

## Finding the Heart of Refuge in Difficult Times

### Welcome

Thank you for coming tonight to join in this evening of reflecting on Refuge. Your coming here is a gift to all of us here, your fellow journeyers, for it is always good to feel that we are not alone in our need and in our search.

You have come here because you are thirsty, in need of something. We all are in need, often it may look like our needs are different, individual, but ultimately, it is one need, the need to be connected -- connected to ourselves, our true selves, and to be connected to our Source. And so we journey, seeking this connection, seeking to get past the distractions, the fear, the lies, the pain, the misconceptions, to Reality. And what a journey it turns out to be! Not easy, no. But also, once you're underway, the riches of this path are so precious, we soon find that there's no other life possible.

But given that the path is not always easy, and also, that if we hit an easy stretch, it can be tempting to set up camp there in that sunny, easy-street place, and forget about the path that's leading off into the rocky stretch ... for both these reasons, we need to remember, and find, and strengthen Refuge.

Tonight, I want to talk to you about building this strength of refuge, and I hope that my words to you will speak from my heart to yours. I hope that my words will help to refresh you, to satisfy your thirst just a little, though not completely. For it is our thirst that keeps us going, but it is also finding little sips of clear fresh water along the way that can affirm us in our path, and keep us journeying on to the true Source.

### Outline of evening

So for the next little while, I'll be giving you some of my thoughts on what refuge is about. Then we'll do a little exercise so that each of you can maybe get a clearer sense of what refuge means to you. And then, we'll write down some of our ideas on Refuge, and when we break for tea, you can bring your post-its up and add them to our Refuge tree. Then, after our tea break, I'll give you some suggestions for how you can work with Refuge in your daily life and in your practice, to make it a living, vital source of strength and inspiration for you on your path.

**Refuge:** what do you think of, what image comes to mind? ...Shelter from the storm, a place safe from danger, a place of peace away from conflict or difficulties. Comfort ... a good strong, milky British cup of tea .... Pillar of strength ...helping hand ... a hug ... an umbrella in a sudden rain shower.

The story of the Buddha 's enlightenment tells of two refuges that he drew on. One was sitting beneath the Bodhi tree, and trees have an ancient tradition of sacredness. And the other was that, when finally confronted face to face with Mara, and challenged as to his entitlement to awakening, he touched the earth, calling on the witness of the Earth Mother, we might call her Gaia, and on his birthright as a part of this whole, to be awakened and free from suffering.

This story of the Buddha's own awakening also serves to point out the function of refuge. Taking Refuge, reflecting on refuge is a way of building and strengthening us on our path, and it also helps to develop faith, faith in the legitimacy of this path, and faith in our own ability to see it through to the very end. Taking refuge, reflecting on and strengthening refuge, can feed the flame of inspiration, support our commitment, sustain our determination.

Taking refuge is the one action that is common to Buddhists of all nations, and is also traditionally the only action required to make one a "Buddhist" (and here we need to remember that "Buddhist" is not an exclusive designation, one can be a Christian, and be "Buddhist", one can be Jewish, and be "Buddhist". This is because Buddhism has no dogma, no canon of required beliefs, it only invites us to be aware, and to find out for ourselves. In a little while, we'll explore some of the ways, Buddhist and universal, in which refuge can be understood.

So while Refuge is particular to Buddhism, refuge is a universal gesture of the human heart, and can be embraced from any tradition. Most traditions have prayers and formulae that serve a similar purpose, for example the Lord's Prayer for Christians.

What's most important for building the strength of refuge in ourselves, is finding the connecting point, the image or symbol that is personal to yourself, that carries real feeling, that is energizing. I want to encourage you to be broad in your inspiration for your refuge images and symbols. Go ahead, mix up your traditions, if that's what gives you the connection. We're all more or less mixed up anyway, childhood and family religious traditions, English literature, the whole of world culture is available to us, we're the children of the global village, so yes, put the Virgin Mary along side Coyote, if that's what works.

So let's begin looking at the elements of Refuge –

**Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa** (3 times)

Homage to the Blessed One, the Noble One, the Fully Enlightened

**Buddham saranam gacchami** (to the Buddha for refuge, I go)

Taking refuge in Buddha: the Awakened one, the exemplar of awakening, generalized to refer to Awakening itself. Beyond the Buddhist traditions, we can understand this first source of refuge to be: transcendent consciousness, divine presence, the Holy One, Source, or, the simple clarity that is the heart of the present moment.

At its simplest, taking refuge in Buddha can be reminding yourself of simple goodness, in the good heart that is our fundamental motivation in this work.

For some people, there can be an aspect of devotion in this first of the three jewels, maybe devotion to the Buddha, or, we may find that our connecting link to the transcendent is another guiding figure, Jesus, Mary, Mohammed, Kwan Yin, or another being who is an example of living awakened mind, of compassionate commitment to leading people out of suffering. For some of us, this can be our teacher, our guru.

Some of you might find that there is a certain place in nature inspires a reverence, a connection to the Holy, so you can call that place to mind, picture it: I will lift up my eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help. (Psalms)

There's another Psalm that has stayed with me: The Lord God is my home, and underneath are the everlasting arms: "Coming home" .. this can be really evocative, the goal of a journey is to come home.

Another source of refuge can be Grace, reminding oneself that there is a constant outpouring of grace from the Cosmos; we need only to place ourselves in the Now of the cosmos, to receive it. And remembering too, with grace, there is no "deserving" requirement; it is, like Portia's mercy, freely given, like the gentle rain from heaven.

A candle, alit in the dark of the night. Your own front door. Your meditation cushion.

**Dhammam saranam gacchami** (to the Dharma for refuge, I go)

Taking refuge in dharma: here, we place our confidence in the healing power of understanding. That as we practice, and get these little aha moments, when we see the connections between thoughts, and feelings, and actions, and how we build our worldview from so many taken-for-granted habits of thinking, we're taking refuge in the power that this gradual growth of understanding has, to heal us, to slowly connect us to our own inner roots, and eventually, to that moment of forgetting ourselves, and so that we're left only in the realm of the Holy, the Source.

And so we dedicate ourselves to this path of unfoldment

Also, when you take refuge in Dharma, this is the place where you affirm your confidence in the validity of this Path, and in the **teachings** of Path. Yes, this path leads to our goal, which is to come out of suffering into joy, compassion, wisdom. We are so fortunate to have available to us, all these teachings, we take refuge in the teachings, books, and various wisdom traditions. We can read the desert fathers, Sufism, the Hasids, and so on... even the internet is now a tremendous storehouse of teachings. We can also remember that life is teaching, everything that comes our way can be taken as teaching, that even the toughest situation is an opportunity ... or challenge .. for new wisdom, new kindness, new behaviour.

We also here are taking refuge in our own wisdom, and our capacity to grow in wisdom, our ability to take the teachings and to put them into practice.

So when we take refuge in Dharma, we can remember the teachings that have connected for us, maybe the book that is our current inspiration, or we can call to mind a key idea or intention that is currently guiding us – something like, I'm committed to staying more fully in the present moment, because when I lose that connection, my patterns of impatience and anger start to pull me askew.

### **Sangham saranam gacchami** (to the Sangha for refuge, I go)

The third jewel, Sangha, originally referred to the community of monks and nuns. In Tibetan tradition, this term sangha refers to the teachers. The Buddhadharma comes to us because it has been kept alive for 2500 years by ordained and lay practitioners, as a living practice that is made new and real in each generation. So we take refuge in this long line of those who have kept the teachings alive, who have traveled this path before us, and left their footprints, their trail blazes, to guide us on our journey.

With this third jewel, we can also call to mind our present sangha, the people who support us in our practice, maybe we sit with them, maybe we turn to them for emotional support, .... friends and family who give community to us every day. We can even include those who challenge us to become clearer and kinder, maybe those who aren't so easy to get along with, even our kids, our teenagers ....

When we think about taking refuge in sangha, at the simplest level, this is about what grounds us and what sustains us. Fundamental to grounding is our body, so we commit to keeping it as healthy and balanced as is possible. So here, we can reflect on activities and beings who help us stay grounded, healthy and connected.

Ultimately, this third jewel, sangha, is about interconnection, or interbeing as it's sometimes called, the understanding that we are not solitary, isolated units, that where I end and where you begin is not a solid border. Rather, we are all participants in a system, an ecology that comprises physical bodies, human culture, energy, psyche and psychology and so on. Really, this wisdom of interbeing is that we are all one life, and remembering that, is a refuge, as well as a responsibility, that can inspire us and support us in our practice, in our making path real in our lives. Remembering interbeing, it means that even as I work through my own suffering, I am changing the reality of those around me in the direction of clarity and kindness.

## Exercise

Let's start by chanting refuge together – don't worry, if you don't choose to join us, that's ok, and if you wish to chant with us, but have no wish to call yourself a Buddhist, this won't make you one. The Buddha said, "find out for yourself", so experimenting is really what Path is about, finding what works for each one of us. So: (chant refuge)

Guided meditation: Centre in body, relaxing any areas of holding .... Aware of breath, as it easily flows into the body and is released out again.

Now, reflect on the first of the three jewels, Buddha, see what thought comes to mind, maybe an image, .. what makes you feel safe, protected, supported, inspired? What figures guide you, or what picture do you have that symbolizes Awakened Mind, or Source for you? To refocus your attention on the topic, at intervals, silently repeat to yourself, Buddha, or, awakening, or guiding.

Now, the 2<sup>nd</sup> jewel, dharma, teachings, universal laws or truths of life, wisdom teachings of all the traditions of this planet .... What thoughts, pictures .....

Now, the 3<sup>rd</sup> jewel, Sangha, our spiritual community, our supports, what grounds us .... Interconnection .... The Gaia or creation in which we have our being .....

Take a moment to re-centre, enjoy the stillness and peace of this moment, having invoked the light of Awakening to be with us and to guide us ... if you wish, you may bow to this moment of calm, of clarity. Then, write on your post-its one or two of the images or thoughts that you had for Buddha, for Dharma, for Sangha

(at tea break, we put our post-its on the Refuge tree, Buddha in the branches, Dharma on the trunk and Sangha amongst the roots.)

## After break: practicing Refuge

Buddhism teaches us that we have some choice in the emotions that we experience; we can change our conditioning by actively cultivating wholesome attitudes and states of mind. In case you might be wondering, as we talk about reflecting on Refuge in order to build faith: what if I'm just creating this faith, am I just fooling myself, it's not really "real" --- well, we have to remember that there are many pathways into developing mind, and, while meditation is one, and maybe the most important, other pathways also support us on the Path, and one such pathway is the imagination. Because, as the Buddha observed, every action begins as a thought, if we sort out wholesome from unwholesome thoughts, and cultivate the wholesome, we're on our way to living more ethically, more kindly, and with less suffering in our own lives and in the impact we have on others. Metta meditation practice works on this principle.

So, we start by learning some about the Buddha's teachings, and maybe some about other spiritual traditions as well, because they all have a great deal to offer, and each person has their own best mode of developing. And then, once we have made a balanced decision, factoring in our reason, our heart, our sense of ethics or moral code, and our own learning style, then having come to this decision, we can start to cultivate for example faith, encourage it to take strong roots in our lives, in our beings, so that the plant that grows will be healthy, will withstand the weather that is sure to come, and will sooner or later flower and bear fruit, for oneself and for all beings.

So Yes, at first we might feel like we're faking the feeling of faith, or of kindness, or, the feeling of taking refuge, but if we have thought it through, and we have concluded that this is a wholesome thing to do, then we can persist in building the feeling as a source of strength for our path

So, we can reflect and find the strong images or ideas that create a resonance in our hearts and minds. We can write poems, make pictures. The classic meditative way of reflecting is to repeat the phrase that we are reflecting on, out loud, or silently, and see what thought or image we have about it, then, repeat it again, and keep doing this for a number of times. Then, go on to the next phrase.

Also, we can take refuge with us through our day, it can be there for us every time we “lose it” in a day, have a sudden burst of irritation, are in pain or in fear, or we are tempted into a course of action that we are resolved to change, or even if we find ourselves starting down a slippery slope of negative self-view. Take refuge. Say to yourself, to Buddha I go for refuge, and so on. Or picture your three images that stand for the 3 jewels: for example, maybe a spot in nature for Buddha, a key dharma phrase like, regard all things as a bubble on a stream, and then, maybe, for Sangha, your dog who is so uncritically faithful and loving and absorbing and transmuting of all stormy feelings. Or, a short form could be, to just take three mindful breaths, or make mindful contact with three places in our body.

When you have worked with some of these approaches for awhile, it can be interesting to take up an idea that Thich Nhat Hanh suggests: The three jewels take refuge in me. This can encourage us to explore my responsibility to bring the teachings to life, to make them real, and help them to help others. You can imagine placing each of the jewels, or whatever your personal symbol is, in your heart centre, and then considering how you could act to bring this principle to life, through your life. An example might be: How can I manifest Buddha, awakened consciousness, in my work life? Maybe I could put a flower on my desk, and let it remind me to breathe with awareness whenever I notice it.

And so, let your creative imagination work with these guiding principles, and this way, we can awaken our own inner dharma teacher, the active aspect of our precious inner Buddha nature.

So these are some ideas for making refuge a real support to you in your life, on your journey to becoming whole and heartfelt and clear. Working with refuge can strengthen our faith, our determination, and our dedication to the work of the path, and this can help us to keep going through thick and thin, through the good days and the bad days. Making Refuge very personal and meaningful to oneself, even if it's not orthodox, will bring this tradition to life, and help it to work in our hearts, for the increase of awakened energy in the world.

### **Closing remarks**

Thank you for coming to this talk this evening, there has been a wonderful feeling of sangha, and thank you all for sharing your images and experiences of refuge, enlarging our understanding, and inspiring and teaching one another.

Thanks to Theodore and to the volunteers here at Snow Lion for setting up, advertising and hosting this evening, this is a great bodhisattva service that they do here.

If you are interested in knowing more about Friends of the Heart, there are some brochures available, and you are most welcome to talk with me or with Richard or Andy.

And now, let us share the merit of this time we have had together, enriching our understanding of the dharma – “May the merit raised here for the good and the wholesome, be shared forth now to help all beings who are suffering.”

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At Snow Lion <http://www.snowlioncanada.com/>

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