

Dharmette: Refuge Instead of Ruminating

Gil Fronsdal

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I was quite touched by the different practice discussions I had today. One of the themes that ran through them was that of refuge. A number of people brought that up. Then I reflected upon it a little bit just now, recalling the conversation I had last week with someone who was deeply steeped in the world of the study, the field of psychotherapy. He told me that one of the really important insights apparently that they have in modern psychotherapy is that most of the therapeutic, psychologically therapeutic problems or psychological problems that people have, that therapy is supposed to address, are exacerbated or strengthened or come to be because people spend too much time thinking about themselves. There's a way in which it's very easy to get on the bandwagon of self-reflection.

There's something about that reflection that's a little bit addictive or very much kind of self-propelling. It's kind of like we think something about ourselves that's uncomfortable, and then there's a reaction to the discomfort, like this is something wrong here or something wrong with me, and I have to consider it and reflect on it. The very idea that something's wrong with me doesn't feel good. There we have more not feeling good. That prompts more self-concern about, like, I have to fix what's not good about me. Certainly there's something not good about me here.

What is that? The very looking for that problem or trying to understand it itself doesn't feel good. There's this kind of pulling into what doesn't feel good world to address it, to solve it, to fix it, to care for it, maybe out of compassion even, that kind of perpetuates a cycle of being caught in it. Sometimes it's called rumination. I kind of love this word, rumination. I think we should use it a lot because it's what cows do.

My hope is if people say to themselves, boy, I'm ruminating a lot, they'll think of cows. That'll somehow pop the bubble or somehow bring a smile on their face. That's what I've come to. I thought human beings are like the pinnacle of biological sophistication. It turns out I'm not any different than a cow. I love cows. I lived on a dairy farm for a while, worked on one.

One of the antidotes to this excessive self-reflection that some people are capable of—some people don't even know how to put it down, it just goes on and on—is to understand that our life exists in a wider field, a wider context. There's more to our life than just our thoughts. There's more to our life than just focusing on self. The idea of refuge is one of those things that points to that. There's something more here that's supporting us than our own ability to be in the labyrinth of thinking over and over again, in the maze that there's no way to get out.

I feel this coming here today, and when you guys showed up and were sitting here together, I'm not just sitting here alone. I'm sitting here with all of you. But more than just all of you, there is a collective silence, a collective presence, a collective intentionality that I feel. That touches me a lot, that I feel like I'm part of some wider field now of practice that I don't feel if I'm alone. I feel supported by that. I feel connected to that.

I feel like there's more happening here than what's inside my own skull. It's meaningful for me. I just came back from Tassajara, the Zen monastery in the Big Sur Mountains. I used to live there, I used to pose a monk there. So for me, there's very strong associations. Just to go into that valley, going into the meditation hall there, to be in the community, I feel like now there's so much more going on here than what I can think about.

It's almost like I'm surrounded or nurtured or nested by a lot of field of goodness that's informing me, that's touching me, that's guiding me, that's inspiring me, that I can't associate, I can't pinpoint in the middle of my thinking world, my thoughts that spin around, my thoughts, what I think about. That's not where that nurturing is found. It's found in this wider context. We talk about refuge as being refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and the Saṅgha. Saṅgha is the people we practice with. Dharma is most simply said to be the teachings of the Buddha that point to guide us in meditation, guide us to the wisdom of the Dharma, guide us to live a good life.

It's wonderful to have these teachings that are available. Some people feel very comforted or inspired to know that there are these wonderful body of teachings that they can dip into. When they need inspiration, they need support, they need guidance, those teachings are there available, you know, in the bookcase. The Dharma is also more deeply than the teachings in a book, but rather in the practices that you can do. To know there's something else besides your own spinning world of thoughts, there's practices. Putting your body on the cushion, putting your body in walking, being honest as in careful and full way as you can about what your experience is, are powerful practices.

To learn how to be comfortable with discomfort, to be engaged in that process of freedom

is a refuge because it's not up to just you. What we say in the Dharma is that what we contribute to the practice is create the conditions so that something can grow inside of us, so that something can be shed inside of us. The two come together, whereas as we grow like a snake, we shed our skin. As we grow in the Dharma, we shed our attachments. We're not actually doing this. We're supporting this amazing process that you can feel inside. Goodness is welling up. Oh, there's more going on here inside of me than just me. Isn't that good? Do you know there's more in you than just you?

It's what a relief. So, take refuge in the Dharma that way. The refuge in the Buddha—some people are quite inspired that there was such a being, such a person as a Buddha, that someone understood so much, realized so much. But the Buddha, when he talked about refuge in the Buddha, he talked about refuge in the Buddha's awakening. Immediately, it's in something that we're capable of too. It's almost like he's deflecting it from himself and saying, yes, it's the awakening that's important. The awakening that also holds you, it's available for you, that's a potential for you.

I love the metaphor of awakening because if I have a really good nap and wake up, I'm not caught in my thoughts anymore. I might be thinking, but there's a wider field now of clarity, of space, of openness. Especially if I wake up in my nap, I don't start up with things right away. The biggest danger I have with taking naps now in my old age is that when I wake up, I'm so content that I don't want to get up. I just lay there. Why should I get up? I am. I lay there and look at the ceiling and like everything's good. There's a feeling of goodness, a feeling of just nothing needs to happen, a feeling of ease, a feeling of wakefulness as a clarity and a spaciousness and a simplicity to it that is not crowded with to-do lists, not crowded with fear or anxiety or aversion, resentments.

To be awake, to me, is this wonderful metaphor that the Buddha did it in some kind of really thorough way. I hope that all of you have, at least once in your lifetime, had an ordinary wake up from a nap or from a sleep and felt refreshed, felt clear, felt, "This is good. I had a good night's sleep." So that's the reference point. Now we're just taking that and building it and making it bigger or fuller, making it be possible for our life to be that way. So all these things, refuge then, is there something that's larger than ourselves that is supporting us, that protects us, that guides us, that inspires us, that orients us in how to live this life?

It's so good to realize there's more here than you that's supporting you, more here than you that's protecting you, more here than you that is helping you find your way through this life. That's the refuges. Classically in Buddhism, that's what it's called. What is it for you? Do you have some sense of what's here? Maybe it's part of you, but not that little one you that you

identify as. This is who me, myself, and I is. The part of you that's functioning inside that you can't take credit for. You can't say, I'm doing this. But it's supporting you and guiding you.

Is there something around you that holds you? Are you saturated like I was at Tassajara by goodness? It's easy to read the news and get caught up in the labyrinth of thinking about and reacting to what's happening in the world and forget to notice the goodness that's right here now. It's very important not to forget it. Because as bad as things are in the world, as much suffering there is and cruelty there is in this world of ours, the last thing we want to do is to add more suffering to it. Don't suffer because the world is suffering. That doesn't make any sense. That accumulated growth of suffering just grows and grows. There is another way that we don't want to ignore the suffering. We don't want to be blind to it.

But don't give up on the goodness, the peace, that's actually much more available each moment, each day, now, here, when that amazingly difficult thinking mind can become quiet enough to just be open to the refuge that's here, be open to the beauty that's here, that's open to the goodness that's here, the love that's here. It's here, it is available here. So try to be a human, not a cow. I hope I didn't offend anyone. And so thank you very much.