



I would like to offer a series of four talks inviting everyone on a spiritual journey, if you're not already on one. Or, if you are, I will describe some aspects of that spiritual journey so that you may be able to recognize them and say, "Oh, yes, I can resonate with that." Or you might say, "No, my experience is different, I'd like to take issue with that." It's an open invitation. What I would like to offer as a theme for this series of talks is this: We are all refugees on our way to our true home.

Let me begin by inviting us all to look at our global situation. If we look around us and look at the media that tells us what's happening in different parts of the world, we know that there are so many acts of violence happening—killing many people or destroying lives, destroying property. There are many incidents that give us a sense of insecurity, a sense of unease, a troubling sense that all is not well with the world. Those incidents are emblematic of something going on in our human community, and one of the major themes that we can see is that our human community, this global community that lives together on this earth, is so fragile and divided among itself such that violence and conflict occur on almost a daily basis. And there are so many incidents that keep on increasing and adding to that violence. What's happening, and how can we live through this? How can we navigate through this very difficult situation, wherein we are always looking out and trying to see what next incident might come?

As we look at this fractured human family of ours, we see that there are so many causes of those divisions that cause conflict and animosity among ourselves. And because of that, the way we live our lives also leads to a sense of unease, or what we could call a dis-ease, using a hyphen. That sense of being in a dysfunctional state applies not only to our human community, but especially to our own individual lives.

Again, as we look around, we are being told that there are troubling signs regarding our own collective future. We may note that there have been many, many cases where we are told that our global habitat, this earth where we share our common lives with all sentient beings, is being threatened with ecological destruction. We are on the verge of a major ecological crisis of such proportions that our very future on this earth as a species is threatened. Now, this sense of these unsettling events, incidents, and tendencies makes us all feel that all is not well with the world.



One other symptom that we can note regarding this sense of un-wellness, this unease or dis-ease in our world today, is the fact that millions and millions of our fellow human beings are now in a status where they are fleeing from their ancestral homes because of threats of violence or threats on their lives, or because of factors that make them feel that they can no longer live in a decent way, in a humane way, in the places where they used to live because of economic, political, social, and other factors. And so, those persons who are dislocated—dislodged from their homes and now in transit, looking for a place where they can live decently—are called refugees.

In that regard, that sense of dislocation is what is making them unable to live their full human lives. As I said, dislocation is simply a symptom, and we are all moved when we see that somebody is truly in a state of distress and seeking to live decently. We were all moved by the picture of the little boy—a five-year-old who died on the coast of Greece—who fled his war-torn place and seeking a new home. That picture indicated for us that that's the fate of millions and millions of our fellow human beings.

Now, those of us who may be fortunate enough to have our own home, where we can live securely for a time may feel, "Oh, I'm glad it's not me." But, again, if we look at these global trends, we sense that we are not isolated from those situations or incidents, where more and more are feeling that they need to relocate or they need to really look for another place where they can really find a place to live as a human being. So I'd like to offer some reflections in a way that might enable us to see how we are, ourselves, refugees. But this is not to make light of the suffering of those who are truly refugees in the full sense of the word and really listen with our whole hearts to their plight to see how we might be able to respond.

But in that regard, we will also recognize that we ourselves—as long as we are in a state of unease, dislocation, or in a place of not really feeling grounded in our own lives—are also experiencing that sense of not being totally in sync. We too are out of sync with our true selves. This sense can give us inspiration to seek out a spiritual path, a path whereby we will be able to find our grounding, we'll be able to find our footing, and we will be able to say, "I'm living in the best way I can as a human being."

Now, what is there left for us? First of all, let me again offer some reflections from the Buddhist tradition. In the Buddhist tradition, such a situation that relates to or refers to our global



context, as well as that which refers to our individual sense of where we are in our journey in life, is called *dukkha*. Dukkha is a word that comes from Nepali, based in the Sanskrit, that comes from a compound word which means "the wheel is out of sync." The wheel is not centered, so it's wobbly or it's not functioning well. It's dysfunctional. It is dis-eased.

The word dukkha has traditionally been translated as "suffering" in many Buddhist textbooks or many standard Buddhist translations in English. But the word suffering does not quite catch the sense of what this dukkha means in the Buddhist tradition. Dukkha really refers to the fact that we are disjointed, dysfunctional, dis-eased, and that dis-ease, that dysfunction, is calling for something to address it, calling for a fix. So this dysfunction is calling for a way in which we can heal it, we can fix it, so that we can then arrive at a place where the wheel is centered again, and therefore the wheel can roll smoothly.

That situation where the wheel rolls smoothly because it's truly centered is called *sukha*, the opposite of dukkha. Sukha is a word that means "well-being," or being at ease. It means being in a state of happiness and being in a state of fully living one's potential. And so, as we look around and acknowledge and recognize these signs of our global dis-ease, the global dukkha, and as we see that it reflects on our own individual way of living our lives, our own individual dukkha, we ask ourselves: How can we turn from dukkha, state of dis-ease and dysfunction, to a state of sukha, a state of well-being, ease, peace—a state of being truly grounded and living life in the best way we can as human beings and as sentient beings?

As I noted, the Buddhist tradition has something to offer to all of us in that regard. Now, when I say Buddhist tradition, I'm not trying to sell Buddhism in the way that if you don't become Buddhist, then you're not with it. I would like to use terms from the Buddhist tradition in a way that you can take as an invitation to learn about and perhaps receive some pointers from Buddhism—not with a capital *b*, an institutional religion whereby one thinks that one has to believe certain things and therefore follows certain rituals. I'd like to use "buddhism" with a small *b*, in the way that a very good friend and mentor, Sulak Sivaraksa, who is a Thai activist, has used it. He said his message is not just about or for Buddhists with a capital *b*, those institutional Buddhists who would identify with the religion or with the community that call themselves Buddhists, but with those people of goodwill who are seeking to live a way of life based on a sense of peace, a sense of seeing things for what they are, and a way of living life that



is open to truth and true freedom in a way that brings forth a life of openness and a life of an open heart that lives in compassion toward other beings.

So you may be a Christian or a Hindu or a Muslim or Jew or Sikh, or you may profess no religion. You may say, "I don't believe in any of that," or you may be agnostic, but if you are someone who is seeking a way of life based on peace and based on goodwill in a way that wants to really see us all, human beings and sentient beings, live together harmoniously in the world, then you are a person we can all relate to and we can walk with, whether you give yourself a religious label or not. In that regard, it's an open invitation to consider some things that might open our hearts and enrich our lives toward something that may be able to address our current global malaise.

Now, what does the Buddhist tradition have to offer? It offers us what we call the three refuges—in other words, in realizing that we are in a rut. Our global situation is in a very, very troubling state, and we are all calling for a fix, just like the astronauts when they saw that there was something not good that was heading their way and they said, "Houston, we have a problem." And so if we look at our world today, that's the cry that comes out from our hearts: "Houston, we have a problem." Now how can we address that?

If we look at the global proportions of the kinds of situations that we're dealing with, realize that there's nothing I can do individually, but yet, think again. If we look at where all of these problems are coming from, we'll note that these are from individuals who, themselves, are reflecting the trouble in their own individual lives. The trouble in our society really comes from the trouble in *individuals* who are thereby acting with violence—and with conflict and animosity and so on—in a way that messes up their own life and messes up the lives of others.

If the cause of our global and social problems come from individuals, then perhaps we can begin by addressing the root of those problems in the way individuals live their own lives. And where else can we begin but our own selves? That's the invitation that the Buddhist tradition offers to us. And, as I noted, it offers three refuges, three places of refuge where we can turn to in order to be able to find a way of living in peace and with an open heart that will be harmonious with others and a heart that is truly living empowered by compassion.

Now, where do we begin? First of all, I'd like to note that when we say "three refuges" in Buddhism, the practice is to say, "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take



refuge in the sangha." It does not mean it's a cop-out, that I'm placing all my problems on the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, and therefore I no longer need to make any efforts. It's not a way of passing the buck to something higher than me—namely, the Buddha, dharma, sangha in whatever way you might conceive it—and then therefore just saying "Okay, now I have taken the three refuges, I'm taken care of. I'm okay. I'm saved. I have accepted the Buddha and the dharma and the sangha, and so therefore I'm saved." Not that at all.

The way I'd like to offer taking the three refuges is by noting that in reciting the three refuges, "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the dharma. I take refuge in the sangha," we are thereby taking these three treasures, these three jewels in the Buddhist tradition, as a beacon for a way of life. In this way of life, we may be able to live in peace, we might be able to find a way of living harmoniously with one another, we might be able to live in a way that lends to another's happiness so that it's not so much giving the responsibility elsewhere. In this, we resolve and intend to live as the Buddha, as taught by the dharma, and with the sangha. What do I mean by that? We will now have to look at it in particular detail.

One other point I would like to make in closing this talk is that the Buddhist tradition is not so much a set of teachings that are to be believed, or a doctrine to be accepted, nor a ritual that you have to perform, but an invitation to a way of life. What does that way of life consist of? Well, let's take a look. Let's see what taking those three refuges entail for our individual lives. This is what I'll be covering in the next few talks.