

## Being One's Own Refuge

by Gil Fronsdal

Since the time of his awakening the man named Gotama attained has commonly been known as the “Buddha” – i.e., the “Awakened One.” He was not the Buddha before his enlightenment; rather he was someone seeking awakening, *bodhi*. In this quest, Gotama could not rely on the guidance and inspiration of a Buddha, Dharma or Sangha because a Buddha and a Buddhist Sangha, i.e., community, did not yet exist. Furthermore, the Dharma or teachings of liberation had not yet been discovered. Gotama therefore did not have the Triple Refuge for his support; he could not rely on the vision, motivation and devotion that is represented in going for refuge. He did not have the protection that this refuge provides. Gotama, therefore had to rely on himself and his own determination. In a sense he had to be his own refuge.

The suttas contain many passages in which the Buddha gives the instruction for his listeners to also become their own refuge. In the days before his death he instructed people to do this. He said,

“Dwell with yourselves as an island, with yourselves as a refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as a refuge, with no other refuge.” (DN 16.2.26)

Here, “island” is an analogy for a place of safety from the swirling floods of attachment and craving. To avoid seeing this quote as contradictory, having oneself as an island and as a refuge should be understood as synonymous with having the Dhamma as an island and a refuge. In this usage, Dhamma here does not refer to a set of teachings but rather to something found in oneself or in one's actions, i.e., what the teachings point to.

The Buddha explained that the way to dwell with oneself as one's own island and refuge is to practice the four foundations of mindfulness. The Buddha explains elsewhere that this practice of mindfulness leads to living in a way that is “independent, not clinging to anything in the world.” This is a state of inner safety, refuge, and protection from

attachments and the difficulties born from attachments. It is with this refuge that one makes a refuge of oneself. Explaining the same thing in different terms, elsewhere the Buddha associates making a refuge of oneself with “discarding all attachments.”

The following passage contains another of the Buddha’s teachings related to making a refuge within oneself by practicing mindfulness, in this instance mindfulness of the body:

“Bhikkhus, I will teach you the refuge and the path leading to the refuge.

And what, bhikkhus, is the refuge? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this is called the refuge.

And what, bhikkhus, is the path leading to the refuge? Mindfulness directed to the body: this is called the path leading to the refuge.” (SN 43:43)

The suttas associate refuge with being safe from fear and danger, and so the implication here is that one is protected from fear and danger through the destruction of lust, hatred, and delusion. In other words, when a person brings their lust, hatred, and delusion to an end, this person is left with what can be called an internal refuge that is also the ultimate refuge.

The Buddha’s emphasis on each person becoming their own refuge might explain why he did not appoint a successor to lead his monastic order after his death. For those who were concerned that they would not have a teacher after he died, the Buddha said, “[W]hat I have taught and explained to you as Dhamma and discipline will, at my passing, be your teacher.” Here the Dhamma refers to the teachings, practices, and realizations that one engages in when on the path of liberation. This is a Dhamma that is actualized as we practice mindfulness and the relinquishment of attachments. Through practice we make our self our own refuge where we become safe from anxiety, conceit, greed, hostility, and delusion. And as we are no longer entangled in these states, we become a refuge for others as well, we offer them the safety and example through which they can learn to become their own refuge