

I Walk In Refuge With The Buddha

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So this morning, my wife read me headlines from a news site that she was reading. And the headline said something like, to have a happy life, don't be frightened. Stop being frightened. Well, that sounds nice. But I also thought, that's great. That's maybe what my topic is today, because that topic is a very Buddhist topic, and it's the topic of refuge.

Right. And so those of you who don't know much of Buddhism, it'll become clear, well, you know, how central it is. And refuge, and the idea is to, often we talk about going to refuge or going in refuge, going to some place that's safe or someplace that's protected. And that can be both inspiring to some people to know that there can be safety to be had in this dangerous world we live in. And for some people, they could seem kind of off-putting because it seems like it's withdrawing, that's pulling back into some place that we're going to be all safe and comfortable and not really in the world how it is.

So I'll tell you a story from some years ago that just delighted me when I understood what was going on. It just kind of could get all turned on a moment. So I was in a training. And we invited a trainer to come. And as a way of beginning our time together, the trainer said, take out a piece of paper and pen, and write down what you need to feel safe here. And I thought, this is okay, this is good, to create safety.

And if we have safety, then we could all share and be together nicely. And I kind of imagined we would share what we had written and that would create community and safety in itself or something like that. So everyone was very earnest and was writing away what they needed for safety. And then she said, okay. And so then everyone came back and was sitting there and ready for the next thing. And she said, okay, now you bring that with you.

If you need safety, you bring that with you, that very thing. So you kind of turned it around in the way that no one expected it. And if you turned it around kind of to make each person responsible for themselves to create the safety that they would have there. Now, this also could be inspiring and it could also be off-putting, because there are real dangers in the world, and what? Now I'm responsible. People have been dumping on me forever, and now I'm supposed to be the one.

And so, but there is a refuge. There is a place to find protection and safety that is not withdrawing from the world, but actually allows us to be in the world more fully. There is a place to find protection and safety that is not withdrawing from the world, but actually allows us to be in the world more fully. And it's a little bit like, and maybe it's a little bit too pedestrian of a metaphor, and it's a little bit, but most of us, most of you here, I think, great majority of you, in order to come here today, you probably put on shoes.

And in putting on your shoes, you're protecting your feet. So it's a little bit easier to walk around and get here. By having protected feet, safe feet, it's actually easier to go where you want to go in this world. And we don't say we're giving refuge, protection to our feet. And it's worried, welcome now, you're disappearing, you're not available to us, you're disconnecting from the world. You know, this is really a problem, these Buddhists who wear shoes.

No, it actually allows us to step into the world more freely and we're available for a world, more connected, rather than going so gingerly. And so it's the same way with this refuge, this refuge that Buddhists discover, that to have that refuge actually allows us to go into the world better and fuller. It's not a withdrawal. And so usually there is considered to be three refuges. And these are called the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha.

So the Buddha is the exemplar, and the founder of Buddhism is an exemplar of what's possible. He's more important that he's the exemplar than it is he is the founder of Buddhism. He's the example of how thoroughly a person can become happy and free. There's a Dhamma, which are his teachings for sure, that point to that possibility, but also the underlying kind of patterns of life that we tap into in order to find our inspiration, in order to find our safety. And then there's a Saṅgha, which is the community of practitioners, especially the community of practitioners who have really tasted the freedom that Buddhism is about.

But it could be any of our fellow practitioners. And then the way that it's usually chanted, it's actually one of the core rituals of Buddhism, where people will chant, Buddhāṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, and it goes on. And the gacchāmi at the end is a literal meaning means to walk. And Buddhāṃ is Buddha and saraṇa, is refuge. And with the way the grammar is, it's actually you have a fair amount of choice about how you put it together grammatically.

The most common, perhaps, in English, is I go for refuge to the Buddha. But what I'd like to offer today is something different. I walk in refuge together with the Buddha. I walk in refuge with the Dhamma. I walk in refuge with the Saṅgha. And the word walk is kind of a metaphor for moving through life.

When it's just saying it in my mind, I become minded of a Native American religious idea that is to walk in beauty. That's inspiring. And for Buddhists, we say walk in refuge. And we have company for that process. We have companionship. We're not doing it alone.

Their support. And so we walk in refuge with the example of the Buddha, with the guidance of the Buddha, with the way leading the Buddha provided. We go for refuge with the Dhamma. We walk in this world with the support, with the companionship of these teachings, and then with the community. And this idea of walking is something that each person needs to do themselves.

So bring your own safety. Bring your own refuge. You have to do something. It's not like just this going for refuge. It's not sitting on your couch and just looking out waiting for something to protect you. And like, I'll be fine if I just hold on tight to these things.

It does require stepping into the world. It does require living a life, a life that's dangerous to some degree, a life that has its challenges. A life where maybe the biggest challenge is you yourself, to yourself. And so to step into that and see it, to hold it, to be with it, to walk in this world. And so that comes to something that's seldom talked about in Buddhism.

And that there is a fourth refuge that the Buddha taught. The Buddha never actually told anyone that they were supposed to engage the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha as the refuge. The one thing he did say in terms of refuge, he said, make yourself a refuge. And so the fourth refuge is yourself. And so that goes back again, to be safe, bring it with you.

Or to say it may be nicer. We have to find something. It's up to us to find a way of being in the world that we create, we make a refuge. And eventually, as we make ourselves a refuge, we make ourselves a refuge for others. We become someone who's safe for others. We make ourselves someone that we then accompany and support others in their deep process of becoming free, becoming themselves.

And so there are three different kind of main meanings that this walking in refuge implies. It implies an understanding, something that provides meaning, gives meaning to our life, an understanding to our life. It implies something that is motivating, something that we can commit ourselves to or be devoted to. And it implies some form of inspiration, something that's heartfelt, some kind of the classic language in the tradition is some kind of gladness or joy that bubbles up from the inside.

So those are the three kind of elements of what means to walk in refuge. And so there's an understanding we come to. So it's not magical thinking. Oh, if I just trust the Buddha with-

out knowing what you're doing. The idea is you have to understand something. And that understanding doesn't come from reading books.

It doesn't come from listening to my talk. It might be somehow a byproduct of it, these things, but the real understanding comes from yourself. You begin seeing and experiencing for yourself something profound, something very meaningful. And for different people, this can be different things. I don't want to be very careful. I don't only give one example or just leave you an impression there's only one thing it can mean.

For some people, it's seeing dramatically clearly and how they are contributing to their own suffering, by what they're clinging to, attached to, what they're resisting, what they're fighting, what they're rebelling against, what they are running away from. And it's a whole slew of things. And to see that so clearly, wow, I thought it was the world that was doing it. But I'm contributing to this in the way. And lo and behold, I see that it's possible, as difficult as I might be, I'm inspired, I'm motivated. I know it's possible to chip away at this way in which I'm contributing to my suffering.

Even if it takes me a lifetime, that's how I want to walk. I want to move through this life, engage in this life. So I stay close enough, attentive enough, to my inner life, so I began chipping away at how I keep adding to my suffering, adding to my challenges, how I keep making it worse for myself. And so the inspiration there might be, the understanding there, is maybe the motivation is encapsulated by the expression, I won't make it worse. No matter what's going on, I'm not going to make it worse. And for some people, that's maybe a really great and great possible.

It seems like at least that's possible. I can't make it better. That's too high a bar. That just seems too much to make it better. But at least I'll stop making it worse. That's how I'll walk through this world. And we'll chip away at it.

For other people, it is something better that they discover through this practice. And I was trying, thinking about this talk, I was trying to remember for me, what words would I use to describe what I discovered? Because it was something positive that I found that really changed my direction of my life through this practice. And I couldn't quite settle on one word. When I was younger, I used the word integrity for it. But not ethical integrity.

It was more of a sense of feeling whole, like all of myself was there. I felt complete. And I had never felt that way, really in my life in a regular way, I started to be awakened through my meditation. And it wasn't that I was less neurotic or less troubled or my mind's not qui-

eter because I just think a lot. But there was something about the being present for it that something felt complete, something felt like I'm including it all here.

And this inclusion of all of who I am warts and all, that just created a sense of health, a sense of well-being, a sense of healing or something. It might have been a feeling of peace. I felt more peaceful at ease. I might have been more feeling at home here in this being and this world. There are a variety of things I was starting to feel through my meditation and practice. And that became important enough for me that it kind of turned my whole life in a new direction.

And at first it was just a small turn of the ocean liner, but then slowly it got bigger and bigger turn. And that was, I want to now have this, whatever I was discovering in meditation, this is so important, this has so much value. So it feels like nothing else is richer or more true this way of being, at least for me as I walk through the world. I want to walk through the world with this way of being, because this seems right. And now I want to find out how to do that in the world.

I want to find out how to be working outside of meditation. How can I have what I have in meditation? How can I have this in my daily life? And that became a multi-year process. And I made, step by step, I went deeper into Buddhism, not to get more out of Buddhism, or be more Buddhistic, but I wanted to answer this quest I had, which is how do I live from this place of at-homeness or completeness or peace or integrity that I was feeling? I can be lived this way in my whole life because that seemed valuable and important.

And so I had an understanding, which is part of refuge, that it was possible to live a different way. It was a possible to live a way that was settled, at ease, at peace. I was motivated to do so. Not only was I motivated, I was committed. But the commitment was not like hard and fast. I didn't even know I was committed.

It was like, this is what I'm doing. I mean, I wasn't even decide. I didn't even have those words in my mind. I'm saying this in retrospect, looking back at my life when I was in early 20s, that yes, that's what I was dedicated to. This is what I was going to do. And it was heartfelt. There was an inspiration to do it.

It just felt so good. And in fact, the truth was that both of these two things, positive and negative, motivated me. I could see the more I felt better how I was making it worse for myself. And so I was inspired not to make it worse. And I could see what this better way of being was. And I wanted to stay close to it.

And it wasn't just hedonistic. It wasn't just selfish to feel, you know, just better and not feel worse. It had a much deeper kind of feeling of rightness because it was almost like this is what allowed me to be, stop being selfish. This allowed me to stop being self-preoccupied and caught my neurosis. And it was clear that what was being born in this process was, was a greater sense of community, greater sense of compassion, a greater sense of care for the world around me that I didn't have before I started this process.

So for me, the process, these three different aspects of refuge, you know, very alive. It involved an understanding. And for some people, you know, it's related to the topic I talked about last week, the *Four Noble Truths*. For some people, that encapsulates it beautifully for them, this new understanding. And it encompassed a motivation. And it encompassed something that was felt heartfelt.

Or an inspiration. This is like, makes me happy. This seems right. This feels good. That doesn't mean that there was clear sailing for me, and I just kind of like, just... You know, I had a lot of ups and downs, a lot of challenges as I went through this practice, but I never doubted it.

And so that was the refuge. I walked in refuge. I walked in refuge in the practice, in refuge in myself, that I was going to do it. Because I kind of could see that what this is about, I can't contract it out for someone else to do it for me. I had to do it. I had to show up. I had to show up every day.

In some ways, every minute, to show up for this life. And then I had to, you know, keep walking the walk. Keep walking the walk. Keep doing it. Keep finding it. Keep discovering it here and now.

And so this idea of, so then going in refuge, walking in refuge, means that we're accompanied, we're surrounded, we're filled by something that's profoundly important, something's invaluable, and to stay close to that, to be reminded of that. So when I was in my 20s for a while, actually I was living in a place where they had manzanita berries, and I picked all these dry berries, and then I very quickly went to the shop and clearly, and kind of flattened out little sides of them, so I could drill a hole through them. And then I made mala beads from them. So I made my own kind of, you know, a little thing. I carried out my arm for a while. And it wasn't because I was showing off that I was a Buddhist.

They were kind of big and long, you know, like many beads. It was kind of awkward. And so, if I wasn't going to do anything, I was always being reminded of. It was this awkward thing,

you know, bracelet kind of thing was there. And so it was reminding me of refuge, reminding me of the practice. Because I needed help sometimes to remind, oh, yeah, remember, remember.

And sometimes I would go through and you knew this thing where you're like prayer beads, so you could just count them through, you know? And I wasn't doing anything else but doing that, because just, you know, running through them with my thumbs. But that too reminded me, kept me connected. Remember, you stay here, stay here. I know people who really can't concentrate meditation. And so they find they're having these, you know, mala beads, like prayer beads.

And every time they breathe, they do one, and then they stay connected. So what does it take to walk in refuge? And so it's important in Buddhism, this topic of refuge, because it's a turning point for someone. It's a point where the Dhamma becomes, the practice becomes maybe the centrally important thing in their life, where they have a lot of faith, a lot of inspiration, a lot of love for this. And some people say that it's nothing more important than this.

And then other people say, what? The spouse says what? Your kids say what? What? Nothing is more important because we're so much better and more present and maybe even more have more love for all those people in our life. So you can tell them, you know, it's a trade-off. Okay, if you want you want you to be the most... If you want you to be my most important thing, let me tell you the trade-off.

If you're the most important thing, I will not be so happy. And then I'm not able to offer you as much love. But if you allow me to have this practice be the most important thing, then I'll have so much more for you. That's the trade-off. And if you need to bargain, negotiate. You know, that's one approach.

But so, refuge, refuge in the Buddha, refuge with the Buddha, refuge with the Dhamma, refuge was the Sangha. And I like this wording, I go, I walk in refuge with the Buddha. I'm the one who's walking, I'm the one who's engaging, I have to do it. And so like it's kind of like these shoes, if you don't wear them, they can't protect you. You have to walk if you want the shoes to protect you.

You have to walk if you want the Dhamma to protect you. You have to enter into this world and with all of who you are. So this quote that I started by, there was something like, to live a happy life, stop being frightened. I'd like to offer something different. To live a happy life,

bring all of yourself along. Bring all of you to the table.

Bring all of you in as your walk, including your fear. Hold it all together. Let it all be here. And that's the possibility in why I think this Dhamma, this practice is so powerful, so wonderful. It's not to reject any part of ourselves, but finding a way to walk in the world, to be in the world, to be ourselves, where we bring all of it along, and doing so live a wise life.

Doing so live a life that doesn't harm ourselves or others. That's at the heart of the Dhamma. So those are my thoughts today about this topic of refuge. So we have about 15 minutes before the scheduled end. If any of you would like to ask any questions or have comments about this, you're welcome to ask or so speak.

Questioner

I'm wondering if you have any suggestions on refuge with the Saṅgha when you're by yourself. Are you ever by yourself? Did that ever happen? Physically, yes? Oh, physically. Oh, physically. That happens occasionally.

I think that the classic practice of doing that is to bring the Saṅgha to mind. Think about them, remember them, consider them. You know, some people have pictures on the little altar at home, and some people have pictures of the Buddha, well, the pictures, they have maybe of their teachers, teachers that inspire them. So find some way to remember, recall, maybe going for a walk and thinking about it. So being intentional. And this is an example where the answer, these kinds of answers always, how are you going to walk now?

What are you going to do? How are you going to be active in the process of looking for what you're asking for? And so these are some of the ways to bring them to mind. Maybe write a letter to the Saṅgha. Have you written a letter to your Saṅgha? Right? You don't have to mail it. But that might bring it all to mind and the connection you have and make it kind of come alive in your heart in a nice way.

Thank you. Hello, everyone. Thank you. My question is about finding refuge during conflict during a moment that your body is triggered and how to work through that rather than walking away from it. Yes. Well, I mean, there's so much to be said about that, you know, very important topic.

Depends a lot about who you're with, who the conflict is with, and, you know, and what's possible. There are times where, because of who I was with, I asked that can we take a pause? Yes. And I think a few times I've asked, they ask, you know, can I step away for a while? I need to kind of be with myself and process this so we can come back and process this with you.

Because, you know, I'm a little bit, I don't know, my wife says I'm equally introverted and extroverted, but so there are times where I need to really go off by myself and really process it.

Introverts often need to be time alone. It's hard with introverts and extroverts because extroverts want to do it right now in person. And that's what works best for them. So you have to explain, you know, I have a need. I want to take care of this. I want to be honest and really come to the bottom of this. But in order for me to do this effectively, I need to pause.

And sometimes I've done it for three, you know, can I take two or three minutes just to breathe here and just check in so I can come back in a way that's more effective? Yeah. So sometimes that's what necessary. But knowing you have that option, then you don't have to run away. The other is to assess what the other people are capable of. You have to have certain street smarts to see are they capable here.

And maybe the only thing they're capable of is let's lower the temperature a little bit. We can't really resolve this, but let's lower the temperature and... And one way to do that is to name little bit what's happening in a safe way. Like, oh, I see this is difficult for you. And I see it's difficult for you. It's difficult for me. And I'm not sure what to do, but I just want to acknowledge that, yes, this is not an easy thing. Just that.

I learned many years ago, that one way to de-escalate the conflict is really strong, if it's true to the statement, is to let people know you're frightened. Like, you know, wow, you know, this is really difficult for me. I'm scared right now. Especially if someone's angry with you because they're kind of hostile in the conflict. Some people, when they hear that, they shock, like, wow, I have no idea. And they're on notice, like, is this really what you want to do? maybe unconsciously it is.

They want you to get... But when it was made conscious, it's hard for them to kind of want to keep doing that. So just saying, you know, and you're not saying anything about them. You're saying, wow, I'm really afraid. And I need a minute to catch my breath here. And then sometimes it's helpful if you have established ahead of time. So if it's with some friend or a partner or someone you're going to be seeing for a long time, when things are good, you might say, you know, I kind of suspect sooner or later, we're probably going to have some kind of conflict. Maybe. It might be accidental.

But can we have a plan, you know, how we talk to each other, what we do? Can we have a plan of what we can ask of each other so that we don't just go into it with all the plates flying

through the kitchen? But so that we can say, if I lift my hand and say, let's at least sit down together. Or let's both of us go outside and get some fresh air before we continue. Or let's both of us now talk about this only using I statements. And then, so anyway, if you can, plan ahead.

But then in relationship to this talk I gave today, which is really where you have the most possibility of success. People are difficult. So getting everyone to kind of harmonize is not always so easy, but at least harmonize within yourself. And so that's where the... How do you walk? Walk in refuge. Walk connected.

So if a person really has a strong sense of what refuge is for them or what's a really strong sense of a good inner way of being... even if it's not available right away, we have a practice to reconnect to it. We have a practice to try to come back to it. And if we can't really get back to it, but then we have a practice of mindfulness. And mindfulness is part of what mindfulness can do, especially if it partners with a practice of getting grounded. So just sit up straight or stand straight and breathe and just feel what's going on and hold it all in some kind of way.

And really become very clear what your experience is right now. And that clarity of what's happening is a refuge. So those are some things to do. But I don't want to imply that it's easy. Thank you.

So, yes, Cheryl. A number of years ago, in fact, probably more than once, told a story, which was very interesting, a personal story, about being on the street at night in San Francisco. Is that a story? I don't know if you've told it lately or not. Would you be willing to tell it? It's not that long a story. And I doubt whether you've forgotten it.

I have all kinds of San Francisco street stories, but maybe it's the woman in the car? No, you're walking with a friend. You were walking with a friend, and these guys came up to you with a gun, I think. They what? With a gun? Oh, it wasn't, no, that's not me, no. There was a friend of mine who someone came up with a gun and I had a few friends who were held up at gunpoint in San Francisco but maybe the one that I'm thinking of one of them was useful seemed like a very useful thing to do.

I remember one of them was the person just looked at this young man with a gun and said something like, you know, you're not a good Christian. Your mother would be ashamed of you. And that was enough to kind of just break the whole thing and the person left. A number, I've got wonderful stories of people, but, you know, getting out of trouble in San Francisco streets like that. But the, and there's wonderful stories, but you can't use it as a technique. It

all has to do within the moment.

Something feels like the right thing to do. And the one person who didn't do something like that and kind of was reactive back to my friends, back to someone who came and held him up, he reacted. And I think the person who held him up somehow was never apprehended, but he ended up in jail because of his reactivity to it all. So it's good to stay calm and know how to be non-reactive. Yeah.

Yes. I like the story about the prayer beads. The what? Pear beads, yeah. Sorry. Okay. I like the part about the pear beads, but I would lose them, I guarantee.

So, but, you know, I find that staying mindful, especially at work, is really hard. And I did set an alarm to go off at noon every day to kind of try to remind me and a lot of the time I just turn it off because I'm in the middle of something. So do you have any other tips or maybe somebody else has other tips on how you remind yourself to be mindful during the day when you're busy? So two things I could say. One is to make it a habit to do much of your work sitting, standing? Both. Both.

Is to focus on your posture. And so sit in a good, aligned, upright posture, and also stand that way and sit in a good way. And let that, the posture somehow call forth, bring forth as a form of mindfulness. Because if our posture collapses, so does our mindfulness. But if the posture is kind of aligned and good, sometimes we can see when we're starting to lose the mindfulness because the posture begins to collapse or give up. So posture is invaluable.

The other is to have reminders around. And I used to use every time I went through a door-frame, that was my reminder. Okay. And it was kind of nice because when you go through a doorframe, you're going into a new space. It's good to kind of notice what you're doing and not just be kind of lost in thought. And so I used to go through a lot of door frames. So that was a great thing to do.

Some people put stickers on things that they'll see regularly. I've known people who put a sticker, like it says remember or something, on top of their computer screen so that it's always there. So they see it regularly. And... So, you know, something you do regularly, and it can be a series of things. So if it's, you know, if your thing was only at noon once a day, I bet you go to the bathroom more often than once a day. So make that your thing. You know, it says, yes.

Yes. As far as staying mindful at work, I have a mug on my desk. A what? A mug. A mug. It says, take a breath and remember who the heck you are. So as far as taking refuge in yourself,

you know, I've got the Dhamma. I've got a long life of experience. I'm looking at turning 70. So, come on. You know, I'm not helpless. So... I just find that really useful.

Great. I love it. Yeah. If I didn't have the mug, I'd put a little sign there. Yeah. Because you've got this. Because I've got some worries, and I realize that worries are related to fear.

Yeah. And I know how to deal with fear. Nice. So, yeah. Yeah. So there are people, you're so at work, at home, and the bathroom mirror, on the steering wheel of the car. People put all these little reminders. Okay, maybe that's enough.

So I'll end this way.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

And may all the ways that you might walk in refuge support you to be a refuge for others. May this practice we do be for the welfare and happiness of the whole world. Thank you.