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the need to understand ourselves,
the need to clarify the confusion we live in.”*



Taking Refuge

From a talk by Ajahn Sundara

After three or four days on a meditation retreat, most of us are over the worst. We tend to look a lot brighter and happier than when the retreat began. That's the result of three or four days of looking inwardly and of being with ourselves. However horrible we might feel about ourselves, we get close to that feeling and actually listen to our heart and mind. Then some lovely things happen and we begin to relax. It's not an easy thing to do but we begin to be more accepting of all the pain, of all the suffering, that we usually tend to put aside.

We never seem to have the time to be friendly towards ourselves. It doesn't seem like an important thing to do — to have the time and the space to live in harmony with ourselves. So when we go on retreat what a wonderful opportunity to be able to open up, to be able to listen, and perhaps to understand a bit more profoundly the nature of our mind, the nature of our thoughts, of our feelings and perceptions. We have the chance now to realise that we only feel limited and bound by them because we rarely have the opportunity to pay attention to or investigate and question their reality, their true nature.

At the beginning of a talk like this, we have a tradition, we acknowledge the Three Refuges: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. When we become a monastic, a homeless one, we trade our home and we get Three Refuges. So we're not totally homeless. We actually take three very secure refuges and we leave behind all that we suppose to be safe, that which we assume to be protective and secure. We leave behind home, family, money, the control of our lives, the control over the people we live with, the place we actually stay — we let go of all that. And in return, we take the Three Refuges.

Now, in my experience these refuges do not mean very much at first. I didn't quite understand what they were about. Several times a year, we have Buddhist festivals and ceremonies. We follow a lovely custom on those days. We meditate through the night and before the all-night vigil we slowly walk around the monastery three times, holding a candle, some incense and some flowers in our hands. Monastics and lay people walk together, silently around the monastery contemplating the Three Refuges, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It's very beautiful and inspiring sight.

At first I didn't know what this really meant. I would reflect on the Buddha and just get a blank in my mind; reflect on the Dhamma, another blank; reflect on the Sangha, another blank. I didn't panic though. I realised that there must be something that I was not doing right and I wasn't in a hurry to get it right. I felt at that moment that I had a whole lifetime to understand this. So

I just relaxed considering that the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha wasn't something I had to think about. I knew somehow that those refuges were in the human heart and perhaps as I practised I would come to know what they meant.

I think what brings many of us to be interested in the practice of meditation is the need to understand ourselves, the need to clarify the confusion we live in. Many of us want to be free; we want to understand, we want to realise, to see for ourselves what it's all about. We are fed up with books; we've read enough; we've listened enough; we've met enough wise people. We've done everything we could to understand and yet that didn't seem to be sufficient.

Second-hand knowledge somehow is not really satisfactory. We want to experience for ourselves what all these wise people and all the wise teachings are saying. As long as there's no realization of the truth of our mind there's no real understanding. It's difficult to taste the joy and the freedom of knowing, experiencing the Buddha's teaching for oneself — what's known as insight, seeing directly the true nature of our mind and body and realising the freedom experienced when we let go of any attachments.

At the beginning of the practice, at the beginning of the path, we still tend to look for a form of happiness. We all want to be happy, don't we? Who wants to be miserable? We all want to be free and to experience pleasure. I certainly didn't want to come to the

monastery to be miserable and experience suffering. When I came, I was quite certain the practice of meditation would make me happier and give me a lot of pleasure. Happiness was pleasure. And that's something we should take into account.

The practice is not here to make us suffer. We only suffer because we haven't practised properly, because we haven't done what is necessary to let go of ignorance, to let go of our attachments. So it's important to take this into account. We should not imagine that because we are practising we have to be terribly serious and feel that unless we experience some terrible pain or hardship that somehow something is not quite right.

That kind of idea made me suffer quite a lot at the beginning of my training. I had the impression that unless I went through some kind of hardship I would not be able to let go. And it's true that more often than not unless it hurts our ignorance is not acknowledged. If it doesn't hurt, we can go on forever without really being aware of it. This seems to be our human predicament. Unless something hurts, we don't really wake up, we don't open our eyes and look.

So everyday we recite the Three Refuges as a reminder because out of habit, we tend to take refuge in things like anger and worry. We tend to take refuge in self-pity or pleasure, distraction, obsession with ourselves or wanting to sleep or eat all the time. We take a lot of refuge in food, don't we? And then we take refuge in

feeling guilty about eating. So our tendency is to take refuge in the wrong things, things that makes us unhappy. And if we didn't have reminders, if we didn't have skillful means to bring back into consciousness what's really important in life, we would forget ourselves and never see the way out of suffering.

~ REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA ~

The refuge in the Buddha is the refuge in the knowing. The Buddha knows the world — which in Buddhism does not mean the world of mountains, rivers and trees but the world that arises in our mind and body and the suffering that we create out of ignorance.

In our daily chanting we say that the Buddha knows the world, he knows the arising of the world, the ending of the world; he knows the way the mind creates the realities we live in, the universe we navigate through. By going through the process, we also begin to see clearly the path that leads us out of suffering. Somebody asked me today, "Who is the one who knows? Who is the one who is aware?" A good question, isn't it? Because I can't find anybody being aware, can you? I tried for a long time to find someone who was aware in me. I finally gave up. I remember when I did a meditation retreat with a well-known Burmese teacher, a long time ago, somebody was talking about "Who was the one who knows. Who is it?" One of the assistant teachers said: "A super consciousness." I really liked that at the time; the one who knows was a super consciousness.

So I imagined my brain to be lots of little, sort of mini-consciousnesses, with a kind of umbrella on top, a super consciousness. I felt really good; I really got the feeling I knew something about this Buddha, this Buddha mind, the ‘one who knows.’ But unfortunately, the nature of the mind being what it is, after about two or three days I began to question and doubt, because that’s the natural process. As soon as we get an answer, we can be sure we are going to get a doubt. This is the way it goes.

And ever since I have made peace with the fact that maybe there is nobody who knows. Just knowing — that seemed to be fine. Knowing seems to be able to carry on functioning with or without my doubts. Without having an answer, I can still take refuge in being the ‘knower,’ being the one who’s aware, who can see.

Even so, sometimes we can make a big problem out of it. We can create somebody who knows and then get upset because we’ve got somebody who doesn’t know. We get disappointed when we haven’t got somebody who knows in there, inside of us. And maybe we get overjoyed when we find someone who is aware. See, again it’s the swings of pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. But the One who knows is that very factor that balances out those extreme swings of the mind. The ‘One who knows’ is what is called the Middle Way.

We can see the extremes of the mind, happiness, unhappiness, pleasure and pain, inspiration and despair.

We can see hope and depression. We can see praise and blame. We can see agitation, sleepiness, boredom, the whole lot. And that seeing is a balancing factor, because we become aware of our attachments to these moods, these states of mind. Without a refuge in the knowing, in the awakened mind, we'd never be able look at the mind; we'd be lost in confusion. So the refuge in knowing is very important.

Together, the refuges are called the Three Jewels — and they are really like beautiful jewels that we can go back to whenever there is confusion, whenever there is agitation. We can always go back and take refuge in knowing those states. We don't have to think about them, we don't have to psychoanalyse ourselves. We can actually go back to the knowing. And what happens then is that we see what the Buddha saw: impermanence. We can see that these states are not worth holding onto because they are insubstantial, not satisfactory. And we get the intriguing feeling that maybe we are not 'This.' Maybe it's got nothing to do with 'Me.' Maybe my depression is not 'My' depression.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to realise that one's sadness is actually not a personal thing? Because we tend to think that everything that happens to us is personal, we create many problems in our lives: 'Poor me'; 'I'm the only one that this happens to'; 'No one else has this problem, except me.' Everyone else looks terribly confident, don't they? Especially if we lack confidence in ourselves. Everyone else seems to be terribly strong and

really know what he or she is doing. I used to think like that. I used to look at someone and, if I felt a bit depressed or miserable, I could be quite convinced that they were OK. They were fine. I was the only one who had problems until I realised they, too, had problems.

Because we are self-centered creatures by nature, everything is 'my' problem, 'my' life, 'my' sorrows, and 'my' relationships. 'My' melodramas. Everything seems to center around 'Me.' Refuge in the Buddha allows us to see this very clearly. And it's a compassionate refuge. It's not a refuge that's critical.

When we take refuge in mindfulness, we don't have to criticize or condemn or get angry with ourselves. We can observe the tendency to be critical, angry or demanding towards ourselves. It's a very compassionate refuge. In fact, that refuge is one of the first lines of our chanting, 'the Buddha has compassion as vast as the oceans,' and that's really what that refuge means. It is a beautiful, compassionate home.

So we have three homes, three refuges. We have refuge in the Buddha. It doesn't have a roof, no central heating, but it feels very good. It feels very secure, very reliable — especially when you see how much of our life is so agitated, so unreliable and insecure. As we become more aware, we have a clear view and a clear understanding of what *samsara* - the endless round of birth and death - is all about. And we are all here to get free from our attachment to it.

Taking refuge in the Buddha actually keeps us

in touch with what is real, what is actually true. That's one of the reasons we tend to forget about it. The meanings of mindfulness is "recollection," to remember. We can remember every time we get lost in being silly or in being unkind or in being angry or impatient or stupid. We can also remember that we don't have to change ourselves. The compassion of that refuge is that in being awake to what is happening, there is no judgement; we don't have to become somebody who is not angry or who is not stupid. We can actually acknowledge what is happening and accept it in consciousness and in our heart. As soon as we have this clear vision of what's going on we realise that it's changing and see clearly the uselessness of struggling to keep things permanent, to keep ourselves as permanent entities. We are constantly changing, so what's the point being this person that we cherish, pamper and try to make as happy as possible?

Most of our struggle in life is to create situations where 'me,' my personality will never have to face suffering, or endure pain, will never feel embarrassed, ashamed or guilty. That's why we are so good at forgetting — and we have to learn to remember again. We have to learn to be aware, to have *sati* (mindfulness) in our heart as a refuge and as a protector — it protects us, it protects the heart.

~ REFUGE IN DHAMMA ~

The second refuge, the Dhamma, is very close to the first one. In fact, there is a famous teaching that

the Buddha gave to his disciples just before dying. They were anxious about him leaving this world and wondered who was going to be their teacher after the Buddha's passing away. They were concerned as to who was going to take over and be their guide. And he said: "The Dhamma and the Vinaya will be your guide and your refuge." On a previous occasion he had also said that: "Who sees the Buddha sees the Dhamma, who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha."

Dhamma and Buddha — there's no need to have a physical Buddha. We can actually find the Buddha, the one who knows, the one who is aware in our own heart. And as soon as we are aware, mindful, we are in touch with the Dhamma. That's the beauty of this practice. Sometimes, when we read books about Buddhism, we think we have to read the whole *Tripitika* before we can get in touch with the Dhamma. We believe that we have to learn the *Abhidhamma*, perfect the ten *paramitas*, develop the five powers, get rid of the five hindrances and know the 56 states of consciousness, and so forth. By the end, we can feel so exhausted that we don't even want to start.

In fact, today I was reflecting that when in our meditation period we mindfully breathe through our nostrils enduring a little bit of pain, a little bit of sweating or bearing with the heat and the cold, noisy people or boredom, we haven't got any idea of the amount of things we're really practising with. We don't know yet that at those moments we're perfecting the ten *paramitas*,

that we're letting go of the hindrances and developing the five powers of concentration, effort, mindfulness, faith, and wisdom. We might not be aware of it but we're really perfecting many spiritual qualities of the heart. But it doesn't seem like very much, does it? We're just breathing in through the nostrils and then breathing out, and then we feel a bit of pain, then it's gone. Nothing much really? And yet over some years of practise, we begin to see the fruits of our effort and the teachings come alive.

So the refuge in the Dhamma is not something we have to look for very far. We don't have to look for the Dhamma somewhere, out there in another country, or in another person, or for a thing that will happen tomorrow or next year.

The quality of Dhamma is immediacy (*sandittihiko*) — right here, right now. The Dhamma invites us to “come and see” (*ehipassiko*) and can be realised when there is awareness and wisdom. It's not “delayed in time” (*akaliko*). Each morning we chant those qualities. We don't have to wait for someone to tell us what it is. We don't have to read books. We don't have to have a progressive step-by-step study before we can get in touch with Dhamma.

The refuge in awareness brings us into the present and in the present there is the Dhamma, there is the truth, there is the way things are. But it can only be seen when there is a clear awareness of the present moment.

Another meaning of the Dhamma is “that which

sustains itself.” Nature sustains itself; it has its cycles and its seasons — it just goes on forever. We can look at the nature of our mind, our human nature and how we function. We also have seasons and cycles, we have our days and nights, our darkness and brightness, we have a rhythm. And because we don’t know that rhythm, we can sometimes drag ourselves to the point of complete exhaustion, sickness or mental stress. We often forget we are part of nature, part of “the way things are.”

Our intelligence, our capacity for knowledge, tends to alienate us from our nature. We often feel estranged from ourselves because our human nature is not really that exciting. Thoughts are so much more exciting! We think, think, think the most incredible things. Our imagination is really quite creative, especially on retreat. We can really see how the mind is this wonderful creator.

A famous Thai meditation teacher said once that in Buddhism it’s not a God that creates, it’s ignorance. We create out of ignorance. We create an incredible amount of wonderful things and miserable things — the heavens and hells. We can imagine almost anything. Sometimes we wonder what we have done in the past because our mind can think of the most bizarre things.

Because of our capacity to think and create mentally, we often don’t acknowledge our physical nature, the rhythm of our body, the rhythm of our mind, the rhythm of our emotions, of our feelings, of our moods, of how we are affected by the world around us, by the

moon and the sun, by the day and the night. Many of us don't seem to appreciate any of that in relation to ourselves. We tend to have a lot of ideas of how things should be, how we would like things to be, how we think things should be, and have very little space for 'the way things are,' for what is happening in the moment. In fact, after a while, one can see a really clear pattern in the mind: there is what we think it should be, then there is what we'd like it to be, and finally what is. All three seem to have a bit of a hard time cooperating with each other.

In my early years, it took me a while to notice this pattern but through the practice, I began to understand that in one moment we can only be aware of so much - which is often not very much. We can think a lot of things but we can actually know only a little. It's through knowing and investigating that which we are, that understanding deepens.

When I was still an *anagarika*, I spent my third *Vassa* with another nun 300 miles from the monastery. It was the *Vassa* period and we were on retreat for most of the time. In the beginning, whenever I experienced some forms of greed, anger or delusion I would see a recurring pattern of thoughts. At 7:00 PM at night, when we were doing our evening chanting, the suffering that I had undergone through the day would seem to be dispelling, or at least decreasing. And I would suddenly have this amazing 'insight' about how I would spend the next day and just how I was going to deal with all my problems.

I would suddenly know how to handle greed, I knew how to handle hatred; I knew how to handle boredom, restlessness, the lot. I felt fully in control and knew that I would never suffer again. I knew it. I was convinced that I would never suffer again.

Of course, by 9:30 my insight had blossomed to the point where I had absolutely no doubt that I was enlightened to all my problems. I would go to bed, and 4:00 AM would come. You can imagine what happens at 4:00 in the morning! In the early years, it was still quite hard to get up at that time in the morning. The mind can feel drowsy, dull, depressed, awful.

I would do some yoga exercises as I knew that doing yoga was better than just staying in that negative state. And after the session I would generally feel better. We would do our chanting then would come the morning. We did not have breakfast in those days except for a hot drink and my negativity wouldn't lift up as quickly as I wanted. I would still be feeling a bit grumpy and miserable. Then would come the meal and that was really quite something. During those three months we had decided to do the one-sitting practice which meant that once we sat down to eat we could not get up and if we did we had to stop eating and that would be it for the day!

So we made sure that when we sat down we had enough to eat in case we had forgotten something and had to get up again. By the end of the meal, I'd feel terrible again because of course, I had over-eaten. That

meant an afternoon of misery, dullness, sleepiness and confusion because the mind was not able to cope with the annoyance of feeling greedy or upset with itself. Every day for a while I would see the same cycle begin again. Of course there were some bright and peaceful spells too!

But sitting in front of my meal, all my insights had vanished, gone somewhere where I couldn't find them. At that moment it would be really hard to drag wisdom and mindfulness into being because basically I just wanted what I wanted; I wanted to eat what I wanted and how much I wanted. And that was it!

Before each meal we did a reflection saying that eating is for the welfare of the body, not for fun, not for pleasure, nor for beautification or fattening and so forth but after chanting it automatically I would forget all about it and start to eat.

Anyway, by 5:00 PM I would feel better and a little lighter. I had just spent four hours digesting a heavy meal whilst doing walking and sitting meditation; by 6:00 PM there would arise in my mind again the resolve to not do it again, to not budge at all or give into my desires. At that moment my understanding was perfectly clear. By 7:00, I had no doubt. By 9:30 I knew the whole Buddha's teaching and I knew I could handle it all and I would never suffer again.

That process went on for quite a while until I realised that it was just my mind. It had nothing to do with reality. It was just the way my mind thought. Now

if we believed these thoughts and didn't look at them as dhammas or felt that 'this is what I am,' can we imagine the amount of disappointment we would have every day?

In fact, every day I felt disappointed with 'myself' and would have the feeling that "I'm no good. I can't do it." But then I began to see clearly that pattern and, as I realised it was exactly what I was supposed to learn from and to understand, there were no problems.

As long as we take things personally, we miss the Dhamma and are fooled by what arises in our mind. We fail to see that the things that we are taking personally are not what we are, nor what we think they are. We tend to believe and identify with the constant stream of thoughts, feelings and perceptions of our mind and it's no wonder that we become neurotic and have to go to psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, faith healers and so on.

It is a matter of practising with right attitude, with an attitude of compassion and infinite patience, rather than developing and perfecting any particular techniques. Because although we may have done a lot of practice and be an expert in breath meditation, body sweeping and all that, if we are still striving to develop the perfect *anapanasati* meditator our approach is wrong. Without a correct perspective, we are still caught up with the idea that we have to improve on 'Me.'

The immediacy and directness of the experience of Dhamma is something quite extraordinary; it's another great blessing. We can realise the true nature of

our thoughts without any intermediary, without any interpretation. We don't have to create anything; we can just see thoughts as they are. It is quite a remarkable thing and it's what attracted me most to this teaching.

When I came to practice I was, in a way, so overjoyed at the simplicity and immediacy of the realisation of the nature of the mind. You did not have to learn too much or get a Ph. D., you didn't have to start accumulating more knowledge. In the practice of Dhamma, there is a process of letting go, of emptying and freeing ourselves from the burden of knowledge, from the burden of accumulated experiences, from the heaviness of being somebody or carrying a person in the mind.

I remember that when practising in the world as a lay person — now of course this is not to influence you all to become monks and nuns — I had the feeling that I was always 'somebody' practising. I found that very difficult. There was this burden of 'me' practising. When I came to the monastery I was ordinary and could forget about feeling special or being somebody going against the stream, some strange creature on the spiritual path, because everybody there was doing the same thing — you were just normal.

That's another meaning of Dhamma — "the Norm." That which is normal, ordinary. Much of our training in the monastery focuses on the ordinary. Daily, we spend periods of time cleaning, sweeping, dusting, walking from one room to the next, doing simple jobs and paying attention to the most mundane things such

as opening doors, getting dressed, eating, getting up in the morning, brushing our teeth, putting our shoes on, going to the toilet, going to bed. Simple things like these are not exciting and our mind learns to calm down and be more simple, more ordinary.

We can't really get that excited about putting our socks on, or getting up at 4:00 in the morning. We can't really get fascinated cleaning the toilet somehow. Though I tried hard! I tried to make it really interesting but I couldn't. Somehow it's just so ordinary. I cleaned the toilets for a long time at Chithurst Monastery where we all had different morning chores to attend to. We call them chores but they're not really, they're just what we do each morning and whatever we make of them. They can be boring. They can be interesting. Or they can be just as they are.

We can see our mind wanting to make things special. I remember how in the morning, cleaning the toilet, I would decide to clean the sink first and then the toilet second and then the floor third. Perhaps next day I would change the pattern; I would prefer to start cleaning the windows first, or sweep with a different broom. Or I would decide not to mop with this particular mop. I would change my mops. I would find myself really getting hooked on using a particular tool, or getting upset about really trivial things and making a big melodrama about nothing at all. If I had not been living in the monastery, I would never have seen the way the mind can create melodramas out of absolutely nothing.

To be in touch with the ordinariness of our life is something very difficult for us because we have been conditioned to get our boost of energy through things that are interesting or stimulating. Or, we focus our attention on the next thing — on what's going to happen next.

Unless we have guidance and help from wise people, from people who have an understanding of the path, we tend to carry on in our spiritual practice in the same way as before we started. We're still looking for fascination, for excitement, for something special, for the big bang, for the flashing lights, for the super insight that's going to solve all 'my' problems.

But I'm afraid it doesn't work like that. With the practice, there is a change in our relationship with our mind. We let the flux of greed, hatred and delusion flow. We don't make a problem about it any more. We let the flow of our own mind just take its own course. We stop shaping the flux of our thoughts and feelings into this or that. Being in harmony with Dhamma is making peace with whatever is going on now, with "the way things are," the Dhamma.

That doesn't mean we turn into a cabbage or into a non-entity or that we just sit there and sort of wait and wait and wait for things to happen. Though we can sometimes feel like that. After some years of practice I remember how I could feel really stupid. There were moments when I had totally given up on the idea of ever feeling intelligent again!

Once I remember crossing the courtyard at Amaravati on one hot sunny afternoon feeling quite miserable and depressed. I had lost the passions of the mind. They didn't seem to be there any more. There was just a kind of dull state and I was strongly identifying with it. It was awful. I really thought that this mood was what I was and I could hear myself being really upset about it. I thought: "I can't bear this, it's impossible. 'They' with a capital 'T' are turning me into a turnip" (which I thought of as the most pallid, wishy-washy, nothing-looking vegetable!). I did not know who 'They' were... I remember meeting on the way one of the teachers of our community. I told him: "I am probably reaping the karma of having hated being a housewife." I always hated the idea of being a housewife so much so that in the past, before becoming a nun, I resented having to do any cleaning, housework, any washing or dishwashing. Yet I found myself doing just that in my early training at Chithurst. He laughed and replied: "Well, when you really don't mind that any more, then it means your karma with it is over."

That was really a very good insight because I didn't think that I minded. Yet I felt so despairing and miserable that obviously something in me did mind. So it's difficult to be ordinary and accept the triviality of our life. That's why most of the time we feel frustrated, because we think that somehow things are going to be different, or that they should be different, don't we?

We sense that life shouldn't be just getting up in

the morning, having breakfast, getting bored, having a cry with one's spouse, going to the toilet, eating, getting bored at work, coming back, watching television, going to bed, getting up in the morning, and on and on and on, day after day after day. We feel that somehow there must be something else. So we go on a trip and travel around the world — and we find out that even on the other side of the world, we still have to get up, we still have to go to the toilet, we still have to eat, we still get happy and bored with ourselves, we still get annoyed and depressed. We still get the same old 'me' — whether we are here, or in California, or in India, or anywhere. To come to terms with that has been the greatest teaching of monastic life.

Actually, monastic life is externally pretty repetitive and boring. And if we identify with the structure or the routine then it's the most tedious lifestyle. It's so monotonous at times, you have no idea! But through accepting the perception and feeling of boredom for example, we realise that it's actually quite OK.

It is not so much a matter of getting rid of boredom but of seeing what we are expecting from life. I spent many years expecting from life something it could not give me. That's why there was a problem. And in the same way if I expect something from the monastic life that it cannot give me, then I'll be very disappointed, frustrated or in a constant state of conflict.

So seeing the way things are is a very important realisation because then we can actually work with life

as it is rather than expecting or dreaming about it. Expectations are like dreams. And most of our life is like a dream, or like a cloud, and we hope that this cloud will give us something real and substantial. Have you ever been able to shape a cloud? Or a dream? Yet this what we are always trying to do isn't it? Can we have any control over our dreams? Maybe we can, but most of the time we can't even remember them or do what we want in them.

So there's this dreamlike state that we create out of expectations, out of not understanding the limitations of our mind and body, of our life and the world we live in. Our mind can only do so much. Our body can only do so much. When you're young, you think your body can do anything, but when you get to middle age, like me, then even sitting can become a challenge. I used to love sitting — I could sit for long periods and really enjoy it. It was a pleasure. But now, sometimes, it's more an endurance test.

So we are limited; we are bound by certain restrictions. But if we see them for what they are, then a wonderful thing happens: we can actually work with life as it is. We don't have to expect something from it anymore; we can actually give to our life. And that's a great change in the mind. Through the practice we begin to see that we don't have to ask or get or demand something from life. We can actually give, offer and joyfully respond to it. And this, we can all do.

The natural process of the realization of Dhamma

is the awareness that life is a constant opportunity to give, to be generous, to be kind, to be of service in whatever situation we are in. As we let go we don't get so caught up and obsessed with ourselves. We can actually be useful. We can help. We can give. We can encourage ourselves and the people around us.

~ REFUGE IN SANGHA ~

The refuge in the Sangha, the last one, is the refuge in noble friendship — *kalyanamitta*. It symbolizes the community of men and women, ordained or living in the world, who have taken refuge in living wisely and compassionately, in accord with the Dhamma. They take refuge in harmlessness, loving-kindness and respect for all living beings. These are people who have a moral conscience. They are aware when they're not really doing the right thing or acting foolishly or harmfully.

This refuge symbolises the purity of the human heart. I remember when for the first time I heard of the concept of the 'Pure Heart.' I thought that it was a beautiful expression — 'Pure Heart.' It felt like a good thing to be — a pure heart. And that's really what that refuge is: it's a refuge in that in us which is good, wholesome, compassionate and wise.

Before I started being interested in Buddhism, I used to go to Christian monasteries to do short retreats by myself. The thing that struck me most in those places — I didn't know anything about Buddhist monasteries then — was this awesome, pervading feeling of respect

for life, for each other. Even the silence seemed to be a kind of acknowledgement of reverence, of honoring the best in human beings. It was very moving. Even though I could not explain what it was, I sensed that people were devoted to something really good, to something really true.

When I came to Chithurst and met the community for the first time, I had a very similar feeling of meeting human beings totally dedicated to honouring the truth, to being it and living in accordance with it. And so the refuge in Sangha was the first thing that brought me to the monastic life.

My interest in joining the monastic Sangha came from the need to have a vehicle and a refuge of sanity in myself that would provide some guidance. I realized for example that without an ethical standard to contain and understand the energy of my desires, I was really in trouble. I was always very good at knowing what I should do, what I should be; I was a real expert at creating ideals! But somehow the energy of my desires had very different ideas about that. My self-gratifying habits on the one hand and my yearning for truth on the other didn't meet, didn't seem to be very good friends.

One of the first things that became really clear when I joined the Sangha was that the precepts were my best friends and my best protectors. I never had the feeling that they were imposing themselves on me at all. On the contrary, I knew that they were supporting me and reminding me of being more mindful of when I

spoke, when I acted, when I thought or when I ate or even when I slept.

The training of our body and mind requires an enormous amount of patience and compassion. Our habits are strong and if we have lived a fairly heedless life in the past, we can't expect to turn instantly into a virtuous person. When we arrive at the monastery we don't become a saint overnight. And it is not a meditation retreat and the keeping of the precepts for ten days that is going to turn us into one either, is it? But at least we have a situation and a teaching that can help us to look at what is not correct or skilful in our behaviour and our habits and to make peace with it.

So we take refuge in the Sangha and use the standards followed by those who have walked the Path and liberated themselves before us. This refuge points to our commitment to virtuous conduct, to a way of life that protects and nurtures peace in the heart and reminds us of our intention to liberate it. If we didn't have these guidelines, we would easily forget ourselves. And we are very good at that. In fact, that's what the mind is most intent on and does all the time, it forgets. But when we take refuge in mindfulness, in the Dhamma and in the purity of our intention to free ourselves from delusion, we remember that we have the necessary tools to train the heart and to see clearly the unskilfulness of our habits, of our speech or of our thoughts, etc.

These refuges may appear as if they were three: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. But actually they are just

one. We don't have one without the other. When there is virtue and the intention to live harmoniously, with compassion and respect for oneself and each other, then there's a naturally growing awareness, in harmony with the Dhamma, and we are more attuned to the truth. All of them interact and affect each other.

At first, we don't know quite what or where these refuges are. They may seem to be just words. You might even feel confused and have no trust in them. But as we practise, as we keep letting go of our attachments to thoughts, feelings, perceptions, they become a growing reality.

We can actually experience these refuges. They become a part of our life, a part of something that we can go back to, right here, right now. We don't have to wait. They are always present in our heart. Here, now, in the present. That's the real beauty of the practice of the Path. It's that total simplicity, that immediacy, complete in itself. There's nothing else that you need. Just in taking the Three Refuges, you've got all the tools you need for your heart to be free.

