

Going for Refuge

by Gil Fronsdal

The goal of awakening is often emphasized in Buddhist teachings. In practice, however, the inner transformation known as “going for refuge” can be just as important as awakening itself. “Going for refuge” refers to the decision to base our life on walking the path to liberation. When we go for refuge, we align ourselves with the goodness and truth that comes from non-clinging.

There are two related meanings of the English word refuge that highlight the value of *sarana*, the Buddhist word for refuge. The first meaning refers to a place where people can find safety from danger. The second meaning refers to an area, like a wildlife sanctuary, set up to protect and support what is seen as valuable. In Buddhism, going for refuge includes both of these meanings: it is a way of protecting ourselves from danger as well as safeguarding what is most valuable or beautiful within us.

The practice of going for refuge is as ancient as Buddhism itself. It began with those who, after meeting the newly awakened Buddha, were so moved they spontaneously declared their dedication to him and his teachings (i.e., the Dharma). The way they declared this dedication was by stating they were “going for refuge” in the Buddha and the Dharma. In time, as some of his disciples also experienced awakening, they became the Sangha—that is, the community of awakened people. Together, the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are known as the “Triple Refuge.” People who understood the value of the Triple Refuge would state their faith by saying they were “going for refuge” in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Sometimes the Triple Refuge refers to the historical Buddha, the Dharma he taught, and the Sangha of practitioners who have followed in his footsteps over the centuries. This can be called the “external refuge” because these exist outside of us. But the Triple Refuge also refers to inner qualities that give rise to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Since these are inner states or capacities that we all have, this can be called the “internal refuge.”

The external refuge in the Buddha is important because few people readily discover on their own the full potential they have for spiritual transformation. Therefore, it is helpful to have the Buddha as an example of what is possible for each of us. In addition, the Dharma teachings protect us from taking paths that work against our own freedom and awakening, and, on the other hand, provide us with practices and teachings that are useful and beneficial. Being connected to a Sangha offers us a way to learn from others and to be supported by those who are also on the path of practice.

The internal refuge in the Buddha calls on and builds our inner capacities. Refuge in the Buddha both recognizes and develops our capacity to experience the peace of non-harming and non-attachment. It shows us the possibility of uprooting the fear, hate, delusion, and greed that are the sources of our suffering. And it shows us our own ability to mature spiritually. To take inner refuge in the Buddha is to rely on confidence in our potential for spiritual growth and transformation.

The internal refuge in the Dharma can be thought of in a number of ways. Because one of the primary characteristics of the Dharma is non-harming, one powerful way to rely on the internal refuge is to have a commitment to non-harming as our refuge. The Dharma is not an abstract principle or reality; rather, it arises from how we are and what we do. When we dedicate our lives to non-harming, the Dharma flows through our lives, allowing us to practice with the Buddha's teachings and to live harmoniously.

The internal refuge in Sangha encompasses our capacity to have relationships that are mutually supportive for walking the path of liberation. This includes our goodness, kindness, compassion, and generosity toward others and ourselves. Walking the path of non-harming and awakening does not depend only on our efforts to practice; it is also supported by relationships with others that are characterized by wholesome feelings, motivations, and attitudes. We are all capable of these states, but often overlook them. To take refuge in the inner Sangha is to have confidence in our inner goodness, even when it may not be readily apparent.

The inner Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are what the Buddha referred to when he encouraged people to take refuge in themselves. In the last days of his life he said, "You should live being your own refuge with no one else as your refuge. You should live with the Dharma as your refuge with no other refuge." The first sentence suggests that people must walk the path of practice for themselves; no one else can walk it for them. The second sentence suggests that the Dharma is found in ourselves, in our own capacities.

Some people look to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for refuge when the things they had previously been relying on no longer support them. Changes in work, finances, relationships, health, and society can be stressful when our well-being depends on their being a particular way. Thus searching for happiness outside of ourselves doesn't work in the long term. The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are reliable and long lasting when we find them in our own inner wisdom, peace, and non-contentious relationship with reality.

The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha can sustain us in difficult times. They encompass values, practices, insights, and realizations that not only protect us from self-destructive behaviors but also help us live wisely. They help bring forth the best qualities in our hearts.

Going for refuge is making the choice to orient ourselves by what the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha represent. It could be as simple as deciding, "I now orient my life to being very careful with my speech so that my speech is honest." It could be the dedication, "I will try to live without harming others." For some, it may involve a radical, even revolutionary, change in how they live their lives as they dedicate themselves to the path of liberation, wisdom, and compassion.

Some people approach going for refuge as a firm, courageous, and enthusiastic commitment to a life based on spiritual freedom and compassion. It is a commitment that simultaneously energizes us to act in new ways while encouraging a deep relaxation. So many unnecessary things can be let go of when we trust that the Dharma path provides meaningful and profound support. Going for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha protects us from danger as much as it nourishes the growth of what is most beautiful within us.