

## 11\_26\_25 Talk\*

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**Speaker 1** [00:00:00] I would like to explore with you tonight, in keeping with currently the American holiday, which has some complicated history of but if we take it simply as an opportunity once a year for reflecting on what we are thankful for, and with some encouragement to actually express that thankfulness, including to others that we're close to, giving thanks. I wanted to explore with you a certain approach to this that has to do with a very biologically grounded and also spiritually grounded sense of refuge. So I invite you to consider back when you were a kid, what were refuges for you? And by refuge, I mean places and people or activities, or even ideas or experiences that felt protective and comforting, and you could be refueled in them. They replenished you. Maybe they lifted your spirits, they lifted your heart. I can name two right now, three really. One was the wilderness, the outdoors, orange groves and the hills that were wild. You know, they had deer and coyotes and rattlesnakes and no lions or tigers or bears, but definitely the hills around Southern California. That was a huge refuge for me. Just being by myself out in something kind of wild in nature.

[00:01:35] A second one was science fiction, actually, kind of a vision of a bigger universe, a vastness, but also a sense of the individuals in it who could solve their problems. And if they just kept at it and figured it out, they could, you know, save the space station. And I like that a lot. And then of course, one of my secret refuges was at night, after my traditional loving and traditional parents would send me to bed for the evening. I would get a flashlight and read under the covers, which may have been a factor in developing nearsightedness, but that's a whole other story. So refuge. What were refugees for you as a kid? You even might want to put in the chat. I'm seeing someone put libraries. Oh my gosh, libraries. Whew, libraries, what a refuge. Bless librarians. Holy moly. So yeah. Maybe friends were a refugees for you. Maybe some sports activities. When I learned that I actually had some feeling for scrambling and rock climbing, that became kind of a refuge for me in the early adulthood. Right.

[00:02:41] Perhaps for you, religion, you know, some sense of the what was meaningful for you and maybe a faith tradition. You know, I when I travel, there's something very beautiful for me at least in in going into a place of religious practice, a particularly ongoing religious practice. And to be able to visit and respectfully kind of rest in the sense of it. For me, it's a nice refuge. The ocean. Wow, what a refuge. You know, if you're not in trouble, but I mean the sense of it like vastness there. Okay. Yeah. I'm seeing lots of good stuff here. So notice what you feel like when you are in refuge. You might even think about other people. Even if the relationship, you know, is like a whole pie, that's the whole relationship, right? And maybe there are is a slice or two or three that's a little oogie woogie. In the pie of a dear friend or your spouse. Not that my spouse has any oogie slices. Oh, I've never say that. Anyway, of course, we gotta get in here, her in here sometime and interview her about me. In any case, you know, is there sometimes, you know, I I would take refuge. I'd done a couple stints of therapy and I would take refuge actually in the sense of presence in the eyes of my two therapists. One had eyes that were very blue, one very brown, but still the that sense of their gaze, being present with me, accepting me, not intimidated or bamboozled or dismissive of me. Yeah, calm, accepting clarity, refuge. Okay.

[00:04:33] So right now, you might take an opportunity, and I'll be quiet for about a minute, to give thanks for some of your refuges. We give thanks for what is freely given to us. You know, we we don't really earn it. It's a gift. And it can be a little spooky sometimes to feel to

let yourself recognize your dependence on so many gifts. And yet we live dependently. We live, you know, in the giving. We are living in the giving of the sun, green growing plants, giving us oxygen. The physics of our universe that prevents us from floating up in a way. We're living in the giving, including of so many other beings, you know, all the people who've worked hard to do things before us, you know, to pave the sidewalks we walk on, to, you know, repair things, figure stuff out, invent paper clips and you know, science and medicine, living in the giving. So I'll be quiet as you kind of named yourself. Thank you for some of the many refuges you've experienced and do experience in your life.

[00:05:49] So let's be quiet here together, and I'll do it with you for a minute or so. Naming refuges and giving thanks for them. Okay. Many people look out at the world today, these days, and probably can recognize much that is good in it, while also having many of us feel a kind of growing sense of unsettledness at the pace of change, a sense of fragmentation, things falling apart while accelerating. And that's not a happy combination. And major serious issues, seemingly fought to do nothing about, such as the looming climate catastrophe, inexorably coming our way and already present in its just early stages.

[00:07:42] So anyway, so there's understandably a sense of being rattled and unsettled, totally appropriate. And therefore the more that these times feel unsettled and scary and rattling because they are in many ways, it's more important than ever to find that which gives you refuge, that's under your control, to remember or to enter into, to physically sit in your comfortable chair in your home, to find refuge in in truly your friends and family, the your the people that really are with you in this life, those who are. More important than ever. And so being thankful, not just on this day. Or tomorrow in America, but every day, being thankful for our refugees really helps you to be more established in them, more often established in them, more deeply established in them, which is really good for you and good for other people as well. And appreciating the value of refugees and giving thanks reminds us of their value. There's some details about how to practice with refugees, just to share. Traditional statement is along the lines of I take refuge in or I go for refuge to. Both of them, you know, feel right. I think that both of those, especially I go for refuge too, can feel a little outside yourself, a little dualistic, if you will, over there.

[00:09:15] And another way to approach this as well is using words like, with a feeling like I rest in or I abide as, or even I am a certain refuge, right? You know, I am in it and it is in me, that kind of thing. So you might explore that. It's also quite common for people to think of refuge very concretely, very normally, but when I look at so many wonderful comments in the chat, that it's a great opportunity to expand the sense of what refuge really is, which then, you know. Leads me to the next step here, which is to talk about three traditional refuges in Buddhism. And I'd like to explore these with you in some creative ways. Some creative ways. And you can certainly apply this to other things. For quite some time, every morning I would do a little practice around taking refuge in and as seven different things. Three of them were the three I'm about to name right now, and I'll spare you some of the rest of my little list.

[00:10:23] But one refuge I took was in reason, and by extension, science as an aspect, not the only aspect of reason, but a key aspect of reason. I took refuge in reason. And also you could I took take refuge in practice, you know, just simply making efforts in this life and knowing that you are someone who will who will practice. So there are many things you can take refuge in. Traditionally in Buddhism, it is said that in this order, one takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Now, those words are traditional words and they can mean different things.

[00:11:04] So one way to think about the word Buddha is an historical teacher, an actual human individual who really did live in northern India, you know, probably 400 to 500 years, estimates vary. Before the common era, so roughly 2400 or so years ago, maybe, that real individual struggled, and as best we can gather from the early surviving written records, engaged a life of practice, did this and that, evolved, awakened, and then taught for another 30 plus years. That individual is someone that we could potentially have confidence in, much like we would have confidence in a really good coach or a really good teacher. It's not that we don't, we don't, you know, just take what they say on faith alone. We watch them over time, but if they're increasingly credible over time, we might give them the benefit of the doubt, or we might be willing to try it out. So there's a taking refuge in the lived example and the integrity and the credibility of a of a human individual who is a teacher, taking refuge in that individual, sometimes called the Buddha.

[00:12:18] Then, in another way of looking at this, the word Buddha itself means essentially in that early language Pali, of knowing. So the Buddha is one who knows deeply. So we can take refuge in the deep knowing of what is true inside us all. This brings the refuge home to. In which you can take refuge both certainly outside yourself in an historical individual, and you can take refuge in the knowing that is already present within you, often covered over or distracted from, a knowing that can become increasingly present, increasingly in the mix in the wallpaper in your mind, even in the foreground of awareness, and with even a deepening sense, if you relate to this, what's called Buddha nature, the sense that the nature of all phenomena, deep down, is fundamentally rested in that which is unconditioned, that which is timeless and therefore not subject to decay, not subject to arising and passing away, therefore that which is capable of being a reliable source of happiness, even the highest happiness of all. So that's available to us right here. The expressions of our deep knowing can sometimes have a lot of words in them. The menu is not the meal. The many words that express wisdom of different kinds are useful, but this deep Buddha. Buddha, you know, thou art that deep nature is deeper than all words and available to you as your own refuge. I would say for the moment that the most important thing is to find what is true inside you and to see if there is meaning for you in being thankful for the life of the Buddha, the individual, Siddhartha. And is there thankfulness for his lived example, his story, the teachings that have emerged from that origin point? Is that meaningful for you? And is it also meaningful for you to locate inside yourself an inherent kind of wakefulness? Right. Okay.

[00:15:23] Then there's the second refuge, classically, traditionally, the Dharma. And here too, there are different meanings of that word. One way to take that word is that it's describing realities. What is what are realities? And in a funny kind of way, is it a refuge for you to take refuge in reality? Are you thankful for reality? Now, there could be parts of reality you're not thankful for. Okay. I'm not thankful for, you know, atrocities. I'm not thankful for events, random storms, events that kill all kinds of animals, forest fires. Think of all the non-human creatures, human human creatures sometimes as well, but non-human creatures. Forest fires have been a feature of life on earth for a long time. Oh, poor creatures. You know, I'm not really thankful for those elements of reality, but reality altogether and a sense of fundamentally you surrendering to and submitting to reality as it is, as a kind of ultimate sort of refuge. I give up to reality, right? Is that available to you? Right? Can that feel like a refuge for you? In a very, as Tara Brach would put it, a very radical kind of acceptance. So we can take refuge in and we can be grateful for, thankful for Dhammas, you know, realities, actual realities.

[00:16:59] And another second meaning of Dhamma or Dharma is accurate descriptions of reality, including deep spiritual teachings. And certainly in the Buddhist tradition, a very elaborated collection of teachings originating in early Buddhism and then proliferating and spreading, like a mighty tree with some major trunks and then many branches, twigs, and leaves in the last 2400 or so years. Can you take refuge in the teachings? Are they credible for you? Do they do they have the ring of truth for you? Do you turn to them? Are you thankful for them? I'm profoundly thankful myself for the wisdom keepers, certainly in the Buddhist tradition, but also around the world, not just in Buddhism, including people who at often great risk to the own life, you know, currently today, or you know, sneaking, you know, sacred texts out of occupied Tibet, occupied by the Chinese government. And that's a fact, and you know, and and other forms of protecting of great wisdom, or oral teachings. Wisdom was passed down in yogic traditions and other traditions, you know, for millennia. I think about the native people of Australia, you know, the little I know, 40,000 roughly years, you know, oral traditions, rich oral traditions of wisdom passed out. You know, can we turn to that and be grateful for that? You know, how much of the Dharma do you actually read? You know, I always try to keep a little bit of Dharma books going.

[00:18:34] Or do you like listening to talks or to tapes? So many teachers these days. Great opportunities to access deep, deep wisdom. What a refuge to feel grateful for. And I really encourage you to keep approaching this material, grounding it in what is refuge for you. We're all scared monkeys. Rather than intellectualizing about this topic and kind of spinning out about it, whew. What brings you home and helps you feel you know, here? I'm okay. So taking refuge in Buddha, taking refuge in Dharma. And then I'd like to add a third sort of aspect to Dharma here. I'd love this question, I think from Oprah Winfrey. Tell me one thing you know for sure. What's one thing you know for sure? What are the deep things you've come to know for yourself as guiding principles in your life, as lessons, and as qualities about yourself? What is it within you that you are thankful for?

[00:20:07] And I'd like to make a distinction between being thankful for good fortune, in other words, talents or physical attributes in yourself that were the result of the genetic lottery. Yes, we can be thankful for our good luck. And also, can you be thankful for qualities inside you that more are about good character, more about your own virtuous efforts, your own nobility, your own good heart? Doesn't have to be perfect to be really, really good-hearted. Yeah. And then the third classic refuge is Sangha, community. That's a really interesting one because the original emphasis in early Buddhism around the Sangha was the community of monastics, both male and female, grudgingly, but eventually the Buddha came to fully ordain women. And there are some wonderful teachings from women in the Pali Canon, the collection of early written teachings. And there's a collection of kind of edited but still beautiful poetry. I think it's called the First Free Women. It's a collection of beautiful short poems from women in early Buddhism.

[00:21:38] Anyway, so in the Sangha there were it was in initially monastics. Okay. Call that, think of that as the vertical dimension in which we can be thankful for and take refuge in people who have dedicated their lives to practice and handed down across the centuries various traditions. You know, no tradition is perfect, a lot of patriarchy in the Buddhist monastic tradition and other issues and problems. And it's still a work in progress, although there have definitely been a number of historic changes, certainly even just the last 10 years, if not certainly the last 10 or 30 years. In any case, we can be thankful for, and I'm thankful for the monastics that I've known who have been sincere and really dedicated their lives at some sacrifice often to this path of wisdom. In here, we've had some recent monastics, Ajan's Nisabho and Kovilo, who've taught here online, really great, right? So the can there can be a thankfulness for that lineage of monastic teaching. Okay. Place for

that. And also there can be thankfulness for our community, including our community here. I've seen many names, and I see people whose faces I don't recognize that are actually new here. It's kind of like, you know. We evolved in these small bands. That's our that's normal for us, whether it helps us carry our sadness or supports our spiritual practice. You know, you look to the left, you look to the right. Now we're doing a lot of this online.

[00:23:26] And still you can have a very strong feeling of solidarity and community and mutual support, you know, with other people here. And think about feeling in community even more broadly. You know, for example, I think Insight Timer or some of these other devices, they will show who is meditating at that moment now worldwide. Well, here we are. I guarantee you that around the world, thousands, potentially millions of people are engaged in some form of deliberate contemplative practice right now. For many of them, it's in a religious context. Some it's more secular. We are in community with all these people right now, and we can be thankful for them. I myself think that it's important to add the engaged application of elevating consciousness into the systemic sources of suffering of in the world. I think that's an important addition and application to contemplative practice. That said, wow, think what the world would be like. If there were not, if there was not an element of contemplative practice in it, at least in some quarters, it would be a really worse world, I think. And we can be thankful for that and thankful as we abide in community with all of that. Yeah.

[00:25:06] And then last, with regard to Sangha, I wanted to broaden this notion a little bit and slightly playfully to appreciate the Sangha, the community within each one of us. You know, Walt Whitman put it, I am multitudes. You know, I I sometimes say, I feel it feels like a zoo in here with a bunch of Stone Ageds, a bunch of monkeys, some mice and some lizards, and even all the way down, probably some, you know, stalks of corn deep inside, different kinds of psychological approaches, like Freud's id, ego, superego, different traditions, Jungian notions of archetypes, different qualities inside us, internal family systems, talks about different kinds of parts, many different ways into this. And I just wonder what your relationship is with your own inner multitude, your own inner village, your inner sangha. There's a lot of You know, good research and practical wisdom that has to do with the value of as Richard Schwartz, Dick Schwartz put it, founder of internal family systems, no bad parts. There are parts that need some regulating. I definitely have parts that you know have a temper, let's say, or can just kind of slack off too much sometimes. Okay, we manage these parts. You know, maybe there's a part that is easily wounded and needs, you know, a fair amount of kind of love and tenderness and protection, you know. But they're all here to help you.

[00:26:51] And one thing that can be really quite remarkable is to imagine different parts inside you, different energies, different voices inside in a normal mind, different subpersonalities, however you think of them, and actually thank them. You know, turn to one, turn to, let's say, that boisterous, playful part of yourself that used to get you in trouble, maybe when you were a kid occasionally. Thank you. Maybe that sort of wistful, romantic, tender, slightly melancholy and mopey part. That's sort of embarrassing sometimes. Thank you. Right? How about that part of you that's pretty Fierce can get moved to anger pretty fast. Maybe it's gotten you into trouble sometimes, gone too far. Still, that part fierce, wild. Thank you. Thank you too. How many other parts? You know, would you like to thank? Right? Wow, that's an inner Sangha, an inner community. There may be parts a little bit like monastic parts maybe outside, but inside you, a part that has a kind of serene wisdom, a kind of fearless, calls you on your bullshit, calls them on their bullshit. Reminds you that their bullshit doesn't have to become your bullshit. You don't have to believe it over there.

[00:28:42] And also, meanwhile, is seeing you clearly and you know, reminding you of a fair standards for yourself that you're probably reaching most of the time already, and you're surpassing and in the bonus round. You know, that part. That kind of, I think of some very tall being in robe, sort of austere, kind and austere and words of truth. Thank you, that part. Many different parts inside, right? So you might reflect on what it might do for you this time of year to thank those different parts inside yourself that are in your own inner sangha, including some of the parts that are sort of hard to include, hard to admit, hard to accept. You can still thank them for their intentions, their efforts, even their contributions. And similarly, this is a good time of year when you're sitting across the table from Uncle Bob or Aunt Maria. And there are parts that show enough that you don't care for much. Over there, can you see an inner sangha? Inside Uncle Bob or Aunt Maria or or whoever else is around the table, and can you appreciate the part? In them. Can you appreciate some of their parts in them and thank them? Over there in the community, the Sangha, you know, the zoo that is every one of us. And notice what happens when you take refuge in that kind of thankfulness. That's what this whole talk has been about, a kind of experiential exploration for you of what happens when you take refuge in thankfulness, including thankfulness for some traditional refuges, like the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

[00:30:43] So I get asked periodically, what am I talking about? When I point to, think of it like this. We start with mind, in a sense that we begin with our experiences. There are experiences, right? Doubting our experiences is an experience. From our experiences, so there are experiences. There is seeing, there's visual perception. Perhaps there is sound. There are experiences. There perhaps is a sense of weight. Okay? From these experiences, we infer from we go from mind to matter. There is there is stuff out there. All of our experiences of the stuff out there are simulations of it. Constructed by a nervous system that is adapted to generate pretty accurate simulations of what's out there, enough to live to see the sunrise based on, and yet they're simulations. Okay, that said, mind and matter, most people, and certainly scientifically minded folks accept that both of these are the case. There is intangible information, there are intangible experiences, and there is tangible stuff. Is there also mystery? I have teachers and friends who are pretty dogmatic atheists. Nope. And then you die. And that's that. That's their attitude. Okay. Or maybe they leave it a little door open, like, well, there might be mystery, I don't know, but there's no evidence for it. You can't use it. I don't care. Okay.

[00:32:31] On the other hand, there is the Buddha who said essentially in his journey through mind and matter, he explored and found increasingly blissful states, but each one was fundamentally unreliable because it was subject to impermanence. It was made of parts that were connected and changing. And in his journey, he then encountered what he described as the not condition. Not subject to arising and passing away, the deathless, timeless, unconditioned. What do we make of that? Was he deluded? My friends who and teachers who just leave it at mind and matter, they they have a hard time with this part, but they think, well, he was misunderstood. Or, well, you know, those records came in, you know, three, four hundred years after he died. Or yeah, maybe he thought that way, but he was wrong on that one. Okay.

[00:33:31] On the other hand, really, maybe there is something fundamentally unconditioned, always just prior to the emergence of conditioned reality. Maybe there really is some kind of underlying field or ground in which the universe is unfolding. And many people from many traditions point to it and have a very clear sense of it, including ascribing qualities potentially of consciousness and even love to that which is

fundamentally vast and still and unconditioned. That's the territory to the person who asked me that question that I'm speaking to. And I'm not asserting it dogmatically people can argue about this. I find those arguments pretty sterile. On the other hand, it's a central aspect certainly of early Buddhism and I think it's a really important thing to be prepared to talk about. So therefore I do.

**Speaker 1** [00:34:26] That said, most of practice is in the realm of the conditioned of the The relative, as it were, distinct from the absolute. And certainly that's where we can find a lot of value in very simple ways in taking refuge in thankfulness and being thankful for our refuges. And for me, I don't, I'm not gonna lie, I've had a very growing sense of you know, the absolute ground of all. And for me, it's a kind of ultimate refuge. So, another comment or question or two, if that's okay. I take refuge in math. I see we have some math geeks here, you know, pi. I see that, you know, the expansion of pi. All right, let's see here. So I see Anita's comment here. Maybe there's something valuable in the Dharma. The Buddhist approach has seemed rather harsh. Interesting. Well, I definitely think that there are Buddhist approaches that can sound harsh. I think the routine translation of dukkha as suffering or unsatisfactoriness is deeply mistaken and has led to a lot of harshness. Maybe there's some analyzes about the ultimate emptiness in sensual pleasure that might sound harsh. You know, people vary. I find certain expressions of Buddhism, you know, maybe some of the more expressions and different. Places, yeah, I can find that a little harsh. I find teachers who hear someone say, you know, I have ADHD. I'm just naturally distractable, you know, it's normal. It's not even a disorder. I'm just quite distractable person. It's hard for me to meditate. What should I do? And they say, just pay attention to the breath around your nose. Just keep coming back there. I find that pretty harsh.

[00:36:30] So I think there are definitely some things that are harsh. On the other hand, wow, you know, if you just sort of read a lot of, you know, the early teachings of the Buddha, they're they're very tender. There's a lot of sweetness in them. There's a lot of kindness and relentless helpfulness. That's that's very sweet. And certainly many heartfelt and not so harsh qualities are foregrounded in Buddhism, like compassion and kindness and happiness for others and all the rest of that. So, you know, find for yourself what what works for you, you know, and I I have found for myself that the kind of harsh elements that Anita is referring to, I myself have not liked them, and they have not been valuable for me. Qualities of noble honesty that might sound a little harsh. I've gotten a lot of value from. But it really helps me a lot if it comes with a kind smile and a twinkle that really senses from the inside out, you know, what I'm talking about. Anyway, so find for yourself. I hope that this has been helpful for you. You know, the whole notion of being thankful for our refuges and bringing thanks to them as a wonderful way to deepen our own internalized sense of resting in our own refuges and being able to walk evenly over uneven ground in this shaky time. So I'm very thankful for you. I'm going to be thinking about you all for the rest of my evening and certainly tomorrow. And I'm very grateful to you, really. We we could not be here without each other. Thank you.