

After the Retreat: Finding Refuge Within

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Of all the things you could have been doing this Sunday morning, you chose to spend these last minutes of the week in practice. It is one of the best things you could have done—for yourself and for the world.

It is truly wonderful to gather together like this, brothers and sisters in practice, supporting one another in cultivating awareness and kindness. What we are doing is intimate and precious. There is something especially beautiful about a Zoom meditation room: each of us sits in our own space, visible to one another just as we are, and yet we are together. Each person in one room, and at the same time in a shared space. It feels almost like magic.

We gather because practicing together is easier than practicing alone. Each of us supports everyone else. I speak to each of you—and to myself. Every person here strengthens the whole. It is like a vast net, each knot holding the others. To see everyone quietly practicing, simply cultivating awareness, is deeply inspiring. The practice is simple—and sometimes very difficult. It is not easy to pause our busy lives to sit or walk mindfully.

Some of you have just completed a two-week or even a month-long Metta retreat. It is lovely to see you here. And yet, when a retreat ends, we can feel its ending quite sharply. I noticed it this morning. For the past two weeks I have been rising at 3:30 a.m. to prepare for the sessions. Today I woke at 5:00. How wonderful—and yet also strange. I did not come here in the same way. I would not see the same people. And then the next thought came: “Ah, but I will see all of you.”

When something ends—a retreat, a shared journey—we can feel a little lost. We may wonder how we will continue without that structure or companionship. Some of you may have followed the monks walking across the United States, tuning in each day: Where are they now? What are they saying? What are they doing? It was inspiring. And when it ended, perhaps there was a sense of loss. Someone asked, “What will we do when you are gone?” And the simple answer came: “Keep walking.”

That is the essence of it. Even when the retreat ends, even when the monks depart, we continue walking this path together—whether we see one another daily or not. That is precious to remember.

There is a natural desire for company in the practice. We all feel it. And yet the growing edge of practice is learning to find inspiration within ourselves, even when external encouragement is not present. We live in a busy and often distracted world. The people around us may not care about mindfulness, wisdom, compassion, or kindness. So what do we do? Do we become discouraged? Or do we turn inward and ask, “Where can I find inspiration here?”

Learning to find that inspiration within is part of the maturing of practice. It is not always easy. But it is deeply valuable to discover faith and confidence that remain steady whether we are alone or in a group.

In Pali, faith and confidence are known as saddhā. Saddhā is one of the ten Paramis, the perfections that carry us from delusion toward awakening. Ultimately, no one else can walk the path for us. No one can carry us from hatred to Metta, from confusion to wisdom. Others can support and encourage us, but each of us must walk for ourselves.

Trust what brought you here this morning. You could have been doing many other things—perhaps more immediately pleasant. Yet here you are. Trust that impulse. Have confidence in it.

At the beginning of a year especially, it is helpful to reflect on refuge. Confidence needs a sense of safety. When we do not feel secure inwardly, we often seek refuge outside ourselves. In the Buddhist tradition, we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.

But are these merely words? Or do they truly land?

To take refuge in the Buddha is not to worship a distant, superhuman figure. The Buddha was a human being, like us, with the aspiration to awaken. He cultivated wisdom and compassion through persistent effort. His life demonstrates what is possible for a human being.

To take refuge in the Dhamma is to trust the teachings—the truth of the way things are. When we hear them, something in us recognizes their truth. As the Buddha said, “One who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha; one who sees the Buddha sees the Dhamma.” Though we did not live in his time, we encounter him through the teachings. Our resonance with the Dhamma connects us with him.

To take refuge in the Sangha traditionally means the community of the enlightened. More broadly, it includes those who practice sincerely. This gathering is a Sangha. A monastery is a Sangha. Any community committed to awakening is a Sangha.

When you look at your screen and truly let in the presence of others, notice what happens. A softening. A slight lifting at the corners of the mouth. We care about the same things. We are connected by shared values of wisdom and compassion. We are not separate.

The truth is that we are indivisible. Though we may feel isolated at times, we are part of a vast web of beings cultivating goodness. Somewhere in the world, someone is meditating as you sit down to practice. Someone else is struggling through a difficult sitting. Someone else is experiencing peace. We are walking this path together, whether or not we see one another.

The challenge is not to become dependent on external encouragement. The deeper refuge is internal: remembering our interconnectedness and our own goodness. Each of you supports everyone else, simply by practicing. Your generosity of spirit, your kindness, your willingness to show up—these are real gifts.

Appreciation nourishes Metta. Metta supports the practice of Vipassanā. Vipassanā gives rise to wisdom. Wisdom strengthens faith. It is a self-reinforcing cycle of goodness. It is not complicated. It is simply the repeated willingness to turn the heart toward kindness and clarity.

There is a paradox here. The more deeply we understand interdependence, the more independent we become in practice. The less we cling to others for support, the more we genuinely support one another. There is increasing fearlessness, increasing kindness, and a growing willingness simply to be human.

One of the most poignant expressions of this paradox appears in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (Digha-Nikāya, Sutta 16), which recounts the final days of the Buddha. As the Buddha approached death at the age of eighty, his attendant Ānanda was overcome with grief. The text

describes him leaning against a doorpost, weeping: “I am still a learner with much to do, and the Teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me.”

When brought before the Buddha, he was gently admonished and comforted. The Buddha reminded him that all conditioned things are subject to change and separation. Then he said something essential: after his passing, the Dhamma and the discipline would be their teacher.

He concluded with these final words: “Now, monks, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay. Strive on with diligence.”

There is nothing sentimental in these words. They are direct and clear. Everything that arises passes away. Therefore, practice diligently. Make of yourself a lamp. Be a light unto yourself.

This does not mean creating something that is not already there. It means attuning to the light that is already present.

So when you feel bereft—when the retreat ends, when the monks leave, when the teacher is not there—remember these words. You can do this. You can continue. Each moment of awareness, each moment of kindness, is part of the path.

We walk together, whether visible to one another or not. Thank you for holding hands along the way. Thank you for supporting one another—and me. We are all bringing each other along.

At our last gathering around Christmas, I asked what gifts you wished to offer the world. Remember the gifts you have already given. Each of you has offered something of goodness in these past months. That goodness is the foundation. From remembering it comes confidence. From confidence, refuge. From refuge, wisdom.

And perhaps, if that is your aspiration, the path leads all the way to what the Buddha realized. At the very least, it leads to more light, more compassion, and deeper rest in this great interdependence.

We cannot do this without spiritual friendship; the Buddha said that noble friendship is the whole of the holy life. And yet we must each walk on our own feet. That is the great paradox: independently interdependent.

Trust the interdependence, and you will discover a profound independence.

Thank you, truly.

Dīgha Nikāya 16:
The Great Discourse on the Buddha’s Extinguishment
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