Refuge

Chas DiCapua · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:00:23

During the week-long retreats throughout the year, it's very common for someone in the hall to ask, or someone will write a note saying, "What is the meaning of the bowing?" This comes especially from folks who may not be used to seeing that or doing it.

The main answer is: it depends. If you asked a hundred people, you might get a hundred different answers.

One thing I really like is the lowering of the body. The Buddha is on the altar, and the etiquette is that there not be anything higher than the top of the Buddha's head—not where anyone is sitting, not anything on the altar. Maybe that flower is a little higher, but certainly not us. The gist behind this comes from when someone asked the Buddha, "Who are you?" when they first met him, and the Buddha said, "I'm awake." So that statue represents awakeness and awareness. Putting the self lower than that, or elevating awakeness and awareness higher, means holding that as a value in our lives above anything about the self or ourselves.

But generally, when someone bows three times, what they're often doing is, in some kind of form, taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. And then again, what does that mean? What does taking refuge in the Buddha or the Dharma and the Sangha mean? If you had a hundred people and you asked them, "What does that mean for you exactly? How do you resonate with refuge in Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha?" you might again get a hundred different answers.

But even though you might get a hundred different answers from a hundred different people, going for refuge on the Buddhist path is a teaching in and of itself. And that's what I'd like to talk about tonight—going for refuge.

I want to read something I found very interesting in some writings by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He was writing about going for refuge, and he talked about two different people.

The first person was living by natural morality. You just know some people—they might not be spiritual, they may not be religious, but they're just good. They have a goodness to them. Living by natural morality, they're meditating each day, but they haven't gone for refuge. They don't feel that the Dharma is really necessarily their path.

The second person is not able to exactly live by the precepts yet. They don't have time to meditate every day. But they've sincerely gone to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for refuge.

It is said that this second person has a greater chance for attaining unconditional happiness, precisely due to the power of them going for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and the influence it will eventually have on their life.

So the first person, if you use the precepts as a guide, is living by the precepts and meditating daily, but they haven't gone for refuge. The second person is not really living by the precepts so well, not meditating, but has sincerely gone to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for refuge—and it is this person who will have a greater chance for achieving deep happiness. I thought that's a powerful statement.

This is Bhikkhu Bodhi talking about refuge: "The door or entrance to the teachings of the Buddha is the going for refuge to the Triple Gem. As slight and commonplace as this step might seem, especially in comparison with the lofty achievements lying beyond, its importance should never be underestimated, as it is this act which imparts direction and forward momentum to the entire practice of the Buddhist path."

Thanissaro again: "The act of going for refuge marks the point where one commits oneself to taking the Dhamma, or the Buddha's teaching, as the primary guide to one's life."

You hear these words—direction and guide. They show us what direction to go in. They help guide our life in the direction that will bring happiness.

I thought I would look up "refuge" in the dictionary. I was curious to see what the meaning was. At least in the dictionary I used, it was "shelter or protection from danger or difficulty." Then I was curious what a "refugee" was: "one who flees from home or country to seek refuge elsewhere."

Refuge is shelter or protection from danger or difficulty. A refugee is one who flees from home or country to seek refuge elsewhere. And of course, the home and the country, in our case, is more an interior space—where we may have used to been inhabiting in our hearts and minds.

We look to seek refuge elsewhere.

Given these two definitions, a couple of questions came to my mind. What dangers or difficulties are we seeking protection from? Refuge, after all, shelters and protects you from danger or difficulty. And then the next question is more pragmatic: What is it about this particular refuge that will provide protection from these particular dangers or difficulties? What are the dangers we're talking about? And what is it about these three refuges that actually gives protection from them?

I want to explore those questions now.

The dangers are categorized in the teachings into three different types: the dangers of this present life, the dangers in future lives, and the dangers of conditional existence itself. Each one has an outer and inner dimension—dangers in the outer world and dangers inherent in the heart and mind.

In this present life, what are the outer dangers? War, disease, old age, sickness and death, political and

social unrest, and the uncertainty about when they're going to occur. That uncertainty is more of an inner danger. Other inner dangers include the way we respond to these occurrences. But even more deeply and more insidiously, there's the simple fact that they happen at all—that they could happen at any time.

Today I traveled about an hour and fifteen minutes to go teach a daylong retreat. I get there and the retreat manager hadn't arrived yet to unlock the center. We're waiting, waiting. They never showed up. I made a few phone calls, tried to see if someone had a key. No key. All right. No retreat. Okay. And I was talking to the people while we were waiting, asking them, "Did you even have one thought this morning that this retreat wouldn't happen?" No. It's like these things—that this can happen—that's an example of the inner danger. Anything can happen anytime in this life.

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it as "an unlocalized fear that our familiar supports will suddenly be stripped away, leaving us without our usual frame of reference." He's speaking to that inner danger in this present life.

Things happen that we don't like. Have you noticed? Things happen and we don't like them, and we want them to be different. Again, Bhikkhu Bodhi: "A fundamental disharmony emerges from the cleavage between desire and the world, and the result for us is suffering."

Luckily for me, I had a bunch of housework that I had actually been trying to find time to do, and I thought, okay, we're not going to have the retreat? Great, I have some time on my hands. So there wasn't a lot of attachment and suffering, but there easily could have been.

We can't control the world and the events that make it up. We try our hardest. And what's interesting—what can make it confusing—is that we do exert a lot of control over the world. It's thirty-eight degrees outside right now and sixty-eight in this hall. We exert a tremendous amount of control over our environment. And so we can be lulled into thinking that we have ultimate control, or that we should be able to control everything.

Some people have this sense about global warming: "Yeah, it's happening, but we can fix it. We have the technology and we can fix it." That's the deluded, rather arrogant view that we can actually control whatever we want.

This is from the Tao Te Ching, which often speaks about the master and the master's qualities:

She understands that the universe is forever out of control, and trying to dominate events goes against the current of the Tao. The Tao is often used, one way that Dharma is used, as the truth of things, or simply how things are.

So those are the dangers of the present life, outer and inner. What is it about refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha that gives protection from these dangers? It is the cultivation of the heart and mind that does not react with suffering to the events of the world. This is the refuge that will give us protection from the

dangers of this present life. We can't control what's going to happen, but we can cultivate our heart and mind so that we're not suffering.

Then there are dangers in future lives. Outwardly, there is the possibility of being reborn in a lower realm. If you take the Buddhist cosmology as true or real, that is a genuine possibility. There are lower realms and very distinct ways in which a being is born in those realms. They are really hard to get out of because the suffering is so difficult and it's hard to practice. Also, when you move in either direction from the human realm, time becomes really, really long—one year could be like a million of our years. So you can be in these places for vast stretches of time, and the higher realms stretch out as well.

That's the outward danger: depending on how we practice sīla, samādhi, and paññā in this life, there is cause and effect. There is karma. It's real. It's a law. We can't escape it. And just to say, if you haven't looked at the cosmology much, you have to be pretty bad to be reborn in a lower realm, so don't freak out. But it is a possibility. It's a danger. It's an inherent danger.

There is also an inner danger that relates to future lives: generating wholesome karma and avoiding unwholesome karma, just what I've been talking about. We need to be clear which is which, as well as cultivating the ability to resist the conditioned habit patterns that lead us to produce unwholesome karma.

To answer the question of what gives us protection from this type of danger: ethical conduct helps us be clear about which is which as far as karma, and development of the heart and mind helps us recognize and not follow unwholesome habit patterns. Practicing with sīla and practicing with mindfulness to notice when unwholesome habit patterns come up in the heart and mind allows us to let them go. We're not generating unwholesome karma.

Again, Thanissaro Bhikkhu writes: "When a Buddhist takes refuge, it is essentially an act of taking refuge in the doctrine of karma. It is an act of submission in that one is committed to living in line with the principle that actions based on skillful intentions lead to happiness, while actions based on unskillful intentions lead to suffering."

How often is that in our mind? How often is the clarity of that fully present as we go about the day? I don't know about you, but I know that truth, yet in the moment it's kind of like, "Well, I know that." I know two plus two is four, but as I'm walking down the street, I'm not thinking two plus two is four. It's like that. It needs to be, or it's helpful if it's really, really present so that this template is informing everything we're thinking, saying, and doing.

"It's an act of claiming protection in that by following the teaching, one hopes to avoid the misfortunes that bad karma engenders. To take refuge in this way ultimately means to take refuge in the quality of our own intentions, for that's where the essence of karma lies."

So sīla and samādhi are what give us refuge from the dangers of future lives—working, continuing to refine ethical conduct and continuing to cultivate awareness and mindfulness to notice in the moment if

our intentions are wholesome or unwholesome.

Then there are the dangers of conditioned existence itself: samsara and the dukkha inherent in it, craving for existence and the ignorance that underlies that craving. It is wisdom, paññā, that gives us protection from that ignorance. Wisdom uproots ignorance. We go from avijjā to vijjā, from not having clear seeing to having wisdom.

A teacher and the teachings of how to develop wisdom are what give us refuge from the dangers of conditioned existence: being shown what the path is, the teachings, walking the path, and support from spiritual friends and teachers so that we can continue to walk the path towards clear seeing. That is what gives us protection from the dangers of conditioned existence.

So that's what we're taking refuge from. It is just this cultivation of our heart and mind—of sīla, samādhi, and paññā—that is our true refuge and what gives us protection from these dangers. I use the word "true refuge" for a reason.

And why? Why is it a true refuge? Because it actually will give us protection from the dangers that we're seeking refuge from. It works. That's the first thing—that it actually works. And the second is that it can't be taken away.

So if that's true refuge, then what constitutes false refuge? Before going to specifics, just two aspects of false refuge, which of course is the opposite of true refuge. When we take refuge in false refuge, the reason it's false is that it doesn't work. It actually doesn't give us the protection that we're looking for. And false refuge can be taken away, because it's more of an outward thing.

When we take refuge in sila, samadhi, and paññā, it can't be taken away. Can someone take your insight into whatever you know to be true away? No. It's not possible. But if I look to eat a cookie every time I have a difficult emotion—if I look to refuge in the cookie jar—that's a common form of refuge. I remember one time Christopher was teaching, and he was talking about going to the refrigerator. He said, "The refrigerator is the Western pagoda." We go for refuge to the refrigerator a lot.

So false refuges don't work, and they can be taken away. There are many, many ways that we go for false refuge, but just for time's sake, I want to talk about how it is that we go to sense pleasures for false refuge.

We're kind of tragic in a certain way, us humans. We know that they don't work, but we keep trying. And I'm sure you've heard this in some dharma talk—it's kind of popular—but the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

When I first came to the dharma, I remember my first teacher—I had just met them, maybe a week I had known them, and not really been with them that much. So all of a sudden I was just with them one day, and he just looked at me and said, "Chaz, you know you're insane, right?" I was like, "I'm not insane!" But what he was speaking to was how when there's not wisdom, when we don't have any sila, samadhi, and

paññā, we live our lives in an insane way. We live our lives trying to be happy in ways that don't work, and we continue doing the same thing. So he was pointing to that, but at that time I didn't know—I thought he really meant it.

There's a great little story or parable about this, about Nasruddin, the Sufi wise man slash fool. His friend came over to see him one day and found Nasruddin sitting in front of a huge pile of hot peppers—those thin red ones—eating one after another with tears streaming down, hiccuping. But he kept eating them. This friend comes up and says, "Mullah, what are you doing?" And he goes, "I keep waiting for a sweet one." Tears running down.

This taking refuge in pleasant sense pleasures, pleasant experiences—now biologically, we're primed to shrink away from what's unpleasant and to go toward what's pleasant. When a baby is born, the way it knows to go for food, the way the hand pulls off a hot stove—it's just how we're made up. And it serves us. It really serves us on many levels. But it doesn't serve us on this level. This level meaning developing wisdom and compassion. Because on this level we're after one thing and one thing only: unconditional happiness. Happiness that can't be taken away. Complete and unshakable freedom of the heart and mind.

Now what happens is we get confused. And that's what the word ignorance is—avijja in Pali. You could translate it as confusion, not wisdom, not clear, not knowing clearly. And this wisdom is the wisdom that knows based on seeing the truth of how things are. It's through seeing the truth of how things are.

When we see that, it's not as though some additional wisdom arrives, informing us what leads to happiness and what doesn't. The wisdom is right there in the seeing of how things are—it knows what leads to happiness and what leads to unhappiness. It's right there in that seeing.

And of course, the mistake we make is that we mistake pleasantness for happiness. We make that equation. Somehow we've gotten into the habit of hooking those two together—pleasantness equals happiness. And so we spend our lives seeking after and holding onto pleasant experiences while avoiding and pushing away unpleasant ones.

Now, if this worked, then most people in the Western world would be very, very happy, because we have so many resources and conditions to keep unpleasantness at bay. Being cold, for instance, doesn't always have to be unpleasant, but it often is. I remember once watching some documentary filmed in Ladakh. They were in someone's home, and you could see their breath. It struck me—when it's winter, they're simply cold inside their house. We can avoid that just because of the circumstances we find ourselves in. We have tremendous resources available to us, and so we can really up the pleasant ante.

But does that lead to happiness necessarily? No. We can know that. It's not just an on-off switch. Probably no one here would dispute what I just said. But again, in the moment do we know it? And at what level of subtlety do we know it? When we take the time to look—to the degree that we take the time to look—it becomes very clear that pleasantness does not equal happiness.

Atisha was a Tibetan practitioner quite a long time ago, eleventh or twelfth century, I believe. He said, "Friends, the things you desire give no more satisfaction than drinking seawater. Therefore, practice contentment." That's just such a pithy statement. The things you desire give no more satisfaction—read happiness. Satisfying what? Our heart's desire for peace, for freedom. Everyone has that. Every human being comes with that built into the hard drive, so to speak. And there's only one way we get deep satisfaction: when the heart and mind come to complete peace. So these things we desire give no more satisfaction than drinking seawater to quench thirst. It doesn't work. Therefore, practice contentment—being content with what is, with what we have.

So that's false refuge and how it works, how it comes to be: all the different ways we try to escape difficulties, both outwardly and inwardly, especially inwardly in the heart and mind, by saying basically, "That's unpleasant. I don't like that. I want to change this experience to one that's pleasant."

So that's false refuge. Now, how can we become aware of it when it's happening? How can we start to become more aware of it in a skillful way? Sometimes we might be aware of grosser examples of how we use false refuge, and we can recognize those. But our whole practice is simply increasing the subtlety with which we know.

I may have used this quote last Saturday, but I found it really interesting. Someone once said that the practitioner who sits down for their first time to meditate, being with the breath, and the practitioner who is at third stage enlightenment—one mind moment away from arahantship—they're both doing the same practice.

They're doing the exact same practice—it's just they're doing it on different levels of subtlety. I thought, that's true.

So how can we learn to be more and more aware of false refuge on a subtler and subtler level? Well, first by simply hearing teachings that there is false refuge. There's true refuge, there's false refuge. And knowing what it is and how we engage in it in our own lives. Reflecting: How do I engage in false refuge? When I get pushed to my edge, how do I try to cope? When I'm bored, when I'm home and no one's there and I don't know what to do—standing in the middle of the living room, don't know what to do with myself—where do I go? What do I reach towards if there's not enough presence? Just really reflecting and knowing what it is that we do.

Knowing that false refuge exists and reflecting on the ways that we engage in it—it's like we can be on the lookout for it as well as our conditioned response to whatever it is we don't like. Can we notice? And of course, again, the template is: something is happening that's unpleasant, and we don't want it. We want to replace it. We want to move away from it and replace it with something that's more pleasant. That's the template. How we all do it involves huge variation on that theme.

So can we begin to notice this occurring again on subtler and subtler levels? How does this happen for you

here on retreat? How do you move away from what's unpleasant to what's pleasant on retreat?

I notice an interesting thing in sitting meditation. If it's kind of towards the end of the sit—the sit's been going on for a while and the mind is not really grabbing onto anything, but it's kind of pleasant, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant. You can tell I'm a greed type. Pleasant, pleasant. I've learned that at a particular time in the sit, when maybe the body might be getting a little achy—there's not extreme pain at this moment or else it would have the attention—I notice the mind doing that, and then I'll go, "Ah," and I'll look back to the body. There's some moderate pain going on that I didn't even notice, and the mind was just thinking, let's stay with something pleasant instead of feeling that. Not even intense pain—moderate pain. That's one example. Not that it's wrong or bad, but again, to notice so that we can work with it.

And then, what supports the noticing of it itself? What supports us waking up to these habit patterns, these particular ways? Maybe, again on retreat, some of the subtler ways that we go for false refuge. What supports this?

First, mindfulness. Cultivating mindfulness supports it. Sometimes there can be moments—or more than moments—where we think, "Why do I have to be mindful of this? What is this doing?" When we're cultivating mindfulness of the breath, it doesn't just help us with mindfulness of the breath. It helps mindfulness as a mind state get stronger. And of course, that mindfulness can come up anywhere. In this case, as we're talking about, the strength of that mindfulness can come up and notice as we go for false refuge. Or even start to make that movement from unpleasant towards pleasant. Or even noticing that we don't like, that there's aversion to the unpleasant. As we support mindfulness in general, it comes to bear on more and more of our experience.

This is the intention behind more and more continual mindfulness. It's like the pearls on a string. You start off and there's a pearl here, there's a pearl there. Twenty feet down, there's another pearl. As mindfulness strengthens, there are more pearls. And as mindfulness gets really strong, there are so many pearls that they start to touch. That's where you can start to get more continuous mindfulness. And it comes to bear, as it's more continuous, on more and more of our experience.

And so this seeing of these habit patterns—on whatever level, from the most gross to the most subtle—this habit pattern of moving away from the unpleasant, this seeing of it is the purification practice. It's the purification stage of our practice.

Our practice moves and flows between two different stages, and there are different names for them. The way I learned was purity and purification. The purity stage is when something unpleasant comes up and there's strong mindfulness, strong equanimity, no suffering. There's no problem. That's the definition of when we're in the purity stage.

When we're in the purification stage, something unpleasant comes up, there's aversion to it, we start to move away from it, we look for pleasantness—and that movement is seen. That's the purification.

What happens is, because one feels better than the other—again, back to liking the pleasant—because the purity stage is often a more pleasant experience, we like it better. But we also then mistake it for better practice. This was really helpful when it was pointed out to me: the purity and purification stages are both equal as far as being supportive to our own awakening and our own happiness. The purity stage isn't better. They both just work in different ways, and they're both equal.

So as you're practicing during the day and you're seeing—basically seeing the defilements, which we do a lot—then maybe it can be helpful just to know: "Oh, I'm in the purification stage. Great. This is good. This is just as good as the purity stage." This also helps us not judge ourselves for what we're seeing. Again, we practice to understand, not to judge.

Purification stage. Oh, look at that. It's really true. It's really true that the habit pattern of the human mind is to move away from unpleasantness and grasp after the pleasant. Look at that. It works. I'm not an exception to that.

I think I mentioned this perhaps in the other talk, but there's this importance of not judging our practice and not judging ourselves—not only just because it's painful and it hurts, but equally important because when we judge ourselves, in that moment when the judging arises—aversion directed inward—when the mind contracts around that, when that clouds the mind, there's no clear seeing. It blocks any clear seeing.

And there's so much great clear seeing available in the purification stage. It's pregnant with the possibility for understanding. But once we go into judging and that clouds the mind, we can't see.

There's a famous part of what is actually a very long treatise by the Third Zen Patriarch: "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences." Do we have a preference between the purity and purification stages of practice? We probably do.

"The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything"—especially your experience in the moment. "If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind."

And when that happens in the moment, we can't see clearly.

Speaking to this in a slightly different way, Pema Chödrön says, "Trying to fix ourselves is not helpful." Very pragmatic. "Trying to fix ourselves is not helpful. It implies struggle and self-denigration. Denigrating ourselves is probably the major way that we cover over bodhicitta"—bodhicitta meaning the awakened heart-mind. Awakened, seeing clearly. We cover over the seeing clearly when we're denigrating ourselves.

Okay, let's assume we notice this movement towards false refuge. We can avoid—or mostly avoid—the judgment of it. Now what? Now what do we do? Two more things.

If it's in the phase where it's just arising in the mind, notice what that experience is like. Notice what it feels like in the body, in the mind, to move away from life, to start to pull back from life. It has a very particular feeling to it. We have to look and see. But my experience of it is that it's not happy-making. It's not pleasant at all. Is that experience relaxed? Is it content? Is it at ease? Or is it agitated, filled with unsatisfactoriness, and not at ease? We have to look and see, right in that moment for ourselves, what the truth of that experience is like for us. And again, for me, it's a very unpleasant experience.

This is Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche: "Rest in natural great peace, this exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thought, like the relentless fury of the pounding waves in the infinite ocean of samsara. Rest in natural great peace." We can tap into that. You can actually feel that—beaten, helpless by the waves of samsara. We can feel that in the moment of moving away.

And then, if we notice this moving away from unpleasantness towards pleasantness during or after it's occurred, we can still practice with it. We can ask ourselves: Did this satisfy me? Did this give me protection from the danger I was seeking shelter from? Is it the refuge that I'm looking for? We can ask and look and see. Or has it left me, like poor Nasruddin, waiting for something? Still waiting, waiting, waiting.

This is all we need to do—this kind of looking, this kind of investigation and questioning. It's all right here. Whether it's in the purity stage or the purification stage, we just need to connect and look. Because when we do, we begin to see clearly.

So that's false refuge—how it comes into being, how we can skillfully be aware of it and work with it. But how is false refuge integral to our awakening? It happens so much. Is this just some abhorrent, separate thing? Could it be integral to our awakening? Isn't it something bad that we have to get rid of so that we can have true refuge?

Yes and no. We definitely won't find true refuge. We will not liberate our hearts and minds if we constantly and continually seek false refuge. That's true, absolutely. Yet it's through seeing—on subtler and subtler levels, from our own experience—that false refuge does not provide us with the refuge we're seeking, that it does not provide us with the happiness we so want. When we see that, we turn towards true refuge. And in the seeing of that, it's not like we see it and then go, "Well, now I think I'll turn towards true refuge." In the clarity of seeing how false refuge doesn't work is the turning towards true refuge.

We're going to take refuge in false refuge until we don't. That's kind of how we are as humans. So the only sane response for someone who really wants to be free is to start paying attention to exactly how you take false refuge and what that experience is like. Because as human beings, we're a bit slow and deluded. No, really. Think about it—as a species. But we're not completely dumb. When we start to actually see what leads to happiness and what doesn't lead to happiness, when we actually start to see that false refuge doesn't work, we act. We do act. We do have the capacity to do what's needed for our own happiness.

But we need patience. Patience is a powerful, powerful and necessary mind state that we need to cultivate on this path. It's one of the paramis.

As the Buddha pointed out in so many different times and ways, even in how he taught, this is a gradual process. Even when we begin to see, it still takes time. We don't just instantly change. You see something in your own experience, but habit patterns are strong.

The example I like to use is this: imagine a two-mile-long, fully loaded freight train going sixty miles an hour, and the engineer decides to stop. It doesn't just stop. That freight train will take ten or fifteen miles more before it actually comes to a complete halt.

One of the really good benefits of a long retreat like this is that it shows us just how important patience is. You really get to learn about patience on a long retreat, because these things don't turn on a dime.

Most of you have probably heard this, but in case someone hasn't, it's such a lovely poem by Portia Nelson called "There's a Hole in My Sidewalk." It speaks to this process:

I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost. I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I'm in the same place. But it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to find a way out.

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it there. I still fall in. It's a habit, but my eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

I don't like the "fault" thing—there's got to be a better word.

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

I walk down another street.

Then the addendum is: you stand next to the hole and you help people out when they fall in.

As a way to begin bringing this to a close, some more words from Bhikkhu Bodhi. He's so clear—I love how he writes about the Dharma.

He writes: "The Dhamma is the actual refuge. As the goal of the teaching, the Dhamma is the state of security, free from danger. As the path, it is the means for arriving at the goal. And as the verbal teaching, it is the body of instructions describing the way to practice the path. But to make effective use of the means at our disposal, we need the help of others who are familiar with the path. Those who know the path make up the Sangha, the helpers in finding refuge."

Remember, we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

"Those who know the path make up the Sangha, the helpers in finding refuge—the union of spiritual friends who can lead us to our attainment of the path. We need a doctor to diagnose our illness and prescribe a remedy. We need medicine to cure our illness. And we need attendants to look after our requirements. To get well, we have to take the medicine. We can't just sit back and expect the doctor to cure us all by him or herself. In the same way, to find deliverance from suffering, we have to practice the Dhamma. For the Dhamma is the actual refuge, which leads to the state of deliverance."

And that's what each of you is doing here, very steadfastly and beautifully. You're actually practicing the Dhamma. This is something you can reflect on from time to time—it can really brighten the mind. You're actually practicing the Dhamma. You are cultivating true refuge, refuge that's unshakable, that can't be taken away, and that works.

And if there's anyone sitting here right now thinking, "He's not talking to me. I'm not practicing the Dhamma. I'm not doing this very well. I'm not creating much of anything here"—I just want to say that that's not true. It's simply not true. Those are just deluded thoughts. We all have those thoughts at times. Your presence here is not accidental. You are practicing the Dhamma. And it's really an inspiration for everyone.

Just to close with something from the Dhammapada about refuge:

They go to many a refuge—to mountains, forests, parks, trees, and shrines—people threatened with danger. That's not the secure refuge. That's not the highest refuge. That's not the refuge, having gone to which you gain release from all suffering and stress.

But when, having gone for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, you see with right discernment the Four Noble Truths—stress, the cause of stress, the transcending of stress, and the Noble Eightfold Path, the way to the stilling of stress—that's the secure refuge. That is the highest refuge. That is the refuge, having gone to which you gain release from all suffering and stress.

So let's sit quietly for a few moments.

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