

Taking Refuge - Pema Chodron (from *The Wisdom of No Escape*)

The whole process of meditation is one of creating that good ground, that cradle of loving-kindness where we actually are nurtured. What's being nurtured is our confidence in our own wisdom, our own health, and our own courage, our own good heartedness. We develop some sense that the way we are the kind of personality that we have and the way we express life - is good, and that by being who we are completely and by totally accepting that and having respect for ourselves, we are standing on the ground of warriorship.

I've always thought that the phrase "to take refuge" is very curious because it sounds theistic, dualistic, and dependent "to take refuge" in something. I remember very clearly, at a time of enormous stress in my life, reading *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice became a heroine for me because she fell into this hole and she just free-fell. She didn't grab for the edges, she wasn't terrified, trying to stop her fall; she just fell and she looked at things as she went down. Then, when she landed, she was in a new place. She didn't take refuge in anything. I used to aspire to be like that because I saw myself getting near the hole and just screaming, holding back, not wanting to go anywhere where there was no hand to hold.

In every human life (whether there are puberty rites or not) you are born, and you are born alone. You go through that birth canal alone, and then you pop out alone, and then a whole process begins. And when you die, you die alone. No one goes with you. The journey that you make, no matter what your belief about that journey is, is made alone. The fundamental idea of taking refuge is that between birth and death we are alone. Therefore, taking refuge in the buddha, the dharma, and the sangha does not mean finding consolation in them, as a child might find consolation in Mommy and Daddy. Rather, it's a basic expression of your aspiration to leap out of the nest, whether you feel ready for it or not, to go through your puberty rites and be an adult with no hand to hold. It expresses your realization that the only way to begin the real journey of life is to feel the ground of loving-kindness and respect for yourself and then to leap. In some sense, however, we never get to the point where we feel one hundred percent sure: "I have had my nurturing cradle. It's finished. Now I can leap." We are always continuing to develop maitri and continuing to leap. The other day I was talking about meeting our edge and our desire to grab on to something when we reach our limits. Then we see that there's more loving-kindness, more respect for ourselves, more confidence that needs to be nurtured. We work on that and we just keep leaping.

So for us, taking refuge means that we feel that the way to live is to cut the ties, to cut the umbilical cord and alone start the journey of being fully human, without confirmation from others. Taking refuge is the way that we begin cultivating the openness and the goodheartedness that allow us to be less and less dependent. We might say, "We shouldn't be dependent anymore, we should be open," but that isn't the point. The point is that you begin where you are, you see what a child you are, and you don't criticize that. You begin to explore, with a lot of humor and generosity toward yourself, all the places where you cling, and every time you cling, you realize, "Ah! This is where, through my mindfulness and my tonglen and everything that I do, my whole life is a process of learning how to make friends with myself." On the other hand, this need to cling, this need to hold the hand, this cry for Mom, also shows you that that's the edge of the nest. Stepping through right there-making a leap-becomes the

motivation for cultivating maitri. You realize that if you can step through that doorway you're going forward, you're becoming more of an adult, more of a complete person, more whole.

In other words, the only real obstacle is ignorance. When you say "Mom!" or when you need a hand to hold, if you refuse to look at the whole situation, you aren't able to see it as a teaching, an inspiration to realize that this is the place where you could go further, where you could love yourself more. If you can't say to yourself at that point, "I'm going to look into this, because that's all I need to do to continue this journey of going forward and opening more," then you're committed to the obstacle of ignorance.

Working with obstacles is life's journey. The warrior is always coming up against dragons. Of course the warrior gets scared, particularly before the battle. It's frightening. But with a shaky, tender heart the warrior realizes that he or she is just about to step into the unknown, and then goes forth to meet the dragon. The warrior realizes that the dragon is nothing but unfinished business presenting itself, and that it's fear that really needs to be worked with. The dragon is just a motion picture that appears there, and it appears in many forms: as the lover who jilted us, as the parent who never loved us enough, as someone who abused us. Basically what we work with is our fear and our holding back, which are not necessarily obstacles. The only obstacle is ignorance, this refusal to look at our unfinished business. If every time the warrior goes out and meets the dragon, he or she says, "Hah! It's a dragon again. No way am I going to face this," and just splits, then life becomes a recurring story of getting up in the morning, going out, meeting the dragon, saying, "No way," and splitting. In that case you become more and more timid and more and more afraid and more of a baby. No one's nurturing you, but you're still in that cradle, and you never go through your puberty rites.

So we say we take refuge in the buddha, we take refuge in the dharma, we take refuge in the sangha. In the oryoki meal chant we say, "The buddha's virtues are inconceivable, the dharma's virtues are inconceivable, the sangha's virtues are inconceivable," and "I prostrate to the buddha, I prostrate to the dharma, I prostrate to the sangha, I prostrate respectfully and always to these three.--Well, we aren't talking about finding comfort in the buddha, dharma, and sangha. We aren't talking about prostrating in order to be safe. The buddha, we say traditionally, is the example of what we also can be. The buddha is the awakened one, and we too are the buddha. It's simple. We are the buddha. It's not just a way of speaking.

We are the awakened one, meaning one who continually leaps, one who continually opens, one who continually goes forward.