As we move into the fall season, the activities at the Center increase in number and in importance to our practice, among them the October and December sesshin, the Ceremony of Gratitude and the Precepts Renewal Ceremony. It is a time for all of us to rededicate ourselves to the Three Refuges. This issue of Mountains Talking is devoted to helping our understanding of the Three Refuges of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The Three Refuges
By Peggy Metta Sensei

An edited version of a talk given on January 30, 2010

The Buddha said:

Driven by fear, people run for security to mountains and forests, to sacred spots and shrines. But none of these can be a safe refuge, because they cannot free the mind from fear.

Take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, and you will grasp the Four Noble Truths; suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path that takes you beyond suffering. That is your best refuge, your only refuge. When you reach it, all sorrow falls away. (The Dhammapada 188-196, Easwarin, p. 133)

Let us explore taking refuge. What is a refuge?

Why is practice, this temple, our community and tradition a refuge? Every morning and every evening we have a ritual during which we recite: “I take refuge in Buddha. I take refuge in Dharma. I take refuge in Sangha.” These are the first three of the 16 Bodhisattva precepts. They are often referred to as the Three Jewels or the Three Treasures. And taking refuge is often the official entry into Buddhism and the Bodhisattva Path. Taking refuge is a minute to minute practice and a life-long journey that begins with sincerity and flowers with our inquiry and ultimate relinquishment.

Thich Nhat Hanh says this about the Three Jewels:

To seek for refuge means to look for a place that is safe, a place we can rely on. Faith, in Buddhism, does not mean accepting a theory that we have not personally verified…In Buddhism, our faith is concrete, not blind, not a leap. It is formed by our own insight and experience…The Buddha encouraged us to see for ourselves. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is not blind faith; it is the fruit of our practice. At first, our Buddha may be a book we’ve read, our Dharma a few encouraging words we’ve heard, and our Sangha a community we’ve visited once or twice. But as we continue to practice, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha reveal themselves to us more fully. (The Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings, pp 150-151)

We often do come to practice at first because we are seeking refuge, a safe place. We might not have used those words, but something stirs within us and perhaps “our Buddha may be a book we’ve read” about this dis-ease, this dukka, this First Noble Truth that is common to the human experience.
Fall Calendar Events

Sangha Workday
Sunday, October 5: 8 am to noon

October Sesshin
October 18 - 25: Center is closed to the public but most sittings are open to members.

Zazenkai
Sunday, November 2: 6 am to 3:30 pm

Fall Sangha Meeting
Sunday, November 8: 9 am

Ceremony of Aid
Thursday, November 20: 7 pm

Talk on the Precepts
Sunday, November 23: 8 am

Thanksgiving Ceremony of Gratitude
Thursday, November 27: 9 am

Precepts Renewal Ceremony
Sunday, November 30: 8 am

Rohatsu Sesshin
December 6 - 13: Center is closed to the public, but most sittings are open to members.

Buddha’s Enlightenment Ceremony
Saturday, December 13: 9 am

Holiday Party
Sunday December 14: 4 - 6 pm

New Year’s Eve Sitting (informal)
December 31: 9 pm - Midnight

Hive full of sisters
The many bees are numbered
I vow to save them
--Jaqueline St. Joan
I take refuge in Buddha, and resolve that with all beings, I will understand the great way whereby the Buddha’s seed may forever thrive.

I resolve that with all my brothers and sisters, with all sentient and non-sentient beings and with all that exists that I will understand the Great Way. Understanding the Great Way is a gift from the ancestors. I take refuge in Buddha, by fully accepting all that life has to offer. Life with all its ups and downs, all its joys and sorrows and yet as one Zen master said, “every day is a good day.” I take refuge by simply experiencing this life. For the meaning of life is to experience life.

I take refuge by understanding that nothing is permanent, everything is changing and while nothing exists, at the same time everything exists. I take refuge by taking delight in the world and standing in awe of it, with all the colors, tastes, sounds and myriad things constantly singing their praise. I take refuge in Buddha by baking bread, picking tomatoes and listening to the songs of the birds. The Buddha’s seed will forever thrive.

Verse

The sun rises in the east and the stars comes out at night
A flower burst forth from an ancient seed
Wonders of wonders

-- Dennis Sienko

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I take refuge in Sangha.
I vow to accept help and nourishment on the path and to give it freely.

-- Peggy Curry
I take refuge in Buddha and resolve that with all beings I will understand the great way whereby the Buddha’s seed may forever thrive.

When I take the curb too tight at the sign that says “Try our Gluten-free Bread!” at the sandwich shop in Pueblo and blow two tires just before the meeting with Tetsuko’s doctor, I sit in the narrow band of shade in the baking hot parking lot and call Clark for moral support. I tell him I’m waiting for the tire repair guy I’ve gone through three people to find on Labor Day weekend, and that I’m trying to take refuge in Buddha. I say this laughing with the small part of me that is able to laugh, and five days later, lying on a massage table I see that the Buddha’s seed is joy, joy and equanimity no matter what is happening. The seed thrives in the midst of war and pestilence, Ebola raging in Africa, extreme terrorists raging in Syria, only because we have and are the refuge of Buddha.

Verse:
For perpetual harvest
Plant in fertile soil
In sun or shade
Water deeply and often
Mind the weeds.
--Merilee Schultheiss
Waking up in zazenin in the midst of falling
having nodded off again
I breathe in the cool twilight
as the ponderosa pines breathe out.
Straightening my spine I sit like a mountain.

After the end of the sitting
we huddle around the campfire
a handful of close companions with hearts
ablaze in the intimacy of flames turning logs to
ashes
for what must have been hundreds of thousands
of years.

I walk alone
through the woods
in the dark, only the stars
gazing back at themselves through these eyes.

Suddenly aware
I’m lost, I stand still
listening to the forest
and looking up at the Great Bear…

Then
stepping
slowly stepping
finding my way to my tent
I kneel down to unzip the door—
a shooting star flashes overhead.

Glimpses of Blue Mountain--John Steele

Sliding
into bed
the mountain
breathes in and out
until the stars vanish
and the drone of cicadas
sinks into a dreamless sleep.

Blue Mountain Sunrise

Photo by KTM
Thought after thought arises in mind, thought after thought is not separate from mind.

--Kannon Sutra

Haiku

Eating oatmeal,
The sound of the shower
Reminds me you are here.

The calendar, the telephone, the dying cat,
and the feeling that these intrusions interfere with this moment
just as it is.

--Clark Dollard
He says, What’s the biggest number? What’s out there,

after atmosphere and space? We are driving home

from preschool. There is no biggest number, I say.

There is always one more. He is quiet then, strapped in his
car seat, packing his cheek with one grape after the other,

snatched from their complex stems, pulp sticking where

grapes first reveal themselves to be grapes. I watch him

in the rear view mirror of my life. How much to say?

How much not to say?

Later, his father with his library books, and his grandfather

with his museums and his magnificent mind, and the mud

of Mars, the speed of light, the dinosaurs of time and fossils

of arithmetic. Then the mother appears and the peanut butter

sandwich, followed by the tantrum and the nap.

I open and close like the sliding doors of my mini-van, picking

up the questions along with the four-year old, who now tells

me that after the oxygen we breathe there is space that goes on

and on and on. He says, It’s called zero. My hands are on the steering

wheel; my eyes flash in mirrors and glass. I stop myself from

saying to him that it’s not zero, it’s infinity.

His feet kick against

the back of the driver’s seat. Zero is when there is nothing, I say

nonchalantly, adding Would you like a cheese cracker? He says,

No thanks. I’ll have zero cheese crackers.

Then in a pointed voice

he says, And no one knows what zero looks like. I am propelled

again, a bell, a wooden clapper, silence along with the traffic.

And as I pull the van up to the front of their house, Mama

at the door, Dada just arriving in his Jeep, I take his baby

sister into my arms to carry her to Nico’s side of the van.

Then the capsule pops open and he emerges from inside

by his own propulsion, standing on the edge, about to

take one big step onto the curb. He extends one hand

to me, holding out a trashy cluster of stems without

one fruit left. He drops it. That’s what zero looks like,”

he says, and runs back into their world.
And with this stirring we begin to get curious about it. Why am I so fearful or angry, so sad or jealous or greedy? I thought this was just the way we humans are. Isn’t it?

Then somewhere, somehow if we are extremely fortunate, we encounter the Buddhadharma, and if we have ears to hear it- we hear it! Yes, there is suffering, I know this suffering. I know this holding, resisting, grasping, contracting, this fear. And somehow I also know that there is and that there can be freedom from this endless, endless merry-go-round of me, me, me.

How do I know that?

Because I take refuge in buddha, dharma and sangha AND buddha, dharma and sangha take refuge in me. That’s how I know.

To take refuge means to look for a place that is safe, a place that we can rely on. The great paradox here is that the “pursuit, danger, or trouble” from which we are seeking safety arises from within us, not outside us. And that that which we can rely upon is also within us.

Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas says, “70) “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

So we come, whether it be by our intellect or our intuition, and we show up at a place like this. For many of us raised in this culture, even though we may appreciate the ideas and philosophy of Buddhism, and are intrigued by these Zen masters, talk of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is a bit foreign or strange even. But that being said, there is something that stirs when we walk into this Temple. Taking our seat of practice is like going home, returning to a safe place, a place we can rely on. We begin to remember, that which is within us begins to come forth. Buddha, dharma and sangha simultaneously all around us and sitting on your cushion.

In a traditional sense, Buddha is the figure on the altar and the historical one who showed us that we too can awaken and free ourselves from sorrow, Dharma is the teachings that guide us, and Sangha, the community that makes it possible to practice.

Another way of understanding the Refuges is that Buddha is Truth, Shunyata, Fullness, Completeness, Dharma is all phenomena. And Sangha is the Harmony of all things, the net of Indra.

Buddha is your nature and mine, which we seek to actualize. Dharma is the mountains and rivers, the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars, the rocks, dogs, ducks, cars and trains, clouds and rain and you and me- all phenomena. Sangha is all beings everywhere, sentient and non sentient, Sangha is you and me.

So you now might ask how do I take refuge in That? Where is the safety there?

Well, we must look again at taking refuge.

John Daido Loori writes,

The way we use the word refuge is taken from the Japanese term Kie-ei. Kie-ei consists of two characters. Kie means “to unreservedly throw oneself into,” no holding back, no way out, no safety net, harness or rope. That is the way you work with a koan - unreservedly. That is the way a parent rescues a child who is in danger. (No hesitation). The second character ei, literally means to “rely upon” in the way a child leaps into a parents arms, trusting unequivocally. (Loori, The Heart of Being, page 43)

How do we unreservedly throw ourselves into and rely upon the Three Treasures? In essence that is our practice, our life long question. Daido continues,

All we have to do is reach out. What does it mean to reach out? It means to have exhaustively asked the questions: What is Buddha?, What is Dharma?, What is Sangha? What does it mean to take refuge? What does it mean to vow? What does it mean to commit? What does it mean to have a relationship with a teacher? The answers are all available. Nothing is hidden…We can find it by asking. And most important, we can find it simply by looking into ourselves. Why do we practice? What do we seek? What do we want? Are we willing to practice the edge, take a risk, unreservedly throw ourselves into practice? (Loori, p. 44)

So Are we?

This can sound like jumping off the cliff into an abyss, a bit terrifying. But this leap- this unreservedly
throwing ourselves into can also be like a child jumping off the swimming pool’s edge into their parents’ arms. This is what we discover in taking refuge. This going for refuge emerges from trust, not fear. Our practice develops this trust so that we can throw ourselves in over and over and over. Living our life on the edge is simply throwing ourselves into each moment, again and again.

How often do we really do this in the course of our day, in the course of our life? Maybe a handful of times - like when our child is born, when we fall in love, when someone we love dies, when we see something exquisitely beautiful for the first time, when we challenge our physical limits way beyond our beliefs.

Perhaps these times are a little more akin to being thrown in, being pushed off the cliff. Life has a tendency to do that. Life doesn’t want you sitting on the sidelines. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is this life in which we take refuge and rely upon, in which we are asked to throw ourselves into unreservedly.

A teacher in the MBSR clinic at Umass med school has a T-shirt that reads: “Maybe the hokey-pokey is what it’s all about.” You put your whole self in, you put your whole self out, you put your whole self in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn your self around, and that’s what its all about.

So, it’s okay to put your right hand in and take your right hand out to start with. Practice builds trust and eventually there will be no problem with putting your whole self in. Not only no problem, simply a way to live naturally.

But please don’t misunderstand, you are still jumping into the fire. Again, Daido says this:

In order to reach our full human potential, we must live completely and die completely. In order for this practice to function, it needs to be engaged. It does not happen automatically because we wrap a rakusu around our neck, put on a robe, attend a retreat, or read a book on Zen - “Okay I’m here, now do me dharma. It doesn’t work that way. We have to work for it. We have to put ourselves on the line. We have to practice the edge of our life in order to receive the dharma. Undeniably it is here. We are surrounded, interpenetrated, enveloped, and swallowed by it. (Loori, p. 49)

Please find out what is Buddha, what is Dharma, what is Sangha…discover it for yourself by putting your whole self in.