"JUKAI - A REFUGE AND A HOME"
a teisho by John Tarrant, Roshi

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious
issues.
Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

JUKAI - A REFUGE AND A HOME
John Tarrant, Roshi

The ceremony of refuge is a sort of koan that I return to every year
when we perform it. Refuge is a Zen initiation. It starts with vows
and involves taking on a robe and a Zen name. This is the closing of a
circle, the completion of a thing begun before. Disasters and joys
first drew us to attend inwards and so to value our lives, then a
chain of many causes led us to our companions in zazen.

Refuge comes when a certain kind of wandering is finished because now
we can make out a path through the Pacific fog. Perhaps the true
wandering begins then, in trust. We have become curious, we listen to
the inner life and act on what we hear and follow it. Like a wedding,
the ceremony closes one time and opens another that we are already
becoming immersed in. And Jukai is a public ceremony - we acknowledge
that we are in a greater whole, composed of uncountable beings, of
stars and plants and rivers and particular people who know us well.
Our vows are taken before this big audience.

From our small point of view, refuge is intended to be helpful and
practical. If we are confused we can check our experience against the
vows and the spirit of the ceremony. What is this? How does it fit? Is
it right? Do I love it? So we can begin to refine our question and our
capacity to ask and explore. And we choose. We understand by this that
we won't always make the best choice because we choose what we don't
know. We choose to walk a path without a precise knowledge of the
destination. It takes courage to choose and this is a good thing,
close to love. And we are willing to bear the shame and guilt of
choosing and erring and changing. When we decide, other possibilities
go dark. There is risk. By choosing, we show that we have learned this
- that sometimes the choosing itself is as important as what is

chosen, that we are on a journey not at a place of ending and it's best if we love the travelling for its own sake.

In their profound sense, the vows lead us down into the timeless centre of the world which is the core of the self. There, we walk alone in the moonlight, not remembering our names. We are not stirring things up and the lake naturally settles, the water grows translucent. This is what the vows allow and encourage. They do this by focussing on the particular and small. They draw a boundary around our acts the way ancient cities and temples were built within circular walls. They don't usually relate to heroic shifts but to the accumulative power of many small choices. If we are in doubt we need to do our one good thing - one thing true or genuinely of service - and the next good thing will appear. The way is like this. Despair tells us that the good is not worth doing because it is so small. Yet it is precisely the small that is vast. It develops our integrity and with it our relation to the Tao and the source of everything sacred.

Finally through the vows, we take on the blood line of the teachings and meet the ancient men and women standing behind us. Our participation in the way has deepened and turned more towards joy because we have become conscious of it, we have said to our inmost selves, "I am walking the way."

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