



I take refuge in the dharma. What does it mean to take refuge in the dharma? What's dharma? In its original sense, dharma is that which holds something together. That which makes something what it is. That which is the true nature of whatever it is. The dharma is what Buddha realized that enabled him to awaken. It is the truth of what things are—the truth of things as they are—that thereby liberated him from *dukkha*, the sense of disease or dislocation that caused his suffering, and allowed him to truly find that place of peace.

Now, what does dharma consist of? What is involved in that truth that allows for that place of peace? You could also call it liberating truth—the truth that sets us free. That's what the dharma is. To see the dharma is to realize that which can make us free and allow us to live in full freedom. What does that entail? There are different ways of expounding the dharma in early Buddhist scriptures but, for this talk, I'll focus on one way in which the dharma has been articulated in a sutra from the Great Vehicle, also called the Mahayana.

I'm referring to the *Heart Sutra*. The sutra is supposed to be the heart of the Buddha's awakening and message. The *Heart Sutra* is a short sutra that somehow is the gist of all of what Buddhism is about. Central to this sutra is the message: form is none other than emptiness, emptiness is none other than form. Now that's a well-worn and oft-recited phrase, but who can explain it?

Let's see how we can offer some pointers to appreciate what this message is all about. First is that term “emptiness.” In Western languages the term emptiness is a very, very negative word. It's as if there is nothing there—it's empty. But the way it is used the *Heart Sutra*, and in most sects of Buddhism, it's not a negative thing but simply a statement of the way things are. To put it in a more positive way, it is simply to say: there is no thing in this universe that stands independent of anything else.

Each and every thing that exists in this universe exists only in so far as it is connected and interrelated with everything else. That's hard to imagine. For example, this stick. When I say this stick is characterized by emptiness or this stick is empty, someone



who hasn't heard all of this language may say, "Are you talking nonsense? The stick is right there." But when I say the stick is empty, what I'm saying from the Buddhist understanding is that this stick cannot be something separate that I'm looking at as an object. This stick is only this stick in so far as everything else in the universe constitutes what it is.

Namely, this stick is constituted by everything else in the universe. That's a message that may be hard to fathom from an ordinary, common sense point of view. But if we look at what those who are on the cutting edge of sub-atomic physics are discovering, they will say, "Hey, that's right. That's also what we're finding out in our own research—that each everything in this universe is composed of what each and everything else is all about." There is that sense of interconnectness with everything.

There is a book that is already about 30 years old called *The Tao of Physics* written by Fritjof Capra. In that book, he describes how the discoveries of cutting edge physics at that time were already confirming the messages from the Hindu and Buddhist traditions that were discovered through meditative practices.

So, the word emptiness is simply saying that everything in this universe is interdependent with everything else. And so if we ask the question, "Who am I really?" I can give you different facets of what I understand to be myself—my name, my background, my origin, my character traits, my temperament and so on. Yet all of those are simply aspects of how this I is connected with everything else. Who am I? Well, I am someone who was born of the union between my parents. If we go further and further, I am not anyone but the fruit of all of those different occasions in the universe that led to this birth, that led to all of these circumstances in my life that make me who I am.

And so in that regard, all of my ancestors—and if you consider it, all of those ancestors dating back to the beginnings of the human race—also produce progeny in a way that makes everyone in the human race connected to me. In that way, we're all connected somewhere. We're all kin. Again, this is a way of trying to articulate what



we're invited to see directly if we follow the Buddhist advice to stop our analytic minds, just be still, and allow our hearts to see things for what they are.

I am interconnected with everyone in a way that I am kin to everyone and everyone is kin to me. That's basically what the sutra is trying to convey. Form is no other than emptiness. In other words, everything that exists in this universe that's form is interconnected with everything else. In realizing that, you'll be free. You'll be free from what? Well, if we look at things only from our so-called common sense point of view, where we think that I am the subjective individual and everyone else is a different subject, and that we're all separate from one another, then we're basically looking at the world from a very, very narrow-minded point of view.

That point of view leads us to a sense of insecurity. We might think: I'm only one among others so I need to boss my own existence and I need my own turf, my own stuff, my possessions, and I need to have more power. That is the kind of diluted way of living that is motivated by what are known as the three poisons—greed, ill will and ignorance. This teaching of the Buddha notes that our dissatisfaction, disease, or dukkha, is caused by our way of life that is motivated by and sipping in those three poisons—greed, ill will and ignorance.

Why greed? If I feel isolated from the world and believe that I'm just by myself or that there are so many things out there that I want, then I want more and I don't want to be interrupted by others. I develop ill will toward others because I feel that they will be threatening me in my desire to have more. They will be my rivals, competitors, or even enemies. I tend to see others as threats against my little self that wants to have what it wants. So this leads to and ill will, all based on that diluted point of view that I'm separate from others. In this way, greed, ill will and delusion become the causes of lifestyles that mess up our lives or the lives of others.

Ill will just generates more animosity. It is what generates the violence that we see among our fellow human beings, all based on that delusion of our separate selves. To



address that, the dharma is precisely what allows us to see that we're kin to one another and that everything I do impacts others. The well-being of everyone else is connected to my well-being; likewise, my well-being is connected to the well-being of everyone else. As I see the liberating truth that we're all interconnected, I am able to realize that my own heart wants me to live in a way that causes well-being for others.

Coming from a heart of greed, I will be able to turn around and live in a way that is the opposite of greed—a heart filled with generosity. As I live in generosity, I find that others are also generous toward me. It turns that circle of greed around and gives the antidote of the dharma—the truth that we're all connected. The ill will that is generated by that sense of separateness is now overturned, and we have a heart that simply wells up in good will. May all beings be happy. May all beings attain full well-being.

As we learned in the *Heart Sutra*, which expresses the heart of the awakened one: as a mother regards her only child, have this boundless heart toward all beings. As I see the dharma and that I am kin to each and everyone in this universe, loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy generate in my heart. This casts away the clouds of delusion that make me think I separate from others. We're able to live in a way that provides the antidote to those three poisons of greed, ill will and ignorance. The antidotes are generosity, good will, and the wisdom that brings forth compassion. That's the dharma.

So when we say, "I take refuge in the dharma", it is simply acknowledging the liberating truth that I seek from the bottom of my heart. It is to see my kinship with each and every one and see how I am intermittently connected with each and everything, so that there is nothing in this universe that is separate from who I am. I therefore regard everyone with respect. I am able to bow in gratitude to everything and everyone around me.

That is what realizing the dharma consists of in my life. It is turning my life away from being selfish, greedy, and filled with ill will and delusion. Instead, I turn toward a

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life that is open-hearted, generous, and full of good will toward all. In seeing things as they are, this life flows with a heart of compassion. I take refuge in dharma.