

## Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem.

The triple gems are the three precious jewels of life: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Just about every Buddhist tradition includes 'taking refuge in the triple gem'. This can provide a focus and a momentum to our practice.

"One who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha sees with right understanding the four noble truths" – Buddha.



*"Buddham saranam gacchami"* (I take refuge in the Buddha)

We can use the refuge in the Buddha as a reminder of our expansive, immeasurable nature, our unfolding connection with all life.

It is a sense of awakened attention, this taking refuge in the Buddha. The Buddha can remain in our minds as an historical figure or we can see the Buddha as an awakened outlook. We can speculate about the meaning, but in insight meditation practice we see the futility of speculation: we do not need to figure out whether there ever actually was a Buddha. This speculation does not lead to liberation and this is the understanding that can unveil the true Buddha mind.

When we take 'refuge in the Buddha', we can undertake it as a ceremony with deep meaning and aspiration. An aspiration to live in a free and open way, or we can just repeat, parrot fashion, each phrase without realising the deep significance of the refuge. We are not taking refuge in any idea, view or belief: we are transcending any personal habit we may have. The point is that taking refuge in the Buddha is a mirror to see the limitations of our own personality.

Taking refuge in the Buddha is a tool to remind us every time we hear the inner critic, the conditioned personality arises. This conditioned personality always results in a contraction of self - a limitation and isolation from the world, as well as bringing about a loss of love and joy. With the arising of the identification with the personal, we fall into the subject/object duality and the world of measurement - whereas the Buddha mind exists in the understanding of the world of the immeasurable.

With this clinging to the personal we lose touch with the soft voice, the voice of love and compassion..... the soft voice is the Buddha's voice and it is this voice that frees us from reaction to life.

We need to ask the question: 'What can I take refuge in - what can I trust to remain steady and unaffected in this uncertain and ever changing world?' Can I trust my personality: the "I" that continually reacts, that takes the dualities of life, praise and blame, gain and loss, success and failure and pleasure and pain so personally? This "I" that is constructed out of past experiences, from views and opinions that we cling to - how can we trust this impermanent and fragile construction?

By putting our trust in this "I" we are setting ourselves up for disappointment and suffering.

We can use the refuge in the Buddha as a practice in our daily life. We can remember to trust in our deepest understanding and let go or loosen our identification with the personal, softening our reaction to life... Whenever reaction arises we can remember the saying "this is not me, this is not who I am, this is not mine".

*"Dharmmam saranam gacchami"* (I take refuge in the Dharma)

In the second gem, the 'Dharma' has several meanings. It is the teachings directed towards awakening and liberation. It is the truth of the way life unfolds, the natural truth, the undistorted perception. And it is the way of living in accordance with this natural truth.

The Dharma teachings are a tool for liberation. They are not the ultimate truth but point to that which cannot be conceptualized - therefore these teachings should not be clung to.

We can however verify the teachings for ourselves through the observation of our own experience. Studying the teachings and contemplating the dharma is a very supportive practice, but it is meaningless unless it manifests itself directly in our lives: bringing greater freedom, awareness and understanding.

So the Dharma is both the way of living an authentic life, and also the teachings that guide us in our day-to-day practice.

As a practice, we can study and contemplate the Dharma teachings, listen to Dharma talks and bring more mindfulness to our daily lives. In paying close attention to our interactions we can learn from our own experience and benefit from the wisdom that comes from Dharma study and from the innate natural wisdom.

*"Sangham saranam gacchami"* (I take refuge in the Sangha)

Looking at the third gem: the 'Sangha' can refer to the community of all beings, or the community of those concerned with awakening - those concerned with the deeper questions of life.

The Sangha has no boundaries, it is not exclusive, it is not a cult, it sees into the interconnectedness of all things, sees into the emptiness of self - the self that is empty of "I" and "mine".

The Sangha supports each of us in our practice, it promotes love and compassion. We all belong to this great family of beings... each of us can only exist at this moment because everything else in the universe is as it is. We are deeply connected but also totally unique. This is the paradox of the Sangha.

The Sangha is the expression of the Buddha. It is the coal-face of Dharma practice or Dharma life: Sangha is relationship.

To use the Sangha as a practice is to become sensitive to the needs of others. It is the role of the Bodhisattva - the one who works for the welfare of the Sangha.

The Buddha said that one of the worst crimes was to instigate splits or conflicts in the Sangha.



The Triple Gem: that of awakening. The way of awakening and the community of those concerned with awakening is not restricted to any religion. It has no boundaries and excludes nothing.

An understanding of the Triple Gem opens the door to the deathless.

'Taking refuge' is a practice that reminds us of what is important in our lives: that life is short and every moment is precious. It is an act of devotion and gratitude - for this very life experience, and for this opportunity we have to explore and experience these Dharma teachings. Incorporating the taking of refuge into our daily life brings deep joy, meaning and appreciation. It enhances our relationships

and enables us to live in a free and liberated way, sensitive to the needs of others and aware of our deep connection with all life.

May all beings find refuge in the Triple Gem.

Will James