

## **Going for Refuge**

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### **Introduction**

Okay, so this year at San Francisco Buddhist Centre we are exploring the theme of Going for Refuge throughout the year. It's a very broad topic, so in some ways you could just continue to do the meditation, Dharma study, we normally do and it would all fit under the umbrella of Going for Refuge in some way. But we are going to try to emphasize this theme along the way because it's a very, very important aspect of the Buddhist teaching and tradition. And the founder of our tradition, Sangharakshita, has especially emphasized the act of Going for Refuge or the teachings on Going for Refuge and they are actually acknowledged by all of the main Buddhist traditions. So if you go to a Tibetan temple and you say something about Going for Refuge they will very much know what you mean, and if you go to a Mahayana temple, like a Zen or Chinese Pure Land place, they will very much know what you mean, and if you show up at a Theravadin place, maybe Thai Forest tradition and talked about Going for Refuge, they would very much know what you meant. Very much like I said when we chant the Refuges and Precepts, it's something that all Buddhists would recognize.

Tonight I'm going to talk a little bit about what it is and I especially wanted to go back to some things that Sangharakshita had to say about it because I think it is one of the areas in which he has contributed a lot to the Buddhist world by lifting up this Teaching and saying, "It's actually quite important." In some ways it's just considered a first basic thing in many other traditions and Sangharakshita said, "Actually it's a teaching we should spend much more time with, and rather than thinking that's its something we do at the beginning, actually to think of it as something that we do continuously if we are interested in deepening a Buddhist practice and that would help us to think of it as something we can deepen."

So I was quite inspired to go back to some of his teachings and I will let you know when they are his words, because I certainly don't want to take credit for them.

### **The Buddha's Pursuit of the Spiritual Life Out of Dissatisfaction**

So this act of Going for Refuge, which I'll say a little about what it is as we go along, but it goes back to the stories of the Buddha's life. So the Buddha is the founder of this tradition and he was a human being that experienced quite a lot of dissatisfaction as a young man although he was raised in a very privileged environment. He had everything he could materially want, he was in a wealthy family, and he left home like many other spiritual seekers were doing at the time. I think if you think about the 60s when at the time there was really an alternative movement we can think about the time of the Buddha as a similar thing going on. [laughter] Actually, traditional culture was in a lot of upheaval and there were a lot of people just hitting the road. It's kind of wild to

imagine this: people were hitting the road just being spiritual seekers, just setting out looking for the truth of things. Existential, you know, big questions. So he joined that kind of movement and was seeking and did eventually study with some very well known teachers of the time and then felt still there was something missing. And through his meditation practice, and building on what he had been taught, broke through that last bit that he felt no one else had been able to help him break through. So that he felt he was, at that point he was Fully Enlightened. [Laughing] I think that word 'fully' emphasizes that last little bit he felt was significant to break through. And then he continued to wander and teach. He did not really have much time in solitude. He was really constantly teaching to all sorts of people.

### **Early Taking of Refuge in the Buddha**

So in stories from his life, in what is now India and Nepal, some 2,500 years ago, after his Enlightenment experience, he was described as having a very particular kind of presence and people kind of noticed him. He maybe didn't look like some of the downtrodden people that were stressed out from their job kind of wandering around in a daze; he had a slightly different quality than that. And the name Buddha that was given to him just means 'Awake'. He just looked like someone who was Awake, alive, present – that was the most striking quality. There was a glow or a kind of energy to him. I think maybe we know some people that are relatively more Awake than others, that kind of have that quality, so we can kind of imagine that, I think. Someone that actually had something intriguing going on there that you might want to know more about. So sometimes along the road he might come across someone else who had hit the road looking for truth or maybe a merchant that was traveling from one town to the next. And they would be struck by his presence and maybe there would be a very short dialogue there that would ensue and in many cases these people would spontaneously say, "I Go for Refuge to you". There are very specific stories of this. Other times rather than passing someone on the road he might actually be sitting under a tree, you know it's pretty hot in India, having some kind of very detailed debate with some of the more philosophical types. And debates are recorded which I can't really understand which hairs they're trying to split exactly. And after a long debate with a skeptic or even a critic, well sometimes they laughed and said, "Well you're full of ..." whatever, and did not Go for Refuge to him [laugh] but sometimes other people did feel that he was able to explain something – those key existential questions that they were seeking. And again, sometimes to the point when they would say you know. "You've answered all my questions, I Go for Refuge to you".

There's one story I like where there are sixteen different Brahmins. So these are very educated religious people of the time, who one by one ask the Buddha all these very deep questions and they are all recorded, these are the conversations that I find hard to follow, and one by one he answers them and they are at the Rock Temple in Magda, so they are sitting under these rocks, these cold rocks, and this dialogue is going on. The way it was described afterwards by someone who was there, they say:

*'The Buddha answered the questions with the exactness of truth just as things are. The Brahmins were pleased to hear the words of this wise man and so filled with pleasure by the clear-sighted vision of this kinsman of the sun they settled down to a life of purity and goodness spent in the shelter of the precious wisdom of the Buddha.'*

So again, this idea of the shelter of his wisdom. This act of Going for Refuge happened with wealthy kings and queens and merchants; it happened with the Dalits who were at the time incredibly badly discriminated against and still are considered untouchables by the Hindu caste system; and also with these people he talked to them about the nature of human condition. And you can imagine for them how having someone actually say to them that by following certain practices and by cultivating themselves that they could become like him, fully Enlightened. You know that must have had a huge impact on people that had been told they were quite literally spiritually garbage. So it's not that hard to imagine in this situation how these people were very drawn to following his tradition. There was also a vicious murderer who went for Refuge to the Buddha but only after he had tried to kill him very seriously. [laughter] So it goes on and on these stories, right?

### **What is Going for Refuge to the Buddha?**

So what is this? We don't really have the phrase Going for Refuge in our time. So what is it that these people are doing? So, in Going for Refuge to the Buddha, these individuals would be meeting something in his person – I think it would take some imagination so what would it be like in these stories, these encounters. What would it be that they would be meeting? And he must have embodied and realized a degree of development that, upon meeting it, they felt they too wanted to be a Buddha basically. You know it's like when someone has a really good haircut and you think, "Hey who's your hairdresser?" [audience laughs] Imagine how much more so, right? They are looking pretty much free from suffering and totally compassionate and aware. So maybe its, "Hey, being fully Awake – maybe I can be fully Awake, maybe I want to be fully Awake". So I think that's the heart of the matter. Part of the experience must have been seeing someone that's fully Awake, and maybe I'm not fully Awake, or I am partially asleep. [laughter] There must have been something comparatively quite striking about his presence and development as a person that many people felt that he had something to teach too, because a lot of these very highly learned practitioners probably were pretty sure of themselves when they met him and of course a lot of them didn't decide to follow him, but those that did must have felt there was something that he could offer. So I think it was something like that that was going on. So meeting the Buddha was something like having a mirror held up and you could see both how far you had to go but you could also see that you could get there. You know there was something about it, people felt like, "Hey I can do this", and so there was both sides: seeing there was more to go and also seeing that this was something that could be real, could really happen.

### **Questioning Convention**

So, I don't think really we are that different from those people 2,500 years ago. I think for many people there is a sense that everything is not quite exactly right. It's a kind of nagging little sense. It's deeper than feeling like, sometimes we experience it like, "Well if only I had this in place and that in place then things would be alright", but I think it is actually deeper than any of those things. Like you could try to get a million things in place and this niggling feeling would never quite be resolved. So there's a sense of questioning and it can start even as very young children. I just heard a very nice story over dinner, someone saying how as a young child they were questioning all sorts of things. Like a lot of people would say, "Your kids have turned out quite well – does

God really exist?" I mean, you're all telling me that God exists, I mean how do we really know that He exists, or She exists or, well, why? Why do we have to do it this way? So I mean the fresh mind not really completely indoctrinated, [laughing] is just challenging convention. Convention, that is how eventually we can be so conditioned by convention, that convention becomes true. So just because people do it that way that is the way it is.

Once you, for example, start just looking at something as basic or present as cross-cultural awareness you quickly become aware of that people have very strong ideas about how something is. Like how you behave at a dinner table, and that is 'absolutely sacrosanct ... that is the way it is', and in another culture that is 'absolutely not the way its going to be' and that is an absolute way it is too, and it goes back hundreds of years, you know.

The wisdom teachings of Buddhism that really question reality have a term called Conventional Reality. It's labeled as such – it is merely a convention. And these are all the ideas that we kind of collectively [agree to]. Like time, for example, is a conventional reality. Like, who said 9 a.m. is 9 a.m.? [laughter] We just put that system on nature and call that 9 a.m. Someone in a different time zone calls it 3 p.m. [laughter] 9 a.m. is someone else's 3 p.m. And when you meditate a minute can seem like an eternity or it can seem like a nanosecond. So, what's time, what is time really? It's a convention; it is useful but also not absolutely solidly real. I think some people experience quite a lot of this kind of doubt about conventions just being conventions, and having to live a certain way. And also along with that is a sort of feeling that maybe a more fulfilled life could be found by not completely living by all these conventions. It doesn't mean that you want to break every rule and rob every bank you see but it may mean that maybe you feel there's a freer or more creative way to live.

Some of us recently saw *The Matrix* as part of Buddhist film night and I think some people regretted seeing it and some people were glad they saw it, but just referring back to that movie if you'll indulge me. [laughter] Who's seen *The Matrix* – show your hands please. [Audience members raise hands] Okay, so enough of you, and so the main character who is (pause), thank you, Neo, has this niggling feeling, right? He's like totally within the system but he's kind of feeling like there might be something other than the Matrix, right? And I think there are a lot of other great subversive films. We need something in our culture that is kind of questioning – I particularly like films by David Lynch and one of my all time favorite subversive films is a film *Happiness*. Has anyone here seen *Happiness* by Todd Solandz? He did *Welcome to the Dollhouse* too. It's very subversive; it's kind of like taking very happy suburban America and the whole veneer, and saying, "What really is going on underneath that veneer?" Some of what really goes on is really quite unsavory – not everything is unsavory but it's their way to try to poke at convention. So in some ways these films could be seen as very Dharmic in that they are trying to get us to question the status quo and our conditioning and to question that whole idea that we should spend our whole lives, living our lives very particularly in being productive members of a somewhat questionable society [laughing].

So, yes, I think Buddhism is counter-cultural in that it causes us to question, or it asks us to question, conventional society, and again its not the point of this or that or anything, it asks us to Wake Up like in the middle of living, to wake up and to be alive.

## Conventional Society and the Eight Worldly Winds

So one way that conventional society is talked about is this endless blowing of the eight worldly winds that characterizes what is called conditioned existence – the existence that is lived very much within convention unquestioningly trying to make it work. These winds are just opposite of each other.

So, on the one hand there's praise and then there's blame, so we like to get praised and don't like it when we get blamed. So inevitably when you get praised be ready because there's going to be blame as well. Good reputation and bad reputation, gain and loss, and pleasure and pain. These are seen as inevitable comings and goings of our lives. Sometimes there is pleasure, and then there is also pain, and sometimes we do gain things and then there's also inevitably loss as well. So this is just what characterizes life. To the degree that we want praise and fame and gain and pleasure we spend a lot of time struggling to try to secure these kinds of securities, things that make us feel okay, and of course we don't want blame or disrespect, we don't want to lose things, we don't want pain, so to some extent we do our utmost to keep these out of our lives, but the winds, they just keep blowing – you can't really control everything in that way. I was actually talking to a friend – she's a mom – and it's funny we were talking about how planned our lives are or not planned. And she was saying it's kind of funny meeting some people that you know who say “By age 25 I will have mastered the violin, by age 32 I will be a surgeon, [laugh] by age 35 I will have a wife, living in a 2 or 3-bedroom house and have a boy, and when I'm forty I will have a girl”. [laughing] Things are planned out for them and that's how they approach life. And we were just laughing saying how much our lives had not been like that at all and certainly there's not no reason not to plan anything, but all the best-laid plans may not turn out the way you think. Like maybe you can't play the violin because you have a strange pinky finger that won't actually hit the strings the right way so your dream eludes you or whatever it is.

So, being too wrapped up in trying to navigate all this is called the world of *samsara*, the world of self-made suffering. So, it's like pain isn't the suffering – that's not self-made suffering – pain is like a condition that might happen. It hurts, but you know pain is natural, it's part of life. Whether its emotional pain, knee pain, or whatever it is. But what is self-made suffering is the inability [to accept] or intolerance to the existence of pain, if you get the difference? Do you get the difference? So if we can't accept pain as being part of experience then that will cause us suffering, because it is, and it will barge in on us as well as pleasure, which we tend to like more. So this is the world of *samsara* and it's a certain way of looking for security that is constantly frustrating. And I think we probably all agreed that we have life experience to some extent in doing this, so we don't have to look very far to reflect on this. So part of life is this experience, then, of dissatisfaction because of this frustration, because we can't get things to just... if only everything would just line up perfectly. How is it in this moment it never totally just does that or people don't totally do what you think they should do?

You know events don't totally do what you think they should do. In my case, Bush got reelected and now that has been all sorts of dissatisfaction for me personally – other people may feel differently. So dissatisfaction is part of our human experience to the extent that we are not yet Enlightened.

## Engaging with and Learning from Dissatisfaction

But I think what we do when we feel dissatisfied is that we try to get rid of it. So when we get dissatisfied, one response is just to try harder to make everything work, so we feel frustrated so we spend more time, I don't know, making plans, trying to make everything fit and actually the option related to Going for Refuge is seeing dissatisfaction as a very beneficial moment, a very beneficial event, and actually to see it as a starting point in the spiritual path. A starting point not just once but over and over again. So I think that's one very important point that I want to make, that dissatisfaction, as the Buddha taught, is a very universal experience because of us being caught up in trying to make life work in a certain way that it will never work, and some of us sort of have this little light bulb that'll go off. We are getting that, you know, again and again and again. We are getting this questioning feeling you know, "Is this working for me – maybe there's another way?"

So questioning can unplug us from the status quo. It's a counter-cultural creative act and to some extent we maybe don't want to have to live so creatively. Sometimes I think we would want to plug into a formula and it would all work, because sometimes it is quite challenging to be ethical, to be Awake, it can feel quite challenging. But, I think for some there really isn't a choice. The rabbit is out of the hat already, there's no going back. That sense of questioning has already happened enough that you can't just try to go stick your nose back down your cubicle and never think about it again. [Audience member: "No cure for the blue pill"] Yeah! [laughing] Thank you.

You know, we can try to suppress or distract ourselves from that feeling of dissatisfaction, but I think for some the experience, that energy of questioning, is too strong. And we become as Chogyam Trungpa said, '*a spiritual refugee*.' That's a great idea, we become a spiritual refugee – the old home is no longer home. The home of convention can no longer really be home but we are still cast adrift, we have not yet found where we are going to end up or even not quite sure what the new home looks like. So in relation to Going for Refuge Chogyam Trungpa said we are all spiritual refugees.

## Dissatisfaction Setting Us on the Path

Also that questioning is seen as something very, very valuable. In the Zen tradition it's said that the questioning actually comes from the Enlightened bit of us that is covered over most of the time but is trying to break through. So it's like our potential. So what is questioning is actually our Buddha Nature; our Enlightened nature is trying to wake us up. So if we go back to *The Matrix*, its kind of like Neo gets these messages right? Like Morpheus or Trinity are trying to contact him, they are trying to tell him stuff like "Follow the white rabbit," [laughing] whispering things in his ear at the club like, You've been wondering about the Matrix haven't you? Yes, well, we come from outside the Matrix, and its true. So this is like this voice. So the recognition of dissatisfaction is simply to be able to simply be mindful of the experience of dissatisfaction or what's called *dukkha* traditionally itself and rather than seeing that experience as something to be gotten rid of is seeing it as something very valuable. The questioning releases energy for the pursuit of a creative way of being, the path towards Enlightenment, because it actually causes us to stop putting 110 percent of energy into trying to make *samsara* work. Also the liberating of the

energy from taking 110 percent into trying to make *samsara* work is called also renunciation. We could say renunciation is the wish to be free, so there's a wish to be free, so some energy is released. If we reflect that we are all in the same situation – that others around us are the same, then that actually gives rise to compassion and *bodhicitta* or the compassionate heart – all considered very precious. It's not that we turn our back on the world when we have this mood of renunciation, this wish to be free, because we really can't, I mean we are reflecting on all the conditions that supported our life until now – we can't just extract ourselves from everything, but we can wake up in the world. I mean that is the difference, so renunciation is about waking up in the world. I think it's mostly about an attitude change – that's what it is.

At this point I don't think we have very many answers, so the spiritual refugee may not have all the answers, but the questionings is well in progress. And we are questioning things like, "Well what will really make us happy?" or your own versions of that. "Well what is really the meaning, what would it be, what would really fulfill me then?" Sangharakshita said :

*'Dissatisfaction, if it is not just disgruntlement but a genuine and creative mood of inner revolt is a positive and powerful impulse. Indeed such a mood is the starting point.'*

I love that phrase, *'a genuine and creative mood of inner revolt.'* [laughing] That's fantastic. [Audience asks "Is that like rebellion revolt?"] [Laughing] Yes, "No, I'm not going to do this anymore!" Yeah, revolt like "I'm not going to do this anymore". They also do talk about revolt, so they are actually related, yeah. He (Sangharakshita) says:

*'You can be dissatisfied perhaps with the quality of relationships, with your work, with your leisure activities and perhaps more often than not you're pretty fed up with yourself as well.'*

[Laughs] So then the process of Going for Refuge then is also meeting something of meaning. So there's questioning. So we've moved away from something but there's also implied the moving towards something. You know, somewhere in this adrift refugee status, what do we meet? Something I hope that is better than the idea that the streets are paved with gold somewhere.

I think I just went through a fairly long period of just being cynical, I think that's what happened. I got into questioning, I didn't think there was anything positive to move towards – I thought it all sucked, I don't know. Some other people might have gone there. Some of you may not have gone to that place. So I actually spent quite a long time being cynical, and I really loved Sartre's "Hell is other people," and I found that a really somehow a reassuring line [laughter] [Audience member: "Which line?"] "Hell is other people" from the play *No Exit*. But so somehow, whether you are either seeking it – you might be seeking it – or it might just drop in your lap. Something of meaning entered your life right?

### **Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha**

And for people who are at the Buddhist centre its something about the Dharma. And those who are drawn to Buddhist practice can find refuge in its ideals or its vision of what's possible, in its teachings, its methods, and its teachers and its community. So these are known as the Three Precious Things or the most precious thing: The Three Jewels. The Buddha or the ideal of human

potential or Enlightenment as well as the historical person, the founder of the tradition who did it, got the tradition going. The Dharma is the teachings and methods that help us to realize that. And the Sangha, which is particularly those who have realized that teaching to some degree, but also to a greater extent all those who are also practicing who can support us.

So why are these a refuge? What is a refuge? Well a refuge is something truly reliable – it feels like a place where you can find your bearings, like in the midst of these worldly winds, something that offers protection and something that we can head towards. All those things are implied in refuge. So it seems that even the Buddha wanted a sense of refuge after his Enlightenment. I was reading the story of his life as recorded in the Pali Canon. Immediately after he was Enlightened, apparently – this might have been a couple of weeks following his enlightenment experience – he had this reflection. He thought to himself:

*'He lives unhappily if he has nothing to venerate and obey. But what monk or Brahmin is there under whom I could live honoring and respecting them.'*

So finally he had gone past what he had picked up from anyone else and I guess that thought made him kind of sad so then he thought:

*'But there is the Dhamma discovered by me, supposing I lived under that, honoring and respecting that.'*

That's really interesting, even for someone that's fully Enlightened wanting to have something that they could have as a compass of some sort and respect. I think that's a really interesting idea. So this is that sense of wanting to go for refuge to something, even a fully Enlightened being. I think in some ways it further demonstrates his Enlightenment because he didn't become some sort of egomaniac. [laughter] He still found himself in a larger system of reality.

So the Dharma he said he can still look to is the natural lawfulness of how things are. That's one of the Jewels, Three Jewels. Laws like, "everything arises and falls on the basis of conditions; the observable law of impermanence, that everything is changing and not solid in the way we think of things as solid conventionally. That everything is interconnected, and so on. So this is the Dharma. And that's what the Buddha taught. So maybe for us, a lot of us, the Dharma might be something easier to relate to than maybe looking for someone like the Buddha to venerate. I think maybe for us the teachings or the path is easier to really give ourselves over to. Certainly for me, that was my first sense of Going for Refuge. I think I was very wary you know of something like a cult or something. I really was actually pretty much into tearing down authority at the time so I probably wouldn't have been a very good student anyway of someone in that way. [laughing] So to me it was the Dharma that was the door.

### **Dissatisfaction Characterizes Samsara, Going for Refuge as an Act**

So the Buddha's teachings said with that experience of dissatisfactoriness, you're not crazy actually – it's a very important feeling, a very important sense and you shouldn't be content with *samsara*, it is characterized by self-made suffering and human beings can through cultivation be free of that dissatisfaction by cutting out the root of it. That dissatisfaction characterizes our



unenlightened lives and this is how to do it. So that's what the Buddha said and we are still getting those teachings. That basic message is still what we are getting. There have been many many subsequently Enlightened teachers and many other subsequently, I think, pretty well versed practitioners and this is what is coming down to us still.

So Going for Refuge is an act. There is not only what we are kind of loosening up from and moving away from and freeing ourselves up, but also what we want to move towards, and we access that through the Dharma teachings to the extent that we Go for Refuge in the sense of the Buddhist tradition. And here are a couple of quotes from Sangharakshita. He said that:

*'Going for Refuge represents your positive emotional reaction, in fact your total reaction and your total response to the spiritual ideal. When that ideal is revealed to your spiritual vision such is its appeal that you cannot but give yourself to it.'*

And he also said:

*'A Buddhist is one who goes to refuge in response to the Buddha and his teaching. A Buddhist is one who commits themselves; they give themselves to the Three Jewels. This was a criterion in the Buddha's day and remains a criterion today.'*

I think the feeling of that spiritual ideal being revealed to your spiritual vision, one of the people that met the Buddha put it like this upon hearing his teachings:

*'Magnificent the Dhamma has been made clear in many ways by the blessed one as though he were righting the overthrown, revealing the hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, holding up a lamp in the dark for those who with eyes to see visible forms. I Go to the Blessed One for Refuge and to the Dhamma and to the Sangha of full-timers. Beginning from today let the Blessed One receive me as his follower who has Gone to him for Refuge for as long as breath lasts.'*

## **Opening to Transformation**

It's a good description someone really having one of those "Aha" moments. So this kind of mood is what's behind when we chant the Refuges and Precepts that we did earlier. And this mood that Sangharakshita said was 'the inner revolt', the whole start of the path, this spark is what we are really trying to keep in mind and keep cultivating. If we want to get fully Enlightened, you know we can feel the benefits of getting a little more and more Awake but really there's an idea that we are still going to keep suffering if we don't get at the root of our investment in trying to make *samsara* work, which is based in a lot of our views and especially the view in ego protection, looking for security in certain ways. So Going for Refuge is something that as people practice can deepen. Sangharakshita taught that. Deepen from a provisional level, where we are generally interested in Buddhism and we may try to observe the ethical precepts, sometimes meditate, study, but we are still trying to fit Buddhism into our conventional life. It's like we want to keep one foot in that conventional life and make it work and just sort of pad around it with Buddhism. And he talks about effective Going for Refuge as a deeper practice in which we are no longer trying to hold onto the conventional life, and only decorate it, if you were, or trying to improve it with Buddhist practice, but that we're actually willing to be changed through the practice, that our life

is transformed. So you know, it is a little more challenging to actually change in those ways. That is a kind of deeper level of practice. And then ultimately we would become the Refuges.

So it's not like we are always venerating something outside of us, ultimately what it's saying is that this is who we can become. We can become Enlightened, its not about worshipping other people who are Enlightened just getting, just caught up in them being Enlightened, its really about our own transformation being inspired by the fact that others have done it. So I'll just leave us with the teaching by Padmasambhava on the matter, who said:

*'The essential meaning of taking refuge is to accept the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as your teacher, path and companions for practicing the Path and then to pledge they are the fruition you will attain.'*

So not only are they the Path, they are actually what you will become.

*'It is called Taking Refuge because of accepting the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as the support, Refuge, and protector or rescuer, for being freed of the great fear of the suffering of obscurations or unenlightened life.'*

So it is called Taking Refuge because of accepting The Three Jewels as a support or a refuge, it's a protection from unenlightened life, and then he goes on to say that *'Going for Refuge is inseparable from practice itself.'* It's really the spirit underlying true practice. That's what makes true practice have the spirit that has effect.

Okay so I think I will leave it there.