

# 2020-10-18 Actions and the Three Refuges

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dharma, sangha, caterpillar, cocoon, skillful, support, monkeys, people, movements, settle, greed, truths, important, fable, refuge, butterflies, community, freedom, cliff, beneficial

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Greetings, good morning, from Redwood City. And so here we are. I'm happy to be here. And for the moment, I don't feel too much like talking. But I will start.

The talk today, what I want to talk about is the three refuges, or the Three Jewels. The wonderful thing about these three is they're both a refuge and a support for us. And also jewels and treasures that we can experience or have for ourselves. And treasures we can share with others. And to talk about these three treasures and refuges, I'd like to tell you two fables.

The first fable has to do with a group of caterpillars who somehow ended up on neighboring plants, maybe some of them on the same plant or neighboring leaves. And they spent their life they had so far munching on the leaves. And they felt very contented to be in a little community of other caterpillars, because they knew that it wasn't strange to be munching green leaves and wasn't strange to be crawling in ways caterpillars crawl across the leaves. And they knew that they were ordinary caterpillars living ordinary lives, and they had the support of their community around them. And then one day, one of them had this kind of irresistible urge and explained that to the others, you know, I really have this urge to wrap myself up in thread and kind of cocoon myself and just kind of see what happens and be quiet for a while. And the other Caterpillar says, No, no, no, that's pretty selfish of you. You know, we have this wonderful life here, we're sharing it and eating together and for you to kind of withdraw from us and go into this kind of cocoon and just disappear. And that's like, must be the height of selfishness, and you're only thinking about yourself, and you shouldn't do that. You have to stay here in community with us. But the irresistible urge to cocoon had the upper hand. And so this caterpillar, that's what it did. And the others were a bit annoyed, some of them even angry. And so then after some time, what had been a caterpillar emerge from the cocoon is a butterfly. And the other ones said wow! And they felt the urge to and so they cocooned and eventually they all became butterflies

together and re-met each other as butterflies and then fluttered around in a way. And now they were not caterpillars, they are butterflies.

So then the second fable. And this fable, concerns a group of monkeys living in the jungle. And they pretty much watch over themselves. This is not a social group of monkeys, and they kind of compete for food, they fight, they compete for territory, they're kind of always kind of like jockeying for position, and it's a kind of, you know, each each one for themselves in a kind of way. But the food is a little bit scarce in the jungle, maybe part of the reason why they are the way they are. But they happen to live underneath the cliff. It's not a very high cliff, maybe it's 20, 25 feet high. And they see up in the cliff, there's kind of a valley that goes back and flat and there's all these banana trees there and very ripe bananas. And they tried jumping up the cliff, they can't get very high. They try getting little sticks to stand on but they can't go high enough and nothing works for them to get up there. And each one trying for themselves. And then one day one of the monkeys says to the others, you know, why don't we band together and maybe together as a group cooperatively we can find a way to get up there and initially met with a lot of resistance. And no, that's not our way, that can't be done, I can't trust you, and I'm gonna do it my way. And I don't want to lose my freedom coming together and doing something at a group. And all kinds of kind of resistance to this idea. But after a while, maybe because they're hungry enough, they decided to try the suggestion of that first monkey. And that monkey said, Okay, now six of you line up in a straight row facing the cliff, and four of you jump up on their shoulders, and two of you jump up on their shoulders, and now one jump up on their shoulders. And, lo and behold, then the one monkey could climb up that like a ladder, and then jump up on the cliff. And from the cliff could help the others to get up. And pretty soon they were all up on the one where they are, they're all managed to get up on into this valley where the bananas were. And they had all the bananas they could eat. And they were up there eating and they started kind of appreciating each other and discovered what it's like to work together. And this is a nice, and then they kind of started living in a cooperative life together and this wonderful paradise of a valley.

So, these two fables one represents the Buddha and one represents the Sangha. The Buddha represents a process of freedom, is a process of dropping down and kind of cocooning ourselves in a certain kind of way, especially like in meditation. It is a stepping away from our social world, in some ways, our social life or concerns, our responsibilities, even. And there are times we get criticized for this, that it's selfish, that it's somehow abandoning people. But there's a process of really going inwards and settling and finding peace here, and really learning how to settle and be present in a full and dynamic and insightful way. That is un-interrupted, un-distracted, un-preoccupied by other things, so that the deep inner work can go so deep, that the person can go in and get turned inside out. Inside out and become butterflies become free and be able to fly, to become a Buddha, become free.

So that's the one way and the Sangha represents the story of the monkeys, that the Sangha is the support and the cooperation and the mutual interactions that we have with each other on the path of practice, on the path path of life, and to learn and develop this freedom, to learn to develop this ability

to be cooperative, to mean community and to develop relationships. So we support each other, kind of mutual support, like the monkeys that mutually support each other to get up the cliff. This is one of the great life tasks. And this is part of what the sangha is.

So these are two kind of opposed movements that a person can take. One movement is to go inwards, and in a sense kind of be apart from this inner world, these outer world, just be in the inner world and find a transformation there into something quite profound and beautiful. The other movement is to be involved other people and connected in an important way and cooperate and really be involved with people in a rich way. And these two different ways of being sometimes are held in opposition to each other. Some people are very much into the community life, like the caterpillars are with each other. And they get upset when someone steps away from that. Some people are so much involved in their individual lives, that the idea of cooperating and being involved with others is what they resist and what they don't want to do. At different phases of life, different times of practice, each of these movements is appropriate. And they shouldn't be held in opposition to each other. They each have a place. Now what allows us to what's what the Dharma is. The Dharma is kind of a bridge between these two. These two actions, the actions of cooperation and being with people and the actions of settling ourselves on ourselves in some deep, deep inner way, cocooning ourselves in the depths of practice, And the Dharma is kind of stands between those two.

And so what is the Dharma? The Dharma is many things. And I think it's appropriate that I couldn't think of a fable to tell you, because the Dharma is something I don't know, maybe it shouldn't be concretized in some kind of way that a fable, little bit does. But one of the meanings of Dharma, it has many meanings, is conduct, is action. And many people associate Dharma with teachings, with certain truths of nature, truths of ourselves, spiritual truths. But one of the very important meanings of Dharma is action. And the Buddha said that actions are refuge. And he said that because Dharma is our refuge, it's the Dharma is found and expressed in how we act. Some people think of the Dharma as teachings or something to believe. And there is some degree of belief and provisional belief that goes into these teachings. Some people think that Dharma is about discovering what's true. And there is some truth to that, that we're discovering some deeper truths about life. But there's a tendency to make the beliefs and the truths too important. Maybe because in western religions, beliefs, and maybe truths are considered, you know, crucial and very important and you have to believe. In the Dharma, the real meaning of the Dharma, or the most profound meaning, and how it supports us is that is that it's has to do with what we do, the actions we undertake, we're supported by our actions. And if we want to change. The way the change to be transformed, real change doesn't happen from beliefs, and doesn't quite happen from truths. But change happens by really, even if we see truth, its actions, how we live that truth, that really begins to transform us in a deeper way. We learn by doing, and we learn the Dharma by doing in such a way that we get the feedback loop, oh, this works, this is good. This is true.

So to live a life that's full of greed, and just always wanting and tensely getting up in the morning, just like what can I get now, what can I have, I have to work and get more money and more this and that, that's an action. And that produces a very different life than a life that the action is not to be greedy, and therefore not in a hurry to do anything, but maybe lives a life with generosity. Relaxed generosity versus frantic greed. Those two have a very different effect on the whole psychophysical being. Such a big effect of the each transformer person in a particular direction. We are changed by what we do regularly. And the idea of kind of being carried along in greed, and being a community that supports that begins to change, you know, very profound ways who we are. Then this is what they find, for example, the the genesis of group violence, and hatred can often be in small little steps, where a little bit of as accepted. And it becomes normative. And then as its normative, then people are willing patient accepting of something a little bit not normative and then more and more, you have people doing horrible things to each other. Because the group they're in has slowly come to normalize it and seen it, seen it as being acceptable behavior. This is how they described things like in Rwanda, where there was genocide or in Germany during World War Two.

And so what we do is so important for Buddhism and to understand that, that doing things that are non greed, non hatred, non delusion, to live a life that is skillful, and do skillful actions. And this is one of the fundamental ideas of the Dharma. It has to do with skillful action. And kusala-kama, there's an Pali term for this. And kusala kama has to do with actions that are beneficial, that are useful, that are wholesome for ourselves, and to learn to recognize that certain way of doing things, to speaking to others, acting in the world and certain ways of relating to ourselves internally, how we think about ourselves, how we talk to ourselves. There are skillful and unskillful. They're harmful and, and harmful ways of doing that. And not just to believe that and take that as teachings or take that as a kind of truths and just leave it at that, then it's not really the Dharma. Tthe Dharma is to turn the attention inward, and see how that works for ourselves. And to recognize in ourselves, that if I speak to myself this way, by the end of the day, I'm going to feel very discouraged and depressed. If I somehow am able to put that kind of thinking aside, the self criticism, the self hatred, if possible to put it aside, I'll get through the day very different. So I'm going to spend the day, every time those thoughts come up, I'm going to let go of them, and do an equal amount of loving kindness for myself. And that letting go and substituting with goodwill can have profound effects.

Those are all kind of a doing. So we learn what's a skillful doing what's beneficial doing, what helps us, and we start seeing what we're doing. One of the things we learn to do in the Dharma is we learn to let go of a lot of the doing, which is not beneficial. And in western Dharma circles is often emphasis on being rather than doing and sometimes a talk like I'm giving today that emphasizes action is really troublesome for some people. Because it sounds like well, now I have to get really busy, I have to do a lot and there's an obligation, and that is my whole life obligation and doing and getting and accomplishing. And here we get another message like this. But to do that, doing skillfully, is to recognize how to do in a way that allows us to settle and get peaceful. And a lot of that is an undoing for sure. A lot of that is letting go of all the deleterious movements of the mind movements of the of

speech movements of the body that we do, so that we can be unsettling. And so there's a lot of shedding, a lot of settling that goes on and shedding of extraneous extra material, extra thoughts, feelings, ideas, and to cocoon ourselves can look like doing nothing, but a lot of undoing, the doing of undoing, that allows us to get really quiet and still and allow this inner metamorphosis to happen, that makes space to be quiet. And so there is a kind of a doing. And a classic little idea that to have in Buddhism is the idea of the karma that brings us to the end of karma, which in ordinary terms, may be one way of understanding it is the actions that come to the end of action. The action that we do, action of letting go for example, becoming quieter and still there and less and less thoughts in the mind. Not so we become dull, or numb, but we become clear and present in a fuller, fuller way. And there's a kind of a doing. So to do skillful doing is to see where's the movement towards freedom. Where's the movement towards peace and to happiness? And sometimes the answer is to cocoon. Sometimes the answer is to be involved with others, to cooperate, to support others, to be involved in a mutual way in which human life as always been a social life, always been one way or the other, that we support each other. Some people are introverted, and so they don't do it so much, you know, actively and extravagantly or something. But we live in a life where you know that much of our we don't grow most of us do not grow all our own food, collect your own water, prepare our own foods. You know, a tremendous social network supports our lives. So either as introverts or extroverts, finding the right way to participate in that, not because it's an obligation, but seeing skillfully, how it's beneficial, how it supports us, how that brings freedom.

And for people who are used to cocooning and discover their freedom there, then going into community life is where they begin to expand and test that freedom. How they get to see where they're still not free. And they can bring their practice to that. For people who live a lot of community life and are really skilled at that and navigated quite beautifully, then going cocooning for a while is very important, because then we see there what we're overlooking maybe, where the attachments or the cleanings are or some of the deeper underlying, maybe beliefs that are operating that maybe are not so healthy to have. And so going back and forth between those two modes, is one of the important movements or Buddhist practice down through the ages to understand that sometimes we cocoon and sometimes we're in community, and to figure out the balance for that is the task of the Dharma. Let the Dharma be the mirror, the attention that allows us to recognize what's skillful and not skillful, what's on the path, and what's not on this path. What is onward leading to freedom, and what is backward going. What in the language of ancient Buddhism, is that that the Dharma is what supports us. So we don't fall backwards, and supports us to go forward. And how do we do that? It's not magical thinking. It's not like there's this Dharma out there that you could just magically kind of trust and we'll take care of you. The Dharma is enacted by how we live our lives, what we do. The Dharma is not for the inactive. But rather the Dharma is for those who are active enough. Who are active with enough mindfulness to be able to discern for themselves, which actions are skillful and unskillful. Which actions are and also how to act in skillful ways, how to act in beneficial ways, how to recognize them, when we act with tension, or hurry or expectations, or with a lot of self judgment, or kind of critical self monitoring, all kinds of things that's not really skillful. Then to be upset with myself for doing things unskillful is even

more in skillfulness. But to find our way to a skillful way. To be skillful about Oh, look at that, I just, that was harmful for myself, I just kind of criticized myself, that was an ouch. So okay, let me have some goodwill here, let me be generous and compassion to all this. Let me see how I can, with open an open hand, open heart, open mind, open to how I am and allow something to settle, have something to undo something to relax deeply.

Most unskillful actions that the body, mind, and speech do involve some degree of tension, of stress, of strain, some degree of shutting down or things kind of going on getting narrower or darker. And so to recognize that and to learn to relax that to relax the strain, the tension, that's the movement towards greater freedom, movements towards what's skillful, and its is what's skillful to relax that. What skillful to do, has the opposite qualities. Skillfulness has, as we do, it has qualities of ease, of calm, of relaxation, of openness, of goodness of wholesomeness, it feels good to do the wholesome, the skillful.

And so the Dharma. We see the Dharma and are supported by it. When you look at our actions, and are able to recognize, oh, that doesn't work. That is kind of a that's a lot of tension, that's actually kind of harmful to myself. And this other way, is less harmful. And then, so what it requires of us in the Dharma world and finding the path is a ongoing mindfulness that monitors all this and sees the choices we're making about how to be with our bodies with the actions we do, the actions of our speech, the actions of our mind, in order to choose what's wholesome.

Some people will feel that hearing this that the ongoing mindfulness to track all this, it means I'm busy, a lot of work. As soon as it becomes a lot of work and is busy, it's not wholesome. So we're not in a hurry, it's like a marathon, we're not going to race, we're going to take our time, we're going to pace ourselves, we're going to settle in. And that ongoing quality of continuity of practice, is something we settled into. And it becomes who we are, rather than something we have to keep doing. It's not so self consciously done, it becomes almost like self second nature, kind of like riding a bicycle. At first, it's very self conscious, and a lot of effort to ride the bicycle. But at some point, if you do it for a long enough time, it becomes second nature. And it's almost like, you know, you don't have to think about it, just that's what you do.

So the Dharma. So the Buddha that we take refuge in is really our own capacity to go inward, to be transformed, and come out as butterflies. The Sangha that we take refuge in, is a port that comes from when we're working together cooperatively with others, practicing together with them. And the Dharma is that which is the mirror, the way in which we mirror or see and ourselves, the nature of our actions, the quality of those actions, how the consequences of those actions, so we can differentiate between what we should keep doing, and what we should let go off. And then we're supported by that, that's onward leading. And these three movements, these three actions are the three kind of approaches that is the orientation, the guidance, the the other orientation, perspective that a person has, that has

gone for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma Sangha. It's not magical thinking. It's really trusting, that we see in ourselves that we find the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

So may you enjoy your actions. And then be wise about how you live them. Because if you're not, you're still your your mind, body and speech will still act, but then it'll act out of unconsciousness, and not necessarily ways that are beneficial for you. And if you do the beneficial thing, you just gets better and better. It just gets more and more wonderful. So may the refuges support you. Thank you.