

Taking Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

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The first of one hundred twenty questions in *The Guidelines for Zen Monasteries* says, “Do you revere buddha, dharma, and sangha, or not?”

Thus, it is clear that what the buddhas and ancestors in India and China have authentically transmitted is reverence for buddha, dharma, and sangha. Without taking refuge, there is no reverence. Without reverence, there is no taking refuge.

The act of taking refuge in buddha, dharma, and sangha is achieved through mutual affinity and interaction. Whether you are in a deva realm, a human realm, hell, a demon realm, or an animal realm, when you have mutual affinity and interaction with buddha, dharma, and sangha, you invariably take refuge in them.

Taking refuge in the three treasures, you nurture yourself wherever you are, birth after birth, world after world. You accumulate merit, assemble virtue, and attain unsurpassable, complete enlightenment. Even if you are misled by unwholesome friends, obstructed by demons, cut off from your wholesome roots, and become an icchantika, in the end you will regain your wholesome roots, and increase merit. The power of taking refuge in the three treasures will never decay.

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To take refuge in the three treasures, whether at the time of the Tathagata or after the Tathagata’s parinirvana, fill yourself with pure trust, put your hands together, bow, and recite in this way:

“I, so-and-so, from this body through the attainment of a buddha body, take refuge in Buddha, take refuge in Dharma, and take refuge in Sangha.

I take refuge in Buddha, the most revered of those with two feet.

I take refuge in Dharma, the most revered way to become free from delusion.

I take refuge in Sangha, the most revered assembly.

I have taken refuge in Buddha, I have taken refuge in Dharma, I have taken refuge in Sangha.”

Initiate this vow aspiring for enlightenment, the fruit of buddhahood. Even though your body-mind is born and dies moment by moment, your dharma body surely grows and attains enlightenment.

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“Taking refuge in” means returning and relying upon. “Returning” is like children returning to their parents. “Relying upon” is like citizens relying on the king. This phrase implies that you are liberated by doing so. You take refuge in buddha because he is a great master. You take refuge in dharma because it is good medicine. You take refuge in sangha because it is an excellent friend.

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[A commentary called the *Meaning of the Mahayana* says:]

“Why do you return exclusively to these three treasures? The reason why these three are the ultimate place of return is that they help sentient beings to become free from birth and death, and realize great enlightenment.”

These three treasures have wondrous power.

“Buddha” is a word from India. It is translated as “awakened one” in China. It means one who has unsurpassable, complete enlightenment.

“Dharma” is a word [in Sanskrit] from India. It is also called dhamma [in Pali]. There are a variety of Indian sounds for it. In China it is translated as “law.” Although everything that is wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral is also dharma, the dharma in which we take refuge is the dharma that is the law.

“Sangha” is also a word from India. It is translated as “harmonious assembly” in China.

These three treasures have been venerated in this way.

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The three treasures that have been maintained are: the buddha treasure, such as buddha images and stupas; the dharma treasure transmitted as scripture on red or yellow scrolls; and the sangha treasure of precepts, including shaving the head, wearing a dyed robe, and following the precepts and dharma procedures.

The three treasures that function as teaching are: the buddha treasure of Shakyamuni Buddha, the World-honored One; the dharma treasure transmitted as the turning of the dharma wheel, the spreading of sacred teaching; and the sangha treasure of the Five Monks [who listened to the Buddha’s first discourse] including Ajnatakaundinya.

The three treasures that are the essence of reality are: the buddha treasure of the five types of dharma body; the dharma treasure of nirvana that is beyond change; and the sangha treasure of the merit of learning what is beyond learning.

The three treasures as one treasure are: the buddha treasure of fully realizing reality; the dharma treasure of being pure and free of defilement; and the sangha treasure of living in accord with reality, being harmonious, and free from stagnation.

You take refuge in these three treasures. Those unfortunate ones who lack virtue do not even hear the name of the three treasures; how can they take refuge in them?

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The *Lotus Sutra* says, “These beings, because of their unwholesome conditions, cannot hear the name of the three treasures, even for uncountable kalpas.”

The *Lotus Sutra* describes the great causes and conditions of buddha tathagatas. The *Lotus Sutra* is the king, the great master of the sutras expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha. All other sutras and dharmas are its subjects and relations.

The words in the *Lotus Sutra* are genuine. Other sutras that include skillful means are not necessarily the essential teachings of the Buddha. To rely on the words in other sutras in order to criticize the *Lotus Sutra* is upside down. Without the influence of the *Lotus Sutra*, there can be no other sutras. Other sutras assemble to take refuge in the *Lotus Sutra*. This sutra speaks of those who cannot hear the name of the three treasures. Thus, know that the merit of the three treasures is unequalled.

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The World-honored One said [in the *Dhammapada*]:

Many of you are fearful of suffering and take refuge in mountains, gardens, forests, under trees, or in shrines. This refuge is neither excellent nor valuable. You cannot be liberated from suffering by taking refuge in them.

On the other hand, if you take refuge in buddha, and if you take refuge in dharma and sangha, you can always abide in the four noble truths. With this wisdom, you always observe and understand suffering and the arising of suffering, you know how to go beyond suffering forever. You know the eightfold path. This refuge is the most excellent and most valuable of all. You will certainly become free from all suffering by taking this refuge.

The World-honored One clearly taught all sentient beings not to take refuge in mountain deities, demon spirits, and so on, or in shrines of those outside the way, with their fear of suffering. It is not possible to be liberated from various sufferings by taking refuge in those. People follow the crooked teachings of those outside the way, and follow the ways of cows, deer, demons, those who practice not speaking, those who practice not hearing, dogs, chickens, peacocks, or those who put ash on their bodies, grow long hair, sacrifice sheep on the seasonal rites after chanting mantras, worship the fire in the fourth month, or bow to the wind on the seventh day. They dedicate numerous flowers to devas and pray for attaining what they desire. There is no reason why these practices would cause liberation. Thus, people suffer in vain without receiving wholesome results. This is not recommended by those who are wise.

Thus, make sure that you don't mistakenly fall into such crooked paths. Do not take refuge in any practices that are similar to these. Human birth is difficult to acquire and buddha dharma is rarely encountered. Do not spend your life in the company of demons and waste many lifetimes among those who have crooked views. This would be deplorable. Instead, immediately take refuge in the three treasures of buddha, dharma, and sangha, and not only be liberated from all suffering but also attain enlightenment.

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The *Rarity Sutra* says, “Even if you guided the four worlds and the six deva realms of desire, and helped all beings there to attain the arhat fruit, the merit could be compared with that of helping one person to take refuge in the three treasures.”

The four worlds means the Eastern, Western, Southern, and Northern Continents. The North Continent is where the teaching of the Three Vehicles cannot reach. To teach beings there and help them to become arhats would be an extraordinary thing. The merit, however, is not even close to the merit of teaching and helping one person to take refuge in the three treasures. Also, the six heavenly realms of devas are where there are few who attain the way. Even if you would help them to attain the four fruits, it cannot compare with the great and deep merit of helping one person to take refuge in the three treasures.

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The *Ekota Agama Sutra* says:

The king of Tushita Heaven showed the five signs of decay and was about to be reborn as a boar. Indra heard his desperate voice, called to him, and said, “You should take refuge in the three treasures.” The king followed his teaching and escaped being reborn as a boar.

Shakyamuni Buddha said in a verse:

By taking refuge in the buddha, beings will not fall into the three unwholesome realms.

Free from desire, abiding in human or deva realms, they will reach nirvana.

This king took refuge in the three treasures and was born in a wealthy man's family. He left his household, and achieved the state beyond study. In this way, the merit of taking refuge in the three treasures is immeasurable and boundless

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[The *Great Collection of Sutras* says:]

When the World-honored One was alive, two billion six hundred million hungry dragons went to see him, all shedding tears like rain, and said, “We beg you to rescue us, World-honored One of great compassion. Upon reflection, we realize that although we left the household and entered buddha dharma in our past lives, because of various unwholesome deeds we have remained in the three unwholesome realms for immeasurable eons. Then, due to other causes, we were born in the dragon realm and have been suffering a great deal.”

The Buddha said to the dragons, “You should immediately take refuge in all three treasures and practice wholesomeness single-heartedly. As a result, you will be able to meet the final buddha named Lochana Buddha in this present kalpa. Your sins will

disappear during this buddha's time." Upon hearing these words, all the dragons received and maintained the three treasures with utmost sincerity until their lives ended.

Thus, when the Buddha rescued the dragons, he used no other methods or techniques than just presenting the three treasures. Although in their past lives these dragons had left the household and received the three treasures, because of their unwholesome karma they became hungry dragons and there was no other way for the Buddha than to offer them refuge in the three treasures.

Know that the merit of taking refuge in the three treasures is venerable, unsurpassable, inconceivable, and profound. The World-honored One already proved this. Sentient beings should receive them with trust. Without having the dragons chant the names of buddhas in the ten directions, the World-honored One just encouraged them to take refuge in the three treasures. Who can fathom the depth of his intention? Thus, sentient beings nowadays should immediately take refuge in the three treasures instead of chanting various buddhas' names. Do not miss this great merit through stupidity and ignorance.

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[The *Great Collection of Sutra* says:]

Among these dragons, there was a blind female dragon whose mouth looked like excrement, rotten and full of insects. Her body was eaten all over by mosquitoes and flies; it shed blood and puss from their bites. She smelled disgusting and it was impossible for others to be near her.

Seeing the dragon suffering so much, the World-honored One asked with great compassion, "Sister, how come you have such an unwholesome body? What did you do in your past life?"

The dragon replied, "World-honored One, I have all kinds of suffering which does not stop even for a moment. It's beyond description. When I reflect on the past three billion six hundred million years, for one hundred thousand years during that time I was among unwholesome dragons and received pain day and night without end. I remember that ninety-one kalpas ago I was a nun in the dharma of Vipasyin Buddha, but I thought of carnal affairs even more than a drunkard would. Although I was a home-leaver, I could not follow the dharma. I would spread a mat in the temple and often engaged in impure conduct. In satisfaction of my desire, I had much carnal pleasure. Also, I was greedy for possessions and undeservedly received excessive donations from believers. Because of all this, I have been continuously in the three unwholesome realms and have received all kinds of burning tortures. Even after ninety-one kalpas I cannot receive a deva body."

The Buddha inquired further, "Then, after this kalpa is over, what are you going to be born into?"

Hearing these words, the dragon said, "As the result of this past karma, even if I were to be born into a better world, when that karma is exhausted, a wind of unwholesome karma will blow, and I will be born in this place once again." Then the dragon said, "Great compassionate World-honored One, please, please save me."

The Buddha scooped up water with his hands and said, "I call this wish-granting medicine. I will speak the truth to you. In the past I gave up my life in order to save a dove. I had no doubt and did not hold onto myself with the mind of self-clinging. If what I say to you is true, all your unwholesome sickness will be healed."

Then, the World-honored One put the water in his mouth and sprayed it over the blind dragon's body. Instantly, all her sickness was healed. The dragon said to the Buddha, "I wish to take refuge in the three treasures from you."

Thus, the World-honored One gave her refuge in the three treasures.

This dragon had been a nun in the dharma of Vipasyin Buddha. Although she had broken the precepts, she was familiar with buddha dharma. Seeing Shakyamuni Buddha in person, she asked for and took refuge in the three treasures. This is certainly nurturing the wholesome root.

The benefaction of seeing the Buddha undoubtedly depends on taking refuge in the three treasures. Even though you are not a blind dragon and do not have an animal body, if you have not encountered the Tathagata and taken refuge in the three treasures, you are far away from seeing the Buddha; you should be pitied. The World-honored One himself gives refuge in the three treasures. Know that the merit of taking refuge in the three treasures is both profound and immeasurable.

Indra bowed to a wild fox and took refuge in the three treasures. This is all due to the unequalled merit of taking refuge in the three treasures.

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When the Buddha was at the Nigrodha Grove in Kapilavastu, Mahanama of the Shakya Clan came to him and said, "What is a lay person?"

The Buddha said, "If a good man or a good woman whose senses are open takes refuge in the three treasures, the person is called a lay person."

Mahanama said, "What is a partial lay person?"

The Buddha said, "Mahanama, one who takes refuge in the three treasures and receives even one precept [receiving the five precepts in stages], that person is called a partial layperson."

Thus, in becoming a disciple of the Buddha, you take refuge in the three treasures. Whatever precept you receive, you take refuge in the three treasures and then receive other precepts. In this way, you receive the precepts as a result of taking refuge in the three treasures.

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According to the *Dharmapada* [the Sanskrit version of the *Dhammapada*]:

Long ago Indra knew that he was about to die and be reborn as a donkey. He was worried and thought the Buddha, World-honored One, alone could save him from his trouble. So, he went to the Buddha, prostrated, and took refuge in him. His life ended before he stood up and he entered a donkey's womb. Then the donkey broke her bit, went into a potter's house, and destroyed many pots. Getting angry, the potter hit the donkey and harmed her womb. Indra thus regained his life.

The Buddha said, "Your sins have ended as you took refuge in the three treasures at the end of your life."

Hearing this, Indra attained the first fruit [becoming a sage, a stream-enterer].

No one equals the Buddha, World-honored One, for relieving the suffering in the world. This is why Indra rushed to see him. While he was prostrating, his life ended and he entered a donkey's womb. With the merit of taking refuge in the Buddha, the donkey's bit was broken and she destroyed pots in the potter's house. The owner of the pots hit her, injuring her body and breaking open her womb. Thus, Indra returned to his body. Hearing the Buddha's words, he received the first fruit. This is due to the merit of taking refuge in the three treasures.

In this way, to be free from the suffering of the world and realize unsurpassable enlightenment is undoubtedly due to the merit of taking refuge in the three treasures. With the power of taking refuge in the three treasures, Indra not only became free from the three unwholesome realms but he also returned to his body. He not only received the reward of being in the deva realm, he also became a sage, a stream-enterer. Indeed, the ocean of merit of the three treasures is immeasurable and boundless.

When the World-honored One was alive, humans and devas had great fortune. What can humans and devas do during the last span of five hundred years after the Tathagata's parinirvana [the period of declined dharma]? However, the Tathagata's images, relics, and so on are still present in the world. By taking refuge in them, you can still receive merit.

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According to the *Unprecedented Causation Sutra*:

The Buddha said, "I recall that innumerable kalpas ago, in a mountain in the great country of Vimana, there was a wild fox, chased by a hungry lion. While running, the fox fell into a well and could not get out. After three days, when it was ready to die, it opened its mind and said in a verse:

Due to misfortune, I suffer today and am about to die inside this well.

All things are impermanent. It would have been better if I had been eaten by the lion.

I take refuge in the buddhas of the ten directions. Please know that my mind is selfless and pure.

When Indra heard the fox calling out the buddhas' names, he was shocked, thought of ancient buddhas, and said to himself, "I am on my own without a teacher, immersed in the five desires and drowning in them."

He flew down to the well together with eighty thousand devas to talk with the fox. Seeing the fox unsuccessfully trying to climb out from the bottom of the well, Indra inquired, "Does a sage not have skillful means? I see a fox, but you must be a bodhisattva with something valuable to teach. Would you please expound essential dharma for us devas?"

The fox looked up and replied, "You are the king of devas but do not behave well. The dharma teacher is down here and you are up there. You are asking for essential dharma without expressing respect. The dharma water is pure and capable of saving beings. Why do you regard yourself higher?"

Hearing this, Indra was greatly ashamed, while the accompanying devas were surprised and said in laughter, "The king of devas came down with no effect."

Indra said to them, "Don't be surprised. I have been stubborn and without virtue. I need to ask about essential dharma." Then he hung down his celestial robe, picked up the fox, and got him out. The devas prepared the food of nectar for the fox, who took it and regained vitality. Unexpectedly meeting good fortune in the midst of calamity, the fox rejoiced immeasurably and expounded essential dharma for Indra and devas.

This is called the story of Indra taking an animal as a teacher. In this way we clearly learn that the names of buddha, dharma, and sangha are rarely heard. Thus, Indra took the fox as his teacher.

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With the help of our wholesome deeds in past lives, we have a chance day and night to encounter and hear the names of the three treasures and the dharma left by the Tathagata. Such an opportunity does not recede in the course of time. This is the essential dharma.

Even the demon Pamimant takes refuge in the three treasures and escapes disaster. How much more so will others who arouse effort and accumulate merit by taking refuge in the three treasures!

In the practice of the way by children of the Buddha, people always pay respect to and invoke the three treasures in the ten directions, burn incense, sprinkle flowers, and engage in various practices. This is an ancient path and the authentic practice of buddha ancestors. Know that any practice that does not depend upon taking refuge in the three treasures is the way of outsiders, or that of demons.

The dharma of buddhas and ancestors always begins with taking refuge in the three treasures.

Copying of this draft written by Dogen, my late master, was completed on a day of the summer practice period in the seventh year of the Kencho Era [1255]. Dogen could not make revised and final manuscripts. He would have made some additions and deletions in the process of editing. Since this is no longer possible, I have preserved his draft. Ejo.