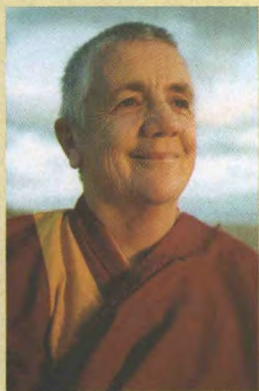


Cleaning the Whole Mirror



Ven. Tenzin Chonyi, a.k.a. Dr. Diana Taylor, an Australian-born Buddhist nun and psychologist, shows us how the spiritual path can easily get undermined by the ego if we constantly have “mixed motives”. In this issue she talks about our mind – and “taking refuge”.

Ven. Tenzin Chonyi is a member of the International Mahayana Institute (IMI), the community of monks and nuns of the FPMT. Your support of the Sangha through the Lama Yeshe Sangha Fund ensures that Buddha's teachings are available for future generations. For further information on the programs and activities of IMI please visit www.imisangha.org

“I hope that you understand what the word ‘spiritual’ really means. It means to search for – to investigate – the true nature of the mind. There’s nothing spiritual outside. My rosary isn’t spiritual; my robes aren’t spiritual. Spiritual means the mind and spiritual people are those who seek its nature.

LAMA YESHE

When I first heard about the Buddhist idea of taking refuge, my immediate reaction was one of disgust. I thought it meant running away from reality. It reminded me of a hymn which I disliked for the same reason: “Rock of Ages cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee.” No way was I going to hide from life.

Looking back, my reaction reflected my own way of coping when life became too much: running away and hiding. I love being alone. My default personality type is introversion. Yet in those days I despised introversion as a weakness. Obviously my understanding of refuge has changed, but there was an element of truth in that early reaction. Refuge can mean running away from reality.

Living in a Dharma center which is also a retreat center gives plenty of opportunity to meet people who are

running away. Relationship problems, mental illness, burnout, failure, catastrophes, suffering in its countless guises are behind the search for peace. Our motivation for refuge is contaminated by neurosis, or exhaustion, or both. Secretly we want a refuge which makes no demands on us and solves our problems for us. Suffering, after all, is the first noble truth and the third noble truth promises complete release from that suffering. Like the words of the hymn, refuge can be the perfect hideout.

Most of us, when we first meet Buddhism are trying to prop up a self which is not only a deluded idea from the ultimate point of view, but is also deluded from a conventional point of view. This conventionally deluded self is busy denying what it does not want to know about itself. It says it is taking

refuge because it wants to fulfill its bodhicitta motivation, but at the same time it refuses to look at its other less noble and self-seeking motivations. From that perspective, we understand refuge from a mind like a dirty mirror, reflecting only what we want it to reflect.

The delusion becomes worse when we try to explode the notion of a self-existing 'I'. We can be quite happy to refute the conscious aspect of that illusory 'I', and even think we have found the object to be refuted. The unconscious aspect of the 'I' which Jung calls the 'shadow' remains intact. We have polished some parts of the mirror, and left the dirt on other parts.

Still, even when our motives are mixed, there are times when it makes sense to pull away from everything going on and take stock with our baby Buddha minds. Buddha taught four noble truths, and the missing two are the ones which our mixed motives are not so keen to investigate. Neurotic refuge is not interested in the cause of suffering or the path from suffering which form the other two noble truths. Exhausted refuge cannot cope with them. At some stage we have to forgo the running away from reality and understand that refuge shows us the path to unmask and face up to our more subtle confusions and delusions.

If taking refuge only means running away from reality, then it is going to harden our delusions. We come home from retreat even more resentful of the realities of poor relationships, illness and failures. Home and work life seem to be a huge distraction from Dharma practice. On one hand, we yearn for the quietness of meditation and on the other hand we live in the noise and chaos of ordinary life. We yearn for the pseudo refuge of ignoring our karma. We have forgotten that each irritation of ordinary life is a personal Dharma teaching. Each irritation spotlights our own unique ignorance, aversions and attachments, and allows us to see underneath to our own personal, twisted wisdom.

If refuge really means hiding, are lamas hiding when they go away and spend three years or twelve years, or a whole lifetime in retreat? Retreat is a time to take perspective, to train the mind to behave itself, to train the mind to stay in increasingly subtle states, to strengthen wisdom and compassion. Refuge is a time to dwell in the compassionate wisdom of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. With that dwelling in refuge, we are open to the guidance we need from wiser and more compassionate minds than our own.

There are good reasons for taking refuge with a mind like a dirty mirror with all its self-serving motivations. We need a cloth and water to clean the whole mirror. ☸

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