

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

WELCOMING *the* UNWELCOME

WHOLEHEARTED LIVING IN A
BROKENHEARTED WORLD

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the UNWELCOME



SHAMBHALA

We can radiate our basic goodness from our whole body, sending it out to more and more beings—across countries, continents, and worlds—until it pervades all space.

—FROM *Welcoming the Unwelcome*

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Beyond the Comfort Zone

The more willing you are to step out of your comfort zone, the more comfortable you feel in your life. Situations that used to arouse fear and nausea become easier to relax in. On the other hand, if you stay in the comfort zone all the time, it shrinks.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I WROTE A LETTER TO MY STUDENTS in which I asked them about where they take refuge: “When things are really tough—like you’re scared, you’re lonely, you’re angry, everything’s falling apart, difficult times—in what do you take refuge?” Usually I don’t get answers to these letters, but this one got a lot of people writing. They found it to be such a helpful question because they had to admit—which didn’t surprise me at all—that in hard times they were taking refuge in Netflix, or in overeating, or in other types of entertainment and distraction.

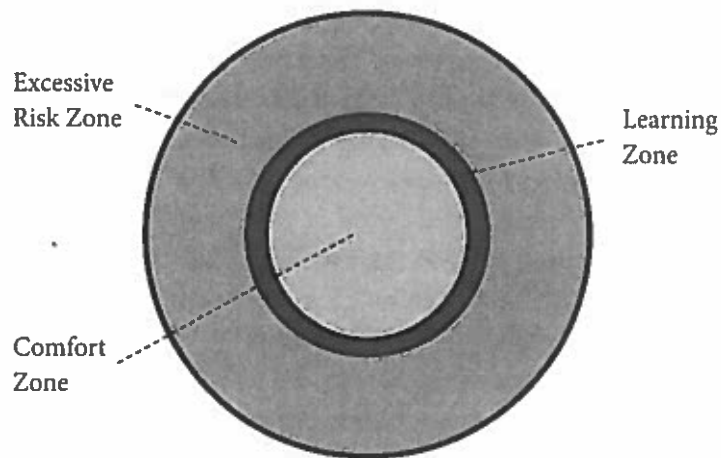
Buddhist practitioners traditionally speak of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. The Buddha is our example, role model, and inspiration. The Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha and other awakened beings like him. The Sangha is the

community of people who are also on the path of awakening. But when I asked my students where they really were going for refuge, many of them were honest enough to admit they weren't looking first to the Three Jewels. Instead, they were going for what was habitual and easy.

Trungpa Rinpoche used to describe most types of refuge as "comfort neurosis." When babies need comfort, they may suck their thumb. When things get difficult for adults, we generally do our own version of thumb-sucking. So, the question to ask yourself is, "What's my thumb?"

I came across a book called *True Refuge* by Tarchin Hearn, a teacher in New Zealand. He talks about how people at his dharma center say a chant every morning in which they take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. But then he asks them to think further about what they really take refuge in when times are tough. Suppose it's streaming TV shows. His advice is to call it what it is. When you're just about to press "play," put your hands together and say, "I take refuge in Netflix." Or if food is your thing, when you're just about to open the refrigerator, put your hands together and say, "I take refuge in the refrigerator," or "I take refuge in this peanut butter sandwich I'm going to eat at two a.m."

To go deeper into this topic, I've found it helpful to use a model describing the process of growth invented by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the 1930s and developed more recently by PassageWorks, an educational group in Boulder, Colorado, where I first heard the phrase "Welcoming the unwelcome." This model can be illustrated with a diagram showing three concentric circles. The innermost circle is the "comfort zone." Around that is the "learning" or "challenge zone." The outermost circle is called the "excessive risk zone."



The comfort zone is what we're most attracted to. It's where we prefer to hang out. Now, I'm not saying there's anything inherently wrong with streaming movies. I'm a big movie lover myself. And everybody needs comfort. But if you spend the rest of your life only trying to be comfortable, watching Netflix every night with your peanut butter sandwich, that can be problematic. There are definitely more harmful ways to get comfortable, but we should ask ourselves: If we always stay in that narrow zone, how are we going to grow?

The learning zone is where we stretch beyond our comfort. Say you have a problem with stinginess. It runs deep within you. Giving things away feels like giving away your ground; it threatens your whole being. You can step into your learning zone by deciding to give away something very small. For instance, I often have a lot of trouble finding a pen that works well for me. When I finally find a good one, the thought of giving it away can even make me feel slightly nauseated. It may trigger deep attachment and security issues. But if I do

give it away, I step into my learning zone. I feel the discomfort and see that I have survived. Then the next day, I can give away something else small—a postage stamp, a smile when I don't feel like smiling, anything that pushes the edge a little bit. The learning zone is provocative, but it's where most of our growth happens.

The outermost circle in this model is called the "excessive risk" zone. This area is usually too challenging to nurture growth. It's like being in the deep end of the swimming pool when you don't even know how to swim. You're just not ready to go there. If you force yourself to be in this outer zone, you'll be too traumatized to learn anything. Some people who push too hard in their dharma practice run away screaming and never meditate again. This kind of backlash can occur if you try to leap from your comfort to the outermost zone. But if you spend as much time as you can hanging out in your learning zone, eventually you'll be ready for some of these greater challenges.

Everyone's three zones are very personal to them. One person's excessive risk zone can be another person's learning zone. For example, I often think about the incredible courage of the Freedom Riders, who rode buses in the early sixties to challenge the segregation laws in the South. They went into situations where a lot of people were happy to insult them—or even kill them—experiences that for most people would be overwhelming. But not everyone was afraid. A few years ago, I met one of the Freedom Riders and I got the impression that for him, riding those buses was actually in his comfort zone. He thrived in that situation, so even risking his life felt comfortable. Maybe for him, having to stay in the office and take phone calls would have felt more challenging.

The interesting thing is that the more willing you are to step out of your comfort zone, the more comfortable you feel in your life. Situations that used to arouse fear and nausea become easier to relax in. On the other hand, if you stay in the comfort zone all the time, it shrinks. It can be that way in a gated community. The gate makes you feel protected. But what happens when your washing machine breaks down and someone has to come in and fix it? The more you try to wall off the danger, the more afraid you become of everyone. And the older you get, the more threatened you feel. Things that didn't bother you when you were thirty or forty can make you very uncomfortable when you're seventy or eighty.

In the context of refuge, I think it's very helpful to keep these three zones in mind and to notice our orientation. Sometimes we just have to say, "I need to be in my comfort zone right now because I'm stressed out and it would help me." If that's the case, honor that. But other times, we may discover that we're kidding ourselves. We can't honestly claim that we're taking refuge in the Three Jewels. We can't honestly say that we're following our intention to use our life to grow. But if we understand how growth happens and are inspired to pursue the path of awakening, we develop an appetite for the things that challenge us. We become increasingly drawn to the places where learning and deepening can happen.

In the fourteenth century, the Tibetan sage Thogme Zangpo wrote *The Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, which is still one of the most quoted and beloved poems in Buddhist literature. Each of its stanzas gives advice on how to live like a bodhisattva, a person whose highest aspiration in life is to wake up for the benefit of all living beings. In

one verse, he poignantly describes why a comfort-oriented lifestyle is unsatisfactory. Happiness “disappears in a moment,” he says, “like a dewdrop on a blade of grass.”* Basing your comfort on things that don’t last is a futile strategy for living. Even when you get something you’ve always wanted, the pleasure you get lasts for such a short time.

The most poignant example is falling in love. That beginning glow part—the honeymoon stage—can last a couple of years. Then you have two people living together, which is when you really start dwelling in the learning zone. This is why relationships can be so powerful for our spiritual growth. If the relationship is to continue, stretching will be inevitable. That’s when you start to deepen.

The idea of happiness disappearing like a dewdrop could sound depressing, but Thogme Zangpo’s intention here is to point us to freedom. Clinging to things that are always changing is a comfort zone tactic. It’s what keeps us in *samsara*, which is a Sanskrit word referring to the vicious cycle we’re all trapped in because we continually resist reality. The only way to free ourselves from *samsara* is to awaken to the open-endedness of how things are. This requires venturing out into the learning zone, where we will encounter fundamental groundlessness. Trungpa Rinpoche equates this state with the wide-open space of our basic goodness. It is the fresh air of our deepest sanity. But because this space doesn’t give us much to hang on to, we usually find it intimidating. This is when, in Trungpa Rinpoche’s poetic description, we tend to “hide ourselves in caves and jungles,” which is

* All quotations of Thogme Zangpo are translations by Ken McLeod that appear in *Reflections on Silver River* (Sonoma, CA: Unfettered Mind Media, 2014).

a way of saying we become very self-involved. We “kindle a great fire of hatred,” “roil the river of lust,” and “wallow in the mud of laziness.” Aggression, passion, and ignorance—what are known as the three poisons—are the result of not connecting with our basic goodness because we fear the groundless state.

Tonglen is one of the most effective practices for changing our attitudes about comfort. Instead of following our habit of avoiding discomfort, we breathe in what we tend to find unpleasant or threatening. But again, we don’t do this to the extent that we enter the excessive risk zone. Instead of jumping into our worst nightmares, we can work with unpleasantness at a lower intensity. We can use something small, such as disappointment—something unpleasant that would normally provoke a reaction, but not something overwhelming. You were planning on making a special meal, but you realize you’re missing one of the main ingredients and it’s too late to get it. You planned a picnic, but then it started raining. Or you were going to stream your favorite program, but your internet connection is down. Just by choosing to do tonglen in these situations, instead of losing heart or acting out, you’re stepping out of your comfort zone. You’re beginning to make friends with your own pain and to develop empathy with the human condition. Even though you’re working with a relatively minor suffering, you’re building the strength and capacity to handle something greater. If you keep doing this, you’ll find that in great adversity, that strength will be available to you.

Then it’s important to balance the in-breath with the out-breath. Matthieu Ricard, the well-known Buddhist monk and author, was once being tested for compassion by being

hooked up to one of those big machines that records all your brain activity. He began by visualizing himself sending rays of healing light to those who are suffering, but the scientists wanted him instead to focus on breathing the suffering in. For that period, he saturated himself. He had just visited an orphanage in Romania where it was so sad to see how the children were being treated. And he'd also recently been in Tibet after an earthquake. So he had a lot of material, which he kept breathing in and breathing in.

From this experience, he said he learned that a person can only take so much. He found that taking on suffering had to be balanced with love and kindness, with the completeness of life. I think that this example illustrates how he approached the excessive risk zone, and realized that if you breathe in the pain, you also have to send out the love. There's a sense of connecting with both beauty and tragedy—with the delightfulness and upliftedness of life, and with the degraded and cruel part of life.

In this very brief time that we have on earth, we have to ask ourselves how we're going to spend our time. Will we keep increasing and strengthening our neurotic habits in our vain quest for some kind of lasting comfort and pleasure? Or will we make it a practice to step out into the learning zone? It's almost terrifying how fast life goes by, especially at my age. Even though I move slowly and like a lot of space, there's this feeling that I'm rushing to catch up. At the end of each day, what did I do? Did I spend the day strengthening my comfort orientation? Did I indulge in "nostalgia for samsara," as Trungpa Rinpoche liked to say, by longing for the time when I thought I just needed a lovely cup of tea to be happy? Or did I step out into groundlessness and truly take refuge in the

Three Jewels? Did I lighten up and loosen up, or did I hunker down in my armor and try to maintain the status quo?

Status quo is not very helpful for spiritual growth, for using this short interval between birth and death. On the other hand, expanding our ability to feel comfortable in our own skin and in the world, so that we can be there as much as possible for other people, is a very worthy way to spend a human life.