

# Going for Refuge

Excerpted from “Going for Refuge and Taking the Precepts” by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

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## Preface

The first two steps in the process of becoming a lay disciple of the Buddha are the going for refuge (*sarana gamana*) and the undertaking of the five precepts (*pañca-sila samadana*). By the former step a person makes the commitment to accept the Triple Gem -- the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha -- as the guiding ideals of his life, by the latter he expresses his determination to bring his actions into harmony with these ideals through right conduct. The following two tracts were written for the purpose of giving a clear and concise explanation of these two steps. Though they are intended principally for those who have newly embraced the Buddha's teaching they will probably be found useful as well by long-term traditional Buddhists wanting to understand the meaning of practices with which they are already familiar and also by those who want to know what becoming a Buddhist involves.

In order to keep our treatment compact, and to avoid the intimidating format of a scholastic treatise, references to source material in the tracts themselves have been kept to a minimum. Thus we here indicate the sources upon which our account has drawn. *Going for Refuge* is based primarily upon the standard commentarial passage on the topic, found with only minor variations in the Khuddakapatha Atthakatha (Paramatthajotika), the Dighanikaya Atthakatha (Sumangalavilasini), and the Majjhimanikaya Atthakatha (Papañcasudani). The first has been translated by Ven. Bhikkhu Ñanamoli in *Minor Readings and the Illustrator* (London: Pali Text Society, 1960), the third by Ven. Nyanaponika Thera in his *The Threefold Refuge* (B.P.S., The Wheel No. 76).

The tract *Taking the Precepts* relies principally upon the commentarial explanations of the training rules in the Khuddakapatha Atthakatha, referred to above, and to the discussion of the courses of kamma in the Majjhimanikaya (commentary to No. 9, Sammaditthisutta). The former is available in English in Ven. Ñanamoli's *Minor Readings and Illustrator*, the latter in *Right Understanding*, Discourse and Commentary on the Sammaditthisutta, translated by Bhikkhu Soma (Sri Lanka: Bauddha Sahitya Sabha, 1946). Another useful work on the precepts was *The Five Precepts and the Five Ennoblers* by HRH Vajirañanavarorasa, a late Supreme Patriarch of Thailand (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya Press, 1975). Also consulted was the section on the courses of karma in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa* and its commentary, a Sanskrit work of the Sarvastivada tradition.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Going for Refuge

The Buddha's teaching can be thought of as a kind of building with its own distinct foundation, stories, stairs, and roof. Like any other building the teaching also has a door, and in order to enter it we have to enter through this door. The door of entrance to the teaching of the Buddha is the going for refuge to the Triple Gem -- that is, to the Buddha as the fully enlightened teacher, to the Dhamma as the truth taught by him, and to the Sangha as the community of his noble disciples. From ancient times to the present the going for refuge has functioned as the entranceway to the dispensation of the Buddha, giving admission to the rest of the teaching from its lowermost story to its top. All those who embrace the Buddha's teaching do so by passing through the door of taking refuge, while those already committed regularly reaffirm their conviction by making the same threefold profession:

*Buddham saranam gacchami*

I go for refuge to the Buddha;

*Dhammam saranam gacchami*

I go for refuge to the Dhamma;

*Sangham saranam gacchami*

I go for refuge to the Sangha.

As slight and commonplace as this step might seem, especially in comparison with the lofty achievements lying beyond, its importance should never be underestimated, as it is this act which imparts direction and forward momentum to the entire practice of the Buddhist path. Since the going for refuge plays such a crucial role it is vital

that the act be properly understood both in its own nature and in its implications for future development along the path. To open up the process of going for refuge to the eye of inner understanding, we here present an examination of the process in terms of its most significant aspects. These will be dealt with under the following eight headings: the reasons for taking refuge; the existence of a refuge; the identification of the refuge objects; the act of going for refuge; the function of going for refuge, methods of going for refuge; the corruption and breach of the going for refuge; and the similes for the refuges.

### **I. The Reasons for Taking Refuge**

When it is said that the practice of the Buddha's teaching starts with taking refuge, this immediately raises an important question. The question is: "What need do we have for a refuge?" A refuge is a person, place, or thing giving protection from harm and danger. So when we begin a practice by going for refuge, this implies that the practice is intended to protect us from harm and danger. Our original question as to the need for a refuge can thus be translated into another question: "What is the harm and danger from which we need to be protected?" If we look at our lives in review we may not see ourselves exposed to any imminent personal danger. Our jobs may be steady, our health good, our families well-provided for, our resources adequate, and all this we may think gives us sufficient reason for considering ourselves secure. In such a case the going for refuge becomes entirely superfluous.

To understand the need for a refuge we must learn to see our position as it really is; that is, to see it accurately and against its total background. From the Buddhist perspective the human situation is similar to an iceberg: a small fraction of its mass appears above the surface, the vast substratum remains below, hidden out of view. Owing to the limits of our mental vision our insight fails to penetrate beneath the surface crust, to see our situation in its underlying depths. But there is no need to speak of what we cannot see; even what is immediately visible to us we rarely perceive with accuracy. The Buddha teaches that cognition is subservient to wish. In subtle ways concealed from ourselves our desires condition our perceptions, twisting them to fit into the mould they themselves want to impose. Thus our minds work by way of selection and exclusion. We take note of those things agreeable to our pre-conceptions; we blot out or distort those that threaten to throw them into disarray.

From the standpoint of a deeper, more comprehensive understanding the sense of security we ordinarily enjoy comes to view as a false security sustained by unawareness and the mind's capacity for subterfuge. Our position appears impregnable only because of the limitations and distortions of our outlook. The real way to safety, however, lies through correct insight, not through wishful thinking. To reach beyond fear and danger we must sharpen and widen our vision. We have to pierce through the deceptions that lull us into a comfortable complacency, to take a straight look down into the depths of our existence, without turning away uneasily or running after distractions. When we do so, it becomes increasingly clear that we move across a narrow footpath at the edge of a perilous abyss. In the words of the Buddha we are like a traveler passing through a thick forest bordered by a swamp and precipice; like a man swept away by a stream seeking safety by clutching at reeds; like a sailor crossing a turbulent ocean; or like a man pursued by venomous snakes and murderous enemies. The dangers to which we are exposed may not always be immediately evident to us. Very often they are subtle, camouflaged, difficult to detect. But though we may not see them straightaway the plain fact remains that they are there all the same. If we wish to get free from them we must first make the effort to recognize them for what they are. This, however, calls for courage and determination.

On the basis of the Buddha's teaching the dangers that make the quest for a refuge necessary can be grouped into three general classes: (1) the dangers pertaining to the present life; (2) those pertaining to future lives; and (3) those pertaining to the general course of existence. Each of these in turn involves two aspects: (A) an objective aspect which is a particular feature of the world; and (B) a subjective aspect which is a corresponding feature of our mental constitution. We will now consider each of these in turn.

#### **1. The dangers pertaining to the present life.**

**A. Objective aspect.** The most obvious danger confronting us is the sheer fragility of our physical body and its material supports. From the moment we are born we are subject to disease, accident, and injury. Nature troubles us with disasters such as earthquakes and floods, societal existence with crime, exploitation, repression, and the threat of war. Events on the political, social, and economic fronts rarely pass very long without erupting into crisis. Attempts at reform and revolution always wind up repeating the same old story of stagnation, violence, and consequent

disillusionment. Even in times of relative tranquillity the order of our lives is never quite perfect. Something or other always seems to be getting out of focus. Snags and predicaments follow each other endlessly.

Even though we might be fortunate enough to escape the serious adversities there is one we cannot avoid. This is death. We are bound to die, and with all our wealth, expertise, and power we still stand helpless before our inevitable mortality. Death weighs upon us from the time we are born. Every moment brings us closer to the inescapable. As we are drawn along, feeling secure in the midst of our comforts, we are like a man walking across a frozen lake, believing himself safe while the ice is cracking underfoot.

The dangers hanging over us are made even more problematic by their common feature of uncertainty. We have no knowledge when they will take place. If we knew calamity is going to hit we could at least prepare in advance to resign ourselves stoically. But we do not enjoy even this much edge on the future. Because we lack the benefit of foreknowledge our hopes stand up straight, moment after moment, coupled with a vague presentiment that any second, in a flash, they can suddenly be dashed to pieces. Our health might be stricken down by illness, our business fail, our friends turn against us, our loved ones die -- we do not know. We can have no guarantee that these reversals will not come upon us. Even death is only certain in that we can be sure it will strike. Exactly when it will strike still remains uncertain.

**B. *Subjective aspect.*** The adversities just sketched are objective features built into the world's constitution. On the one side there is calamity, crisis, and predicament, on the other the radical uncertainty pervading them. The subjective aspect of the danger pertaining to the present life consists in our negative response to this twofold liability.

The element of uncertainty tends to provoke in us a persistent disquietude running beneath our surface self-assurance. At a deep interior level we sense the instability of our reliances, their transience and vulnerability to change, and this awareness produces a nagging apprehensiveness which rises at times to a pitch of anxiety. The source of our disquietude we may not always be able to pinpoint, but it remains lurking in the undercurrent of the mind -- an unlocalized fear that our familiar supports will suddenly be stripped away, leaving us without our usual frame of reference.

This anxiety is sufficient disturbance in itself. Yet often our fears are confirmed. The course of events follows a pattern of its own independently of our will, and the two do not necessarily coincide. The world thrown up illness, loss, and death, which strike when the time is ripe. When the course of events clashes with our will the outcome is pain and dissatisfaction. If the conflict is small we become angry, upset, depressed, or annoyed; if it is great we undergo anguish, grief, or despair. In either case a fundamental disharmony emerges from the cleavage between desire and the world, and the result, for us, is suffering.

The suffering that arises is not significant solely in itself. It has a symptomatic value, pointing to some more deeply grounded malady underlying it. This malady lies in our attitude towards the world. We operate out of a mental frame built up of expectations, projections, and demands. We expect reality to conform to our wishes, to submit to our mandates, to confirm our preconceptions, but this it refuses to do. When it refuses we meet pain and disappointment, born from the conflict between expectation and actuality. To escape this suffering one of the two must change, our will or the world. Since we cannot alter the nature of the world to make it harmonize with our will, the only alternative is to change ourselves, by putting away attachment and aversion towards the world. We have to relinquish our clinging, to stop hankering and grasping, to learn to view the fluctuation of events with a detached equanimity free from the swing of elation and dejection.

The mind of equanimity, poised beyond the play of worldly opposites, is the highest safety and security, but to gain this equanimity we stand in need of guidance. The guidance available cannot protect us from objective adversity. It can only safeguard us from the dangers of a negative response -- from anxiety, sorrow, frustration, and despair. This is the only protection possible, and because it grants us this essential protection such guidance can be considered a genuine refuge.

This is the first reason for going for refuge -- the need for protection from negative reactions to the dangers besetting us here and now.

## 2. The dangers pertaining to future lives

**A. Objective aspect.** Our liability to harm and danger does not end with death. From the perspective of the Buddha's teaching the event of death is the prelude to a new birth and thus the potential passageway to still further suffering. The Buddha teaches that all living beings bound by ignorance and craving are subject to rebirth. So long as the basic drive to go on existing stands intact, the individualized current of existence continues on after death, inheriting the impressions and dispositions accumulated in the previous life. There is no soul to transmigrate from one life to the next, but there is an ongoing stream of consciousness which springs up following death in a new form appropriate to its own dominant tendencies.

Rebirth, according to Buddhism, can take place in any of six realms of becoming. The lowest of the six is the hells, regions of severe pain and torment where evil actions receive their due expiation. Then comes the animal kingdom where suffering prevails and brute force is the ruling power. Next is the realm of "hungry ghosts" (*petavisaya*), shadowy beings afflicted with strong desires they can never satisfy. Above them is the human world, with its familiar balance of happiness and suffering, virtue and evil. Then comes the world of the demi-gods (*asuras*), titanic beings obsessed by jealousy and ambition. And at the top stands the heavenly worlds inhabited by the *devas* or gods.

The first three realms of rebirth -- the hells, the animal kingdom, and the realm of ghosts -- together with the asuras, are called the "evil destinations" (*duggati*) or "plane of misery" (*apayabhumi*). They receive these names because of the preponderance of suffering found in them. The human world and the heavenly worlds are called, in contrast, the "happy destinations" (*sugati*) since they contain a preponderance of happiness. Rebirth in the evil destinations is considered especially unfortunate not only because of the intrinsic suffering they involve, but for another reason as well. Rebirth there is calamitous because escape from the evil destinations is extremely difficult. A fortunate rebirth depends on the performance of meritorious actions, but the beings in the evil destinations find little opportunity to acquire merit; thence the suffering in these realms tends to perpetuate itself in a circle very difficult to break. The Buddha says that if a yoke with a single hole was floating at random on the sea, and a blind turtle living in the sea were to surface once every hundred years -- the likelihood of the turtle pushing his neck through the hole in the yoke would be greater than that of a being in the evil destinations regaining human status. For these two reasons -- because of their inherent misery and because of the difficulty of escaping from them -- rebirth in the evil destinations is a grave danger pertaining to the future life, from which we need protection.

**B. Subjective aspect.** Protection from a fall into the plane of misery cannot be obtained from others. It can only be obtained by avoiding the causes leading to an unfortunate rebirth. The cause for rebirth into any specific plane of existence lies in our kamma, that is, our willed actions and volitions. Kamma divides into two classes, the wholesome and the unwholesome. The former are actions motivated by detachment, kindness, and understanding, the latter actions motivated by greed, hatred and delusion. These two classes of kamma generate rebirth into the two general planes of existence: wholesome kamma brings rebirth into the happy destinations, unwholesome kamma brings rebirth into the evil destinations.

We cannot obliterate the evil destinations themselves; they will continue on as long as the world itself endures. To avoid rebirth in these realms we can only keep watch over ourselves, by controlling our actions so that they do not spill over into the unwholesome courses leading to a plunge into the plane of misery. But to avoid generating unwholesome kamma we need help, and that for two principal reasons.

First, we need help because the avenues of action open to us are so varied and numerous that we often do not know which way to turn. Some actions are obviously wholesome or unwholesome, but others are difficult to evaluate, throwing us into perplexity when we run up against them. To choose correctly we require guidance -- the clear indications of one who knows the ethical value of all actions and the pathways leading to the different realms of being.

The second reason we need help is because, even when we can discriminate right from wrong, we are often driven to pursue the wrong against our better judgment. Our actions do not always follow the counsel of our dispassionate decisions. They are often impulsive, driven by irrational urges we cannot master or control. By yielding to these drives we work our own harm even while helplessly watching ourselves do so. We have to gain mastery over our mind, to bring our capacity for action under the control of our sense of higher wisdom. But this is a task which

requires discipline. To learn the right course of discipline we need the instructions of one who understands the subtle workings of the mind and can teach us how to conquer the obsessions which drive us into unhealthy self-destructive patterns of behavior. Because these instructions and the one who gives them help protect us from future harm and suffering, they can be considered a genuine refuge.

This is the second reason for going for refuge -- the need to achieve mastery over our capacity for action so as to avoid falling into the evil destinations in future lives.

### **3. The dangers pertaining to the general course of existence**

**A. Objective aspect.** The perils to which we are exposed are immensely greater than those just discussed. Beyond the evident adversities and misfortunes of the present life and the risk of a fall into the plane of misery, there is a more fundamental and comprehensive danger running through the entire course of worldly existence. This is the intrinsic unsatisfactoriness of *samsara*. *Samsara* is the cycle of becoming, the round of birth, aging and death, which has been revolving through beginningless time. Rebirth does not take place only once, leading to an eternity in the life to come. The life-process repeats itself over and over, the whole pattern spelling itself out again and total with each new turn: each single birth issues in decay and death, each single death gives way to a new birth. Rebirth can be fortunate or miserable, but wherever it occurs no halt is made to the revolution of the wheel. The law of impermanence imposes its decree upon the entire domain of sentient life; whatever arises must eventually cease. Even the heavens provide no outlet; life there also ends when the kamma that brought a heavenly birth is exhausted, to be followed by a re-arising in some other plane, perhaps in the miserable abodes.

Because of this pervasive transience all forms of conditioned existence appear to the eye of wisdom as essentially *dukkha*, unsatisfactory or suffering. None of our supports and reliances is exempt from the necessity to change and pass away. Thence what we resort to for comfort and enjoyment is in reality a concealed form of suffering; what we rely on for security is itself exposed to danger; what we turn to for protection itself needs to be protected. Nothing that we want to hold to can be held onto forever, without perishing: "It is crumbling away, it is crumbling away, therefore it is called 'the world'."

Youth issues in old age, health in sickness, life in death. All union ends in separation, and in the pain that accompanies separation. But to understand the situation in its full depth and gravity we must multiply it by infinity. From time without beginning we have been transmigrating through the round of existence, encountering the same experiences again and again with vertiginous frequency: birth, aging, sickness and death, separation and loss, failure and frustration. Repeatedly we have made the plunge into the plane of misery; times beyond counting we have been animal, ghost, and denizen of hell. Over and over we have experienced suffering, violence, grief, despair. The Buddha declares that the amount of tears and blood we have shed in the course of our *samsaric* wandering is greater than the waters in the ocean; the bones we have left behind could form a heap higher than the Himalaya mountains. We have met this suffering countless times in the past, and as long as the causes of our cycling in *samsara* are not cut off we risk meeting more of the same in the course of our future wandering.

**B. Subjective aspect.** To escape from these dangers there is only one way of release: to turn away from all forms of existence, even the most sublime. But for the turning away to be effective we must cut off the causes that hold us in bondage to the round. The basic causes that sustain our wandering in *samsara* lie within ourselves. We roam from life to life, the Buddha teaches, because we are driven by a profound insatiable urge for the perpetuation of our being. This urge the Buddha calls *bhava-tanha*, the craving for existence. While craving for existence remains operative, even if only latently, death itself is no barrier to the continuation of the life-process. Craving will bridge the vacuum created by death, generating a new form of existence determined by the previously accumulated storage of kamma. Thus craving and existence sustain each other in succession. Craving brings forth a new existence; the new existence gives the ground for craving to resume its search for gratification.

Underlying this vicious nexus which links together craving and repeated existence is a still more primordial factor called "ignorance" (*avijja*). Ignorance is a basic unawareness of the true nature of things, a beginningless state of spiritual unknowing. The unawareness operates in two distinct ways: on one side it obscures correct cognition, on the other it creates a net of cognitive and perceptual distortions. Owing to ignorance we see beauty in things that are really repulsive, permanence in the impermanent, pleasure in the unpleasurable, and selfhood in selfless, transient,

unsubstantial phenomena. These delusions sustain the forward drive of craving. Like a donkey chasing a carrot suspended from a cart, dangling before its face, we rush headlong after the appearances of beauty, permanence, pleasure and selfhood, only to find ourselves still empty-handed, more tightly entangled in the samsaric round.

To be freed from this futile and profitless pattern it is necessary to eradicate the craving that keeps it in motion, not merely temporarily but permanently and completely. To eradicate craving the ignorance which supports it has to be dislodged, for as long as ignorance is allowed to weave its illusions the ground is present for craving to revive. The antidote to ignorance is wisdom (*pañña*). Wisdom is the penetrating knowledge which tears aside the veils of ignorance in order to "see things as they really are." It is not mere conceptual knowledge, but an experience that must be generated in ourselves; it has to be made direct, immediate and personal. To arouse this wisdom we need instruction, help, and guidance -- someone who will teach us what we must understand and see for ourselves, and the methods by which we can arouse the liberating wisdom that will cut the cords binding us to repeated becoming. Since those who give this guidance, and the instructions themselves, provide protection from the perils of transmigration they can be considered a genuine refuge.

This is the third reason for going for refuge -- the need for deliverance from the pervasive unsatisfactoriness of *Samsara*.

## II. The Existence of a Refuge

To realize that the human situation impels the search for a refuge is a necessary condition for taking refuge, but is not in itself a sufficient condition. To go for refuge we must also become convinced that an effective refuge actually exists. But before we can decide on the existence of a refuge we first have to determine for ourselves exactly what a refuge is.

The dictionary defines "refuge" as a shelter or protection from danger and distress, a person or place giving such protection, and an expedient used to obtain such protection. This tallies with the explanation of the Pali word *sarana*, meaning "refuge", which has come down in the Pali commentaries. The commentaries gloss the word *sarana* with another word meaning "to crush" (*himsati*), explaining that "when people have gone for refuge, then by that very going for refuge it crushes, dispels, removes, and stops their fear, anguish, suffering, risk of unhappy rebirth and defilement."<sup>[1]</sup>

These explanations suggest two essential qualifications of a refuge. (1) First, a refuge must be itself beyond danger and distress. A person or thing subject to danger is not secure in itself, and thus cannot give security to others. Only what is beyond fear and danger can be confidently relied upon for protection. (2) Second, the purported refuge must be accessible to us. A state beyond fear and danger that is inaccessible is irrelevant to our concerns and thus cannot function as a refuge. In order for something to serve as a refuge it must be approachable, capable of giving protection from danger.

From this abstract determination of the qualifications of a refuge we can return to the concrete question at hand. Does there exist a refuge able to give protection from the three types of dangers delineated above: from anxiety, frustration, sorrow and distress in the present life; from the risk of an unhappy destination after death; and from continued transmigration in *samsara*? The task of working out an answer to this question has to be approached cautiously. We must recognize at once that an objectively verifiable, publicly demonstrable answer cannot be given. The existence of a refuge, or the specification of a particular refuge, cannot be proven logically in an irrefutable manner binding on all. The most that can be done is to adduce cogent grounds for believing that certain persons or objects possess the qualifications of a refuge. The rest depends upon faith, a confidence born out of trust, at least until that initial assent is transformed into knowledge by means of direct experience. But even then the verification remains inward and personal, a matter of subjective appropriation rather than of logical proof or objective demonstration.

From the Buddhist perspective there are three refuges which together make available complete protection from danger and distress. These three are the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The three are not separate refuges each sufficient in itself; rather they are interrelated members of a single effective refuge which divides into three by

way of a distinction in the characteristics and functions of its members. Why such a distinction is necessary becomes clear if we consider the order in which the three are presented.

The Buddha comes first because he is a person. Since we are persons we naturally look to another person for guidance, inspiration, and direction. When it is ultimate deliverance that is at stake, what we look for in the first place is a person who has himself reached complete freedom from danger and can lead us to the same state of safety. This is the Buddha, the enlightened one, who comes first in the triad for the reason that he is the person who discovers, achieves, and proclaims the state of refuge. In the second place we need that state of refuge itself, the state beyond fear and danger; then we need a path leading to this goal; and also we need a set of instructions guiding us along the path. This is the Dhamma, which as we will see has this threefold denotation. Then, in the third place, we need persons who began like ourselves -- as ordinary people troubled by afflictions -- and by following the way taught by the guide reached the state of safety beyond fear and danger. This is the Sangha, the community of spiritual persons who have entered the path, realized the goal, and can now teach the path to others.

Within the triad each member works in harmony with the other two to make the means of deliverance available and effective. The Buddha serves as the indicator of refuge. He is not a savior who can bestow salvation through the agency of his person. Salvation or deliverance depends upon us, upon our own vigor and dedication in the practice of the teaching. The Buddha is primarily a teacher, an expounder of the path, who points out the way we ourselves must tread with our own energy and intelligence. The Dhamma is the actual refuge. As the goal of the teaching the Dhamma is the state of security free from danger; as the path it is the means for arriving at the goal; and as the verbal teaching it is the body of instructions describing the way to practice the path. But to make effective use of the means at our disposal we need the help of others who are familiar with the path. Those who know the path make up the Sangha, the helpers in finding refuge, the union of spiritual friends who can lead us to our own attainment of the path.

This triadic structure of the three refuges can be understood with the aid of a simple analogy. If we are ill and want to get well we need a doctor to diagnose our illness and prescribe a remedy; we need medicine to cure our illness; and we need attendants to look after our requirements. The doctor and attendants cannot cure us. The most they can do for us is to give us the right medicine and make sure that we take it. The medicine is the actual remedy which restores our health. Similarly, when seeking relief from suffering and distress, we rely on the Buddha as the physician who can find out the cause of our illness and show us the way to get well; we rely on the Dhamma as the medicine which cures our afflictions; and we rely on the Sangha as the attendants who will help us take the medicine. To get well we have to take the medicine. We can't just sit back and expect the doctor to cure us all by himself. In the same way, to find deliverance from suffering, we have to practice the Dhamma, for the Dhamma is the actual refuge which leads to the state of deliverance.

### **III. Identification of the Objects of Refuge**

The fruitfulness of the act of taking refuge is proportional to the depth and precision with which we understand the nature of the refuge-objects. Therefore these objects have to be identified with precision and correctly understood. Each refuge-object has a double layer of signification, one concrete and mundane, the other intangible and supramundane. The two are not entirely distinct, but intermesh in such a way that the former acts as a vehicle for the latter. An examination of each refuge in turn will make clear what their twofold signification is and how they interfuse.

#### **1. The Buddha**

The Buddha as refuge can be considered first. On one level the word "Buddha" refers to a particular figure -- the man Siddhattha Gotama who lived in India in the fifth century B.C. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we take refuge in this person, for he is the teacher of the Dhamma and the historical founder of Buddhism. However, in going to him for refuge, we do not take refuge in him merely in his concrete particularity. We rely upon him as the Buddha, the enlightened one, and this has a significance transcending the limits of what can be given by empirical, historical fact. What enables the Buddha to function as a refuge is his actualization of a supramundane attainment. This attainment is the state of Buddhahood or perfect enlightenment, a state which has been realized by other persons in the past and will be realized again in the future. Those who realize this state are Buddhas. When we take

refuge in the Buddha we rely upon him as a refuge because he embodies this attainment in himself. It is his Buddhahood that makes the Buddha a refuge.

But what is the Buddhahood of the Buddha? In brief the Buddhahood of the Buddha is the sum total of the qualities possessed by that person named Gotama which make him a Buddha. These qualities can be summed up as the abandonment of all defects and the acquisition of all virtues.

The defects abandoned are the defilements (*kilesa*) together with their residual impressions (*vasana*). The defilements are afflictive mental forces which cause inner corruption and disturbance and motivate unwholesome actions. Their principle members are greed, hatred, and delusion; from these all the secondary defilements derive. In the Buddha these defilements have been abandoned totally, completely, and finally. They are abandoned *totally* in that all defilements have been destroyed with none remaining. They are abandoned *completely* in that each one has been destroyed at the root, without residue. And they have been abandoned *finally* in that they can never arise again in the future.

The virtues acquired by the Buddha are very numerous, but two stand out as paramount: great wisdom (*mahapañña*) and great compassion (*maha-karuna*). The great wisdom of the Buddha has two aspects -- extensiveness of range and profundity of view. Through the extensive range of his wisdom the Buddha understands the totality of existent phenomena; through his profundity of view he understands the precise mode of existence of each phenomenon.

The Buddha's wisdom does not abide in passive contemplation but issues in great compassion. Through his great compassion the Buddha comes forth to work for the welfare of others. He takes up the burden of toiling for the good of sentient beings, actively and fearlessly, in order to lead them to deliverance from suffering.

When we go for refuge to the Buddha we resort to him as the supreme embodiment of purity, wisdom and compassion, the peerless teacher who can guide us to safety out of the perilous ocean of *samsara*.

## 2. The Dhamma

The Dhamma too involves a double reference. At the elementary level the word "Dhamma" signifies the teaching of the Buddha -- the conceptually formulated, verbally expressed set of doctrines taught by or deriving from the historical figure Gotama. This teaching, called "the transmission" (*agama*), is contained in the *Tipitaka* or three collections of scripture and in the commentaries and expository works which explain them. The three collections are the Vinayapitaka, the Suttapitaka, and the Abhidhammapitaka. The Vinayapitaka collects together all the monastic rules and regulations detailing the discipline for Buddhist monks and nuns. The Suttapitaka contains the discourses of the Buddha expounding his doctrine and the practice of his path. The Abhidhammapitaka presents an exposition of the sphere of actuality from the standpoint of a precise philosophical understanding which analyzes actuality into its fundamental constituting elements and shows how these elements lock together through a network of conditional relations.

The verbally transmitted Dhamma contained in the scriptures and commentaries serves as the conduit to a deeper level of meaning communicated through its words and expressions. This is the Dhamma of actual achievement (*adbigama*), which comprises the path (*magga*) and the goal (*attha*). The goal is the final end of the teaching, *nibbana*, the complete cessation of suffering, the unconditioned state outside and beyond the round of impermanent phenomena making up *samsara*. This goal is to be reached by a specific path, a course of practice bringing its attainment, namely the noble eightfold path -- right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The path divides into two stages, a mundane path and a supramundane path. The mundane path is the course of application developed when its factors are cultivated in daily life and in periods of intensified practice. The supramundane path is a state of wisdom-consciousness that arises when all the requisite conditions for realization are fully matured, usually at the peak of intensified practice. This path actually represents a state in the experience of enlightenment, having the dual function of realizing *nibbana* and eradicating defilements.

The supramundane path comes only in momentary breakthroughs which, when they occur, effect radical transformations in the structure of the mind. These breakthroughs are four in number, called the four paths. The



four divide according to their ability to cut the successively subtler "fetters" causing to *samsara*. The first path, the initial breakthrough to enlightenment, is the path of stream entry (*sotapattimagga*), which eradicates the fetters of ego-affirming views, doubt, and clinging to rites and wrong observances. The second, called the path of the once-returner (*sakadagamimagga*), does not cut off any fetters but weakens their underlying roots. The third, the path of the non-returner (*anagamimagga*), eliminates the fetters of sensual desire and ill-will. And the fourth, the path of arahatship (*arahattamagga*), eradicates the five remaining fetters -- desire for existence in the spheres of fine material and immaterial being, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. Each path-moment is followed immediately by several moments of another supramundane experience called fruition (*phala*), which comes in four stages corresponding to the four paths. Fruition marks the enjoyment of the freedom from defilement effected by the preceding path-moment. It is the state of release or experiential freedom which comes when the fetters are broken.

Earlier it was said that the Dhamma is the actual refuge. In the light of the distinctions just drawn this statement can now be made more precise. The verbal teaching is essentially a map, a body of instructions and guidelines. Since we have to rely on these instructions to realize the goal, the teaching counts as an actual refuge, but it is so in a derivative way. Thus we can call it an actual but indirect refuge. The mundane path is direct, since it must be practiced, but because it serves principally as preparation for the supramundane path its function is purely provisional; thus it is an actual and direct but provisional refuge. The supramundane path apprehends nibbana, and once attained leads irreversibly to the goal; thence it may be called an actual, direct, and superior refuge. However, even the supramundane path is a conditioned phenomenon sharing the characteristic of impermanence common to all conditioned phenomena. Moreover, as a means to an end, it possesses instrumental value only, not intrinsic value. Thus its status as a refuge is not ultimate. Ultimate status as a refuge belongs exclusively to the goal, to the unconditioned state of nibbana, which therefore among all three refuges can alone be considered the refuge which is actual, direct, superior, and ultimate. It is the final resort, the island of peace, the sanctuary offering permanent shelter from the fears and dangers of samsaric becoming.

### 3. The Sangha

At the conventional or mundane level the Sangha signifies the Bhikkhu-Sangha, the order of monks. The Sangha here is an institutional body governed by formally promulgated regulations. Its doors of membership are open to any candidate meeting the required standards. All that is needed to enter the Sangha is to undergo ordination according to the procedure laid down in the Vinaya, the system of monastic discipline.

Despite its formal character, the order of monks fulfills an indispensable role in the preservation and perpetuation of the Buddha's dispensation. In an unbroken lineage extending back over twenty-five hundred years, the monastic order has served as the custodian of the Dhamma. The mode of life it makes possible permits it to exercise this function. The Buddha's dispensation, as we suggested, possesses a twofold character; it is a path of practice leading to liberation from suffering, and also a distinctive set of doctrines embedded in scriptures expounding the details of this path. The Sangha bears the responsibility for maintaining both aspects of the dispensation. Its members assume the burden of continuing the tradition of practice with the aim of showing that the goal can be realized and deliverance attained. They also take up the task of preserving the doctrines, seeing to it that the scriptures are taught and transmitted to posterity free from distortion and misinterpretation.

For these reasons the institutional Sangha is extremely vital to the perpetuation of the Buddha's teaching. However, the order of monks is not itself the Sangha which takes the position of the third refuge. The Sangha which serves as refuge is not an institutional body but an unchartered spiritual community comprising all those who have achieved penetration of the innermost meaning of the Buddha's teaching. The Sangha-refuge is the ariyan Sangha, the noble community, made up exclusively of ariyans, person of superior spiritual stature. Its membership is not bound together by formal ecclesiastical ties but by the invisible bond of a common inward realization. The one requirement for admission is the attainment of this realization, which in itself is sufficient to grant entrance.

Though the way of life laid down for the monastic order, with its emphasis on renunciation and meditation, is most conducive to attaining the state of an ariyan, the monastic Sangha and the ariyan Sangha are not coextensive. Their makeup can differ, and that for two reasons: first, because many monks -- the vast majority in fact -- are still worldlings (*puthujjana*) and thence cannot function as a refuge; and second, because the ariyan Sangha can also include laymen. Membership in the ariyan Sangha depends solely on spiritual achievement and not on formal

ordination. Anyone -- layman or monk -- who penetrates the Buddha's teaching by direct vision gains admission through that very attainment itself.<sup>[2]</sup>

The membership of the ariyan Sangha comprises eight types of persons, which unite into four pairs. The first pair consists of the person standing on the path of stream-entry and the stream-enterer, who has entered the way to deliverance and will attain the goal in a maximum of seven lives; the second pair of the person standing on the path of the once-returner and the once-returner, who will return to the human world only one more time before reaching the goal; the third pair of the person standing on the path of the non-returner and the non-returner, who will not come back to the human world again but will take rebirth in a pure heavenly world where he will reach the final goal; and the fourth pair of the person standing on the path of arahatship and the arahat, who has expelled all defilements and cut off the ten fetters causing bondage to *samsara*.

The eight persons can be divided in another way into two general classes. One consists of those who, by penetrating the teaching, have entered the supramundane path to liberation but still must practice further to arrive at the goal. These include the first seven types of ariyan persons, who are collectively called "trainees" or "learners" (*sekha*) because they are still in the process of training. The second class comprises the arahats, who have completed the practice and fully actualized the goal. These are called "beyond training" (*asekha*) because they have no further training left to undertake.

Both the learners and the arahats have directly understood the essential import of the Buddha's teaching for themselves. The teaching has taken root in them, and to the extent that any work remains to be done they no longer depend on others to bring it to its consummation. By virtue of this inner mastery these individuals possess the qualifications needed to guide others towards the goal. Hence the ariyan Sangha, the community of noble persons, can function as a refuge.

#### **IV. The Act of Going for Refuge**

To enter the door to the teaching of the Buddha it is not enough merely to know the reference of the refuge-objects. The door of entrance to the teaching is the going for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. To understand what the refuge-objects mean is one thing, to go to them for refuge is another, and it is the going for refuge alone that constitutes the actual entrance to the dispensation.

But what is the going for refuge? At first glance it would seem to be the formal commitment to the Triple Gem expressed by reciting the formula of refuge, for it is this act which marks the embracing of the Buddha's teaching. Such an understanding, however, would be superficial. The treatises make it clear that the true going for refuge involves much more than the reciting of a pre-established formula. They indicate that beneath the verbal profession of taking refuge there runs concurrently another process that is essentially inward and spiritual. This other process is the mental commitment to the taking of refuge.

The going for refuge, as defined by the commentaries, is in reality an occasion of consciousness: "It is an act of consciousness devoid of defilements, (motivated) by confidence in and reverence for (the Triple Gem), taking (the Triple Gem) as the supreme resort."<sup>[3]</sup> That the act is said to be "devoid of defilements" stresses the need for sincerity of aim. Refuge is not pure if undertaken with defiled motivation -- out of desire for recognition, pride, or fear of blame. The only valid motivation for taking refuge is confidence and reverence directed towards the Triple Gem. The act of consciousness motivated by confidence and reverence occurs "taking the Triple Gem as the supreme resort," (*parayana*). That the Triple Gem is taken as the "supreme resort" means that it is perceived as the sole source of deliverance. By turning to the threefold refuge as supreme resort, the going for refuge becomes an act of opening and self-surrender. We drop our defenses before the objects of refuge and open ourselves to their capacity to help. We surrender our ego, our claim to self-sufficiency, and reach out to the refuge-objects in the trust that they can guide us to release from our confusion, turmoil, and pain.

Like any other act of consciousness the going for refuge is a complex process made up of many factors. These factors can be classified by way of three basic faculties: intelligence, volition, and emotion. To bring the act of going for refuge into clearer focus we will take the mental process behind the outer act, divide it by way of these faculties,

and see how each contributes to its total character. That is, we will examine the going for refuge as an act of intelligence, will, and emotion.

Before doing this, however, one word of caution is necessary. Any particular phenomenon represents far more than is immediately visible even to a deeply probing inspection. A seed, for example, has a much greater significance than the grain of organic matter that meets the eye. On one side it collects into itself the entire history of the trees that went into its making; on the other it points beyond to the many potential trees locked up in its hull. Similarly the act of consciousness involved in taking refuge represents the crystallization of a vast network of forces extending backwards, forwards, and outwards in all directions. It simultaneously stands for the many lines of experience converging upon its formation out of the dim recesses of the past, and the potential for future lines of development barely adumbrated in its own immediate content. This applies equally to the act of taking refuge as a whole and to each of its constituting factors: both the whole and its parts must be seen as momentary concretions with a vast history, past and future, hidden from our sight. Therefore what emerges out of an analytical scrutiny of the refuge-act should be understood to be only a fraction of what the act implies by way of background and future evolution.

Turning to the act of taking refuge itself, we find in the first place that it is an act of understanding. Though inspired by reverence and trust, it must be guided by vision, by an intelligent perceptivity which protects it from the dangers of blind emotion. The faculty of intelligence steers the act of refuge towards the actualization of its inner urge for liberation. It distinguishes the goal from the distractions, and prevents the aspirant from deviating from his quest for the goal to go in pursuit of futile ends. For this reason we find that in the formulation of the noble eightfold path right view is given first. To follow the path we must see where it leads from, where it goes, and the steps that must be taken to get from the one point to the other.

In its initial form the faculty of intelligence involved in taking refuge comprehends the basic unsatisfactoriness of existence which makes reliance on a refuge necessary. Suffering has to be seen as a pervasive feature infecting our existence at its root, which cannot be eliminated by superficial palliatives but only by a throughgoing treatment. We must come to see further that the causes of our dissatisfaction and unrest lie within ourselves, in our clinging, craving, and delusions, and that to get free from suffering we must follow a course which extinguishes its causes.

The mind also has to grasp the reliability of the refuge-objects. Absolute certainty as to the emancipating power of the teaching can only come later, with the attainment of the path, but already at the outset an intelligent conviction must be established that the refuge-objects are capable of providing help. To this end the Buddha has to be examined by investigating the records of his life and character; his teaching searched for contradictions and irrationalities; and the Sangha approached to see if it is worthy of trust and confidence. Only if they pass these tests can they be considered dependable supports for the achievement of our ultimate aim.

Intelligence comes into play not only with the initial decision to take refuge, but throughout the entire course of practice. The growth of understanding brings a deeper commitment to the refuges, and the deepening of the inner refuge facilitates the growth of understanding. The climax of this process of reciprocal development is the attainment of the supramundane path. When the path arises, penetrating the truth of the teaching, the refuge becomes irreversible, for it has been verified by direct experience.

The going for refuge is also an act of volition. It results from a voluntary decision free from coercion or outside pressures. It is a choice that must be *aparappaccaya*, "not compelled by others." This freely chosen act brings about a far-reaching restructuring of volition. Whereas previously the will might have been scattered among a multitude of interests and concerns, when the taking of refuge gains ascendancy the will becomes ordered in a unified way determined by the new commitment. The spiritual ideal comes to the center of the inner life, expelling the less crucial concerns and relegating the others to a position subordinate to its own direction. In this way the act of refuge brings to the mind a harmonization of values, which now ascend to and converge upon the fundamental aspiration for deliverance as the guiding purpose of all activity.

The act of taking refuge also effects a deep-seated reversal in the movement of the will. Before refuge is taken the will tends to move in an outward direction, pushing for the extension of its bounds of self-identity. It seeks to gain increasing territory for the self, to widen the range of ownership, control and domination. When refuge is sought in

the teaching of the Buddha the ground is laid for this pattern to be undermined and turned around. The Buddha teaches that our drive for self-expansion is the root of our bondage. It is a mode of craving, of grasping and clinging, leading headlong into frustration and despair. When this is understood the danger in egocentric seeking comes to the surface and the will turns in the opposite direction, moving towards renunciation and detachment. The objects of clinging are gradually relinquished, the sense of "I" and "mine" withdrawn from the objects to which it has attached itself. Ultimate deliverance is now seen to lie, not in the extension of the ego to the limits of infinity, but in the utter abolition of the ego-delusion at its base.

The third aspect of going for refuge is the emotional. While going for refuge requires more than emotional fervor, it also cannot come to full fruition without the inspiring upward pull of the emotions. The emotions entering into the refuge act are principally three: confidence, reverence, and love. Confidence (*pasada*) is a feeling of serene trust in the protective power of the refuge-objects, based on a clear understanding of their qualities and functions. Confidence gives rise to reverence (*gaurava*), a sense of awe, esteem, and veneration born from a growing awareness of the sublime and lofty nature of the Triple Gem. Yet this reverence does not remain cool, formal, and aloof. As we experience the transforming effect of the Dhamma on our life, reverence awakens (*pema*). Love adds the element of warmth and vitality to the spiritual life. It kindles the flame of devotion, coming to expression in acts of dedicated service by which we seek to extend the protective and liberative capacity of the threefold refuge to others.

## V. The Function of Going for Refuge

The going for refuge is the door of entrance to the teaching of the Buddha. It functions in the context of the teaching as the entranceway to all the practices of the Buddhist discipline. To engage in the practices in their proper setting we have to enter them through the door of taking refuge, just as to go into a restaurant and have a meal we have to enter through the door. If we merely stand outside the restaurant and read the menu on the window we may come away with a thorough knowledge of the menu but not with a satisfied appetite. Similarly, by merely studying and admiring the Buddha's teaching we do not enter upon its practice. Even if we abstract certain elements of practice for our personal use without first taking refuge, our efforts cannot count as the actual practice of the Buddha's teaching. They are only practices derived from the teaching, or practices in harmony with the teaching, but so long as they are not conjoined with a mental attitude of taking refuge in the Triple Gem they have not yet become the practice of the Buddha's teaching.

To bring out the significance of going for refuge we can consider a contrast between two individuals. One meticulously observes the moral principles embedded in the five precepts (*pañcasila*). He does not formally undertake the precepts in the context of Buddhist ethical practice but spontaneously conforms to the standards of conduct they enjoin through his own innate sense of right and wrong; that is, he follows them as part of natural morality. We might further suppose that he practices meditation several hours a day, but does this not in the framework of the Dhamma but simply as a means to enjoy peace of mind here and now. We can further suppose that this person has met the Buddha's teaching, appreciates it and respects it, but does not feel sufficiently convinced to acknowledge its truth or find himself impelled to go for refuge.

On the other hand let us suppose there is another person whose circumstances prevent perfect observance of the precepts and who cannot find leisure for practicing meditation. But though he lacks these achievements, from the depths of his heart, with full sincerity, understanding, and dedication of purpose he has gone for refuge to the Triple Gem. Comparing these two persons we can ask whose mental attitude is of greater long-term spiritual value - that of the person who without going for refuge observes the moral principles embedded in the five precepts and practices meditation several hours a day, or that of the other person who cannot accomplish these practices but has sincerely gone for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. No clear pronouncement on this case is found in the suttas and commentaries, but enough indication is given to support an intelligent guess. On this basis we would say that the mental attitude of the second person, who has gone for refuge with clear understanding and sincerity of heart, is of greater long-term spiritual value. The reason for such a judgment is as follows.

As a result of his moral and meditative practices the first individual will enjoy peace and happiness in his present life, and will accumulate merit which will lead to a favorable rebirth in the future. However, when that merit ripens, it will become exhausted and expend its force without leading to further spiritual development. When the fortunate rebirth resulting from the merit comes to an end, it will be followed by rebirth in some other plane, as determined

by stored-up kamma, and the person will continue to revolve in the cycle of existence. His virtuous undertakings do not contribute directly to the transcending of the samsaric round.

On the other hand the person who has sincerely gone for refuge to the Triple Gem, without being capable of higher practices, still lays the foundation for spiritual progress in future lives merely by his heartfelt act of seeking refuge. Of course he has to reap the results of his kamma and cannot escape them by taking refuge, but all the same the mental act of going for refuge, if it is truly the focus of his inner life, becomes a powerful positive kamma in itself. It will function as a link tending to bring him into connection with the Buddha's dispensation in future lives, thereby aiding his chances for further progress. And if he fails to reach deliverance within the dispensation of the present Buddha it will very likely lead him to the dispensations of future Buddhas, until he eventually reaches the goal. Since this all comes about through the germination of that mental act of going for refuge, we can understand that the taking of refuge is very essential.

The importance of going for refuge can be further gauged through a textual simile comparing faith to a seed. Since faith is the motivating force behind the act of refuge, the analogy may be transferred to the refuge-act itself. We explained earlier that the mental act of going for refuge calls into play three cardinal faculties -- understanding, will, and emotion. These three faculties are already present even in that very simple, basic act of seeking refuge, contained there as seeds with the potential to develop into the flowers and fruits of the Buddhist spiritual life. The understanding that leads a man to go for refuge -- the understanding of the danger and fearfulness of samsaric existence -- this is the seed for the faculty of wisdom which eventually issues in direct penetration of the four noble truths. The element of volition is the seed for the will to renunciation -- the driving force that impels a man to renounce his craving, enjoyments, and egoistic clingings in order to go forth in search of liberation. It functions as well as the seed for the practice of right effort, the sixth factor of the noble eightfold path, by which we strive to abandon unwholesome impure mental states and to cultivate the wholesome and pure states. Devotion and reverence for the Triple Gem -- these become the seed for the germination of "unwavering confidence" (*aveccappasada*), the assurance of a noble disciple whose confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha can never be shaken by any outside force. In this way the simple act of going for refuge serves as the threefold seed for the development of the higher faculties of right understanding, right effort, and unshakable confidence. From this example we can again understand the taking of refuge to be very essential.

## **VI. The Methods of Going for Refuge**

The methods of going for refuge divide into two general kinds: the superior or supramundane going for refuge and the common or mundane going for refuge. The supramundane going for refuge is the going for refuge of a superior person, that is, of an ariyan disciple who has reached the supramundane path leading irreversibly to nibbana. When such a person goes for refuge to the Triple Gem, his going for refuge is a superior refuge, unshakable and invincible. The ariyan person can never again, through the remainder of his future births (which amount to a maximum of only seven), go for refuge to any other teacher than the Buddha, to any other doctrine than the Dhamma, or to any other spiritual community than the Sangha. The Buddha says that the confidence such a disciple places in the Triple Gem cannot be shaken by anyone in the world, that it is firmly grounded and immovable.

The common way of going for refuges is the way in which ordinary persons, the vast majority below the ariyan plane, go for refuge to the Triple Gem. This can be subdivided into two types: the initial going for refuge and the recurrent going for refuge.

The initial going for refuge is the act of formally going for refuge for the first time. When a person has studied the basic principles of the Buddha's teaching, undertaken some of its practices, and become convinced of its value for his life, he may want to commit himself to the teaching by making an outer profession of his conviction. Strictly speaking, as soon as there arises in his mind an act of consciousness which takes the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as his guiding ideal, that person has gone for refuge to the Triple Gem and become a Buddhist lay disciple (*upasaka*). However, within the Buddhist tradition it is generally considered to be insufficient under normal circumstances to rest content with merely going for refuge by an internal act of dedication. If one has sincerely become convinced of the truth of the Buddha's teaching, and wishes to follow the teaching, it is preferable, when possible, to conform to the prescribed way of going for refuge that has come down in the Buddhist tradition. This way is to receive the

three refuges from a bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk who has taken full ordination and remains in good standing in the monastic Order.

After one has decided to go for refuge, one should seek out a qualified monk -- one's own spiritual teacher or another respected member of the Order -- discuss one's intentions with him, and make arrangements for undergoing the ceremony. When the day arrives one should come to the monastery or temple bringing offerings such as candles, incense, and flowers for the shrine room and a small gift for the preceptor. After making the offerings one should, in the presence of the preceptor, join the palms together in respectful salutation (*anjali*), bow down three times before the image of the Buddha, and pay respects to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, as represented by the images and symbols in the shrine. Then, kneeling in front of the shrine, one should request the bhikkhu to give the three refuges. The bhikkhu will reply: "Repeat after me" and then recite:

*Buddham saranam gacchami*

I go for refuge to the Buddha;

*Dhammam saranam gacchami*

I go for refuge to the Dhamma;

*Sangham saranam gacchami*

I go for refuge to the Sangha.

*Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami*

A second time I go for refuge to the Buddha.

*Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami*

A second time I go for refuge to the Dhamma.

*Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami*

A second time I go for refuge to the Sangha.

*Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami*

A third time I go for refuge to the Buddha.

*Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami*

A third time I go for refuge to the Dhamma.

*Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami*

A third time I go for refuge to the Sangha.

The candidate should repeat each line after the bhikkhu. At the end the bhikkhu will say: *Saranagamanam sampunnam* "The going for refuge is completed." With this one formally becomes a lay follower of the Buddha, and remains such so long as the going for refuge stands intact. But to make the going for refuge especially strong and definitive, the candidate may confirm his acceptance of the refuge by declaring to the monk: "Venerable sir, please accept me as a lay disciple gone for refuge from this day forth until the end of my life." This phrase is added to show one's resolution to hold to the three refuges as one's guiding ideal for the rest of one's life. Following the declaration of the refuges, the bhikkhu will usually administer the five precepts, the ethical observances of abstaining from taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants. These will be discussed in subsequent articles.

By undergoing the formal ceremony of taking refuge one openly embraces the teaching of the Buddha and becomes for the first time a self-declared follower of the Master. However, going for refuge should not be an event which occurs only once in a lifetime and then is allowed to fade into the background. Going for refuge is a method of cultivation, a practice of inner development which should be undertaken regularly, repeated and renewed every day as part of one's daily routine. Just as we care for our body by washing it each morning, so we should also take care of our mind by implanting in it each day the fundamental seed for our development along the Buddhist path, that is, the going for refuge. Preferably the going for refuge should be done twice each day, with each refuge repeated three times; but if a second recitation is too difficult to fit in, as a minimum one recitation should be done every day, with three repetitions of each refuge.

The daily undertaking of the refuges is best done in a shrine room or before a household altar with a Buddha-image. The actual recitation should be preceded by the offering of candles, incense, and possibly flowers. After making the offerings one should make three salutations before the Buddha-image and then remain kneeling with the hands held out palms joined. Before actually reciting the refuge formula it may be helpful to visualize to oneself the three

objects of refuge arousing the feeling that one is in their presence. To represent the Buddha one can visualize an inspiring picture or statue of the Master. The Dhamma can be represented by visualizing, in front of the Buddha, three volumes of scripture to symbolize the Tipitaka, the three collections of Buddhist scriptures. The Dhamma can also be represented by the *dhammacakka*, the "wheel of Dhamma," with its eight spokes symbolizing the noble eightfold path converging upon nibbana at the hub; it should be bright and beautiful, radiating a golden light. To represent the Sangha one can visualize on either side of the Buddha the two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana; alternatively, one can visualize around the Buddha a group of monks, all of them adepts of the teaching, arahats who have conquered the defilements and reached perfect emancipation.

Generating deep faith and confidence, while retaining the visualized images before one's inner eye, one should recite the refuge-formula three times with feeling and conviction. If one is undertaking the practice of meditation it is especially important to recite the refuge-formula before beginning the practice, for this gives needed inspiration to sustain the endeavor through the difficulties that may be encountered along the way. For this reason those who undertake intensive meditation and go off into solitude preface their practice, not with the usual method of recitation, but with a special variation: *Aham attanam Buddhassa niyyatemi Dhammassa Sanghassa*, "My person I surrender to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha." By surrendering his person and life to the Triple Gem the yogin shields himself against the obstacles which might arise to impede his progress and safeguards himself against egoistic clinging to the attainments he might reach. However, this variation on the refuge-formula should not be undertaken lightly, as its consequences are very serious. For ordinary purposes it is enough to use the standard formula for daily recitation.

## VII. Corruptions and Breach of the Refuge

*Corruptions* of the refuge are factors that make the going for refuge impure, insincere, and ineffective. According to the commentaries there are three factors that defile the going for refuge -- ignorance, doubt, and wrong views. If one does not understand the reasons for going for refuge, the meaning of taking refuge, or the qualities of the refuge-objects, this lack of understanding is a form of ignorance which corrupts the going for refuge. Doubt corrupts the refuge insofar as the person overcome by doubt cannot settle confidence firmly in the Triple Gem. His commitment to the refuge is tainted by inner perplexity, suspicion, and indecision. The defilement of wrong views means a wrong understanding of the act of refuge or the refuge-objects. A person holding wrong views goes for refuge with the thought that the refuge act is a sufficient guarantee of deliverance; or he believes that the Buddha is a god with the power to save him, or that the Dhamma teaches the existence of an eternal self, or that the Sangha functions as an intercessory body with the ability to mediate his salvation. Even though the refuge act is defiled by these corruptions, as long as a person regards the Triple Gem as his supreme reliance his going for refuge is intact and he remains a Buddhist follower. But though the refuge is intact, his attitude of taking refuge is defective and has to be purified. Such purification can come about if he meets a proper teacher to give him instruction and help him overcome his ignorance, doubts, and wrong views.

The *breach* of the refuge means the breaking or violation of the commitment to the threefold refuge. A breach of the refuge occurs when a person who has gone for refuge comes to regard some counterpart to the three refuges as his guiding ideal or supreme reliance. If he comes to regard another spiritual teacher as superior to the Buddha, or as possessing greater spiritual authority than the Buddha, then his going for refuge to the Buddha is broken. If he comes to regard another religious teaching as superior to the Dhamma, or resorts to some other system of practice as his means to deliverance, then his going for refuge to the Dhamma is broken. If he comes to regard some spiritual community other than the ariyan Sangha as endowed with supramundane status, or as occupying a higher spiritual level than the ariyan Sangha, then his going for refuge to the Sangha is broken. In order for the refuge-act to remain valid and intact, the Triple Gem must be recognized as the exclusive resort for ultimate deliverance: "For me there is no other refuge, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are my supreme refuge."<sup>[4]</sup>

Breaking the commitment to any of the three refuge-objects breaks the commitment to all of them, since the effectiveness of the refuge-act requires the recognition of the interdependence and inseparability of the three. Thus by adopting an attitude which bestows the status of a supreme reliance upon anything outside the Triple Gem, one cuts off the going for refuge and relinquishes one's claim to be a disciple of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.<sup>[5]</sup> In order to become valid once again the going for refuge must be renewed, preferably by confessing one's lapse and then by once more going through the entire formal ceremony of taking refuge.

### VIII. The Similes for the Refuges

In the traditional Indian method of exposition no account or treatment of a theme is considered complete unless it has been illustrated by similes. Therefore we conclude this explanation of going for refuge with a look at some of the classical similes for the objects of refuge. Though many beautiful similes are given in the texts, from fear of prolixity we here limit ourselves to four.

The first simile compares the Buddha to the sun, for his appearance in the world is like the sun rising over the horizon. His teaching of the true Dhamma is like the net of the sun's rays spreading out over the earth, dispelling the darkness and cold of the night, giving warmth and light to all beings. The Sangha is like the beings for whom the darkness of night has been dispelled, who go about their affairs enjoying the warmth and radiance of the sun.

The second simile compares the Buddha to the full moon, the jewel of the night-time sky. His teaching of the Dhamma is like the moon shedding its beams of light over the world, cooling off the heat of the day. The Sangha is like the persons who go out in the night to see and enjoy the refreshing splendor of the moonlight.

In the third simile the Buddha is likened to a great raincloud spreading out across the countryside at a time when the land has been parched with a long summer's heat. The teaching of the true Dhamma is like the downpour of the rain, which inundates the land giving water to the plants and vegetation. The Sangha is like the plants -- the trees, shrubs, bushes, and grass -- which thrive and flourish when nourished by the rain pouring down from the cloud.

The fourth simile compares the Buddha to a lotus flower, the paragon of beauty and purity. Just as a lotus grows up in a muddy lake, but rises above the water and stands in full splendor unsoiled by the mud, so the Buddha, having grown up in the world, overcomes the world and abides in its midst untainted by its impurities. The Buddha's teaching of the true Dhamma is like the sweet perfumed fragrance emitted by the lotus flower, giving delight to all. And the Sangha is like the host of bees who collect around the lotus, gather up the pollen, and fly off to their hives to transform it into honey.

### Notes

[1.](#) *Khuddakapatha-Atthakatha*: Saranagatanam ten'eva saranagamanena bhayam santasam dukkham duggatim parikkilesam himsati vidhamati niharati nirodheti.

[2.](#) It should be remarked that although the ariyan Sangha can include lay persons, the word "Sangha" is never used in the Theravada Buddhist tradition to include the entire body of practitioners of the teaching. In ordinary usage the word signifies the order of monks. Any extension beyond this would tend to be considered unjustified.

[3.](#) Tappasada-taggarutahi vihatakilesa tapparayanatokarappavatto cittuppado saranagamanam.

[4.](#) *Natthi me saranam aññam Buddho (Dhammo Sangho) me saranam varam* — traditional Buddhist devotional stanzas.

[5.](#) Though the traditional literature always explains the breach of the refuge as occurring through a change of allegiance, it would seem that a complete loss of interest in the Triple Gem and the feeling that reliance on a refuge is not necessary would also break the commitment to the threefold refuge.