

Refuge (2 of 5) Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We continue on the topic of refuge. The most well-known aspect of refuge in Buddhism is the idea of going for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The Pali word for going, *gacchāmi*, literally means “to walk.” “To go” is a perfectly good translation, but I like “walking” because it implies that when we walk, we bring all of ourselves along.

The idea of going for refuge is to bring all of ourselves into the refuge. It is deeply personal and very individual. It involves real commitment and dedication to step forward into something. Going for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is personal (the “I”), and it involves a certain intentionality, commitment, or sense of purpose (the “going”).

I think it is useful to consider that there are two versions of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. There are the external ones and the internal ones. The external ones are what most people think of as the literal meaning of the words “Buddha, Dharma, Sangha.” The internal ones are how we find the reference point for them or how we recognize them in ourselves.

The external Buddha is the historical Buddha. One of the most important functions of the Buddha for practitioners is that he is an exemplar. He is an example of what is possible – that it is possible to become free. It is possible to shed – thoroughly, completely, and fully – all the different forces of agitation, attachment, fear, hostility, and ill will that live within us. The Buddha represents this – he is an exemplar of it.

This is inspiring because unless we have exemplars of what the Dharma is about, then we have no proof that it is possible to become free. I think of this a little like when the first person broke the four-minute mile in the 1950s. Before then, they said it was not humanly possible to run a mile faster than four minutes. But once someone broke that barrier, then many other people followed. Once the Buddha showed that it was possible to become free – to attain what is possible – then many people followed his example and attained the same degree of liberation.

Having the Buddha as an example, being inspired and guided by that – having a sense, “Oh, this is possible” – does not involve blind faith or allegiance to the Buddha. The Buddha becomes a mirror for ourselves to engage in the practice: “This is possible for me as well.”

The external Dharma is his teachings – the truths, the practices, and what flowed out of him as a way of pointing us to our potential. The teachings of the Buddha are a remarkable set of teachings. There is a vast corpus of texts that claim to represent the records of his teachings.

It is a fascinating body of texts. It is a little hard to get into, but it is so multi-dimensional and rich in the care with which it addresses the issues of practice, philosophy, views, and self. These are all things that we want to shine a light on in order to understand and find our own freedom. A lot of what the Buddha has to teach is meant to be practically applicable. In fact, he says in one place that when someone teaches the Dharma, it should be practical.

The external Sangha is the community of witnesses. They have witnessed what the Buddha teaches and have obtained a similar form of liberation as the Buddha. We know that there are these people – the Buddha is not the only example. There are lots of examples down through time.

Even in our time, many, many people have tasted some of the fruit of what the Buddha was pointing to. They are here to guide, support, and teach us in our own idiom and cultural forms. They may adapt the teachings to what is appropriate in different environments, countries, and cultures. These are the external Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

The internal Buddha is when we see in ourselves qualities of inner freedom, compassion, care, or love that the Buddha had. The internal Dharma is recognizing that some of the values and practices that come out of this freedom or lead to this freedom are also found in us.

One of the primary characteristics of the Dharma is non-harming. We recognize in ourselves that there is a force or a reference point for not wanting to harm any living being at all. A reference point is the feeling or sense that there is integrity or wholeness in not killing, not lying, not harming, and not stealing. This is not because it is the ethical thing to do in the sense of abstract ethics or morality, but because something lives in us.

A feeling or a sense of integrity is the Dharma living in us. The internal Dharma is the Dharma of practicing – of saying “Yes” – and bringing mindfulness, showing up, and being settled.

Keep coming back to the qualities of practice that begin feeling like: “This is a valuable and important way of being. This is where home is. To not be here – to be caught in agitation, desires, expectations, frustrations, disappointments, resentments, envy, or wanting to acquire – feels like a loss or a diminishment of my life.” When we end up in these unnecessary, agitated states, we can feel how we come out of harmony or out of kilter. To begin to recognize settled, wholesome, nourishing, and peaceful states within is to recognize the Dharma.

To recognize the inner Sangha is to recognize how we, in our personal way, live in relationship to other people. We live in relationship to others (not necessarily Buddhists), who share some of these values, whose values resonate with us. We also live in relationship to others who guide, support, or encourage us to live by these values – this attention – this unagitated place of peace, wholeness, and liberation the Dharma points to.

We live in relationship to this with others. In that relationship, certain relational motivations and qualities are part of refuge in the Sangha, such as generosity, friendliness, goodwill, compassion, and honesty. These have to do with our intimate relationship with each other. This is to take refuge in the inner Sangha.

Both the external and the internal Sangha are valuable. At different times, people will orient to one more than the other. Ultimately, the idea is to have something within that we recognize: “Oh, that’s what the Buddha is.” Not that we have all the full qualities of a Buddha, but we see: “Oh, this is what the Buddha was talking about. This is what the Dharma is. This is where the Sangha is found, awakened, or connected to.” We are talking about an inner transformation that happens in practice.

At some point, as people practice, there is the recognition of a way of being that is more valuable than almost anything else. For some people, they would say it is the most important thing for them. It is not because other important things have become less important. Rather, the people in our lives and the purposes from which we live our lives remain just as important as they have always been.

But sometimes the Dharma – the practice, the refuges – becomes *the* most important because it is the very thing that feeds into a healthy, beneficial way of relating to all the other important things as well. It is the common denominator or the source from which flows a way of being that brings benefit to what we love, to the people we love, and to what is important for us.

To take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is not a passive thing. It involves understanding and knowing something for oneself. When practice deepens, we learn to appreciate what we are getting to know. We let what we are knowing and recognizing *live* as a big: “Yes, this is important. This is inspiring.”

To take refuge is an orientation: “This is the direction I want to go.” There is intentionality. Refuges are a guide: “Oh, yes, this is the way.” They are an inspiration, something that can be very heartfelt. For some people, it is a very deep emotional connection. It is something intellectual, intentional, and emotional. Going for refuge is very rich.

Finally, I would like to say that in some places in Buddhism – maybe in some of our Buddhist circles – what gets emphasized are the goals of liberation, freedom, and awakening. Certainly, these are important. But for many people, a comparable magnitude of impact and transformation can be represented by refuge. Refuge is a clear change inside, a turning point in life, which is almost as valuable as liberation itself. It is a big: “Yes, this is what I am dedicated to. This is important. This is where my faith is.”

Refuge can be, for some, a very important decision – a turning point of, “This is important.” It is said that when this happens for people, it gives a sense of purpose, meaning, order, and understanding for how we live our lives. It can give us a lot of peace and reassurance that we have found a way to be in this difficult world.

Thank you all very much, and we will continue on this topic tomorrow.