

TAKING REFUGE

Although I will be talking specifically about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, I will also be talking about what it means for me to be a Zen Buddhist. Becoming a Buddhist is only a stage on the path to enlightenment. Eventually one must let go of everything, even one's religion. In a sense, all religions, even Buddhism, are only provisional means to help us find a path toward the self, which is the source of all teachings. As Dogen said, "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self." Homeless Kodo, a 20th century Japanese teacher, put it another way: "to practice zazen is to do self by the self with the self."

In a sense, becoming a Zen Buddhist can be a very subtle, developmental process over time. There is, however, a formal ceremony called Jukai, in which a practitioner vows to uphold the sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts. Following these precepts becomes a practical method by which a person learns to live his or her life as a Buddha would. During this ceremony a person is given a Dharma name and takes on the blood line of the teachings and meets the ancient men and women of our tradition. When I was ordained a priest in the Home-leaving Ceremony of Soto Zen, I reaffirmed my commitment to these vows.

Some of us who take on a Zen meditation practice are not interested in becoming a Zen Buddhist. For some a Zen meditation practice is a way of deepening their Christian or Jewish experience. Books have been published with titles such as "Christian Zen" and "Jewish Dharma." For others, Zen is a tool, which helps them deal with the many difficulties of life. Each of us has a reason for taking on this difficult practice, and for some, the reasons will evolve as our practice deepens.

Many years ago I was taught to look at a wisdom tradition as a living organism in which everything is intimately connected to the parts and the whole of the teaching. If that is true then each part of Buddhism must contain the DNA of the entire tradition. And more than that, I would say that each part of our tradition contains the DNA of the entire universe. This is another way of saying that if you look deeply into anything, whether it is taking refuge, or emptiness, or a flower in your garden, or *yourself*, you will find Buddha. But then we have to go even further, until we see that there is really *No mind, no Buddha.* (Mumonkan case 33)

I became a Buddhist when I took refuge with an old Gelugpa Lama many years ago. It was in Tibetan, but it could've just as easily been in English and I wouldn't have understood it any better. Although it took a long time for my mind to begin to understand what taking refuge means, something else in me—something deep and quiet in me understood it immediately. Something in me felt recognized! What was that? My first Zen teacher suggested that I keep that as a koan when I sat.

That was many years ago, but it is still a central focus of my practice. Before I received priest ordination I sewed my *okesa*. Part of the practice of sewing is to chant *namo kye Butsu* (I take refuge in Buddha) during each stitch. There are about twenty thousand stitches in a priest's robe. I've learned to take refuge in Tibetan, Japanese, Pali and English. My Zen practice has been to translate these familiar chants of Buddhism into the unknown, wordless language of the self. As Hui Neng says, the transmission of the dharma is outside scriptures.

Over the years taking refuge has become a central question that informs my life. *It is my question*. It is not the kind of question that can be answered by reading books, although I have read the accounts of great teachers of the past. Others have answered this question, but I know that I have to find my own answer. *There is no truth outside of my own experience*. So each morning I take refuge while prostrating in front of my altar and I take refuge again when I go to sleep. And during the day, I try to keep that vow at the back of my mind wherever I go. It is a way for me to not forget that I have dedicated my life to the Bodhisattva Way. It is a way for me to see that my life *is a vow*.

When I bow and recite the refuge prayers, my mind, my feelings and my body are tightly connected to each other—more so than during most other times of the day. I can *feel* the truth of the idea of refuge and I can physically experience the ego surrendering to a deeper part of myself. This brings a strong sense of presence and spaciousness—it brings me into the moment. As I bow, I have the feeling that another, deeper sense of myself is appearing. It feels psycho/physical.

Taking refuge is more than a thought or a belief; it is expressing the Buddha's Way with the whole of myself: body, speech, and mind. My experience is that as I move toward the floor I am moving through time and space to meet myself. I often feel the

ancestors, both past and future, around me, watching. I do not mean this as a metaphor—it feels like a fact of my life. So when I take refuge I am connecting to my deepest identity. We do not have Buddha nature, we *are* Buddha nature. We take refuge in the self that is the life force of the universe. We are committing ourselves to ourselves.

When we take refuge in the Buddha we are committing ourselves to the historical Shakyamuni Buddha and the archetypal figures of our lineage such as Bodhidharma and Hui Neng. And in so doing, we take our places in the beginning-less and endless lineage of The Way. But chanting the names of the ancestors from India to China to Japan to America does not bring me nearly as close to our lineage as bowing in refuge.

What does it mean to take refuge in the Buddhist path—the Dharma? Trungpa said that when we take refuge, we are homeless refugees. We learn to give up our sense of “home,” by seeing that it is illusory. We acknowledge that we are homeless and groundless. More than that, we begin to see that it is a waste of time trying to find something solid in the world. Homeless Kodo says, *Everyone is homeless – it is a mistake if you think you have a fixed home*. In Sunday school I was taught that to be a Jew is to live in exile—a journey that began when Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden. I learned to take that idea as metaphor but during my Zen training I’ve come to experience it as a fact of my existence.

As Zen students we see the ontological homelessness of our situation, just as it is. How do we do this? Dogen tells us to turn on the light and shine it inwards. If we do this we may see that there is no independent, self-existing I; there is no self. The five skandhas are empty. The first time I experienced the truth of that was during the fourth day of my first five-day sesshin, when I experienced my life story floating off into the space just like a child’s balloon. I remember the physical sensation of letting go, of opening myself and relaxing my grip on the story that had been my only identity.

Since then I’ve been a little freer to let go of my attachments to the comings and goings of my personality, especially its propensity for looking to find security in external things. And sometimes this means not to look for truth in books, sometimes this means not to look for truth in the rituals and forms of Zen, and sometimes it means not to look for truth even in the dharma talks of my teachers. During my

practice I have experienced over and over again that my understanding comes from something deep and unknown inside me. I have told my teachers that nearly everything important I've learned, I've learned from myself. I remember during Dokusan with my first Zen teacher I pounded the floor with all my might. My teacher asked with a big smile, "where did that come from?" I couldn't answer and he just nodded, "yes!"

I'd like to close with a quote from the **Maha-parinibbana Sutra**, which contains some of the last words of the Buddha. He told his disciples; he's telling us—you and me — "Be a lamp unto yourselves; be a refuge to yourselves; hold fast to the Dharma as a lamp; hold fast to the Dharma as a refuge; seek not refuge in anyone except yourselves. Whosoever shall be a lamp unto themselves and refuge unto themselves, it is they among the seekers after Bodhi who shall reach the very topmost height."