

Tea time chat transcript - Comments on Refuge

Tahn Pamutto: Well, I mean, “refuge” is really, in some ways, it is an awkward word to use for the concept, because it's very multifaceted. So as far as we can pin it down, refuge is about the Sāsana, the “religious” part of Buddhism. So as long as you are moving in religious circles, you will learn and develop your association to the refuges.

Now I'm staying with my father [Ed. note: father is under hospice care], who is not a Buddhist, and who doesn't have precepts. He doesn't wantonly kill anybody, but he does have a shotgun by his bed that came out last night when he heard a noise by his car (laughs). So I am not around anything that cultivates the refuges. I only have what understanding I come with. But for people who are developing practice and going to groups or checking into an online place like this, almost everything you talk about, almost everything you do in a setting like this, or in a monastery or a temple or a retreat center anywhere, is going to deepen your understanding of what these refuges are referring to.

So it is not as simple as just one thing, “There Is The Refuge”.

There is the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. And so coming in to this, we have doubt about these things, right? We don't take to these things right away, we don't accept these things to some degree. We're like, “Why is that?” “Why are they bowing to the statue?”

“Isn't this idol worship?”

“I'm pretty sure this is a blah-blah-rah-rah-rah-rah...”

“Oh, well, the Dhamma, you know, this particular sutta in the Pali cannon says this, but I'm pretty sure they didn't mean it that way.”

“I'm pretty sure that's just glossing over from a religious concept that's, you know, from thousands of years ago.”

Or maybe you'll be in the sangha and everybody is trying so hard to follow their breath, but you are thinking, “...that guy next to me... Oh, why is he breathing like that? It would be easier for me to follow HIS breath than to follow my own. Ahhhh, I just wish he would stop breathing...”

And so at first we just have to acclimate to the idea that these three points are what ground us: our relationship to the Buddha as teacher, to the Dhamma as truth, to the Sangha as companions on the path and a support structure for the practice

But the Buddha also gives us a number of the chants that we regularly do, to reflect this back to us. The Buddha tells us the things that these refuges protect us from.

The Dhamma [ends] fear. Dhamma is the antidote to fear. So when we reflect on truth, we know that truth is stable and things can't get to us.

The Sangha [ends] dis-ease. Sangha is the antidote to dis-ease. And that's interesting. How could having a network of people protect me from fear of disease? What happens when you get sick? You can't take care of yourself. And we're all sick! We all have defilements, right? So when we are

confused, when we are deluded, being in a network of people keeps us safe. It keeps the treatment going basically, even when we're not quite competent to follow it ourselves. The people around us help guide us towards the middle, especially when we start going off to the edge.

You've all been studying the refuges. So none of us is particularly an authority, and I actually feel like anybody talking about refuges, everybody who has acclimated to the religious aspect of it and to understanding that this is okay... to have faith in something, to have confidence in something. This is okay. We're told not to do it, that it's "so dangerous in the modern day," but it's actually totally okay. Once you get that, then every time you hear something about the Three Refuges you tend to be like, Yeah! Yeah, that's right.

(...a question about various peoples' nirvana beliefs)

Nirvana....there's all these views, right? They just go around and around. Yeah. Leave it alone.

And that's the thing when we talk about refuges, Nirvana is not a refuge. Nirvana is the ultimate peace, but it doesn't solve any of your problems. All of your problems arise in Nirvana and there's still problems. So whether or not you believe in Nirvana, Nirvana doesn't care.

In terms what is worthy of faith, worthy of confidence, worthy of drawing closer to in this world....this is what religion provides people, right? Religion comes up when people are faced with suffering. Now, the thing that's different about Buddhism is that we call it "suffering." We don't say that it's absolutely dependent on and important that everybody has a relationship to God. We say, look, when you're suffering, you try to figure out what to do about it.

That's why one looks at God when suffering. One is not thinking about God when not suffering. And so religion is here for the great mysteries and the great forms of suffering that come into our life. When somebody dies, we get religious. When something bad happens to us, we get religious. When we don't understand why something happens in the world, religion feels like it must have an explanation. But what do we do when the answer can't be known?

Or when the answer, like "Nirvana," won't solve any of our problems. Yeah. What do we do? Well, that's what the refuges are. It's a stable reference point. Just seeing them as that, that you are still in samsara, people are still annoying, religious institutions can still be corrupted. People can still misquote the Dhamma or have weird views or practice self-mortification until everybody is into the new fad.

But in Samsara, working with what we have, we can know the Buddha as a representative of enlightenment; we can know that enlightenment is possible. And actually we can develop faith in that.

Whenever we see somebody respond to suffering in an enlightened way, in a wise way, when they don't compound suffering with more suffering, when they understand it and they're like, "Oh yeah, of course, this is suffering." Samsara equals suffering, suffering equals Samsara. They go together. This, of course, is normal. And that's what the Buddha stands for. He stands for an enlightened person as a representative, as an example.

So when we're thinking about the Buddha, we are basically reminding ourselves that we can improve, we can get better.

Right? That dukkha is not something that has to be run from; we don't have to fear the arising of dukkha once we start to understand it. We know that's the only given in our lives. It's the only thing we could be guaranteed to experience tomorrow. We don't know if we'll get breakfast. We don't know if there'll be traffic, but we know there will be dukkha. Right? So why would we run from that which is predictable, reliable, consistent, right?

The Dhamma. Again, there are so many views in the world, but go and read a sutta and see if it doesn't, in a lot of ways, put into words things that you didn't have words for. See if it doesn't help you contextualize what exactly is going on, what you are doing, what you are trying to do.

And Dhamma is truth. Every time we hear truth, we know, "Oh yeah, that's truth. Yeah, that's true." We "get" it because it's unimpeachable. It's imperturbable. Truth is true. It's stable, it's harmonious. It's in the middle, it's not subject to perspective.

And Sangha. Again, like we could do this on our own, but none of you would be here right now if you were interested in doing it alone. And I think you all have the wisdom to see that it's worth setting aside a little time on a Wednesday to be around other people who are practicing it because they would help fill in the gaps in your understanding. You can draw inspiration from that and support from that.

When you're having a bad day, everybody in the room is not having a bad day. Somebody is gonna have emotional reserves to offer and perspective to offer. And so these are things that we can go to, we can turn to when we're confused, when we don't know what the next step is, or when we don't know, "Am I doing it right?" It doesn't matter. We don't have to ask ourselves these questions, which we don't have answers for or we can't get answers for. Instead, we turn to these things that are reliable and our dukkha subsides. Our fears subside, our sense of dis-ease, of uneasiness and consternation subsides because we are attending to that which is reliable, that which is safe.

And R-, you had your hand up...You still look thoughtful. You still look like you're gonna say something.

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Participant: [I have a]... kind of unrelated but fun anecdote. I think over a year ago, I met Tahn at Union Square Park here for a Thai festival. So he was attending a Thai festival and as he was standing there and I was talking to him, this fellow walks by, I think he was a homeless person.

I think he was one of those chess hustlers who plays and hustles people with chess. And he makes a comment when he sees Tahn, like a very happy sort of comment. "Oh wow, Buddhist monk! Living heaven on earth, eh?" and Tahn was like, "Yeah, something like that."

And the homeless chess player, he says, ... "Man, I wish I could have it that way." And he sort of walked away and it just struck me. It's like one homeless person talking to another homeless person except this other homeless person chose it willingly. And he is very happy because of that. And the other homeless person didn't choose that. Probably not as happy.

So talking about people knowing there's a different path, but not accepting it. It just came to mind. Not very related.

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Tahn Pamutto: But it is. It's the riddle that you didn't realize was a riddle. It's like, what's the difference between these two homeless people? Refuge is the answer. Yes. It was like the one person who's homeless and not really suffering is the one who has a refuge, who is like, "Well, nothing's outta place here. I have Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha." And it's like I keep saying, if you picked me up and you dropped me on a desert island, then I would roll some stones together and make a little Buddhist statue and I'd set up a sitting schedule and I'd figure out, you know, how to eat things without killing living beings.

And I wouldn't know if I'd ever get off the island, but my first priority would be like, okay, well, like how do I keep learning? How do I keep growing? And that's what refuge is. It's like, okay, there's a lot of unknowns here, so why don't I focus on what's known, what's reliable.

Tahn Pamutto, March 2024