

Refuge (4 of 5) Actions as Refuge

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We continue the topic of refuge. Refuge arises in us when we understand that there is profound support for our lives. There is a way of being that provides a sense of safety, purpose, direction, and orientation. When we have some clear insight – this can be the basis or support for how we live our lives.

Refuge is considered to be deeply valuable in Buddhism. As I have been saying, in early Buddhism and the teachings of the Buddha, certain things are highlighted as a worthy refuge. What we most commonly know about is refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Yesterday I talked about having oneself as a refuge. Today I want to talk about action, our activities.

The Buddha also said that we have our actions as our refuge. This is not just a matter of passively allowing, being present, and being the recipient of some deep inner or outer support for us – trusting that we do not have to do anything. Dharma practice is an active practice – doing is part of it. Hopefully, what we are doing is learning how to act in ways that are wise, healthy, and nourishing – free of strain, obligation, pushing, being busy, and free of conceit and self-consciousness – which is equivalent to being self-preoccupied.

Action is so important in the teachings of the Buddha that he is referred to as a “teacher of action” in a few different locations in the ancient texts. I guess there were some spiritual teachers at the time of the Buddha who felt that actions were inconsequential – that no matter what you did, it did not have any long-term benefit, effect, or repercussions. Some people interpreted that to mean you could do whatever you wished. It did not matter how immoral or unethical it was. Other teachers at the time of the Buddha said nothing matters, so you should not do anything, and that not doing – radical non-doing – is actually the way forward.

The Buddha taught that some actions are worth doing and some are not worth doing. Over and over again, you see in his teaching, sometimes very emphatically, when people ask him a question like:

Do you believe in restraint?

Do you believe in non-action?

Do you believe in this or that?

The Buddha would answer the question by saying,

I teach doing what is wholesome and not doing what is not wholesome.

In terms of restraint, the Buddha says:

I teach restraint that is wholesome restraint, not the restraint that is unwholesome.

In response to the question, “Do you teach non-doing?” the Buddha says:

I teach the non-doing of what is unwholesome, but not the non-doing of what is wholesome.

When asked, “Do you teach that we should always do X?” the Buddha says:

No, I teach you should always do X that is wholesome. But you should avoid that which is unwholesome or unskillful.

I like to use the words “helpful and unhelpful” or “healthy and not healthy” for this distinction that the Buddha makes repeatedly between the wholesome and unwholesome.

When we do wholesome things in a wholesome way, beautiful things in a beautiful way, and ethical things in a way that does not harm ourselves or others – so that it is nourishing and beneficial – this is how actions can be our refuge.

One action that is emphasized in Buddhism is straight, strong, simple mindfulness – which I consider synonymous with awareness. It is to be consciously, lucidly aware of our experience. As mindfulness is almost always taught, it is awareness, knowing, recognizing what is happening, and not interfering with what is happening. It is allowing each thing to be seen clearly, without our being entangled with it – without being caught in compulsions of desires or aversion, or being for or against it. One of the characteristics of mindfulness is letting things be – just letting things be.

Some people like to talk about a pause – even a sacred pause – of mindfulness. We do not hurtle into the future, into the next moment – speeding along, going from one desire to the other, reaching out, doing, being so busy that the mind becomes claustrophobic or spinning. It is hard to even notice what we are doing because we talk and act before we know what we are going to say and do. This can feel good because it feels like we are free to say and do whatever we want. There are no limitations or frustration.

But in the Buddhist language, this is not real freedom. By pausing from the incessant activities of the mind and the activities we do – provisionally for a moment – we see what is happening here and let things be. We have a clear, deep, full way of recognizing that what we are thinking, what we are about to say or do, may not be wise. It may not be healthy, wholesome, skillful, or helpful. “Maybe I could not do it.” Or we are sensitive enough to feel and know: “Oh, this is a wholesome thing. This is beneficial. This is nourishing.”

Mindfulness practice has a certain passivity – if we are allowed to use that word – of making space, allowing, and learning to feel what is moving through us. As we live our lives, when we have to act, then we are informed by a clear understanding of what is wholesome and unwholesome. The sacred pause of mindfulness – the space that we give to know what is here – gives us the opportunity to choose between these two. It is a sacred choice.

Buddhist practice definitely involves a degree of living a life of choice. This is not because we are always busy, having to analyze and figure things out. Rather, it is because we are deeply in touch – we feel, sense, and are connected to ourselves – and we recognize what is wholesome and unwholesome, helpful and not helpful, healthy and not healthy.

It becomes easier, more natural, and easeful to go in the direction of health and the wholesome, towards that which is nourishing. With time, a ball let loose on a hill will roll downhill. Over time, we will keep moving toward what is wholesome because this is what our heart, our inner system wants. That is the directionality, the way it is leaning.

It is not like we are busy making choices all the time, but we put ourselves in the place where choice can happen. Sometimes we are making a conscious choice. Sometimes we can feel the wholesomeness within us that is choosing: “This is what is good. This is what is helpful.” That becomes our refuge because we do what is wholesome.

A synonym in Buddhism for wholesome is what is beautiful. Another synonym is Dharma or what is dharmic. In the English/Pali dictionaries, the word *dharma* in this context means what is morally good and what is connected to a good quality or inner way of being.

When we choose to go in the direction of what is good, healthy, and beautiful – this supports us. This leads to an inner growth of what is healthy and wholesome. It creates conditions that support the best in us to come forward and live. It creates conditions for discovering greater freedom, peace, love, and compassion. It tends to support reciprocity – a way in which the world reciprocates – not automatically or absolutely – but the world tends to respond to wholesomeness and goodness with the same. The world becomes more and more a refuge and a place of goodness for us when we enter the world in this way.

The Buddha said:

Our actions are our refuge.

Our actions are so important to pay attention to. As I said, the Buddha was a teacher of action in addition to being a teacher of freedom. For the Buddha, these two are closely connected. Actions that are wholesome and nourishing are also ones that lead us to freedom.

We have actions as our refuge. One of the deep principles of early Buddhism is to be a caretaker of your actions. Be a carer, a lover of your actions, in the sense that if you really love something, you want to do it in the best possible way.

For the next twenty-four hours, you might consider how your actions – your behavior, what you do – can be a refuge, support, protection, guide, and place of insight and deep understanding. Have actions as your refuge.

Thank you.