Beyond All Direction

July 5, 2025

When we have an ordination, one of the questions is, “What is the precept or teaching to the people getting ordained?” Some of the things I have to teach are things I have to memorize, standard for everybody. One of the topics, though, that has to be explained, and that varies from precept or preceptor, is the act of going for refuge in the Triple Gem. Because it’s going for refuge that constitutes ordination as a novice. And it’s strange. There was a British scholar one time who said the Buddha probably didn’t want people to take refuge in him. He probably just put up with it when they did. But then why did he make going for refuge such an important part of ordination, the very beginning, the very beginning of the teachings, when the Buddha was first establishing the teachings? That was ordination. You shaved your head, shaved your beard, put on the robes, and took refuge in the Triple Gem. Later, as things developed, the procedure that we have now has developed. But still, the going for refuge was an important part at the very beginning. And so it’s important to know what it means. Of course, the fact that it’s called refuge implies that there are dangers. And there are dangers on many levels. There are dangers outside. Not so much in terms of what people can do to you, but in terms of the examples they set, the things they teach, that can make you do unskillful things. There was a teacher in the Buddhist time who taught that all actions were useless, gave no results. So it didn’t matter what you did. There was no such thing as good or evil, no such thing as right or wrong. Everything was just a social convention. And as the Buddha said, this person probably was the most dangerous person out there. Not that he killed people, but because he would get them to act in unskillful ways. That’s the first level of danger, outside examples. The second level of danger is your own internal defilements, your greed, your aversion, your delusion. Because even though you want happiness, these things can make you do things that will lead to suffering. And often you think you’re doing something that will lead to happiness. Even though that’s not the case. So that’s the internal danger you have to get past. And then finally, there’s the danger of your skillful actions. In the sense that you do something good, and the results will be there. Good results. But one, they’re impermanent. And two, say you’re very generous, you’re very virtuous, and you get a life up in heaven. And things get very easy. You get spoiled. And then the qualities that got you there get eroded away, and you fall. That’s a danger you have to get past as well. So there are three levels of danger, and there are three levels of refuge. The first is the external refuge. On the external level we have the Buddha as the person, Prince Siddhartha. We saw that his life as a prince, even though it had lots of pleasures, was pretty pointless. After all, he was going to age, grow ill, and die. And if he found pleasure in things that age, grow ill, and die, but those were the goals of his life, he’d end up with nothing. So he left home in search of what would be more lasting, what would be free from aging, free from illness, free from death. And after a long search, trial and error, he found it. And then he taught that path, leaving there for 45 years, walking all over northern India. Wherever there was somebody who was ready to learn from him, he’d go there. So we can see from his example that it is possible, through your actions, to find a deathless happiness. You want to keep that in mind. That’s the other meaning of the word sarana. It means refuge, but it also means something you keep in mind. Keep in mind that somebody has, through his efforts, found the deathless. And it wasn’t because of any special quality that he had that nobody else has. We all have these qualities. Potentially within ourselves. Persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, virtue. He showed that by developing these things, we can get the same results he did. So when anyone else teaches otherwise, we have this to hold on to. That our actions really do make a difference. They really are important. Having that external refuge helps protect us from external dangers. In terms of the dhamma, the external level of the dhamma, of course, is the dhamma that is written down in books, that we listen to, that we read. On the external level, the sangha is of two sorts. You’ve got the noble sangha, all those who practiced in line with the dhamma, and found that they too could find the deathless. And then you’ve got the conventional sangha, the people who go through the ordination like we had today and become part of this community. And both of those are an external refuge. Again, the noble sangha is a good example for us that this can be done. And you look at the members of the noble sangha, and there are all kinds. People of all sorts, all different kinds of backgrounds. Making the point that anybody can do this. As for the conventional sangha, it’s a refuge in the sense that it’s kept the teachings alive, both in terms of remembering the teachings, in terms of habits, values, things you pick up from one another, not through words so much, but through example. So those are the refuges. Refuge is on the external level. The internal level is when you take their qualities and you develop them within yourself. In terms of the Buddha, that would be wisdom, compassion, purity. In terms of the dhamma, the Buddha says you make yourself a refuge by developing the establishings of mindfulness, focusing on a topic like the breath, being ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress, with reverence to the world. Mindful means you keep the topic in mind. Alert, you’re watching what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. And then ardent, in the sense that you really wholeheartedly want to do this well. As for issues of the world, you put them aside for the time being, because you’ve got work to do inside. As you focus on that work, then you develop these qualities within yourself. As for the Sangha, the basic principle they have is that you practice the dhamma in accordance with the dhamma. That means two things. One is you don’t try to change the dhamma to fit your preferences. That’s what a lot of the training in the Sangha is all about. I know staying with Jon Furr, how many times he would ask me to do things I thought I couldn’t do. Very early on we’d start meditating all night, sometimes after long days of work. You learn to put your doubts aside, give him the benefit of the doubt, and you say, “Yes, you can do it. And yes, the results are good.” That’s an important lesson. You’ve got to learn how to question your preconceived notions as to what you’re capable of, or even what human beings are capable of. You’ve got to allow yourself to be stretched, to grow, to be more circumspect in your activities, more audacious in developing what’s good inside you. The other meaning of practicing the dhamma in accordance with the dhamma is you practice for the sake of disenchantment and dispassion. That may not sound all that positive, but as Jon Chah has a good way of translating those terms, he says basically you’re sobering up. This relates to another one of the passages that I had to recite during the ordination about the purpose of all this, and one of them is that you’re sobering up from your intoxication. We’re intoxicated with our youth. We’re intoxicated with our health, with our life, thinking that we have lots of time. There’s no great hurry to work on things, no great hurry to prepare for death. Even though we see people all around us, young people, old people, people dying expectedly, people dying unexpectedly, you’ve got to be prepared all the time. So we have to sober up from that intoxication. That’s what it means to internalize the virtues of the Sangha. And finally, in the third level, and this is where all three come together, you develop all these internal qualities, and they lead you to the deathless. And that’s when you have your ultimate refuge. In fact, that is one of the names that the Buddha gives to Nibbana. We think of Nibbana as being the name for the goal. It’s one of many, and one of them is refuge. You find something that’s unconditioned. It’s not the case that our practice causes it. Our practice takes us there. In the same way that the road to a mountain doesn’t cause the mountain to be, and it usually is built after the mountain. But if you follow the road, you get there. And when you’re there, you’re totally safe, even from your own skillful actions. So have a very alive sense of the dangers around you, and inside you. We live in a dangerous world, and you have a dangerous mind. You can easily pick up bad influences from outside. So it’s good to think about how much you actually do need protection. And how the Triple Gem can provide that. Not that they give the protection to you, but they teach you how to protect yourself. The Buddha saw this as the duty of a teacher. He said the teacher should provide protection in all directions. In his case, he provides it beyond all directions. Not just in space. And time. But including outside of space and time. And it’s teaching that your actions really do make a difference in your life, and the results really do depend on the quality of your intention. When you take that as your working hypothesis, you’re protecting yourself. There were teachers in his time, as I said, who said everything that you experienced in terms of pleasure, pain, either came from past actions, or from the acts of a creator god, or they were totally random. In all those cases, he says, you’re left unprotected if you believe these things. An urge comes up in the mind and you have no way of saying no to it. You have to look at if it came from past action, or it came from a creator god, or it’s totally random. There’s no place where it actually comes from what you’re doing right now. But if you understand that what you’re doing right now is shaping your experience, out of the raw material that comes from past actions, that makes a huge difference. Because you can learn how to change. You can learn the skills of skillful action. You don’t have to go through all the trial and error that the Buddha did. Because he followed his path. There’s not any guarantee that it’s going to be successful. You at least have the example of someone who claims that it is possible, and lays out the path. Now you have to take those instructions and use your ingenuity in applying them to your specific problems, the specific dangers you’re posing to yourself. But the Buddha’s done a lot of the work for you. So take advantage of that. And when you understand this, then you understand this is what it means to go for refuge.

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