

Taking Refuge

Gil Fronsdal

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Last week I gave a talk on the *Four Noble Truths*. The *Four Noble Truths* describe the core perspective of Buddhism on the path of practice. It calls forth not just a belief, but rather an orientation to understand our life, and then a practice to life, offering a path of practice and engagement. Separate from that is people's emotional, heartfelt relationship to the *Four Noble Truths* or the *Eightfold Path*, with the practice of Buddhism and what the Buddha had to teach. For Buddhists down through the ages, it's not uncommon for people to have a very deep heartfelt connection to these teachings and to the path and practice that's offered. In fact, that heartfelt connection is a very important part because it often fuels people's motivation in practice and inspiration.

So it's not just meant to be a dry description of a path, but rather it's also meant to be something that actually inspires people. In that inspiration, there's a more heartfelt engagement in what we're talking about. That sense of heartfelt inspiration or that relationship that Buddhists will often have is sometimes described as going for refuge. Today what I'd like to do is talk a little bit about the notion of refuge, some of the different aspects of it as it appears in Buddhism. Down through the centuries, it has been a very important aspect of Buddhist spirituality, the idea of refuge. It's a rich term, it's a rich idea.

In the *Dhammapada*, there are verses that tie together the *Four Noble Truths* and the refuges. The classic formulation of the refuges, which I'll describe in a minute, is a refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. So, in the *Dhammapada* it says,

People threatened by fear go to many refuges, to mountains, forests, parks, trees and shrines.

None of these is a secure refuge. None is a supreme refuge.
Not by going to such a refuge is one released from all suffering.
But when someone going for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha sees with right insight the four noble truths: suffering, the arising of suffering, the overcoming of suffering, and the Eightfold Path leading to the ending of suffering.
This is the secure refuge. This is the supreme refuge. By going to such a refuge one is released from all suffering.

One of the interesting ideas here is it's contrasting what is a secure and what's an insecure refuge. Many people will take refuge or depend on things which may be, in some ultimate way, not dependable. Some people take refuge in their bank account. I've known people here back in the heyday of the big boom in the 90s. I knew a number of people who'd come here and talk to me and were really counting on those stock options. Usually when I heard the story, they were worthless.

Somehow they were hoping and building a whole future on them, and then suddenly it didn't happen. So people were depending on it to some degree. People sometimes depend on certain jobs, their career. People depend on their health. People depend on relationships. People take refuge in the banks.

People take refuge in the government. People take refuge in their intelligence or their capacity. There are many things people depend on. In a sense, there's nothing wrong about relying or utilizing these things when they're healthy and appropriate. But it can be a shock when people discover that they weren't ultimately dependable. When something occurs, it takes it away.

People whose health, for example, suddenly takes a dramatic shift from one day to the next. People say, "What happened? I can't depend on this anymore." Or the banks suddenly decide that your money is worthless, which has happened. When I was living in Burma, the government decided that all the main currency that people had, overnight, was considered worthless. Imagine the U.S. government saying, "Sorry, you guys."

That'd be okay, because if you had money in the bank, then it was still considered good. But in Burma, no one trusted their banks. So they had lots of cash under the mattresses at home. All that cash, its value vanished overnight. It was kind of coarse paper, so you couldn't really use it for toilet paper even. It doesn't take a lot to evoke this idea that people will go for refuge in things which maybe are not ultimately a refuge.

Here he's talking about going to mountains, forests, parks, trees, and shrines. Some people run away from the city or urban life to try to find refuge or safety someplace else. Shrines—it's not uncommon for people to go to religions as a kind of refuge or dependence, thinking that somehow the religion is going to provide the solution. In the same way, I think there are sometimes quite unhelpful ways of taking refuge in Buddhism or Buddhist practice. Sometimes people hold on to it like a lifesaver. They hold on to the rituals of it, they hold on to the doctrine, they hold on to the community, hold on to teachers in a way that's not ultimately dependable.

All those things can somehow shift and change. Here in this passage, what it's saying is that for someone who has taken refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, if there is understanding, deep understanding of the *Four Noble Truths*, then this is a secure refuge. So the idea of the *Four Noble Truths* providing a very deep refuge for us. The idea of refuge is an interesting term. It has connotations or alternative translations; the word *saraṇa* includes protection or safety. Sometimes, refuge is likened to being in a secure cave.

Back in the old days, a cave was a secure, good place to be, protected from the forces around you. So it has this idea of some place of protection and support or safety. But the idea of refuge might lend itself to the idea of kind of passive dependence. That there's a kind of passivity to it, where you can relax and somehow you'll be taken care of. "Oh, I'm connected now to one of the great world religions and now everything will be okay for me. I just have to be connected to it, kind of hold on to it."

Or somehow the Buddha, take refuge in the Buddha. The Buddha somewhere in some ethereal realm is going to somehow watch over me and make sure that I'm okay. The idea of refuge in Theravādan Buddhism does not imply something passive, something that you can just float on and relax. It implies something that we enter into. It has three connotations, the idea of refuge. It has the idea of a choice that we make.

So an intentionality, a determination, orientation, a choice, a direction for our life. It implies an understanding. It comes with a certain understanding. Sometimes the idea of refuge in the later Theravādan tradition is considered to be synonymous with understanding. The third is that it involves a degree of heartfeltness or emotional connectedness. Some people like to use the word "faith," perhaps, for some of that, but an emotional kind of inspiration or movement within us.

As a determination or a choice, I like to think of refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Saṅgha as the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Saṅgha resonating with something inside of us that

has meaning. So it's not that the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Saṅgha is something out there as much as it represents, it's symbolic, of something that we recognize, come to recognize in ourselves. Nothing else has a potential. In the example of the Buddha, it's certainly nice to be inspired and in some ways think about the Buddha as a wonderful teacher and go to his teachings for help in our spiritual life. Some people take refuge in the Buddha in that capacity. There's a whole other thing to take refuge in the Buddha, not as a person, but as an exemplar of someone who has discovered a degree of peace and awakening and liberation, which is our potential as well.

The Theravādan tradition very adamantly will say the Buddha was not a god. The Buddha was a human being. Later, in other forms of Buddhism, sometimes the Buddha takes on god-like qualities. But in this early tradition, the Buddha was like us. Maybe unusually bright, or spiritually adept or something, but still, he was like us. In that being like us, whatever he discovered, in terms of freedom and liberation and love and compassion, is something that we can discover as well.

So take refuge in the Buddha also implies us taking refuge in recognizing this is something in me as well. This is the potential that I have. To take refuge in the Dhamma also has the sense that something external can have. It's the Buddha's teachings, it's the practices that he taught to put those teachings into place, and it's also the realizations that come when we do those practices. So the Dhamma here has three meanings: the teachings, putting them into practice, and the result of putting them into practice. The teachings are kind of external, but putting them into practice and discovering them for ourselves, Dhamma in ourselves, is the internal refuge, discovering in ourselves.

So going for refuge doesn't imply just something external, but also something that happens within us. The community implies a little bit of the same thing as well. The community is those people who have somehow tasted the results of the practice, somehow seen some results of practicing in their life. But then also, taking refuge to the internal Saṅgha is taking refuge in those good qualities within ourselves, the potential in ourselves that we see in the external Saṅgha, the external community of practitioners. So there's this internal and external movement that goes on. There has to be the sense of recognizing in ourselves something that we also recognize outside.

There's a resonance that happens. Then there's a choice to make this a central orientation for one's life. Generally, for people who take refuge, there's a recognition, "This is really important. I'm acknowledging something that's really important for me." A direction for my life,

an orientation, a ground from which my life is going to be lived. In a sense, what the refuge represents for Buddhists is that the world that we live in is given a certain meaning.

It's given a certain sense of purpose, what life is about. Many people will encounter in their life lots of suffering and a lot of difficulties and a lot of confusion. There's a lot of choices we have to make in life about how to live our lives. It can be quite overwhelming for some people, life circumstances, and there can be a lack of essential meaning. What's the purpose of this life? What am I doing? Where am I going? What's happening here?

The refuge is, in some way, that you have your—oh, this world I live in now has meaning. Maybe not meaning because it's external meaning you can go read meaning in some place externally, perhaps, but rather you have a sense: I choose now, I'm making a choice. My life has this meaning, meaning in the sense of this purpose. This purpose is that a spiritual life—to use kind of colloquial, generic language perhaps, ecumenical language—that my life now has a spiritual base, a spiritual purpose or spiritual meaning. In the Buddhist context, you could say a little bit more refined, you could say, my life now has a Buddhist meaning or Buddhist purpose. If people are allergic to that kind of language, to be a little more refined even still, and more to the point, my life now is oriented or given meaning around the movement from freedom from suffering.

The movement to liberation. Whether it's for oneself, or for others, or for both, somehow that movement is making sense of this world. Yes, there is an ultimate purpose here. There's a purpose to be liberated from suffering. The result of that liberation is an experience of peace, unbounded, boundless peace and love. That's something that is important for me.

This is kind of, "I'm going to make this the orientation that's really important." Some people will do it 100 percent. They make their whole life that orientation. Some people, in a sense, it's the primary orientation, but it really infuses other things they do. They don't go off and become a monk or nun or a full-time practitioner or something, but rather they have other things to do as well. But underneath it all is that background, or underneath that, supporting that, is the idea that there is a path I'm on here.

There is a direction that I can take this life. Now let me see how the other things I do can support that direction or that path, that going there. Sometimes a sense of refuge is most important for people when life is most difficult. When there's some kind of crisis in our life—it could be a health crisis, or someone's dying or dead in their family or a close one, or there's social disruption, or all kinds of crises that can occur. For some people, that's a time when refuge has the most meaning. Because rather than succumbing to chaos or succumbing to

hopelessness, there's some sense that there is hope.

There is a possibility. There's a path. There's something I can orient myself towards. There's something I can rely on. I can rely on this path, this engagement in practice that other people have done. I've known other people who have done it.

So I could do it, too. It gives meaning. It's a purpose to what I'm doing here. I've known a lot of people who have found themselves in tremendous crisis in their lives. But because of their trying to be mindful and present and explore the path, find the path of practice through it, clarify their own attachments, their own fears, find where the peace and liberation is in those situations, at the end of that crisis have grown dramatically. It really has been one of the best—sometimes, occasionally, it's been one of the best things that happened in their lives, even though we never wished it on them, but it really propelled them into a new place.

I've also known people who had no sense of a path, no sense of a possibility, no sense of some orientation in which to understand their crisis, and it kind of drained them. They were snowed under by it, by that experience. For Buddhists, the idea of refuge is particularly important in terms of crisis. Some form of crisis is not an external crisis, but rather is a crisis in our own mind. Not everyone's mind all the time is a benign, friendly environment. Sometimes our minds can appear for some people to be their worst enemy.

Sometimes our minds prompt us to do things that later we tremendously regret. All you have to do is read the newspapers, read all kinds of accounts of things that people probably later regretted having done. Sometimes, aside from what a mind gets us to do that later we regret, our minds also can be very harsh and very critical to ourselves. It can have certain tendencies, powerful addictive tendencies or neurotic tendencies or all kinds of things that go on in our mind that make it very hard. Sometimes a sense of trying to control things, control our life, is in hyperactive mode. Sometimes it's the opposite that's in hyperactive mode—just kind of giving up, a sense of hopelessness.

“My mind is just hopeless. I just can't get out of this sense of hopelessness.” Here also, the idea of refuge can be very important. The idea here is maybe there is something besides your neurotic mind that you can depend on. Many people, sometimes people have neurotic minds without thinking of it necessarily, have taken refuge in their minds. Taking refuge in those thoughts.

Taking refuge, or depending on, relying on these heavy judgments or aversive thoughts or addictions that go on, as if this is really what I have to do with my life. Sometimes a refuge,

the idea of refuge, has tremendous meaning as an alternative to being caught up in our own mind. Or an alternative to thinking that it's up to me, but every attempt I make to try to find a way out of my predicament, I just seem to dig my grave deeper, more and more. So the idea of refuge, for some people, is a way of stepping out, realizing that out of their normal way of engaging the world and relaxing and realizing perhaps there's another way besides being the one in control, the one in charge. For some people, the idea of an external Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha is helpful for that deep relaxation. For other people, it's more the internal sense that there's some kind of self-healing, self-regulating, self-liberating possibility in the mind itself.

If we just get out of the way, don't try so hard, there is a process of liberation that's innate in who we are. We don't necessarily have to always be riding up close, but we can relax a little bit and let something else carry us and hold us. So the refuge has this idea that something else besides our small self, perhaps, our egotistical self, can support and help us along in this way. So, what aspects of refuge is this kind of making a choice or an orientation? This is what's important for me. I think probably anybody involved in any spiritual tradition whatsoever, at some point comes to a place where they make a choice.

This is important for me. This is what I'm going to do. I'm going to follow this. Sometimes spirituality can hit you from the back, through the back door, and you realize what hit you. Suddenly there's a radical change or shift or opening or something that happens. But even in that kind of situation, there's often a kind of a choice that's made.

"Oh yes, this is important and I think I'll go along with this." Or there can be a choice not to go along with it. Hold it, you know, please, later. Or spirituality is very quiet. It doesn't come in through the back door as a big shock, but rather kind of slowly, slowly seeps in. You hardly notice a change.

But then at some point you realize, this has become a really important part of my life. There could be a change or a recognition of, "Oh, this is what I'm making my orientation. This is what I'm making the perspective that I'm gonna hold my life in." The second aspect of refuge is that of knowing. There's an aspect of knowing in refuge or understanding, maybe understanding or insight as part of it. Here, this is very important.

So you don't think that refuge is some kind of blind faith, some blind adherence or blind belief to the Buddha and Dhamma externally. Rather, it's a deeper knowing or understanding about something about the process of transformation, the process of change that our life is about. It's a deeper knowing about the potential or possibility of an alternative to being caught in the

cycles of suffering or caught in the cycles of neurosis or caught in the cycles of fear. To have some sense of knowing a path to that, knowing a way to get there, to know the importance of mindfulness, to know the importance of loving kindness perhaps, to know the importance of community to practice with. There's a lot of things you could know. But at the heart, it's to know something like the *Four Noble Truths*.

To somehow really understand the *Four Noble Truths* is not some kind of creed, but rather it's describing a process of inner change that is accessible to all of us if we just turn in that direction. So there's an understanding that means part of refuge. I go for refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Saṅgha also means then I go for refuge in what I most deeply know. What I most deeply know. It's easy to forget that. You can really deeply know something.

You have a deep experience, you can have a deep understanding, a deep practice that you have access to and know about. But in times of crisis, you might forget about it or you might not feel, oh, it just seems so far away. Going for refuge is a reminder about something hopefully the person knows. Hopefully knows that which you know most deeply. What do you know? Take refuge in that.

Rely on that. Depend on that. Be inspired by that. The third form of refuge, or aspect of refuge, is that of kind of an emotional connection to this. So this is going to be kind of a heartfelness. Kind of a heart is into it.

So it's not a sense of duty. It's not a sense of obligation. Maybe it's not even so serious. I like to think, when I was living in the Buddhist monastery for several years, I went up to the teacher there and said, "You know, I don't really take anything that seriously anymore. But the thing I take most seriously is my practice." Now, that could be a symptom of someone who's depressed.

You know, don't take anything so seriously anymore. But it was actually an expression of the freedom that I was beginning to feel. I wasn't someone who was blowing things off and didn't care about things. Actually, I cared about things more after my years of practice. But I held them much more lightly than I had before. So that sense of lightness.

Hopefully the sense of the *Four Noble Truths*, the sense of refuge, brings us a lightness of being rather than a heaviness. But it also can bring a sense of joy and happiness and warmth within us. So this idea of refuge also has a sense of warmth, or happiness, or gladness. Something like gladness, the heart and the mind. When Buddhists go for refuge, like when they do a refuge ceremony or chant at refuges, they're also connecting to something that's emotional

within them. That emotionality sometimes is evoked.

Sometimes the emotional aspect, if it's the only thing that's evoked, can be kind of blind devotion or unhealthy kind of devotionism. But if you understand that emotional quality being evoked together with a choice of orientation, taking responsibility for our lives and saying, "This is what I'm going to do," and a deep understanding, then I think the emotional aspect gives a lot of warmth and joy to the other aspects of the path. So Buddha, Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, taking refuge in these things. The word refuge here is, I'm talking about it because in the Buddhist tradition it's a very rich concept. To give you a sense of the richness of it, so maybe you can have a sense of how you want to relate to it. Now, in a somewhat quiet, little bit, kind of, think of it maybe quiet, backwater areas of Buddhism, places where the Buddha taught, the teachings of the Buddha, that often I've noticed, kind of slipped it in a little bit like a footnote.

A little bit in the footnote in the tradition, down through the centuries, in the Theravāda tradition is also the notion of a fourth refuge. Mostly people talk about three refuges, but there is sometimes a fourth one which is mentioned. In some of the non-Theravāda traditions, like the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the fourth refuge is the guru. In some Tibetan traditions, where the guru is the refuge, there is very clearly a sense of surrendering your own choice, your own will, and the guru is going to decide things for you—who you're going to marry, what practices you're going to do. Just kind of surrender, surrender, surrender is part of that. You're supposed to see the guru as kind of like the Buddha—all-knowing, all-wise Buddha.

Whatever they say and do is great. In the Theravāda tradition, there is no sense of a guru like this. A teacher in the Theravāda tradition is called *kalyāṇamitta*. That's one of the terms. There are other terms too, but one of the ideas is the *kalyāṇamitta*. A *kalyāṇamitta* is a Pāli word which means "good spiritual friend."

The important word is the word "friend," *mitta*. So rather than someone who's your guru, the teacher is someone who's meant to be your friend. Part of the reason for that is that the path of practice in Theravāda Buddhism is something you have to undertake for yourself, something you have to walk yourself. The Buddha's teachers only point the way and encourage you and mentor you and support you as you do something. Basically, maybe we're, in Theravāda tradition, teachers are coaches. Now we have executive coaches, all kinds of coaches.

So we're kind of like coaches because you have to do the work. We're kind of friends. The idea is more friends for people rather than someone who's kind of a hierarchy, hierarchically

higher above, telling you what to do. So the fourth refuge is not the teacher, the guru. In Theravādan tradition, the fourth refuge is yourself. Isn't that nice?

Since you have to walk the path yourself, there has to be some sense of reliance, some sense of dependence on yourself that you can fall back on yourself. Somehow you have the qualities, you have the potential for liberation, the potential for walking the path, can be found in yourself, is found in yourself, and has to be found in yourself. Yourself is something that's really beautiful, something important. The Theravāda tradition has this wonderfully confusing teaching where you are the ultimate refuge. You can be a refuge for yourself and this teaching about not-self. How are you supposed to hold that?

But the teaching of not-self is not supposed to be a teaching that you don't exist, and therefore you can't make any movement or effort on your own. It's rather that the teaching of not-self is all the movements that you take, all the movements of practice that you take, don't identify with it so tightly. Don't think that this is who you really are. There's nothing you can take as being "this is who you really are," but there still is, in a colloquial sense, me here. Generally, no one else feeds you. We feed ourselves, right?

Even the people who understand that nothing qualifies as a self feed themselves, generally. So there is a way in which you kind of take refuge in ourselves as someone who is capable of walking the path, someone who has a dignity to walk the path, someone who has—the path can be found within us. Because the Buddhist path is not an external path. You will not find the Buddhist path at IMC. It won't be found here. Ever.

So, you'll never come back now. Now that we've confessed it. You will not find it at Spirit Rock. You will not find it at Zen Center. You will not find it at any Buddhist center anywhere in the world. The only place you'll find the Buddhist path is in your own heart.

It's in yourself. So, to take refuge in self is to take refuge in this is where it's found. This is where it's discovered. This is where it's created. This is where we walk it, within ourselves. Taking refuge is not an act of dependence, childlike dependence on some religious ideal or some religious community or some religious leader.

It's rather a movement towards adult-like responsibility. Kind of a movement into growing up. Growing up rather than being a child. In that growing up, as we grow up more fully, there's a beautiful thing that happens. Our self-consciousness begins to fall away. As our self-consciousness falls away, then the sense of self gets more and more transparent and empty.

When it gets empty enough, then we become the Buddha. We become Buddha-like. So ultimately, when you treat the refuges in Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha as something external to you, that you take refuge in, then, conventionally, people sometimes are called—they are now Buddhists. If you take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Saṅgha that's within yourself, then you become a Buddha. Then you become—the difference between being a Buddhist versus being Buddhist. It's very important to take that "A" away.

Because if you are a Buddhist, then it implies perhaps the idea that you have an identity. This is who I am. I am a Buddhist. I'm one among all those different kinds of Buddhists. Whereas if you say, "I am Buddhist," from my mind, it implies that the inner qualities of a Buddha, the inner qualities of freedom, the inner qualities of love and compassion and caring, the inner qualities of mindfulness, that those are becoming more and more part of who we are, as opposed to who we are. So, to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha.

And to understand that in doing that, that we also can take refuge in ourselves. So don't take it too seriously, but it can still be the most serious thing. So thank you very much.