TAKING REFUGE

During the time of the Buddha, becoming a member of the *Dhamma-Vinaya* (*Dhamma* means *the true characteristics of reality as reflected in Buddhist doctrine* and *Vinaya* means *the social discipline required to be a member of the spiritual community;* this came to mean being a Buddhist, mostly in the West.) meant making certain commitments to create clear boundaries regarding conduct that would garner the respect of others outside the community and to foster cultivating the inner values and skills for promoting liberation from dukkha.

One of the commitments involved what are called the Three Refuges:

I take refuge in the Buddha

I take refuge in the Dhamma

I take refuge in the Sangha

Another important commitment involved the Five Precepts:

I undertake the training rule to abstain from killing.

I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not given.

I undertake to avoid sexual misconduct.

I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech.

I undertake the training rule to abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness.

Tonight’s talk will focus on approaching the Three Refuges with a deeper, more contemporary understanding, hopefully to foster a greater ability to apply the principles more coherently and effectively. The exploration of more contemporary understanding and application of the Five Precepts will occur at the next meeting.

A refuge is a place of safety and tranquility, which is an important resource in these troubled times. Human culture has been undergoing profoundly transformative changes over the last several generations since the advent of industrialization which created tremendous upheaval. As a result, there have been multiple economic recessions and depressions, a radical transformation of family life, increases in urbanization and multiple wars negatively affecting millions of people. Over the last 20 years, the addition of “instant information” and, most recently “fake news” through the internet has intensified the stress we are all experiencing.

Back in the earlier centuries of Buddhist culture, the commitment to Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha was related to more fundamental issues of life and death. These days, we live in much more secure circumstances in terms of life or death issues, but the onslaught of media instigates a pervasive vigilance regarding what could go wrong along with a cornucopia of material objects and pleasurable experiences.

We worry about people’s lives in the abstract, those who have been killed in neighborhoods that are not ours, diseases that affect a much smaller percentage of the population than was the case just a few generations ago. We see media derived, idealized versions of “the good life”, that few can achieve. We even get emotionally stirred about fictional events on tv, the movies or in books! Much of our distress is generated, not by real external threats, but by fear of loss of social status, of material property or access to systems such as the internet that didn’t even exist until a generation ago.

I read an article in the New York Times this morning covering a presentation by Yuval Noah Harari about the almost unimaginable amount of cultural change that will occur during this century. Because of increasing automation and population density, a large segment of people will not be able to find a job; perhaps they will become “professional consumers”, whose consumption of goods and services is subsidized in order to keep the economy moving! Most people find their daily work routine an important aspect of what makes life meaningful, even if they don’t like their job. If work isn’t available, what will make life meaningful. When I realized I couldn’t be an artist anymore, I was confronted with an identity crisis. During that period of my life I decided to declare myself a “Professional Human Being” (P.H.B.?) and that would provide meaning in my life; this was just about the same time that I began my Buddhist meditation practice as well. I do “take side jobs that will pay my bills”, and hopefully they don’t conflict with my Buddhism-derived career aspirations.

On the retreat a few weeks ago, someone left a note with this question: “If there is no I, what is the point of consciousness?”. A good question! Since Buddhism posits no core, enduring identity, then what does make life meaningful? From a Buddhist perspective, the application of the Four Noble Truths, particularly the Noble Eightfold Path, provides the orientation for a meaningful life. My reply to that question was that ***since there is no inherent self, the opportunities for thought and action can be organized through the principles and practices of the Eightfold Path, specifically the cultivation of awareness clear of craving and clinging, oriented towards manifesting kindness, compassion, generosity, tolerance and patience***.

This leads to taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Here are my thoughts involving a more contemporary rendering of the Three Refuges:

**BUDDHA**: The traditional rendering of this commitment places the historical Buddha into a place of great reverence, exceptional to the point of being like the reverence of Jesus as “the only son of God”. Contemporary research on the history of Buddhism offers opportunities for a different understanding. One whose being is completely transformed through repeated experience of the Unconditioned, Nirvana is considered an Arahant; one who realizes this Awakening without the support of another realized being is a Buddha. In my view, ***taking refuge in the Buddha involves regarding him as a role model, and example of the possibility to overcome the basic emotional and cognitive biases of the human condition to realize the opportunity to manifest Wisdom, that is, Clear Awareness and Benevolent Intention***.

**DHAMMA**: This is a complex term. Small “d” dhamma represents the actuality of reality without any division into “this” and “that” and the underlying orderliness of the Universe, the complexity of which can never be adequately described through philosophical, scientific or mathematical means. Bid “D” Dhamma represents the concepts and practices conducive for realizing dhamma in ways beyond philosophical or other means. In my view, ***taking refuge in the Dhamma involves an increasing commitment to realizing dhamma through study, meditation and integration of the Four Noble Truths into daily life routines; this systematic approach includes repeatedly observing and dissolving whatever interferes with manifesting Wisdom***.

**SANGHA**: Originally, Sangha represented the community of male and female renunciates, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, who lived under the precepts of Buddhism and dedicated their lives in a monastic way to realizing dhamma. These precepts evolved in the context of the cultural norms of that era and have largely remained intact over the centuries. They have some core values to emphasize that encourage community cooperation, integrity and dedication to the development of the Dhamma. These values need to be revisited in the context of the societal norms of this era. Contemporary American culture doesn’t support a monastic way of life; our task is to find ways to apply the Four Noble Truths in a secular manner, immersed in contemporary culture. In my context, taking refuge in the Sangha requires a new set of commitments that reflect the challenges that we are confronted with. In my view, ***taking refuge in the Sangha involves the adaptation of the best of modern research, combined with committed meditation practice and ethical guidelines for cultivating interpersonal relationship dynamics towards the integration of Buddhist principles and practices into contemporary life***.

As was already mentioned, the topic for next week’s discussion will explore provisional commitments for a 21st century secular Sangha.