

# Dhp 188-192: The Role of Confidence

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 20:04

---

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

So we can continue our little exploration of the Dhammapada. I've chosen a set of verses, 188 to 192, and they're all to do with taking refuge and confidence.

So I shall do my usual thing of intoning them:

*Bahuṃ ve saraṇaṃ yanti, pabbatāni vanāni ca  
Ārāma rukkhā cetyāni, manussā bhaya tajjitā  
N'etaṃ kho saraṇaṃ khemaṃ, n'etaṃ saraṇaṃ uttamaṃ  
N'etaṃ saraṇaṃ āgamma, sabba dukkhā pamuccati  
Yo ca Buddhaṃ ca Dhammaṃ ca, Saṅghaṃ ca saraṇaṃ gato  
Cattāri ariya saccāni, sammappaññāya passati*

This one's easy because it's very straightforward really. So this is a translation:

"People threatened by fear go to many refuges: to mountains, forests, parks, trees and shrines. None of these are a secure refuge. None is a supreme refuge. Not by going to such refuge is one released from all suffering. Having gone for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, they see with right view the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the arising of suffering, the overcoming of suffering and the Eightfold Noble Path leading to the end of suffering. This is the secure refuge. This is the supreme refuge. By going to such refuge, one is released from all suffering."

So these verses were chanted by the Buddha when he came across a certain character called Ajitadatta. So this is the story that it hangs on.

Ajitadatta was the head priest during the time of King Mahākosala, father of King Pasenadi. King Pasenadi was a great supporter of the Buddha and was the king of Kosala. After the death of King Mahākosala, Ajitadatta gave away all his property in charity and after that he left home and became a non-Buddhist ascetic. He lived with his 10,000 followers in a place near the border of three kingdoms: Anga, Magadha and Kuru, not far from the mound of sand where a powerful *nāga* was staying.

Now a *nāga* is a combination of a divine being or even a human being and a snake or a serpent. It was the *nāgas* that kept the Mahāyāna scriptures hidden until it was time for them to be discovered, or revealed

rather. These *nāgas* are worshipped all over Southeast Asia. I'm not so sure now, but in those times it's not just a Buddhist thing. But the famous one for a Buddhist is of course Mucalinda. So Mucalinda was the cobra who came and protected the Buddha from the heavy rains. A deluge came down just after his enlightenment, so I presume it was the start of the rainy season, and Mucalinda rose up and his cobra cover helped the Buddha from getting soaked.

I actually have a very regular copy of that. That is a picture of the *nāga*. He's got a few heads there. I don't quite know why. And the Buddha looks tremendously serene. So he's doing all right. It's a great old statue. I don't know where it came from or who gave it to us. So that's the *nāga* and he lived on this sandpit.

Now, one day the Buddha saw Ajitadatta and his followers in his vision and realized that the time was right for them to attain Arahatsip. So the Buddha sent Mahāthera Moggallāna - that's remember his second great disciple, who was Sāriputta and Moggallāna, and Moggallāna is the one known for these special powers. So Moggallāna went to Ajitadatta and then the Buddha said he'd follow afterwards.

So when Moggallāna went to the place of Ajitadatta and his followers, he asked them to give him shelter for one night. They first turned down his request, but finally they agreed to let him stop at the mound of sand, the home of the *nāga*. The *nāga* was very antagonistic, and there followed a duel between the *nāga* and the therā. On both sides, there was a display of power by emitting smoke and flames. However, in the end, the *nāga* was subdued. He coiled himself round the mound of sand, raised his head, spreading it out like an umbrella over the Mahāthera, thus showing respect for him.

Early in the morning, Ajitadatta and the other ascetics came to the mound of sand to find out whether Mahāthera was still alive. They had expected him to be dead. When they found the *nāga* tame and meekly holding his head like an umbrella over Moggallāna, they were very much astounded.

Just then, the Buddha arrived, and Mahāmoggallāna got up from his seat on the mound and paid obeisance to the Buddha. Mahāmoggallāna then proclaimed to the audience of ascetics, "This is my teacher, the Supreme Buddha, and I am but a humble pupil of this great teacher." Hearing him, the ascetics, who had been very much impressed even by the power of the bhikkhu, were awed by the greater power of the Buddha.

The Buddha then asked Ajitadatta what he taught his followers and the residents of the neighbourhood. Ajitadatta replied that he had taught them to pay homage to the mountains, forests, parks, gardens and trees, and that by doing so they would be liberated from all ills of life. So I presume he was what we would call a pagan, I suppose. It's funny, in those days they would have presumed that the devas were around these particular places.

The Buddha replied to Ajitadatta, "Ajitadatta, people go to the mountains, forests, gardens and parks and trees for refuge when they are threatened with danger, but these things cannot offer them any protection. Only those who've taken refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha are liberated from the rounds of

rebirth."

At the end of the discourse, Ajitadatta and all his followers attained Arahantship. All of them entered the order of the *bhikkhus*. On that day, when the disciples of Ajitadatta from Anga, Magadha and Kuru came to pay respects to him, they saw their teacher and his followers garbed as *bhikkhus* and they were puzzled and wondered, "Who is the more powerful? Our teacher or the Samaṇa Gotama? Our teacher must be more powerful because Samaṇa Gotama came to our teacher."

The Buddha knew what they were thinking. Ajitadatta also felt that he must set their minds at rest. So he paid obeisance to the Buddha in the presence of his disciples and said, "Venerable sir, you are my teacher, I am but a disciple of yours." Thus the audience came to realize the supremacy of the Buddha.

So there we have a nice little story to support our verses. I always find it rather amusing that the *nāga* and Moggallāna were spitting fire and fumes of smoke on this mound which can't have been that far away from Ajitadatta. How they slept through the commotion is itself a magical effort.

So anyway, what I really want to dwell on a little bit is the crucial role of confidence. Just if you sometimes reflect back on your life and remember the first time that you started your job, your first work, of course you were confident, but you weren't entirely confident. It was only after being there for a while, knowing what the work actually involved, that the confidence grew. So here, through the experience, and of course, the knowledge that came as you're doing it. So here you have this combination of confidence and experience.

If you think about a relationship, how long did it take? I mean, the confidence was there at the beginning, an intimate relationship, but then how long did it take for there to be enough confidence to establish an intimate relationship, to establish either a partnership or a marriage? So that again is to do with experience, is to do with going through what you had intended to do. But without that confidence, you would never have started.

If you take a very simple example, like jumping off the high board, I do remember starting off on the springboard and then moving up to the first level of the high board. And then finally I got to the top and it was a jump. I never quite got around to diving head first into the water. So I lacked confidence there. So you can see confidence is at the basis, at the root of anything we do. In fact, you wouldn't lift your cup of tea to your mouth if you didn't have confidence that it would actually arrive there.

And it's one of what we call the faculties, spiritual faculties, which runs normally in tandem with *paññā*, with insight and wisdom. So this combination of confidence, practice, and experience, the one supports the other. And at some point, if a person has a deep enough insight to enter the first path and fruit, this quality becomes a *bala*, a power. You could say it's unshakable because now they realize by their own direct experience that in fact, there is an end to suffering. Even if it's only dimly seen, they have that absolute confidence.

Now here's a little something that came to mind when I was thinking about this. In Islam, if you are asked to deny your religion and your life is in danger, you can do so. So when the Inquisition in Spain demanded that they all become baptised, they were able to do so. Outwardly, they were Christians, but inwardly, of course, they remained Muslims. If you contrast that with Christianity, which begins, of course, with the story of Peter, who denies Christ and really feels - and of course, Judas, who then hangs himself. But Jesus - Peter must have felt terribly embarrassed having denied his teacher. And so what we get in Christianity is much more an acceptance of martyrdom.

And even when the Inquisition moved to southern France and started chasing the Cathars, the Illuminati and in fact I think just ordinary Cathars, they actually threw themselves onto the bonfires. I went to one place - I couldn't find the name of it - but what happened was there were about 150 of Cathars who may have all been Illuminati, I don't know, but they actually threw themselves onto the bonfire. So a very different attitude, and of course you wouldn't do that if you didn't have absolute confidence that you were righteous and that you would be reborn in heaven and that you wouldn't be just jumping out of one fire into the fires of hell. Just a nice little aside there.

So of course what do we mean when we say we take the refuges? Well in terms of the Buddha, of course, it's just a confidence in him as our teacher. But it's also his practice. We know what he went through to become liberated. And that, of course, gives us a confidence. It's not as though he just appeared and said, "Do this and do that." He actually went through it himself. So his teaching comes directly out of his own experience.

If you find yourself to be a devotional type, then the whole idea of reading about his life and his story and contemplating that - and of course, the idea is that you say to yourself, "May I be like the Buddha." So there's a connection there of wanting to imitate the Buddha. But I think we also have to take the refuge within ourselves. There's a Buddha within us. We just haven't realized it yet. And it's actually putting confidence that is in us, that which is seeking its own liberation from suffering. So I think that's an important aside, which is normally not included in the refuges and precepts. But I just think acknowledging that is important.

The Dharma, of course, is the teaching and the practice itself. And it's normally put as three types of knowledges. The first one is that when you hear the teaching, you may be inspired by it. And then you have to make it your own teaching. And that's when you mull over it, where you ponder the teachings. And that leads you to a certain practice. And what you learn actually becomes your own real experience. And that's *vipassanā*. So there are these three levels that are pointed at when it comes to our understanding of Buddhism. It starts with just that reading, hearing, and then finally moves to our own direct experience. None of that could happen were it not that the confidence is slowly building up over time.

Now these refuges that we take, they weren't actually part of the original refuges that the monastics took.

When he first started, the first people who approached him and said, "Look, I'd like to follow your teachings. Could you be my teacher?" His response was just, "*Ehi passiko*," which just means come and try, have a go, see what happens.

Later on when he had established some of his disciples as Arahats, that's when this taking refuge in him and in the teachings and in the Saṅgha came in for anybody who wanted to become a monastic. However, in time - well they say about after 20 years - people who joined the order weren't of a high calibre and they started doing naughty things and so rules had to be made, all sorts of rules that go from obviously moral law such as thieving and murder and all that sort of stuff, but go down to very minute behaviour. So that for instance when I'm eating I'm not supposed to make chapa chapa sounds or suru suru sounds. I'm not supposed to be making sounds as I chew or slurping my drink. So even that sort of very basic etiquette is part of the rule.

So now what happened was as lay people came to want to be his disciples, that second tier of commitment - Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha - became the lay ordination. That's how it moved. That's how it's become the lay ordination. And there's all sorts of levels of commitment. When I became a monk and came back to the West, I began daily shaving my head. In the East I would do it every two weeks - that's a normal time just before you go in for the *uposatha*, the *pāṭimokkha* where the vinaya is read out. But here when I returned to the West I determined to shave my head every day just to remind myself that I am actually a monk. It was my morning ritual. Nothing catastrophic happens if I miss shaving my head, but it's just there as a little practice in the morning.

And that's why taking refuge and precepts is something that we try to make fairly habitual every morning. It doesn't take long, but it's just a moment where you remind yourself of your practice, of what your life is ultimately about. And it's just those little reminders every day that just keep pumping the energy into your practice.

So that's it really. The question is, as a sort of contemplation: what is the role of confidence in my life and how can I make it grow? How do I increase this confidence? Various ways in which I can do it.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused even greater confusion, and that by your devotion to the practice you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*