

Three Refuges

Coming in out of the storm

For over 2500 years Buddhists have “taken refuge” in the “Three Jewels:” the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*. To take refuge means to find a place of safety. Taking refuge brings to mind getting caught in a storm and finding shelter. Keeping that common sense understanding in mind, consider the three refuges.

Buddham Saranam Gacchami¹—“I take refuge in the Buddha.” The word “Buddha” means one who is fully awakened. The Buddha was born Siddhartha Gautama, in India about 2500 years ago. Although venerated by many of his followers, he never claimed to be more than human. His primary message was of suffering and the relief of suffering. He shared his profound insights for forty-five years until his *Parinirvana* ² at the age of eighty. Taking refuge in the Buddha means to validate the Buddha’s teachings in our everyday lives.

Dhammam Saranam Gacchami—“I take Refuge in the Dharma” In the sense used here, “Dharma” means “teachings.” In Buddhism, to take refuge in the Dharma means to study and apply the teachings of the Buddha. The teachings of the Buddha are expounded throughout the sutras. The following excerpt from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: is one of the most comprehensive teachings of the Dharma.

Everything in the universe comes into being as a result of the union of certain causes and conditions. Likewise, all things pass away as these causes and conditions change and cease to exist. Suffering also has certain causes and conditions; suffering also passes away as these causes and conditions change and cease to exist. Rains may come and go; winds may blow, flowers bloom and wilt, green leaves turn to rainbow colors to then be blown away: all of these changes are due to the changing of causes and conditions. Humans are born through the causes and conditions of parents: food develops the body, community develops the spirit. Accordingly, both the body and the spirit change as causes and conditions change. Everything in this universe is enmeshed together like the lines and ties of a fisher’s net. To think that any part can stand alone is as foolish as it is to think that one small knot in a fisher’s net can catch a fish. Not a single flower blooms, nor does a leaf fall, independent of causes and conditions. All things in the universe are interdependent in this ocean of constant change; this is the one thing that does not change. ³

When we understand interdependence, we see the connections between ourselves and all beings. Indra’s Net, an ancient Hindu representation of the universe, describes the universe to be like a giant fisherman's net. At each tie in the net was a faceted jewel that reflected every other point in the net. Even the smallest parts of the universe contain

something of the whole picture. We can conclude from this teaching that we are more connected than we normally consider.

Sangham Saranam Gacchami—“I take Refuge in the Sangha” For 2500 years, controversy has existed over who, or what, to include in the Sangha. As cultural causes and conditions change, a significant trend has been the expanding inclusiveness of the Sangha. Initially, the Sangha included monks only. Later, women were allowed as nuns. Some modernists have even gone so far as to promote the term “nunks” to be gender inclusive. New forms of the Sangha emerged as Buddhism spread across the world. In the 1200s, a radical Japanese Buddhist monk, Shinran Shonin⁴ left the traditional monastery and proclaimed that the Sangha included people from all walks of life: householders, politicians, farmers, and shopkeepers. Shinran was able to make this step because he was centered in the essential rather than the superficial. For Shonin, the Sangha is a place that does not establish boundaries but breaks down walls: a place that includes rather than excludes.

Recently, in Thailand, even trees have been ordained in the hope that this will bring an end to the decline of the environment. “When you ordain a tree that tree becomes sacred. Once a tree is ordained nobody wants to destroy it.”⁵

In the Buddhist scriptures, it is said that there are four communities: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. But I also include elements that are not human in the sangha. The trees, water, air, birds, and so on can all be members of our sangha. A beautiful walking path may be part of our sangha. A good cushion can be also. We can make many things into supportive elements of our sangha. This idea is not entirely new; it can be found throughout the sutras and in the Abhidharma, too. A pebble, a leaf and a dahlia are mentioned in the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* in this respect. It is said in the *Pure Land Sutra* that if you are mindful, then when the wind blows through the trees, you will hear the teaching of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Eightfold Path, and so on. The whole cosmos is preaching the buddhadharma and practicing the buddhadharma. If you are attentive, you will get in touch with that sangha. -Thich Nhat Hanh⁶

When we view the ever-increasing inclusiveness of the Sangha, it is important to keep in mind what is essential and what is superficial. The following Sufi story illustrates the importance of knowing what is essential and knowing what is superficial.

There was a pilgrim who went seeking a famous holy man. The pilgrim rowed a boat across the lake to a small island where the holy man lived. As the seeker neared the island, he heard the Arabic chant: "*La Illaha, illa Allaha Hu,*" meaning, "There is no God but God." The seeker noted that the holy man was pronouncing the chant incorrectly. Disappointed, he decided the least that he should do would be to instruct the “holy man” in the proper recitation. The visitor proceeded to instruct him; the holy man thanked him

for the correction. The visitor returned to his boat and rowed away. Halfway across the lake, he was shocked to see the holy man rapidly running across the top of the water. The holy man, having caught up with the boat, proceeded to apologize: he had already forgotten the instruction and asked to hear the proper pronunciation again. The seeker knew only the superficial: the holy man lived the essential.

When we consider the essential value of the Sangha, we embrace a community that includes other species, plants, animals, environmental features, unseen ancestors, and future generations. We see Sangha as an ever-expanding circle, not stopping at the threshold of our species and next of kin, a community that truly provides refuge: the Sangha of Inclusion.

By taking refuge in the Buddha, we recognize him as a great teacher of compassion, by taking refuge in the Dharma we affirm the value of his many rich teachings, and by taking refuge in the Sangha of Inclusion, we commit to the practice of compassionate mindfulness.

Three Refuges

¹ In most cases, the words in italics are in Sanskrit

² Please see chapter “Nirvana is Not what you Think

³ Avatamsaka Sutra

⁴ Shinran Shonen (1173-1263) was the founder of the Jodo Shinshu Sect in Japan.

⁵ Phrakru Pitak Nanthakthun, a Buddhist monk in north-east Thailand.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/04/buddhist-monks-ordain-trees_n_6784568.html

⁶ Nhat Hanh, Thich. *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*. Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 2002. See also: www.parallax.org.