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**TAKING REFUGE**



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A general understanding of the three principal realisations of the path gives us an excellent foundation for taking refuge in the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha. When we have the determination to be free from difficulties, we'll seek a guide to show us how. When we genuinely cherish all beings, we'll seek someone to show us the most effective way to benefit them. As we recognise that the realisation of emptiness is the key to freeing ourselves and to leading others to liberation, we'll yearn to receive proper instruction so we can meditate on emptiness.

The Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha are the Three Jewels of refuge. The Buddhas are all beings who have attained enlightenment; the Dharma is the realisations and teachings that lead us to liberation; the Sangha, in the strictest sense, refers to all those who have actualised this liberating wisdom by realising emptiness directly.

Taking refuge in the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha is the gateway to enter the path. Taking refuge implies taking responsibility for our own experience. Our happiness and suffering come from our own attitudes and actions. If we don't do anything to alter these, our situation won't change. However, we need to learn how to transform our attitudes and actions; we need others to show us the way to develop our good qualities. Others can't do the work for us, because only we can change our minds. Taking refuge means turning for guidance to the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha with confidence that we can improve and with trust that they will guide us in the proper direction.

In this chapter we'll look at the qualities of the Three Jewels of refuge - the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha - and will address the frequently asked question, "Do Buddhists believe in God?" Then the reasons people take refuge and the meaning of confidence (or faith) will be explored. The ways the Three Jewels can benefit us will be explained by analogy to a doctor, medicine and nurse; and lastly the refuge ceremony will be described.

## **THE THREE JEWELS**

What are the qualities of the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha that make them reliable objects of refuge?

The Buddhas have completed the entire path to enlightenment and thus are able to show us the way. If we want to go to Hawaii, we should follow the instructions of someone who has been there. Otherwise, we could find ourselves in trouble! Since the journey to enlightenment is an even more delicate matter, it's essential that our guides have experienced it.

Shakyamuni Buddha is the particular Buddha who lived 2,500 years ago in India. (Sakya was his clan, Gotama his family name and Siddhartha his personal name.) There are other beings who have attained Buddhahood as well. “The Buddha” generally refers to Shakyamuni Buddha. However we shouldn’t think of him as totally separate from other Buddhas, for they all have the same realisations.

Being omniscient, the Buddhas automatically know the most skillful way to guide each being to enlightenment. There are many stories in the sutras of how the Buddha guided people who were even worse off than we are.

One man, for example, was so stupid he couldn’t even remember the two words his tutor tried to teach him. Disgusted, the tutor threw him out. The man eventually met the Buddha, who gave him the job of sweeping the courtyard of the monks’ assembly hall. The Buddha told him to say, “Remove dirt, remove stains,” while he swept. After some time, the man realised the dirt and stains referred to weren’t ordinary ones: dirt meant the mental obscurations to liberation and stains referred to the obscurations to full enlightenment. In this way, the man gained understanding of the path and eventually became an arhat or liberated being. If the Buddha has the skill to help someone like this, then he’ll definitely be able to guide us!

The Buddhas have infinite, impartial compassion for all beings, so we can be assured of their continual help. Buddhas aren’t like ordinary beings who help their friends and harm their enemies, or who help someone when she’s nice, but not when she’s in a bad mood. Rather, the Buddhas see beyond our superficial differences and weaknesses and have a constant, unbiased wish to help each of us.

A Buddha’s ability to help others isn’t limited by selfishness or ignorance. However, a Buddha can’t make someone act in a certain way. Nor can the Buddhas counteract our karma. They can’t erase the karmic imprints from our mindstreams or prevent them from ripening if all the necessary conditions are present. Buddhas can guide, inspire and teach us, but we’re the only ones who can control our thoughts, words and deeds.

Just as the sun shines everywhere without discrimination or restriction, Buddhas help everyone equally. However, the sun’s rays can’t go into an upside-down pot. If the pot is on its side, a little light can go in. If it’s upturned, then light floods into it.

Similarly, according to our attitudes and actions, we have different levels of receptivity to the enlightening influence of the Buddhas. A Buddha helps others effortlessly and spontaneously, but how much we receive depends on us. If we don’t try to remedy our attachment, anger and closed-mindedness, we prevent ourselves from receiving the inspiration of the

Buddhas. However, the more we follow the path, the more our minds automatically open to receive the Buddhas' inspiration and help.

Because our minds are obscured by disturbing attitudes and karma, we can't communicate directly with a Buddha's omniscient mind. Therefore, out of compassion, the Buddhas manifest in a variety of forms to guide us.

One form is called the enjoyment body. This is the subtle body a Buddha takes to teach the high bodhisattvas in the pure lands. Pure lands are places established by various Buddhas, where advanced practitioners can practise free of hindrances.

However, at the moment, our minds are so concerned with material things that we haven't yet created the causes to be born in pure lands. Therefore, out of compassion, Buddhas manifest in grosser bodies, appearing in our world in order to communicate with us. For example, a Buddha could manifest as our teacher, or as a Dharma friend. A Buddha could even appear as a bridge or an animal, or as a person who criticises us in order to make us deal with our anger. However, the Buddhas don't announce what they're doing and we seldom recognise them.

Referring to the magnificent qualities of Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived 2,500 years ago in India, Buddhists praise his qualities:

You, whose body was formed by a million perfect virtues,  
Whose speech fulfils the hopes of all beings,  
Whose mind perceives all that is to be known,  
To the prince of the Shakyas, we pay homage.

## **THE DHARMA AND SANGHA**

Dharma refers to two things: (1) the realisations of the path, particularly the wisdom directly realising emptiness; and (2) the cessations of all sufferings and their causes brought about by these realisations.

The Dharma is our real protection. Once our minds have become the path and attain the cessations, no external or internal foe can harm us. In a more general sense, Dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha that show us the way to actualise the realisations and cessations.

Sangha are all those who have directly realised emptiness. Thus, they are reliable friends who encourage and accompany us on the path. Strictly speaking, the term "Sangha" refers to anyone with direct realisation of emptiness, be that person ordained or not. Included in the Sangha are arhats, those who have freed themselves from cyclic existence. Bodhisattvas who have directly realised emptiness are also Sangha. These noble bodhisattvas have control over their rebirth process. Due to their great

compassion, they continuously and voluntarily return to our world to guide us.

More commonly, “sangha” refers to the communities of monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to actualising the Dharma, although they may not yet have attained realisations. In the West, some people use “sangha” to refer to the community of lay followers as well. However, this is not the traditional usage of the word.

## **DO BUDDHISTS BELIEVE IN GOD?**

People from Judeo-Christian backgrounds often ask if Buddhists believe in God. This depends on what is meant by the word “God,” for there is a diversity of opinions in the Judeo-Christian world about who or what God is.

If by the word “God” we refer to the principle of love and compassion, then yes, Buddhists accept those principles. Love and compassion are the essential core of the Buddha’s teachings. Many similarities exist between Jesus’ and Buddha’s teachings in this regard.

If we take “God” to refer to one who has infinite love a wisdom and who is free of vengeance and partiality, then Buddhists accept this. Love, wisdom, patience and are qualities of all the Buddhas.

If “God” is used to refer to a creator, then Buddhists have a differing view. From a Buddhist viewpoint, there was no beginning to the continuities of physical matter and consciousness (see the chapter on rebirth). Since many logical difficulties arise if the existence of a creator is posited, Buddhists propose an alternative explanation. Thus, Buddhists don’t accept the ideas of original sin or eternal damnation. Nor is faith alone sufficient to attain peace.

It must be emphasised, however, that Buddhists see the plurality of religious beliefs and practices as beneficial. Since people don’t think in the same way, a diversity of beliefs enables each person to select a system that helps him or her to live a better life. Thus, Buddhists emphasise the importance and necessity of religious tolerance.

## **WHY TAKE REFUGE?**

Two principal attitudes cause us to turn to the Three Jewels for refuge. These attitudes also help to deepen our refuge as time goes on. These are: (1) dread of continuing the way we are, and (2) confidence in the abilities of the Three Jewels to guide us.

Realising how often our disturbing attitudes overwhelm us, we fear they’ll propel us towards unhappiness now and an unfortunate rebirth in the future. Looking even further ahead, we dread being trapped in cyclic existence,

taking one uncontrolled rebirth after another. We know that no matter where we're born, there's no lasting happiness.

Because we don't know how to solve these dilemmas, we must seek advice from those who do. But we must be careful about whose instructions we follow, for if we pick a guide who is limited in compassion, wisdom and skill, we won't be able to improve. Thus, it's essential to examine closely the qualities of possible sources of help. When we have confidence in the abilities of another to guide us, then we'll listen to their instructions and practise what we learn.

## **CONFIDENCE VERSUS BLIND FAITH**

The term "confidence" in Buddhist scriptures is often translated as faith. However, the English word "faith" has connotations of someone who believes in something but doesn't know why. Blind faith of this sort isn't cultivated in Buddhism. "Confidence" expresses the meaning better: we know about the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha and we trust their ability to help us. Three kinds of constructive faith or confidence are developed in Buddhist practice: (1) convinced confidence, (2) aspiring confidence, and (3) admiring or clear confidence.

Convinced confidence arises from understanding. For example, we hear about the disadvantages of the disturbing attitudes and learn techniques to overcome them. We then examine our lives to see if disturbing attitudes cause us problems and if the techniques effectively counteract them. In this way, we'll develop conviction that it's necessary and possible to eliminate the disturbing attitudes. Through reason and our own experience, we'll become convinced that contemplating impermanence will diminish our unreasonable attachments. Because this kind of faith is based on understanding, it's firm and valid.

We can gain convinced confidence that the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha are able to lead us from our confusion. We don't need to believe in the greatness of the Three Jewels just because someone told us to, for that would be like buying a laundry soap simply because the commercial said it was good. Rather, through learning and reflecting on the qualities of the Three Jewels, we'll understand and will be convinced. Such conviction makes us feel close to the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha.

Aspiring confidence is the second kind of confidence. Reading about the benefits of a kind heart and observing the wonderful effects altruistic people have upon the world, we'll aspire to increase our love and compassion. Learning about our Buddha nature and the qualities of the Three Jewels, we'll aspire to become Buddhas. This kind of faith is very invigorating and gives us enthusiasm for the Dharma practice.

Clear or admiring confidence makes our minds joyful. For example, we hear about the qualities of the bodhisattvas and Buddhas - their impartial compassion and penetrating wisdom - and admire them with a happy heart. By focusing on others' good qualities and rejoicing, admiring confidence arises within us.

Confidence in the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha makes our hearts peaceful and gives direction to our lives. As the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*:

The wise take faith and intelligence  
For their security in life;  
These are their finest wealth.  
That other wealth is just commonplace.

In Buddhism, faith or confidence is developed slowly, and it arises through knowledge and understanding. By relying on the guidance of the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha, our understanding of the three principal realisations of the path will grow. Conversely, by deepening our inner understanding and transforming our minds, our confidence in and reliance upon the Three Jewels increase. This occurs because we discern through our own experience that the direction provided by the Three Jewels resolves our unsatisfactory situations. In this way, taking refuge involves taking responsibility for our own experience, as well as relying on the guidance, instruction and inspiration of those who can show us the way to transform our minds.

## **DOCTOR, MEDICINE AND NURSE**

Refuge is likened to the doctor, medicine and nurse a sick person relies upon to be cured. We're like a sick person because we're afflicted with many unsatisfactory situations in this and future lives. Seeking a solution, we consult a qualified doctor, the Buddha. The Buddha diagnoses the cause of our illness; the disturbing attitudes and the confused actions we've done under their influence. Then he prescribes the medicine of the Dharma, the teachings on how to gain the realisations and cessations leading to enlightenment.

We must practise the teachings to attain the result. It isn't sufficient just to hear the Dharma. We have to actively apply it in our daily lives and in our relationships with others. This means we try to be mindful and notice when disturbing attitudes arise. Then, we apply the remedies enabling us to perceive the situation clearly. If sick people have medicine but don't take it, they aren't cured. Similarly, we may have an elaborate shrine at home and a huge library of Dharma books, but if we don't apply patience when we meet a person who annoys us, we've missed the opportunity to practise.

The Sangha are like the nurses who help us take the medicine. Sometimes we forget which pills to take when, so the nurses remind us. If we have difficulty swallowing huge pills, the nurses break them into bits for us. Similarly, those with realisations of the path are the real Sangha who help us practise the Dharma correctly when we get confused. Monks and nuns provide a good example, and any practitioner who is more advanced than we are can help us.

Our Dharma friends are very important, for we're easily influenced by the people we're around. When we're trying to improve ourselves, it's important to be around people who encourage us in this pursuit. If we spend time with people who enjoy gossiping and criticising others, that's what we're likely to do when we're with them. When we're near people who value self-cultivation, their example and encouragement will influence us positively. For that reason the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*:

Wise ones, do not befriend  
The faithless, who are mean  
And slanderous and cause schism.  
Don't take bad people as your companions.

Wise ones, be intimate  
With the faithful who speak gently,  
Are ethical and do much listening.  
Take the best as companions.

How are we to link this advice with our effort to develop impartial love and compassion for everyone? Mentally, we try to look beyond people's superficial qualities and cherish them all equally. However, as we aren't yet Buddhas, we're still easily influenced by others.

Thus, for the benefit of everyone, it's wiser to form friendships with people who live ethically and value self-cultivation. Although mentally we can have equal love and compassion for everyone, physically we should near those who influence us positively. When our own minds become stronger, then we can be around anyone without being influenced by his or her bad habits.

## **THE REFUGE CEREMONY**

Although taking refuge is done in our hearts and doesn't require a ritual, participating in the refuge-taking ceremony allows us to receive the inspiration of the lineage of practitioners that began with the Buddha and continues down to the present. Also, we're formally entrusting ourselves to the guidance of the Three Jewels.

By taking refuge, we're making a firm statement to ourselves and to the holy beings that we'll take a beneficial direction in life. We're determined to stop letting our selfishness and ignorance fool us into chasing after useless

pursuits. Instead, we'll get in touch with our inner wisdom and compassion. Making this decision and taking refuge is a very precious moment in our lives, for we are embarking on the path to enlightenment.

In the Tibetan tradition this verse of taking refuge and generating the altruistic intention is recited in the morning upon awaking and before all meditation sessions:

I go for refuge, until I am enlightened, to the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha. By the positive potential I create by practising generosity and the other far-reaching attitudes (ethics, patience, joyous effort, meditative stabilisation and wisdom), may I attain Buddhahood in order to benefit all beings.

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