buddhism champions, emphasizes, and celebrates – we don't have to accommodate greed, hate, and delusion. We don't have only to learn to be wise about them, navigate with them, or be mindful of them so we don't give in to them.

It is possible to get down to the roots of where they live while dormant, pull them out, and destroy them, in the classic metaphor of roots. Even well short of that, it is possible to have a qualitative experience of real peace, a real absence of clinging, greed, hatred, and delusion. We can experience the heart without the three roots and recognize freedom from them is possible.

For many people, it's rare to feel the full potential for deep abiding peace, openness, or a sense of deep connectedness, intimacy, and closeness in the course of their ordinary, everyday life. The Buddha defined this peace over and over again by an absence – the absence of greed, hate, and delusion. It's difficult for many people to really have a deep, fully embodied, fully integrated experience of this in daily life.

For some people, going on meditation retreats or having a regular meditation practice opens that possibility. Some people can experience peace by going into nature or being at the beach for the day. Sometimes in certain close relationships, something very deep can happen and something can let go.

If that letting go is the refuge, what refuge means here is we trust that. We trust that place where we don't cling. Anything short of destroying greed, hate, and delusion, and they will come back. Clinging will come back. We will get caught up, contracted, resistant, and angry. We will complain, resist, or cower.

The idea of refuge is where our faith is. It is what we entrust our lives to. More than almost anything else, we trust this place of tremendous goodness, the freedom of peace.

People might question this, saying, "Well, that can't be that good. It's dangerous out there in the world. We have to take care of ourselves, and just trusting being peaceful and not clinging is not good enough." But we can turn this around. Because we know peace, we can see very clearly that getting caught up in hostility, resentments, and regrets is not a good deal. We can see that getting caught up in resentment and hostility is a way of harming ourselves. It is a loss and a diminishment of who we are. That is where danger is. It's dangerous to be caught in clinging, greed, or lust.

We can actually feel when we lose the peace, the calm, the settledness, and the openness by getting caught up in clinging, greed, or lust. When we lose this place where there's no greed, hate, and delusion, we can feel very clearly that something precious and valuable is lost. Something profound and wonderful is lost in the process of getting caught in clinging and greed. We feel that it is not worth it. This is a loss. It is also a kind of self-harming. It is a diminishment of us. We are no longer whole and integrated. We become fragmented around the tightness of preoccupation with something.

It is the same way with delusion. It can be hard to imagine, but it is possible to watch delusion, judgment, bias, and prejudice arise, and see how they diminish us. We can see that treating someone with prejudice and relating to them through the filter of prejudice is awful for them, and it's also awful for us. It's a loss.

When we have the visceral experience within of the absence of greed, hate, and delusion, we might decide, "This is where I want to live from," because not living from there is a loss. It is harmful and not really worth it.

Maybe living without greed, hate, and delusion is not the full story for a satisfied life. But it is certainly a pretty wonderful beginning. But no matter what is important for you to do in your life – not directly tied to the absence of greed, hate, and delusion – don't pick up greed, hatred, and delusion to accomplish those things. Our baseline is to find a way of living where we really have faith, trust, and confidence in that place of freedom.

In Buddhism, refuge makes the most sense. This doesn't have to be a logical thing. You don't have to rely on reason to get you there. But when we practice, or when we have a really deep experience of the possibility of peace or inner freedom, then refuge makes sense. Then refuge can mean, "This is what I have faith in. This is what I trust."

Then the work begins, because it's not that easy to stay there. Unless greed, hatred, and delusion have been destroyed totally, all these things will return. Then the arguments, the struggles, and the questioning begin: "What do I need to do here? Maybe I'm supposed to be angry; I have to be angry; other people want me to be angry; I'm supposed to be upset." We can have many judgments and ideas of how we're supposed to be that are different from the absence of greed, hate, and delusion. There are other ways of being where there is social and familial authority saying that sometimes we have to want, be greedy, be angry, or be deluded.

Do we succumb to that? Do we give in to that? We can feel that we have refuge, and we can trust the place of freedom. But then we might ask, what about this circumstance? What about here? That is where the practice is. Right on that line between where the freedom is and where there are tendencies to lose that freedom. That is a fascinating place of practice, a really important place of practice.

If a person has clearly and decisively gone for refuge, meaning they've conclusively decided to orient their lives from that place where there's the potential to be without greed, hate, and delusion, that gives the context of practice a very powerful momentum and a very powerful direction and guide. That is a wonderful life.

My hope is that the ability to learn how to navigate our life without greed, hate, and delusion, without clinging, will also enable us to live with great motivation – to live courageously. We don't complain, but we might protest. I hope that when we should protest against social injustice, for example, because we have refuge, we will be able to do it without fear. We will be able to do it with courage.

The idea of refuge is not passivity. It's only passive in the sense that there's no greed, hate, or delusion. It's not passive in terms of living from our compassion, our care, our kindness, our generosity, and our wisdom. I hope

that this refuge can give you lots of peace and allow you to go through the world in a relaxed, peaceful way, in order to make the world a better place. Thank you.