



Taking Refuge: *Everywhere Life is Sufficient In it's Way*

The word refuge comes from the Latin, *re-fugere*, which means to fly back, or return. Refuge is not something we can get or buy or make happen. There's no place to go to get refuge. Rather, refuge is about returning again and again to what's happening right now. We can return to "now" from our excursions—into the future (planning, strategizing, worrying), and into the past (rehashing, remembering, wishing we could undo or redo).

In English, the word refuge has the connotation of turning in; of a safe place where we can retreat from the intensity and activity of the world. The Japanese word for refuge is *kie*, which includes a sense of return, but also the spirit of wholehearted engagement—the opposite of retreat or turning away. In Japanese, "I take refuge in Buddha," is "Namu kie butsu". "Namu" means honoring and acknowledging what and who inspire us, and expressing our dedication and appreciation to that. "Kie" means to wholeheartedly throw oneself into and to depend on. So "Namu kie butsu" is sometimes translated as "I wholeheartedly throw myself into the house of Buddha." That's the heart of taking refuge: returning to and throwing ourselves into now and now and now.

The word refuge is also connected to the word refugee. When we take refuge, we are willing to become homeless; to give up our familiar ground and settle, instead, with groundlessness. Groundlessness does not mean there is no ground. There is ground, it's just not solid. Settling in groundlessness means finding our footing in the shifting sands of life. It means letting go of whatever it is—past memory or future hope or a new car or job or mate—that we

think will make us happy. It's coming to see that grabbing onto these things will never bring us the happiness or security we seek.

Koans, literally "public cases," are teaching stories that reveal fundamental aspects of awakened life. The koan, "The World Honored One Points to the Ground," from the Book of Serenity, illuminates what refuge looks like. It opens like this:

The World Honored One was walking with the congregation. He stopped and pointed to the ground and said, 'This is a good place to build a sanctuary.'

Here, the Buddha, out strolling with his friends and disciples, is pointing directly to the meaning of sanctuary. A sanctuary is a place of refuge; a place we can go to return home to ourselves, to our true nature. But where do we find sanctuary? Where do we go for refuge? As we move through our lives where can we drop in, enter and be intimate with ourselves?

Sometimes we are spinning so fast, we forget that refuge or sanctuary is even an option. That's what happens when we charge madly through the world; we forget to "stroll," or we get so caught up in the activity of our lives that we forget about our friends and families. To remember that it is possible to "fly back" to ourselves, we need to slow down—and it's helpful to keep our friends and family nearby.

"Indra, King of the Gods, took a blade of grass, stuck it in the ground and said, 'The sanctuary is built.'"

We all have a kingly or queenly, god-like wisdom that helps us remember to slow down and smell the roses, or enjoy the grass. When we connect with and allow this wisdom to be revealed, we understand that grass, or the phone ringing, or our breath, or sitting in traffic, can be the stake we put in the ground. Whatever is happening is an opportunity, *the* opportunity to return to ourselves and find our feet. When we do this, we embody Indra, and sanctuary is revealed.

“The World Honored One smiled.”

I love this part. This is the Buddha delighting in us taking refuge in the Buddha. There’s a famous transmission story where the Buddha gives a wordless “talk” to his disciples. Instead of words, the Buddha simply holds up a flower. When he does this, one of his main disciples, Mahakashapa, smiles. And this is understood to be the first transmission of the teaching—the first time the Buddha recognizes that one of his students “gets it;” that he sees and acknowledges that his teaching has been fully received, understood and embodied by one of his disciples. All with a flower and a smile!

So when the World Honored One (the Buddha), smiles at Indra, I imagine that, mirroring Mahakashapa and the flower, his smile reflects his thorough appreciation and delight in Indra’s understanding—demonstrated with a blade of grass. It’s as if the Buddha is giving a nod of approval. Yes, using what comes to hand, right here, right now, we create sanctuary, refuge, peace. In fact, *only* right here, right now, when we pluck what is fresh and green and alive in this moment, is refuge also discovered fresh and alive.

The verse following the case comments on this:

*The boundless spring on the hundred plants.
Picking up what comes to hand, she uses it knowingly.*

When we stop and look, we see: there are blades of grass everywhere! Every moment is fresh and new. Then, like Indra, we can use whatever is there in the moment to build a temple, to create a place of refuge.

*The sixteen-foot-tall golden body, a collection of virtuous qualities
Casually leads her by the hand into the red dust;*

Sometimes we think spiritual practice is about escaping to the world of golden bodies and virtuous qualities. And maybe these do inspire us initially. But if we’re lucky, these very bodies and qualities will “casually lead us by the hand”—back to our earthy selves. Giving up

our reach for transcendence and willingly staying here, in the dusty world, with everyone else, is the heart and spirit of bodhisattva practice.

*Able to be master in the dusts,
From outside creation a guest shows up.*

A master in the dusts is someone who is willing to live in the red world of samsara. Instead of hanging out, or wishing to hang out, in deva realms with sixteen-foot-tall, golden, God-like beings, we are willing to live in and even master the world of dust—this world.

Consistently, when I show up to begin a meditation retreat, I have some hope or wish that the practice will relieve me of my difficulties. Inevitably, the opposite is the case. Time and time again, a few days into retreat, I am deeply humbled. “Oh yeah, this is not about escape or even self-improvement, it’s about hanging out here with all of my ‘red dust,’—all of my particular forms of suffering and confusion and quirky neurosis.”

Being a “master in the dusts” means being intimate with ourselves; not trying to get away from or fix or improve—but hanging out, moment by moment with what’s happening. I find that when I finally surrender to particulars of being myself—achy knees, or annoyance at the sniffly person sitting next to me, or a mind plagued with my obsessive worry about what we’ll have for lunch—it changes. I don’t change it. But my experience shifts, in ways that are always surprising. This is, “*From outside creation, a guest shows up.*”

We can’t will this guest to arrive. And we don’t get to say what it will look like or feel like. But when it arrives, we can discover and settle into a simple, radical acceptance of things as they are. We have the opportunity to see that see that, no matter how smart or stupid we are, as the verse concludes, “*everywhere life is sufficient in it’s way.*” This is the essence of refuge.