

Taking Refuge: Where Practice Begins

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Buddham saranam gacchami
Dhammam saranam gacchami
Sangham saranam gacchami

Dutiampi buddham saranam gacchami
Dutiampi dhammam saranam gacchami
Dutiampi sangham saranam gacchami

Tatiampi buddham saranam gacchami
Tatiampi dhammam saranam gacchami
Tatiampi sangham saranam gacchami

In Theravaden Buddhist practice the first thing we do at the start of the day, or at the start of a practice session, or on the first day of a long retreat; is take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, chanting the Pali refuge chant.

Why do we do this? What does this mean? What is the significance?

First what do we mean by “refuge”. The dictionary defines refuge as “shelter or protection from danger, trouble, etc.; a place of shelter, protection, or safety.” So taking refuge means going to some place, either physically and/or mentally/emotionally where we feel safe, where we feel sheltered from the unpleasant or negative things that might happen to us in the course of daily life, that might distract us from practicing intensely. By chanting the refuge chant we create what Richard Freeman calls a “practice container”, a conscious boundary within which we can let go into the form of the practice.

But what does it mean to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha?

By the Buddha we may mean several things. If we are culturally Buddhist, if we grew up a Buddhist, we may mean the actual person, the Buddha, who lived and taught 2500 years ago in North India. If we have come to Buddhist practice later in life, where we don't have that sort of deep personal link, we may mean the idea of the Buddha, this person who reached enlightenment through his own efforts, and then went on to teach what he had learned. He is an example of what is possible for all of us. Or we may mean what is often called our own “Buddha Nature”, that possibility within all of us to reach enlightenment just as the Buddha did.

After he reached enlightenment the Buddha thought about what he should do. One part of him was drawn to simply retiring to the forest, where he had lived

before, into a life of seclusion. What stopped him was the realization that if he could do this, so could others, and that it was his duty to teach what he had learned so that other could achieve enlightenment as well. He saw that everyone had Buddha Nature.

So in a sense, by taking refuge in the Buddha we are taking refuge in that possibility inherent in all of us to be a Buddha, to reach enlightenment. We can't know or understand what this means on a rational level, we can only feel that it seems right. Taking refuge in the Buddha is an act of faith, faith in the Buddha himself, faith that he reached enlightenment, faith in our own potential to reach enlightenment.

By the Dhamma we mean the teachings of the Buddha, the record that has come down through the ages of the forty years of teachings that he gave after his enlightenment. The Dhamma is a detailed map, a means, a way to enlightenment. This cannot be a passive process. It takes great effort. We need to study, to immerse ourselves in the teaching. Taking refuge in the Dhamma means that we commit ourselves to that effort, knowing that what we learn will help us along the way.

By the Sangha we may mean several things. Traditionally the Sangha means all those over the last 2500 years who have reached enlightenment by following the Buddha's teachings. Knowing that all these countless other people have achieved enlightenment encourages us, makes us feel that it is possible for us as well.

The first time the Buddha taught was to four wandering siddhus with whom he had spent several years practicing in the forest with. At first they weren't sure of him, because he had left them and their austere form of practice. But as he taught they realized what had happened. One of these four reached enlightenment right then and there, just listening to the Buddha teach the four noble truths. He was the first in this long chain of enlightened beings, the first member of the Sangha.

The Sangha can have other meanings as well. It could mean all people who are currently practicing anywhere in the world. On a more direct and personal level it could mean all the people we are practicing with right now or practice with regularly. When we practice with other people over a long period of time a special bond grows. We know that they are there practicing, struggling, just as we are. Their energy and determination helps us to keep practicing. Taking refuge in the Sangha is taking refuge in the love we feel for those we are practicing with, and letting ourselves feel their love for us as well.

By taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha we are letting go into a feeling of safety and protection that arises out of faith, self effort, and love.

All three of these are needed to be successful. To understand this we should look at what happens if one of these components is missing.

If we have faith and we make effort to study the teachings, but we aren't grounded in love for all beings then we can easily veer towards fundamentalism, fanaticism, extremism. We know that we are right because our faith is strong and the holy book we study (the Buddhist Pali Canon, The Bible, the Koran, the Torah, it makes no difference) tells us that we are right, and everyone else is wrong, that we have the only true faith. This is of course a misinterpretation, a selective reading. We see this all around us every day where fanatics of every stripe quote a verse or two of their scripture to justify their positions and their actions.

If we have faith and love, but we don't make an effort to understand the practice/teaching we have adopted, we can easily wander off into the excesses of the new age flower children. We love everyone, we are love, and everything is bliss. We can lose sight of the shadow side, the dark side of our nature, and pretend earnestly that we don't even have a shadow; that we don't struggle, that we don't suffer. Though this may feel good for a while, even joyous and wonderful, in the end it doesn't work. We have to face the dark side, to acknowledge and even embrace it. The Dhamma show us how to do this safely, from a place of refuge.

If we have knowledge and love, but no faith, then we can easily fall prey to what Trungpa Rinpoche called "spiritual materialism". Faith anchors us in a tradition, a form of practice. Without faith it is easy to adopt the smorgasbord approach to practice, something new and different every day. They are all so interesting and fascinating. There is an old adage that applies. If we want water we don't dig ten one foot holes, we dig one ten foot hole. We have faith that the place we chose to dig is the right one, and go deeply.

Other practices have these elements; faith, effort and love within them. The genius of Buddhist practice is that it sees that we need all three, and that we need them right at the very beginning. One other thing is necessary. We can't simply understand all this on an intellectual level. We have to feel it, experience it. Refuge, that sense of being safe and protected is an experience, not just an idea.

I came to realize this on my first month long sit at Spirit Rock, a Meditation Retreat in northern California. I was 8 or 9 days in and was suffering from what is called an MKA, a multiple kilesa attack. I was full of doubt, doubt in the practice, and doubt in my ability to do the practice. I was very restless, agitated. I wanted "something" to happen. I was very adverse to some of what was being taught in the daily dharma talks, full of criticism of the teachings and the teachers.

At the same time I was working on memorizing a lovely chant we did after the final sit, late in the evening. It was called The Verses of Sharing and Aspiration. The last section of the chant was a reiteration of the refuges.

The Buddha is my excellent refuge.
Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma.
The solitary Buddha is my noble guide.
The Sangha is my supreme support.
Through the supreme power of all these,
May darkness and delusion be dispelled.

So there I was, sitting in the hall during one of the morning practice periods, struggling to keep my mind focused on my breath and body, but these words kept coming back into my mind. I'd be chanting them mentally, then stop, forcing myself to shut them out, to go back to doing what I was supposed to be doing. Finally it somehow hit me, the words weren't just words. I felt safe, protected, surrounded by faith, knowledge and love. Knowing this was what I was supposed to be doing.

It felt like my heart just cracked wide open. This wasn't an intellectual understanding. It was a deep intuitional feeling, an insight. I wept on and off for most of the day. I'm not sure if those were tears of joy for what I felt, the lightness and ease I experienced, letting go of the emotional armor I wore habitually to protect myself, or tears of sadness that I had thought/felt for so long that I needed that armor. It doesn't matter. I had taken refuge.