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the meaning of taking refuge including it being the first step toward recognizing nature of mind itself, interconnections and how it bears fruit, exploring nature of mind and holding view of no beginning and no end

Student 1 [00:00:43] Could you say more about taking refuge and the taking refuge ceremony? What it's like and what it means?

LMC [00:00:50] Who's talking?

Student 1 [00:00:53] Hiding. The disembodied voice. [laughter]

LMC [00:00:57] Comes from every direction. Yeah, it's like wow. I found myself looking under the pecha table to see who that was. [laughter] Your question was again?

Student 1 [00:01:15] To say more about taking refuge and the taking Refuge Ceremony. What it means, what it's like.

LMC [00:01:53] A very big piece of our path... is to turn our minds towards a refuge... in the things which we really appreciate and that don't *trick us* into... treating ourselves and others poorly. And as we all know, it's not easy... because our habit is otherwise. So, we talk about refuge every time we sit down to practice. We engage, we repeat the refuge prayer and we make an effort to hold it and all. But of course, then we stand up and we go out and we're in the world and things are happening. And people often say, I meant to go for refuge... like, every day. And then weeks go by and they completely forgot.

[00:02:54] And so the Refuge Ceremony is meant to give us... a means to practice with that every day. And of course, the ceremony helps to... encourage us even more in that direction. The ceremony is very simple, actually, amongst ceremonies. This tradition is replete with *extremely* complex ceremonies. And this is, this is actually one of the simple ceremonies. Fairly easy to give. Fairly easy to take. And you get a name that presumably you didn't have before. And that name can be used or not used, but the names are always there. Their meaning is always beautiful. Always has a beautiful meaning. And it's nice. Likely they'll be, you know, two or three or possibly even ten or fifteen. We never know how many people will want to do it. And there's a little booklet that you get with your name in it and things.

[00:04:12] Most people say that it was very meaningful, very meaningful ceremony. And... it's also a way of... kind of *officially* entering the path. So, if one has not gone for refuge, we often say it's important to go for refuge as the means to enter the path. So, it has that meaning also. And so, afterwards then you have some liturgical pieces that one can use to kind of remind oneself of it. The little booklet that has some things in it also then is something that... I remember personally being asked by my teacher then to keep that booklet in a clean place... in a drawer that you commonly visit so that you would see it often when you open that drawer. It's like, oh, there that is again. And so, it just reminds you of it.

[00:05:15] And... I guess it also, in a certain way... for many people, is the door to becoming a Buddhist. Which personally, I don't have a big appreciation for that. Because I think that... when you take refuge, you should have the sense that... this is a turning point of some kind. So, it's

helpful to study it in advance so that you have even more sense when you sit down to take the ceremony that... you feel like now I'm doing this. I made the aspiration. My intention is in place. I intend to do this. I'm going to do this. I'm going to follow through on it. That is not magic in any extraordinary way. It's the magic that we all have when we just make the firm intention to do something, even if it's to get on an airplane and fly around the world. We do those things by making a firm intention and then following through with it. And the refuge ceremony is a lot like that.

[00:06:35] We... encourage ourselves and others. Make the firm intention. Sit down. Take it seriously. But don't take it judgmentally. That never is a value. So, the nice thing is, is that, you know, it's the New Year. Everything is coming, and so you go for refuge. And even those who have taken refuge before, there'll be many people who have taken refuge before and they'll be here. And they will also participate in the Refuge Ceremony. They won't get another name, but they'll participate in it. So, you just have the sense of there's a fairly significant number of people... who have the Refuge Ceremony. And they renew it on an annual basis.

[00:07:24] Most of us also renew it every day! It's a daily thing. Anything that you practice, you can do the Refuge Prayer again. And so, it becomes... in a certain way the foundation of everything. That we turn our minds to refuge in the things that are the most precious to us every time that we sit down and do it. And when we forget, we do not beat ourselves up. [laughs] We just forget because that's the nature of being a human being. We aspire to things that we cannot immediately reach. So, we just keep at it. Is that good enough? We can go on for days, you know. [laughs] Thank you.

Student 2 [00:08:54] Carrying on with the refuge theme, how would you compare and contrast... the concepts of... refuge and calm abiding?

LMC [00:09:15] Well, there's a relationship... between those things. Refuge is... in a certain way more fundamental than calm abiding. Refuge we do early on, because it is... so fundamental to our understanding of the entire Buddhist path. Fundamentally, our problem is that we go for refuge more or less continuously in all sorts of things that don't... give us what we thought we were gonna get. We become attached to... all the things in the world that we call, the world of confusion, samsara... where we think that we'll be happy if we make money. We think we'll be happy if we have kids. Or we think we'll be happy if we don't have kids. And on and on. And if I have a career that's right, that I'll be happy because of that.

[00:10:37] And most of us, by the time we've tried those things, one by one, each one of them falls short of our expectations. If it falls short enough, we are truly miserable. And... if it doesn't fall short, oftentimes it's just because it hasn't happened yet. And so, in a certain way, you know, I think one of the things that I remember early on feeling... that it was appealing about Buddhism, that there was no *judgment* in it, that I was a fool for being attached to those things. It was more like... you want to be free of the suffering? Here are some steps to be free of it. It's okay, you can have a career. You can have money. You can have family. You cannot have a family. You can have all those things. But the *attachment* to those things is what gets us. We don't own *it* then, it owns us. And getting out of that space is not easy. People even take their lives by virtue of that kind of conundrum, when we get caught in it. So, refuge is a direct means to deal with that.

[00:12:05] So, instead of going for refuge in all of the worldly goods, whether it's a worldly relationship or physical pleasures or wealth and... you can make your own list. They don't

deliver in the end. And so, refuge is an antidote to believing that it delivers. It doesn't put you in a position where you can't have any of those things. But perhaps the relationship that comes by virtue of understanding refuge, then, is a more healthy relationship, whatever the relationship is to.

[00:12:53] So, we turn our minds to refuge in the very things that we find helpful. So, in a kind of big way, we can say... really the entire tradition is about... recognizing the nature of mind itself. Of the many kind of, you know, one-phrase-summaries of the entire thing, say one of them is... recognize the nature of mind itself. It's the source of all of our experiences. So, of course, to be able to recognize the source of all of our experiences, sounds like that must be good! But it turns out that that is really difficult. Despite the fact that we can't be closer to anything than the nature of mind itself. And yet... probably most sentient beings go through their entire life without having a glimpse of it. A glimpse that they recognize. So, refuge is the first step in that direction. So, we recognize the importance of going for refuge to something other than all of the things that haven't worked for us. So, the thing that we want to go for refuge in, we say the Buddha. We don't mean Buddha as a God. We mean Buddha as the awakened mind. And so, going for refuge to Buddha is going for refuge, also then in all the *means* by which we would come to recognize the nature of mind. In a nutshell. Does that make sense? Is there any missing piece?

Student 2 [00:14:44] That's very helpful, thank you.

Bill [00:14:47] Just to be explicit about the aspect of shamatha that you brought up.

LMC [00:14:51] Oh, yeah. Thank you.

Bill [00:14:52] Shamatha is one of the *means*, or is a part of the means to do this... this larger piece of work. And in terms of recognizing the nature of mind, probably the first thing that we have to do is figure out how to... pay attention. To be present. Without that, the kind of subliminal taking refuge in all the etc's that have been listed... that's the only show going on. And it's not until we can actually pause enough... to witness what's going on that we can begin to... see kind of how we might look deeper. And so shamatha is a basis for looking deeper.

Student 3 [00:16:27] So, I was watching, I was lost in samsara and watching the news programs, and they had interviews at the airport of things that you give thanks for and resoundingly, many people were like family! And I'm like, oh, well, if I were there it would be The Four Noble Truths and The Three Jewels. So, anyways, that's one commentary. But along the lines of what you were saying, which I have appreciated, you know... that the Buddha, often, is the example of one of the refuges. And then, as you've pointed out, it's really the awakened state of mind. And one of the other things that I give thanks for, I was reading some commentary, which was not only the awakened state of mind, but how, you know, that mind is pristine... has existed... will exist. So, you know, despite like karmic tendencies and kleshas and everything, you know, it's comforting... to think of the mind that way. As you know, you know, the mind will always be there for you. [LMC laughs] So, I just thought I would share that. And perhaps you might like to comment on that.

LMC [00:17:43] Oh, yes. [general laughter] Yes, it's... it's important just to mention this. That some of these things are *best* understood, if you can make a... distinction, in your understanding between... the thing that we call the mind and the thing that we call the body. So, when we refer to the body, we really mean kind of the brain, I might say. Because in the West, mostly... scientists... will say that the brain and the mind are pretty much identical. But we make

a *distinction* between those two things... in, I think, all of the Buddhist traditions. And that distinction, if you hold that view, which is to say... that you hold that understanding, even just lightly, it influences your understanding of... your mind. It influences your understanding of your being... by virtue of not depending upon something which comes and goes. That is to say, most people are born with a brain. And by the time they die, it's mostly gone... or corrupted or something's not so good anymore. And so, we tend to *identify* with our body in a way which is not helpful.

[00:19:34] Not helpful also, especially... towards the end of life. Then we have this sense of confusion about things. But if we understand, and I say understand, like *holding the view*... of the mind as not being a corporeal thing like the brain. At the end of life, then... the mind is not... gone. That there is a kind of a continuum which can be confusing in terms of understanding it. But... one way I think to step into that place, is to just consider... that all things in this world... are what they are by virtue of... an interdependent connection with all things.

[00:20:31] So, a simple explanation of that is... if you generally live your life... in the way of being kind to others... being gracious... helping other people rather than taking things from them... certain things transpire by virtue of holding your awareness in your mind in that way. So, that when you meet people, you have pleasant relationships and they feel a pleasant relationship by virtue of having met you. The result of that... is, generally speaking, something positive... by virtue of having made that connection. On the other hand, if you tend to be short tempered, impatient, judgmental, all of that... every time that you engage in that, there is another result that comes... which often is not particularly pleasant. And the further down that road you go, the less pleasant things become.

[00:21:44] So, without speaking about karma, we can say that we are *always*... every minute of every day... we are the result of all the things that we have thought and said and done. First of all, in this life. But even more important, we would say... at *any* time in the past, in the future, whether you were dead or alive... all of the experiences that you had... are kind of connected interdependently... and they bear their fruit... at the time of death, at the time of birth, during the time of life, all along the way.

[00:22:35] So, it's helpful to hold the view that whatever I say, think and do, especially the *thinking* part, which nobody else can see... but if you fill your mind continuously with the aspiration to *only* bring benefit to others, if you can hold *that* position, there's a great many benefits that unfold from it. And those benefits are not limited to the small sphere of time that you made those aspirations and acted in that way. They are more or less kind of thrown into the river of the flow of interconnected things. So... they don't have a short lifetime. The benefits or the downside of it, can appear at any time in the future. So, I know that isn't exactly what you asked, but I just decided to tag it on to something you asked about three months ago, [laughter] because... I'm recalling that it didn't seem like it was entirely clear.

Student 3 [00:23:55] I have another question about these karmic seeds that you're planting. So, I see, you know, like a refuge tree. And at the bottom of the refuge tree, where I think even at the base of Shakyamuni's throne, there are these blue and red bubbles. Are they supposed to be representative of karmic like, you know...

Bill [00:24:26] They're jewels.

Student 3 [00:24:28] Oh, those are the jewels. Okay. All right. Well, I'm not a big jewel person, so, you know, gemstone.

Bill [00:24:36] We would, we would... we would probably... if somebody said jewels, we would draw a different picture. But that's what they are. And there are other precious things there. They are offerings. But offerings, making offerings, *is* planting karmic seeds. Just to be able to kind of wrap it back up neatly. [laughter]

Student 4 [00:25:21] There is a lot of emphasis on understanding the nature of mind. And... it seems to me that... thinking purely in relative terms, that one can become extremely... interested in the welfare of others... compassionate and so forth. And I don't quite understand how... more fully understanding the nature of mind makes that better somehow. Becoming compassionate and caring about other people.

LMC [00:26:05] It doesn't change the nature of mind. Whether you are compassionate or an *evil* person, even, the nature of mind is the nature of mind. It's the foundation of all of our experience. But we don't *recognize* the nature of mind. So, we don't connect the dots in a certain way. It's definitely not the case... that... a thin understanding of the nature of mind... will give us great insights somehow. But, of course, I think most of us might say... living in this body... and having my jealousies, my greed, my anger, my disappointments, my wishes... all of these things that I constantly work with... it's not so difficult to come to a conclusion that maybe understanding the nature of mind could be the single most important thing in this life. And then, if you take the next kind of... *Buddhist step*, if you will... that there is no boundary before or after that. That is to say, the mind has no beginning and no end. That's an important piece in that puzzle. If you want to go deep into it... you have to hold the view that the mind has no beginning and no end. Another way that it's sometimes expressed is... it is unborn. Like, it has never occurred, which would put a kind of beginning point for it. It has always just been what it is.

[00:28:02] So, I get that not everybody has this curiosity. But I have to confess that for me, it's been from the beginning, a curiosity about what that is... before ever coming to Buddhism. My curiosity was, what the hell am I? Like, what is this? Why do I have these? Where, what are they? And I still have that. And... the most appealing approach to all of that is... the exploration, the various explorations that one can do within the context of this tradition. An exploration of... that nature of mind.

[00:28:44] And fundamentally, it's taught, like, if you can, if you *recognize* the nature of mind you, that's pretty much... the goal. The rest of it unfolds from that recognition. And the recognition can be had in a really short... place... suddenly! But ultimately, we also want to... stabilize that recognition so that we are... *fully* aware... of what it is that we're working with. And that leads us to the possibilities that are listed in various places. And the people who have had that recognition will say, that... all of the meditation practices and all the relationships with all beings, and I know like... *everything* changes around that. Everything changes.

[00:29:44] And even those who have just had... even a short insight into the nature of mind, which many of us get... even more than once, that insight. *That* opens up... rather large spaces also, then. We feel inspired by virtue of having engaged in certain practices and then had that insight into the nature of mind momentarily. Even though... it may be that there's a disappointment that follows in that the insight is not permanent.

[00:30:26] So, we're always looking for permanence and we're always reading the teachings about how there isn't any such thing. But... still, you know, we die hard. [laughter] So... we get some laughter, I think it's because we realize that... this is not meant to be... a kind of crude, coarse, judgmental tradition. It actually, at its heart, is joyful. But part of the joyfulness comes from... the kind of... mysteriously bewildering thing. How is it that I can think and communicate and have all these myriad experiences and I just don't automatically witness the source of them? But the truth is that we *don't* witness them so easily. And yet... they just continue like the Columbia River. It just goes. It doesn't care. The mind does not have an agenda. ... We do. [laughs] And that's part of the problem also.

[00:31:44] All of those things, the attachments, the aversions, the jealousies, the greed, the pride, all of those things become obstacles to recognizing the nature of mind. It's like somebody gives you... big compliments, let's say, for something that you did. And immediately, you can't help it! You identify with the compliment. Even if you try not to, then you're identifying with trying not to. It is so difficult to avoid it.

[00:32:21] There's a reason why people spend their whole life... and beyond... into the next life and beyond that, we say. I like to use the phrase... you do this whether you're dead or alive. Because we don't have the assumption that... the whole chain of causal relationships ends at death... or begins at conception or birth. No. The death is actually one of the results of the causal chain right along with birth and everything else. It's just more of the causal chain.

[00:33:05] So... if you're *curious*... enough... about where our experiences come from and how they arise and how it is that I'm in this position at this time and that position at another time, then... the practices in this tradition are a means to explore that in a really profoundly deep way. ... I didn't add easy... intentionally. [laughs] But, you know, even when it's not easy... to be able to commiserate with other members of your community about how difficult it is and how you *hate* it and wish you'd landed somewhere else... at least that's pleasurable. [laughter] You can go out and have a beer together or something.

[00:39:05] So, this evening, we'll have another meditation session. And other short session to raise questions about whatever you're interested in. So, for now.... we can play another card... and by... doing what we also like to do, which is to... acknowledge the goodness in our conversation together this morning. And then dedicating the results of that... to the welfare of all sentient beings. So, that where we close our practice session, always in a positive way. So, we can do that now.

sangha [00:40:10] *dedicating the merit*