Going for Refuge

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

The act of going for refuge marks the point where one commits oneself to taking the Dhamma, or the Buddha’s teaching, as the primary guide to the conduct of one’s life. To understand why this commitment is called a “refuge,” it is helpful to look at the history of the custom.

In pre-Buddhist India, going for refuge meant proclaiming one’s allegiance to a patron—a powerful person or god—submitting to the patron’s directives in hopes of receiving protection from danger in return. In the early years of the Buddha’s teaching career, his new followers adopted this custom to express their allegiance to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, but in the Buddhist context this custom took on a new meaning.

Buddhism is not a theistic religion—the Buddha is not a god—and so a person taking refuge in the Buddhist sense is not asking for the Buddha personally to intervene to provide protection. Still, the Buddha’s teachings center on the realization that human life is fraught with dangers—from greed, anger, and delusion—and so the concept of refuge is a central part of the path of practice, in that the practice is aimed at gaining release from those dangers. Because both the dangers and the release from them come ultimately from the mind, there is a need for two levels of refuge: external refuges, which provide models and guidelines to identify which qualities in the mind lead to danger and which to release; and internal refuges, i.e., the qualities leading to release that we develop in our own mind in imitation of our external models. The internal level is where true refuge is found.

Although the tradition of going to refuge is an ancient one, it is still relevant for our own practice today, for we are faced with the same internal dangers that faced people in the Buddha’s time. We still need the same protection as they. When a Buddhist takes refuge, it is essentially an act of taking refuge in the doctrine of karma: This is an act of submission in that one is committed to living in line with the belief that actions based on skillful intentions lead to happiness, while actions based on unskillful intentions lead to suffering; it is an act of claiming protection in that one trusts that by following the teaching one will not fall into the misfortunes that bad karma engenders. To take refuge in this way ultimately means to take refuge in the quality of our own intentions, for that’s where the essence of karma lies.

The refuges in Buddhism—both on the internal and on the external levels—are the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, also known as the Triple Gem. They are called gems both because they are valuable and because, in ancient times, gems were believed to have protective powers. The Triple Gem outdoes other gems in
this respect because its protective powers can be put to the test and can lead
further than those of any physical gem, all the way to absolute freedom from the
uncertainties of aging, illness, and death.

The Buddha, on the external level, refers to Siddhattha Gotama, the Indian
prince who renounced his royal titles and went into the forest, meditating until
he ultimately gained Awakening. To take refuge in the Buddha means, not
taking refuge in him as a person, but taking refuge in the fact of his Awakening:
placing trust in the belief that he did awaken to the truth, that he did so by
developing qualities that we too can develop, and that the truths to which he
awoke provide the best perspective for the conduct of our life.

The Dhamma, on the external level, refers to the path of practice the Buddha
taught to his followers. This, in turn, is divided into three levels: the words of his
teachings, the act of putting those teachings into practice, and the attainment of
Awakening as the result of that practice. This three-way division of the word
“Dhamma” is essentially a map showing how to take the external refuges and
make them internal: learning about the teachings, using them to develop the
qualities that the Buddha himself used to attain Awakening, and then realizing
the same release from danger that he found in the quality of Deathlessness that
we can touch within.

The word Sangha, on the external level, has two senses: conventional and
ideal. In its ideal sense, the Sangha consists of all people, lay or ordained, who
have practiced the Dhamma to the point of gaining at least a glimpse of the
Deathless. In a conventional sense, Sangha denotes the communities of ordained
monks and nuns. The two meanings overlap but are not necessarily identical. Some
members of the ideal Sangha are not ordained; some monks and nuns have yet to
touch the Deathless. All those who take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha
become members of the Buddha’s four-fold assembly (parisa) of followers: monks,
nuns, male lay devotees, and female lay devotees. Although it is widely believed
that all Buddhist followers are members of the Sangha, this is not the case. Only
those who are ordained are members of the conventional Sangha; only those who
have glimpsed the Deathless are members of the ideal Sangha. Nevertheless,
those followers who do not belong to the Sangha in either sense of the word still
count as genuine Buddhists in that they are members of the Buddha’s parisa.

When taking refuge in the external Sangha, one takes refuge in both senses of
the Sangha, but the two senses provide different levels of refuge. The
conventional Sangha has helped keep the teaching alive for more than 2,500
years. Without them, we would never have learned what the Buddha taught.
However, not all members of the conventional Sangha are reliable models of
conduct. So when looking for guidance in the conduct of our lives, we must look
to the living or recorded examples provided by the ideal Sangha. Without their
element, we would not know (1) that Awakening is available to all, and not just
to the Buddha; and (2) how Awakening expresses itself in the varied aspects of
everyday life.
On the internal level, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are the skillful qualities we develop in our own minds in imitation of our external models. For instance, the Buddha was a person of wisdom, purity, and compassion. When we develop wisdom, purity, and compassion in our own minds, they form our refuge on an internal level. The Buddha tasted Awakening by developing conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. When we, too, develop these same qualities to the point of attaining Awakening, that Awakening is our ultimate refuge. This is the point where the three aspects of the Triple Gem become one: beyond the reach of greed, anger, and delusion, and thus totally secure.