

Refuge (5 of 5) Refuge in Freedom

April 16, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

inspiration, insight, wholesome, unwholesome, Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, greed, hatred, delusion, letting go, releasing, absence, *saraṇa*, safety, safe

Gil Fronsdal

The topic this week has been refuge – one of the most important religious sentiments Buddhists can have. Of course, the word “religion” or “religious” is not in the vocabulary of some people who practice Buddhism. But refuge is associated with a deep feeling of inspiration.

Refuge is the source or the quality of inspiration that leads in the direction of freedom and insight, aligning and attuning our lives with the wholesomeness and freedom we are discovering with the practice. We are aligning with a deep sense of knowing and connectivity – an intimacy that comes with doing the practice – like: “Here is a valuable way of living. Here is a valuable place from which to be in the world.”

This is a place that is deeper than when we are spinning around on the surface of things – in stories, memories, preoccupations, and thoughts, based on our desires, fears, and animosities. To learn to let go of the spinning, agitated mind – the surface mind we often live in – and to discover that there is a deep mind and heart we can come from.

Yesterday I made the distinction between the wholesome and the unwholesome. One way to take refuge in action is to take refuge in the wholesome. We take refuge in doing that which is beneficial. For me, the wholesome feels like, “This comes from my depth.” And the unwholesome feels like that which is skimming the surface of my life and experience. It involves surface tension. If the surface tension can relax and we can allow ourselves to come from our depths, then we have something so good that it is worth being our refuge.

What we discover through meditation practice is represented by the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. When we go for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, it is a way of saying, “I go for refuge with the inner Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha” – the part of us that resonates with these beautiful external refuges.

When the Buddha said, “Make a refuge of yourself,” he is kind of saying: “Come here. Don’t look outwardly so much.” He synonymously used, “Be a refuge to yourself” by immediately following that with, “Be a refuge in the Dharma.” This is about discovering the Dharma within us. We become the Dharma. Practice is not meant to make us different from who we are or to brainwash us in some way. Rather, the practice frees up what is the most profound, deep, and meaningful source of support within us – the Dharma.

To discover in some way that we are the Dharma when the surface tensions fall away and this wholesomeness can come forth. Then we take refuge in our actions by distinguishing between wholesome and unwholesome and moving in the direction of the wholesome.

The Buddha talks about two other refuges. The first I would like to mention is the Four Noble Truths. I think of the Four Noble Truths, first and foremost, as deep insight. We live in a wholesome way. We settle the surface mind with its tension. We drop down and – with a quiet, focused mind – we find a way to be connected and intimate with our lived experience. We begin to see more and more clearly what is happening here.

With that, we start seeing the underlying process. We see how our psychological processes and heart-mind move, operate, and unfold. We see the Four Noble Truths – a rich set of concepts with different connotations, applications, and elaborations at different times. One classic way of understanding the Four Noble Truths, at its heart, is that we really start seeing deeply how limiting it is to crave and contract, to be compulsive, to lose our freedom in the drivenness of our thoughts, emotions, desires, and aversions. We see this thirsting, which is underneath it all, and we see the possibility of letting go.

To see beyond craving to the freedom on the other side. We are no longer blinded by craving, thinking this is what life is, and freedom is giving in to all our compulsions. On the other side, we see something wonderful – a

possibility of peace, happiness, and freedom. To see this is an insight. There are other aspects of this insight, but seeing it shows us another possibility. Take refuge in that insight, “*This* is right.”

The last refuge the Buddha mentioned is that when our heart realizes this deep insight, it has the space to really settle in and become whole, at ease, and relaxed. There is a phenomenal letting go or releasing. This is not something we do, rather it is a releasing, stopping, or an ending of three things that we say over and over again, “greed, hatred, and delusion.” Because we say it repeatedly, we may gloss over or dismiss it: “Oh yeah, yeah. This is Buddhist stuff.” But it is so significant. Greed, hatred, and delusion lie at the heart of all unwholesome behavior. And they get released and let go of.

The absence of greed, hate, and delusion – *this* is a refuge. To have experienced this refuge – the protection, understanding, and value of being without those deep unwholesome tendencies – is to have experienced the most powerful refuge we can have.

At the end of his life, the Buddha said he had made a refuge of himself. This means that he had done the practice all the way to the complete letting go of greed, hatred, and delusion. He had done wholesome things. He had connected to something valuable within, which led him to this deep release. In doing so, he made himself a refuge for himself. He made himself safe for himself – and safe from danger.

This is the possibility of the practice for us. When we go for refuge, we are affirming the value of doing the practice – following the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths, following the path of what is wholesome. We are affirming the value of this deep letting go of everything that is unwholesome. When we do so, we make ourselves our own refuge.

The further we go on the path, the more we will create great inner safety. The greatest danger we have is not external to us. The greatest danger is how we react and respond to what happens to us in our lives – the clinging, attachment, closing down, self-criticism – how we send arrows into our own hearts.

To have made the heart safe – to have made ourselves safe for ourselves – then there is a place of refuge here, no matter how difficult the world is around us. In here is a profound, abiding refuge that comes with the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Finally, in one translation of the suttas, it is not quite accurate that we translate the word *saraṇa* as “refuge.” This is the translation of the Buddha’s teachings in which he says, “Make yourself a refuge for others.” The word that is translated as “refuge” here literally means “safety”: “Make yourself *safe* for others.”

Once we discover the refuge in ourselves, we have the opportunity to become someone safe for others. This is a wonderful quality. Not enough people in the world have a sense of safety. So, to let go and then be able to offer ourselves as a refuge, as a support, and as a compassionate, caring presence for others. Refuge.

Thank you all for this week.