

The Three Refuges

by

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Bodhi Leaves No: 05

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A man first learns about the Buddha's teachings by hearsay. Then he tests what he has heard as far as he can. When he has done this enough to feel convinced that it is reliable, he outwardly expresses his conviction by pronouncing the Three Refuges, the Sara.nattaya or Tissara.na as they are called in Pali. And afterwards, whenever he has the occasion outwardly to reaffirm that inner conviction, he does so by pronouncing them aloud.

The practice dates from the time of the Buddha himself: for at that time after hearing a discourse by the Buddha, a new adherent would express his confidence in this way:

ÑI go to Master Gotama for refuge, and to the Dhamma and to the Sangha. From today let Master Gotama remember me as a follower who has gone for refuge for lifeÑ.

Soon after the Parinibbána, King Madhura Avantiputta, after hearing a discourse by the BuddhaÑs disciple, the venerable Maha Kaccána, he said he would take that Elder as his refuge, but he was told ÑDo not go for refuge to me, Great King, go for refuge to that same Blessed One to whom I go for refugeÑ, and so the king pronounced the refuge in what is nearly its present form: ÑMaster Kaccána, since that Blessed One has finally attained nibbána, we go for refuge to that Blessed One finally attained to nibbána, and to the Dhamma and to the Bhikkhu-Sangha. From today let Master Kaccána remember me as a follower who has gone for refuge for lifeÑ.

The words normally used now are also to be found in the Pali Tipitaka, in the Khuddakapá.tha.

They are:

Buddha.m sara.na.m gacchami
I go for refuge to the Buddha,

Dhamma.m sara.na.m gacchami
I go for refuge to the Dhamma,
Sangha.m sara.na.m gacchami
I go for refuge to the Sangha.

Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, can respectively be translated as: The Awakened (or Enlightened) One, the True Idea (or True Ideal), and the Community. These three Refuges are explained as follows:

The taking of the first Refuge means this: ÑThe Buddha, the Awakened One, is my refuge, my guiding principle, my defence against evil, and my provider of good; it is to Him in this sense that I go, that I resort; it is Him that I serve and honour; that is how I understand and perceive HimÑ.

As to the second, the word dhamma is derived from dháreti: to bear, to remember and to assure. The assurance is given by a path that is reached and by a cessation that is realized; for the Buddha instructs a man to enter upon the path to the cessation of craving, which is the root of suffering; and cessation of that craving prevents him from falling back into any of the states of misery. In other words, in this context the Dhamma is the Noble Eightfold Path, and it is nibbána; and in addition it is the mind-deliverance attained here in this life that is the immediate fruit of the Noble Path, namely, cessation of craving; and it is also the whole body of the Scriptures containing the BuddhaÑs doctrine.

Lastly, the Sangha is so called because it is the community of Right View and Virtue – of Right View that sees things as they actually are, and of Virtue that prevents remorse. In the strict sense the Sangha signifies the four twin types of Noble Person – of a personality ennobled by a purification from greed, hate and delusion. In other words, these types are to be found in each of the four stages of realization, ranging from the type of personality with defilement as yet uneradicated that ends with the attainment of the Noble Path and the type with defilement eradicated that begins with the Noble Fruition consisting in the unassailable mind-deliverance that follows immediately upon the attainment of the Noble Path. The Four Pairs are otherwise known as the Eight Persons.

The taking of the refuge has certain aspects that should be made familiar. They are distinguished as the refuge, the going for refuge, he who goes for refuge, the different kinds of going for refuge, how the refuge is corrupted, and how it is broken.

The refuge – By deriving the word sara.na from sarati (to crush), the sara.na or refuge can be taken as something that combats, that is to say, something that slays and destroys fear and anxiety, suffering and defilement of the mind by craving that severally or together lead to states of misery. It is then a term for the Three Jewels.

The going for refuge – This is the undefiled state of mind in one who has confidence in the Three Jewels and venerates them. It is, in fact, the act of adopting them for oneÑs guiding principle, oneÑs supreme value.

He who goes for refuge – is someone who has that state of mind just described. What is meant is that by reason of that state of mind he decides: ÑThese Three Jewels are my refuge, my guiding principleÑ.

There are two kinds of going for refuge. They are called the supramundane and the mundane (mundane means "belonging to the world with all its heavens" and supramundane means "beyond that world" because it has to do with nibbána as cessation of craving and suffering). The supramundane refuge belongs to those who have seen, who have actually penetrated for themselves, the Four Noble Truths, thereby reaching one the four states of realization and liberation. It is actually perfected by them at the moment of reaching the Path, which eliminates any imperfection in the going for refuge. While its object is nibbána, it comprehends the Three Jewels in their entirety.

The mundane kind is that of the ordinary man who has not yet reached the path. When perfected, it suppresses any imperfections in going for refuge. Its object is the special qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Its purpose is the acquisition of confidence in these three ideas.

There are four ways in which it can be effected.

First it can be taken in the form of self-dedication to the Three Jewels by surrendering oneself to them, when its significance is as follows: "Starting from today I dedicate myself to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Remember me as such".

Second, it can be taken in the form of adopting the Three Jewels as one's guiding principle, when its significance is as follows: "Starting from today I adopt the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha for my guiding principle. Remember me as such".

Third, it can be taken by assuming the position of a pupil, when its significance is as follows: "Starting from today I am a pupil of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Remember me as such".

Or lastly, it can be taken by means of the gesture of prostration, which is the extreme act of veneration of the Three Jewels, and then its significance is as follows: "Starting from today I perform acts of veneration, rising up, reverential salutation and homage only to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Remember me as such".

The refuge is not taken nor broken in certain circumstances. For example, a Sakyan reverences the Buddha as "My relative", the refuge is not taken. And so, too, in the case of someone who reverences the Buddha out of fear, thinking "The monk Gotama is honoured by kings; he must be very powerful and he might do me harm if I do not reverence him", no refuge is taken. But it is taken only by someone who venerates him and regards him as the most to be honoured in the whole world. And similarly a follower (upásaka) who venerates even one who has gone forth into homelessness as a sectarian outside the Buddha's Dispensation, thinking "He is my relative", does not break the refuge already taken in the Three Jewels, much less can it be said that he breaks it by so reverencing one not so gone forth. And also one who bows down to a king out of fear, or who shows respect to a non-Buddhist because he taught him a trade or craft, does not break the refuge already taken either.

As to the benefits: those of the supramundane refuge – the refuge taken by those who are actually liberated by reaching the path – are best described in the words of the Dhammapada:

ÑOne gone for refuge to the Buddha,
The Dhamma, and the Sangha, too,
Correctly sees with understanding,
Four Truths: The Truth of Suffering,
Its Origin, and then its Ceasing,
And the Way leading to its Ceasing,
Here is the refuge that is safe;
Here is the refuge without peer;
And he that to this refuge comes
Is liberated from all painÑ.

On the mundane level – that is to say, for the ordinary man still subject to craving and ignorance and not yet safe from slipping into states of misery – its benefits are that he gets a favourable form of existence on rebirth and is favoured with worldly blessing during this life too.

The supramundane refuge has no corruptions because those who have reached any of the four states of realization beginning with Stream-Entry have right view and no doubt. The mundane refuge, however, can be corrupted by ignorance, by doubts, and by misconceptions about the Three Jewels.

The supramundane refuge cannot be broken for the same reasons for which it cannot be corrupted. But the mundane refuge is broken by dedicating oneself to another teacher, by adopting that teacherÑs doctrine as oneÑs guiding principle and supreme value.

The taking of the refuge is thus the first as well as the last act of a Buddhist.