Family Dharma: Taking Refuge (On the Wings of Angels)

By Beth Roth

While on silent **vipassana** retreat many years ago, I was introduced to the Buddhist tradition of Taking Refuge. Along with about one hundred other *yogis* (retreatant's), I repeated after our teachers these phrases: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha." We chanted this trio of phrases three consecutive times. I don't remember exactly how the teachers explained this ritual to us. Silent retreat was a relatively new experience for me, and I accepted the chanting of these phrases as another interesting aspect of what I considered "retreat etiquette." I had no idea that Taking Refuge is an ancient and profound Buddhist practice, and I could not have predicted how vital this practice would become for me.

Webster's Dictionary defines refuge as "shelter or protection from danger or distress." Taking Refuge is not a concept unique to Buddhism. Every one of us is already taking refuge in our lives. We seek refuge when we want to feel more ok, when we need relief from the discomfort of feeling not ok, or when we require a distraction from our problems and difficulties. Some of these refuges are skilful because they contain the possibility of healing, such as communion with nature, spiritual practices, support of family and friends, and pursuit of art, music, literature, poetry, sports, or movement. Some refuges are not so skilful, because while they may provide a temporary escape from our pain, they do not increase our insight about our predicament. For example, denial of our suffering, or avoidance of pain through substance abuse, workaholism, obsessive shopping, compulsive eating, or incessant busyness are unlikely to promote the wisdom and self-compassion necessary for healing.

In the Buddhist tradition, Taking Refuge means to cultivate an unshakable sense of safety, protection, and belonging. Taking Refuge provides a context for our spiritual journey. We take three refuges, which are often called The Three Jewels or The Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

For some years now, I have included Taking Refuge in my daily meditation practice. Each time that I chant the Three Refuges in Pali and English, I feel my connection to a large international community of monks, nuns, and laypeople who throughout history since the time of the Buddha, and continuing today, have similarly taken refuge:

By exploring these Three Refuges of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, we can identify what our current refuges are, and realistically appraise their utility. If we wish to, we can upgrade our refuge to something that is sacred, timeless, and an expression of our Buddha-nature, meaning our capacity for wisdom, compassion, and freedom. As Joseph Goldstein describes in his book One Dharma, "…in their deeper meaning, the refuges always point back to our own actions and mind states. Although there may be many false starts and dead ends as we begin our journey, if our interest is sincere, we soon make a life-changing discovery: what we are seeking is within us."

Throughout our lives we experience a wide range of emotions, moods, and mind states, and many different physical sensations. Some experiences are pleasant and enjoyable, some are painful, and many experiences lie somewhere in between. In our interpersonal relationships we enjoy pleasant and harmonious interactions, we endure difficulties such as anger, confusion, and fear, and at times we experience neutral, boring, or uninteresting encounters. When we look to the larger world – the neighbourhood and community that we live in, our nation, and the world community, we see much beauty, kindness, and compassion, and also a tremendous amount of greed, hatred, delusion, and suffering. Considering our own painful life experiences, or contemplating the world around us, it can be very challenging to stay balanced, to be hopeful, and to feel any sense of confidence that things will get better in the future. We can easily become frightened, lost, and despairing.

By Taking Refuge, we place ourselves in a spacious container within which we are lovingly held, just as we are. However strong and whole we may feel, however broken and vulnerable, and with all our flaws and imperfections, we are held in great love and tenderness. Taking Refuge also reminds us that we are not alone. It affirms that we belong to something reliable and trustworthy that is larger than our small, individual selves.

In the Buddhist tradition, each of the Three Refuges can be interpreted in a variety of ways. By considering these different interpretations, we discover how each refuge resonates for us, what its deeper meaning is, and how it might best serve us in our lives.

The first refuge, "I take refuge in the Buddha," can mean bringing to mind the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who was born in what is now the border region between India and Nepal approximately 2,500 years ago. This Buddha vowed to discover the end of suffering, and by his own efforts achieved enlightenment. He then spent the rest of his life sharing his realisations with others. We can draw inspiration from this person, a human being like ourselves.

Taking Refuge in the Buddha can also mean taking refuge in another inspirational figure. This could be a historical or contemporary person, a deity, or a mythological being. It is someone who embodies boundless wisdom and compassion, in whose light and presence we feel held and loved. This being offers us a strong sense of connection and belonging, and provides strength and safety with which to celebrate our joy and experience our pain.

Taking Refuge in the Buddha can also mean taking refuge in a very specific quality of ourselves–our true nature, which contains our potential for awakening. Often called our Buddha-nature, it is the capacity to use this lifetime to grow in wisdom and compassion, in order to achieve personal happiness and for the benefit of all beings. As Thich Nhat Hanh interprets this refuge for the Western practitioner, "I take refuge in the Buddha, the one who shows me the way in this life."

The second refuge, "I take refuge in the Dharma" also has a literal and historical meaning, as the Dharma refers to the actual teachings of the Buddha. The Dharma includes The Four Noble Truths that illuminate suffering and the end of suffering; The Noble Eightfold Path that describes how to live wisely and create the conditions for happiness and peace; The Four Foundations of Mindfulness that explain how to cultivate the quality of attention that allows us to be present in our lives; and Karma, often called the law of cause and effect, that shows how all actions have consequences, and helps us to understand that our thoughts, speech and

behaviour will either give rise to greater happiness or create further suffering.

To take refuge in the Dharma has other interpretations as well. It can mean to take refuge in the truths that have been revealed by our everyday experiences, the laws of nature, or the principles that govern our individual and communal lives.

To take refuge in the Dharma can also mean to take refuge in skillful means, in our capacity to live in harmony with the truths of human existence. One example of skilful means is practicing the art of the Sacred Pause – that brief moment of non-action when we stop all activity in order to fully inhabit time. In this moment we are still enough to feel the body and the breath, and quiet enough to notice thoughts and emotions. This Pause, practiced repeatedly over time, enables us to interrupt automatic pilot mode. We realise we have options. We learn to replace destructive habitual reactivity with healthier, consciously chosen behaviours. Other examples of skilful means include training in the Five Precepts of ethical conduct to live a life of non-harming, enjoying and protecting nature and the natural world, and practicing loving kindess meditation for ourselves and others. To take refuge in the Dharma means to trust in our ability to engage mindfully with the entirety of our life. When we take refuge in the Dharma, however we interpret it, we embark on the path that leads to the end of suffering. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, “I take refuge in the Dharma, the way of understanding and love.”

The Third Refuge, “I take refuge in the Sangha,” also has a historical or literal meaning. In the days of the Buddha, the Sangha was the community of monks and nuns who dedicated their monastic life to spiritual growth through meditation and study of the Buddha’s teachings. In the most fundamental way, taking refuge in the Sangha means to remind ourselves that we are not alone. It is to recognise that we are in good company. We belong to all those who long to awaken, who seek practices and understandings that lead to peace and happiness for all beings. Our Sangha may be our family, our friends, our meditation group, our religious community, our pets, or even our favourite place in nature. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, “I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness.” He further explains, “When members of a community live in harmony, their Sangha is holy. Don’t think that holiness

is only for the Pope or the Dalai Lama. Holiness is within you and within your Sangha. When a community sits, breathes, walks and eats together in mindfulness, holiness is there… Because the problems facing the world are so great today, …the art of Sangha-building is the most important work we can do."

Like all spiritual practices, Taking Refuge is a continuous process, a gradual learning. As with breathing practice, walking meditation, lovingkindness practice or living in harmony with the precepts, we take refuge over and over again. We make progress, we slip backwards and sideways, we get distracted, we get discouraged, we get elated, and we begin again. As the practice of Taking Refuge becomes established in our lives, its meaning and significance deepen. Tara Brach describes this process in her book *Radical Acceptance*. "As with any spiritual practice, developing a genuine sense of refuge can take time. Over the years, taking refuge nourishes a profound and liberating faith in our belonging. The Buddha taught that our fear is great, but greater still is the truth of our connectedness."

My practice of Taking Refuge has caused me to reflect on the concept of refuge in the context of family life. Ideally, the family is itself a place of refuge for each family member. When my children were very young, it was I, their mother, who was often their most important refuge. This seemed quite natural, and I remember my own childhood when I "took refuge" in the presence and in the recollection of my parents. While this type of refuge is not identical to taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddhism, I believe the underlying concept is similar. Both reflect the human need to seek safety, protection, and belonging, and both confirm the wholesome nature of our desire to know that we are part of something larger than our individual separate selves.

Like most young children, each of my children was at one time especially fond of one particular stuffed animal. This was the one they held close in bed at night, the one that came on all our trips and vacations, the one whose fabric showed the most wear, and the one who was given a special name and assigned the largest number of human characteristics. My children expressed great concern for their special stuffed animal's comfort and well-being. I believe that the relationship of each of my children to

their special stuffed animal, and their ritual of continually re-establishing their connection to it, was a child's practice of Taking Refuge.

And like most children, my son and my daughter reached an age where they began to transition from the overt display of attachment to their parents and their special stuffed animal for safety and comfort. It was not that they stopped turning to me for security, protection, or guidance. And they didn't discard their special stuffed animal either. There was an evolution taking place, a natural process of exploring where reliable refuge was to be found, and what were appropriate ways of establishing that refuge. My own experience of Taking Refuge heightened my curiosity about what my children would discover.

By the time my son Emilio was about 10 years old he had established the habit of going to our meditation room when he was upset. He would sit quietly on the soft carpet, facing his altar upon which he had created a display of photographs, rocks, shells, and other meaningful objects. He told me that this was the place where he could best calm himself when he felt angry, sad, or frightened. If it was evening, he would light a candle and lie down under a small blanket looking at his altar. During this pre-adolescent period he had frequent outbursts of anger towards me, and many displays of aggression toward his younger sister. When we talked about these episodes, it was obvious that Emilio was confused about his own behaviour. He wanted a clearer understanding of what was happening, and better control of himself in these difficult moments.

One particular episode stands out in my mind. He had become very angry when I'd asked him to do something, and he began yelling at me and wildly flailing his arms. He seemed unable to calm himself, and he refused my suggestion that we try to talk about what was happening. He stormed away, initially to his bedroom, but a few minutes later I heard him enter the meditation room. A short while later he emerged, looking composed and happy. Later he shared with me that while sitting in the meditation room he had felt the presence of an *angelito* (little angel, in Spanish) who seemed to know him well and understand him deeply. Emilio said his *angelito* had helped him to calm down, and had allowed him to comprehend what had just happened. Emilio reported that with his *angelito*'s help, he felt good about himself again.

In subsequent months Emilio called upon his *angelito* regularly. His ritual became more elaborate, and he described it to me in great detail. When he felt very upset, he would go the meditation room, light the special candle, sit with his head bowed in front of his altar, and begin to cry. He would then whisper to his *angelito*, "Please come and help me." His *angelito* always came quickly. Emilio said he sensed the presence of his *angelito* as soon as the *angelito* arrived in the room, and he felt a little flutter inside his chest when his *angelito* entered him. He told me it was his free-flowing tears that unlocked his heart, allowing his difficult emotions to soften, and creating space inside for his *angelito* to occupy. Once united in this way, Emilio could feel his *angelito* helping him to transform his anger, fear, or sadness, a little bit at a time. Then his *angelito*'s work was done, and Emilio would feel him exiting his body. The inner space that had been briefly occupied by his *angelito* filled right up again with Emilio's own spirit.

This ritual became a sort of practice, and as we know, continued practice yields greater proficiency. Emilio described how over time he was able to feel the presence of his *angelito* more quickly, more easily, and more powerfully. He told me, "My *angelito* helps me feel better mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, and makes my body feel lighter."

One day Emilio, Claudia and I were talking about Emilio's *angelito*. I was wondering if there were *angelito*s for other children too. Emilio was emphatic about this possibility. He told me, "I'm sure there is an *angelito* for every child in the world. I think there's one for every adult too. But adults are more difficult. Their hearts can be so closed, which makes it hard for an *angelito* to enter them." I thought this was an astute observation, and potentially at least, very good news.

About a year after Emilio's initial experiences with his *angelito*, my children and I had an unusually difficult afternoon. Every activity seemed unpleasant, every interaction strained. In a moment of frustration, and I'm sure with more than a hint of exasperation in my voice, I asked Emilio, "Do you think you could go to the meditation room and call your *angelito*?" He stopped, looked at me with a very serious expression, and replied, "No, I can't call my *angelito*. He's not available today!"

I was surprised. I asked Emilio how he knew that his *angelito* was not available. In the most matter-of-fact tone of voice, Emilio offered a thorough explanation. "My *angelito* is exhausted from how much I've needed him lately. He's also running out of ideas for how to help me improve my behavior. A lot of other kids' *angelito*s feel the same way. So they're at an all-day gathering of *angelito*s. They're with their teacher, the head *angelito*, who taught them everything they know. They're sharing their experiences with each other, and they're getting new ideas for how to best help the children. So there's not much I can do today. I'm sure my *angelito* will be back tomorrow, and he'll be able to help me again."

It took me a while to digest this new information, and comprehend Emilio's expanded theory about his *angelito*. A few days later I related Emilio's story to a good friend who is a social worker. She put Emilio's explanation into a larger context when she half-jokingly replied, "Emilio's theory makes perfect sense. It sounds just like a supervision session for social work students!"

That was one interpretation, and upon further reflection, I considered another. It seemed possible that Emilio's *angelito*, along with his whole community of *angelito*s, was Taking Refuge – seeking the safety, protection, and belonging of each other, in the presence of their teacher. And after taking refuge in this way, Emilio's *angelito* could return to his everyday realm feeling happy and renewed, and better able to serve other beings. It was a variation of the Bodhisattva theme. Of course I'll never be sure about Emilio's *angelito*. But I am certain that Emilio's practice of Taking Refuge continues to serve him well, thus affirming once again the relevance of the Buddha's ancient teachings to my family's life today.

Beth Roth is a nurse practitioner who teaches mindfulness-based stress reduction and vipassana meditation in Connecticut. She has published descriptive and research articles about meditation in various professional journals.