

Refuge (3 of 5) Refuge in Self

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Yesterday I talked about refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. It is called the Triple Refuge. If you study the ancient teachings of the Buddha, one of the peculiar things is that he never actively suggests that people should go for refuge. He speaks favorably a few times of people going for refuge and the value of doing so. But there are never instructions to go for the Triple Refuge.

He does give instructions for a different kind of refuge than the Triple Refuge. Here is the background for this. The idea of a “triple refuge” as a term predated the Buddha. It was a custom in ancient India to have a triple refuge in three of the gods of the Indian pantheon. Ancient texts talk about this triple refuge – of going for refuge in the ancient gods – that people would do. So it was already a custom in ancient India for people to do something called the “triple refuge.” When the Buddha came along, he directed that language, ritual, and way of expressing faith towards the Buddha, Dharma, and the Sangha. This became the new triple refuge.

Most literally, it is an external refuge: the literal Buddha, his teachings, and the community. As I said yesterday, it can also be an internal refuge. We can find what corresponds to this within ourselves. The Buddha gave instructions for refuge at one significant place near the end of his life. He knew he was dying, and so his teachings became particularly significant. He gave the instructions:

Dwell, abide with yourself as an island, with yourself as a refuge, with no other refuge.

With the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as a refuge, with no other refuge.

The metaphor of an island is a place that is safe from the floods and swirls – the strong currents, waves, and tides – of the world. On our coast, you can’t go swimming in very many places because of the ocean’s strong rip currents.

An island is a place of safety – so make yourself a place of safety. Make a refuge of yourself. He goes on to say to do the same thing with the Dharma, with no other refuge. The only way to harmonize these two statements is that the self and the Dharma are somehow the same. The Dharma is not out there, but rather, the Dharma is found somehow in oneself, with oneself. It is a very strong affirmation of one’s personhood as a place of practice and religious value. To call this person that you are the place of the Dharma is itself an affirmation.

This is often not captured so well if we emphasize too much the Buddha’s teachings on not-self. As profound as the teachings on not-self and emptiness can be, overemphasizing them sometimes dismisses the ordinary phenomenological world that we live in – the ordinary experiences of how we are and how we live. I have seen plenty of people dismiss the value of their emotions, intentions, safety, well-being, and health by over-emphasizing some idea that there is no self or that everything is empty. But here we have the Buddha at the end of his life saying: “Make yourself a refuge. Make yourself an island, a place of safety.”

Then he asks a rhetorical question, “Well, how do you do this?” He explains that you do it by practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness:

One dwells observing the body in the body, ardent, aware, and clearly comprehending, having put aside greed and distress for the world.

One abides observing feelings in feelings, ardent, aware, and clearly comprehending, having put aside greed and distress for the world.

One abides observing mind in the mind, ardent, aware, clearly comprehending, having put aside greed and distress for the world.

One abides observing dharma in dharmas, ardent, aware, clearly comprehending, having put aside greed and distress for the world.

So the way to make oneself a refuge – the way to make the Dharma the refuge – is the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the real refuge. Mindfulness is the place where we find our safety. Part of the task of mindfulness is to do it long enough, dedicatedly and sincerely enough, to discover how it provides a tremendous place of safety, assurance, value, wisdom, and freedom.

Even though the Buddha is pointing to the self, it is not the conventional idea of self – what we identify as a self, self-identity, or conceit. Rather, it is what opens up when we have this powerful form of awareness. It is not that awareness is the self. But it is almost as if awareness is the closest thing to taking refuge in self – taking refuge in the Dharma. Take refuge in your awareness.

This is not awareness in the abstract. Rather, this is awareness that arises out of or is established in the body, in our feelings, in our mind and mind states, and in the dharmas. In this context, “dharma” means the mental processes of our inner life. There is a clear grounding and connection to the specificity of our lives – the details of what is actually going on within and around us. Be aware of that; be established in it.

We are not distracted, reactive, or caught up in things. But rather, we are clearly aware – to the point that we dwell independently, not clinging to anything in the world. The ability to be mindful is not caught or dependent on anything at all. It is clearly established in this world of ours – in our experience and personhood – not clinging to anything in the world. This is how we make ourselves a refuge – by being aware.

The Pali word for refuge, *saraṇa*, is one of the most powerful expressions of faith, assurance, trust, confidence (religious confidence), inspiration, or enthusiasm – that Buddhism honors. To have all that religious feeling – faith, if you will – associated with awareness and not to gods outside of us, which was the custom before the Buddha.

There is not a savior out there who is going to save or protect us. There is something here within ourselves that is the protection, savior, and place of safety. We do that through practice – not through wishful thinking – but by practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the practice of mindfulness. And this includes *ānāpānasati*, which we just finished going through.

This has been another way in which the Buddha talked about refuge. We will continue tomorrow with other ideas of refuge, a wonderful spiritual quality that supports our practice. Thank you.