

Taking Refuge

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Pali:

Buddham saranam gacchami.

Dhammam saranam gacchami.

Sangham saranam gacchami.

Sanskrit:

Buddham sharanam gacchâmi.

Dharmam sharanam gacchâmi.

Sangham sharanam gacchâmi.

English:

I go for refuge to the Buddha.

I go for refuge to the Teaching.

I go for refuge to the Community.

Stalwart Buddhists recite the above invocation (called “the refuge prayer”) three times twice a day—in the morning and the evening. To become formally a Buddhist, a person typically repeats the above formula three times before an ordained Buddhist monk or nun. If no monastic is available, the formula can be repeated in front of one or more lay practitioners or even an image of the Buddha or a Buddhist scripture.

What is the reason for taking refuge? In a way, everyone takes refuge in something—be it their family, money, job, pension, religious or secular ideology, alcohol, or drugs. These worldly things, however, offer no ultimate safety. More specifically, they do not help us overcome the fear of death and other forms of suffering (*duhkha*). The situation is different with authentic spirituality, which shows us how to control our own mind and empty it of negativity, so that we can discover our inherent freedom, our Buddha nature.

The spirituality of Buddhism proposes three closely related “objects” of refuge: the Buddha (the enlightened teacher), the Dharma (the teaching), and the Sangha (the community of practitioners). These are known as the “Three Jewels” or “Three Treasures” (*tri-ratna*)—a notion that originated after the physical death of the Buddha. While the Buddha was still alive on Earth, he was clearly the focus of attention for his monastic disciples and lay followers. Yet, he himself always pointed to the teaching as the principal means of liberation. Shortly before his entrance into the state of ultimate liberation (*parinirvâna*), he admonished his disciples that after his passing everyone should use the teaching as a lamp on the path. He had worked hard to establish a community of strong practitioners, and when he passed away, he left behind no fewer than 500 arhats (“worthy ones”). In early Buddhism, an arhat was a Buddhist practitioner who had fully comprehended the four noble truths and was stably committed to practicing in their light, but had not yet attained enlightenment. Such a one had a

glimpse of nirvâna but not yet irrevocably reached nirvâna itself.

To take refuge means to commit to spiritual discipline in keeping with the Buddhist tradition. This should not be done casually or merely as a matter of belief. The Buddha clearly did not want mere faith-based followers. One time, a well-known individual named Upali came to the Buddha with the intention to debate the master and hopefully correct his views. After a brief discourse with the Buddha, however, Upali was so impressed that he decided to become a disciple of the Buddha instead. He was pleasantly surprised and encouraged when the master advised him to fully investigate the teaching before adopting it. The spiritual path is not irrational but rather calls for the guiding light of reason illuminated by wisdom.

Enlightenment, attained through the exercise of wisdom and compassion, is the only valid reason for treading the Buddhist path. Anything else would be mere conventional religiosity or superstition. It is not enough to take formal refuge and then sit back waiting to be liberated. We must actively use the Three Jewels to observe and transform our mind stream, disallowing negative self-expressions and inviting positive ones. To overcome suffering and become inwardly free, we must take the necessary steps ourselves. We use the Buddha as our example, and we apply the wisdom of the Dharma, and seek support and guidance from the Sangha.

For more information about the three objects of refuge and taking refuge, see *Becoming a Buddhist and Guidelines for the Practice of Refuge*.

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