
Brief Notes on Refuge and Bodhicitta

Taken from teachings given at the Drzewo Życia Centre, Szczecin, Poland, 7-8 May 2009

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What will protect us and what do we need protection from?

In buddhism our practice begins with taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, in the one who is awakened, in his teachings and in his awakening followers. The need for a refuge from the underlying instability of our current situation becomes clearer when we reflect *“My life is not the way I want it to be. I encounter difficulties and problems that I don’t know what to do with”*. In that moment we face both our own incompetence, our own lack, and also the power of the world.

In terms of our identification with this body of flesh and blood, we are small and vulnerable. If we walk across the road without looking, a car, a big piece of metal going very fast will break our body. To have a body is to be vulnerable. Some babies die in the womb, some babies die at birth. In poor countries many babies die in the first year of their lives. Even if we are still alive now, none of us know how long will we live. We don’t know if we should save for our old age or just have good time now. We have to act as if something was the case, but we don’t really know. We don’t know how long we will be healthy. As we get older we find more of our friends develop illnesses like cancer, heart conditions, strokes and so on.

The Buddha described the key aspects our human situation as birth, old age, sickness and death. He pointed out these seemingly obvious simple facts because he had found that they tended to be ignored. Nothing has changed since his time in this respect. We have the same lack of imagination: we see that other people get sick and we think *“Oh, they are sick”*, but we forget that there is not so much difference between them and ourselves. If they can get cancer, I also can get cancer. If their heart gets tired of pumping, maybe mine will also get tired.

Death means everything we have goes away. Whether our life is very tidy and sorted, or in chaos, when the mind starts to separate from the body, there is nothing we can do. My mother died a few years ago when she was quite old. I can remember when she was young and how she was always very busy, cooking and doing nice things with me. At the end of her life she was still reasonably healthy but she was 93. I would say *“Shall we go for a little walk,”* and she would say, *“Why would I want to stand up? Sitting down is very nice. When I stand up I think I am going to fall. Just let me sit”*. Where had my mother gone? It was the same person but all the energy had gone from her heart chakra, and so there was very little power. When we spend time with older people we see that they don’t want to do very much.

This means that it’s not such a good idea to think *“Oh, when I retire I am going to be able to do more practice”*. When you get old you are very likely to be tired. Therefore, the time for practicing taking refuge is now.

We need protection from ourselves

What will protect us and what do we need to be protected from? The Buddha said *“Not your father, not your mother, not your brother, not your sister, not your friend, not your enemy – nobody can help you more than yourself”*. He also said *“Not your father, not your mother, not your brother, not your sister, not your friend, not your enemy – nobody can harm you more than yourself”*. Therefore, the one who needs our protection is ourselves. And what do we need protection from? From ourselves.

This is quite tricky. How can we work out which are the helpful and which are the unhelpful aspects of ourselves? When thoughts, feelings, and sensations arise powerfully for us we often find that we have no choice but to succumb to them. These arising phenomena take us out towards the world or fearfully away from it. That is to say, life is happening to us, yet we often only recognise what is happening after the event. We need protection from our tendency to mindlessly merge with the movement of energy out towards the world or away it. But, more profoundly, we need protection from our tendency to take these movements to be strongly real and as a definition of who we are.

Who we are is, in an ordinary sense, constructed out of all the many different experiences we have had. Depending on our family, and the kind of environment we grew up in, we like some kinds of food more than others, some kinds of clothes more than others, some kinds of hairstyle more than others, and so on. Of course, in this world we have to make choices; we can't have everything. However, when we make our choices about how we will look, how we will live, this is the manifestation of the coming together of many experiences, external and internal that create the momentary, particular shapes of ourselves.

Our experience arises as patterns of factors joined briefly together in accordance with our assumptions and conditioning. Traditionally this is illustrated by the image of a potter working at his wheel. In India, the village potters use a very big, wooden wheel. They put a huge lump of clay in the middle and turn the wheel with a stick to get it going fast. Then they start to pull up the clay from the top and make a shape. The lump of clay has enormous potential; clay can be turned into any shape we like. But once the potter's intention and fingers start working on the clay, it takes on a particular shape – maybe the form of a bowl. As long as this bowl is still connected with the lump of clay, if the potter doesn't like it he can just press it down into the mass and begin again. However, once the clay is cut off from the pile, there is a form—the bowl. The nature of the clay is then changed through the process of firing so that it becomes hard and brittle, and cannot be put back into the clay. This is a very helpful example in thinking about ourselves.

Small babies have incredible potential; all kinds of lives are potentially theirs. But by the time they are five years of age their personality will have already developed through the child's interactions with their environment. If life at home with the family is restricted then new possibilities might open up when they go to school. However, if they have been judged very harshly by parents who tell them *“You don't do things right, you're useless, we know what you are,”* then this view of who they are is likely to be internalised and become very rigid. Once such rigidity gets established, even if good events happen, there will be a tendency to hold tightly to these negative self-beliefs. All of us, throughout our existence, have taken on some kind of conditioning in this way.

From the buddhist point of view, this shaping is determined not only by social interactions, for there is also the impact of the maturing of our own karma. In fact all that we experience, including all aspects of our environment, is the ripening of our own karma. We are implicated in all that occurs as earlier involvements generate current situations and our behaviour in current situations generates future environments.

This is also something we need to take refuge from. For as long as we remain immersed in the narrow beliefs with which we have learnt to define ourselves, we will not see the wider picture of interdependence and we will forget our true potential.

Being alive means being connected

We work so hard to create our life, but then the life we have created can easily become a burden that we feel we have to carry. We try harder but something always goes wrong and there's always more to do. From the buddhist point of view, this is because we are trying to achieve something that is impossible. We want the world to stop; we want to make something which is safe. But the world is not safe because it is constituted out of many factors which are moving all the time.

For the moment we have peace in Europe and for now, we can say *"Oh well, the war in Afghanistan is pretty far away"*. But we can't keep global warming out; we can't keep the economic crisis out. That is to say, the idea that we can build a little wall around ourselves and live inside it feeling safe is a delusion. We are part of an integrated system—the connection of all life—and to seek an individual solution is not going to work. If you try to make yourself happy by not being touched by the suffering of others, you will shrink your heart, and miss out on any real lasting happiness.

In order to take refuge we first have to see how we have taken on a small, shrunken sense of ourselves, and a similarly diminished sense of who other people are. Usually, we act as if we know who we are and who other people are. We see others and immediately sense whether we will or will not like them, whether we are attracted to them or not. When we think we won't like them we try to avoid them, and if we think we *will* like them we try to get closer to them. That is to say, our orientation is fundamentally self-centred: in order to benefit myself, I will avoid bad people and try to be with the kind of people who make me happy.

A function of taking refuge is to realise that the tools we already have for making sense of our existence don't work very well. Taking refuge is to see that our ordinary way of making sense of the world is actually quite confused.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, we take refuge in the possibility of awakening. We are not saying "Oh great Buddha, please save me," but "Buddha, help me to recognise my own buddha nature and to recognise the buddha nature of all beings".

When we take refuge in the Dharma—the teaching of the Buddha—the practices we rely on are methods for experiencing the world in a fresh and clear way, unlike those generated by our own conditioning and karma.

When we take refuge in the Sangha—the assembly, or the group of people who practice—we are opening to the fact that we need help, that we need allies.

Being alive means being connected, and if we focus too much on our own existence, trying to make things as good as we can for ourselves, then this will-to-power will itself maintain a kind of stupidity or ignorance.

Bodhisattva activity is about being connected to the world

In the mahayana tradition, refuge is also linked to taking the bodhisattva vow. When we take the bodhisattva vow we make the intention that in this life and all our future lives we will work for the liberation of all beings. This can be thought of as a kind of heroic activity, as something that we bravely do in order to help other people. We might feel *"I don't have to do this, but it is something I choose to do"*. However the fact is that you do have to do it, not because someone is making you, but because other people are not truly separable from yourself. When you walk down the street you don't see yourself, you see other people. When you sit in a cafe you don't see yourself, you see other people. That is to say, your experience is other people. If you are a schoolteacher and you spend your time in a classroom; you may think *"I am the teacher and these are the students,"* but these students are your world. They are what you see. You see their noses, their ears, you don't see your own nose or ears. Other people are what we are. We always imagine that: *"I am me. I don't know who you are but I'm me, and I have to take care of me,"* but in fact I become 'I' through 'you'. How 'I am' is only made possible through how other people are with me.

For example, today we are here together. We are connected by a shared interest, exploring specific ideas and engaging in specific activities. Tomorrow afternoon I will leave and go to the airport. If, whilst waiting for my flight, I found a chair and started talking to the people around me in the same way I am talking to you now, the police might come and ask what I was doing. I could say *"I'm just being myself. I talk in this way"* but that would be crazy. When I'm in the airport, I wait for the plane and read something or look at the people. That is to say, my talking this way with you is created by your presence. I come into being like this because of how *you* are. And how you are in this moment, in this room, is influenced by how *I* am.

Therefore, working for the benefit of all beings, is not about crossing a big threshold between 'my world' and 'their world'. It is a support for recognising the non-separation, or the non-duality of all phenomena; that which we call 'self' and that which we call 'other' are both part of the same field of experience. Bodhisattva activity is about being connected to the world. For example, just outside the door here, little birds are getting excited about the spring. We can see them building their nests. They know that warm weather is coming and so they feel happy and excited. When we see their happiness we also feel happy. We might then see an old person alone carrying their shopping, and we may think *"Oh, how sad. There is no one to help you"*.

To be connected and touched by whatever occurs is key to the bodhisattva practice. This includes all we may find difficult or 'don't like'. This means learning to allow waves of experience to run freely without blocking them, and not trying to impose a map or image of what we feel a perfect life would be like.