

Taking Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha

by Kokyo Henkel

To be alive in this world is difficult. From birth to death we're faced with all kinds of challenges and we are given no definitive instruction manual about how to live this life. We may receive various instructions along the way, but they're usually not so reliable. Not only do we have to deal with birth, old age, sickness and death, but also not getting what we want and getting what we don't want, over and over again. Everything's impermanent with nothing to truly rely on. What can we really trust? Financial security and insurance policies are good but they cannot be relied on completely as conditions change. Family and loved ones are great, but ultimately they're unreliable, undependable and impermanent too. They're all going to die and we're going to die. Therefore, we try to make the best of it – often investing our trust in all kinds of unimportant distractions, trying to avoid paying too much attention to this pervasive unreliability, because it's painful and frightening. We look for lasting fulfillment and security in having good things, good relationships, good reputation, good health, and so on. So much of life is just trying to make the best of samsara – this unreliable, impermanent, never completely satisfying realm of habitual patterns. Deeply contemplating the extent to which we invest our time and energy in these things paints kind of a bleak picture. It's no wonder that we look for so many activities to distract us from this truth.

Fortunately, that's not the whole story – we also have an incredible opportunity in the midst of all this: taking refuge in buddha, dharma, and sangha. The longer I practice the more I come to the conclusion that these three treasures are the only thing that's really reliable in this life. The more I open to them, the more joyfully I feel it is so. And the more I try to fool myself with refuge in anything else, it never seems to work out quite right. We all have the opportunity to discover, clarify, and remember the three treasures, and question ourselves over and over, is this what we rely on? If not, then what do we rely on or take refuge in? As long as we are alive, we are taking refuge in something. As my teacher Tenshin Roshi once said, “If we go through a whole day without remembering what is most important to us, that's a risky day.” So for the sake of protecting others as well as our own well-being, we need to find our true refuge.

“Buddha” means awake or aware or observing, and is related to the English word ‘bud,’ a flower's awakening or opening. “Dharma” has many different connotations. It can mean to preserve or maintain something. It can mean custom, method, or standard. It can also mean duty or obligation, and goodness or virtue, and element or phenomenon. Though all these meanings are somewhat different, they are also related. Dharma can also mean truth, reality, or law – that's the main definition when we take refuge in dharma. Yet another meaning of dharma is teachings or explanation. Combining these, dharma refers to teachings about truth or reality. “Sangha” means spiritual community or gathering, and it came to mean followers of the Buddha and his dharma, those who take refuge in buddha-dharma. “Ratna” means treasure, jewel, or precious, so they are called the three treasures, jewels, or precious ones. A precious treasure is something rare, valuable, and beautiful.

What can we really rely on one-hundred percent? What is it that will never lead us astray or let us down, never confuse, abandon, or harm us? What is most trustworthy, even when everything around us is falling apart, including our own body and mind? That's the meaning of refuge,

“sharanam” in Sanskrit. It means complete trust, reliance, recourse, refuge – that to which one can surrender. In Japanese it’s translated as “ki-e,” returning to and relying on. The English word refuge comes from the French “fugere,” to flee or escape, and “re” means back to. So refuge in this case means fleeing back to buddha, dharma, and sangha, or escaping from entanglement in this unreliable mess of self-centered habits, back to the reality of buddha, being awake and free. In Zen, we take refuge right in the midst of this unreliable mess, free from samsara while it continues to appear, because we know in reality the true nature of the mess is actually buddha, dharma, and sangha. Refuge also means shelter, or protection from danger, a realm of true safety and security. It’s the perfect word to translate sharanam.

Everything that we know of is impermanent, unpredictable, and unreliable; all our experiences come and go. However, the knowing of everything known doesn’t come and go, the experiencing of each impermanent experience is always present. This knowing or experiencing never changes no matter what’s happening. It is pure, nonjudgmental, all-inclusive awareness, always free from pain even if the present experience feels bound or painful. It never contracts into the feeling of being a separate self – it is simply the knowing of that constricted feeling. And on closer examination, we discover that there isn’t really a known experience apart from the knowing of it. That which is known is nothing other than the knowing of it, an experience is nothing other than the experiencing of it, seeing and smelling a flower is really only the knowing of color, shape, scent, and thought. This pure unbound knowing is an unshakeable refuge called “buddha,” the teachings and practices that directly point to it, clarify it, and remind us of this truth are an unshakable refuge called “dharma,” and those who point it out, who encourage us to clarify it, and who remind us of it are an unshakeable refuge called “sangha.” Sometimes people encourage or remind us to take refuge in buddha by hurting us, so they could still be sangha for us at that time. The unshakable and truly trustworthy refuge of sangha is the way that others are always encouraging, reminding, and supporting us to trust the unbound knowing that is buddha. If we don’t feel encouraged by someone to practice, then we aren’t taking refuge in sangha at that time. These are the three treasures, which are always available for anyone to take refuge in at any time.

These days when walking around town on dark evenings I find, when approaching the curb to cross a busy street, that cars will often stop to let me cross. I feel the kindness from the invisible drivers, whose faces I can’t see in the dark. I usually wave in gratitude as I pass. This anonymous kindness of drivers, people willing to spontaneously give up a little of their own time for a stranger to cross the street, reminds me of the selfless nonjudgmental knowing that we all share. True kindness is always based on the reality of nonseparation between self and other, the nonduality of knowing and known, even if one may have never heard such a teaching. Though it may be just a trivial thing, even a small act of selflessness is worthy of refuge, a pointer to reality, something to trust and rely on in this world of self-centered dreams.

There are some beautiful metaphors in the sutras for the three treasures. Buddha is the bright sun at dawn, dharma is the rays of sunlight that emanate from it and spread over the world, and sangha is those whose darkness is dispelled by the sunlight. Buddha is a great rain cloud in the dry summer, dharma is the rain falling from the cloud, and sangha is the plants nourished by the rain. Buddha is a lotus flower rising in purity from the mud, dharma is the sweet fragrance of the lotus flower, and sangha is the bees who are drawn by the sweet scent to gather nectar from the

lotus to make nourishing honey. Buddha is a skillful doctor who prescribes medicine, dharma is the medicine to relieve suffering, and sangha is the nurse who assists the doctor by reminding the sick to take the medicine.

Dogen Zenji presents four different versions of the three treasures: “The abiding-and-maintaining three treasures are buddha as painted or carved images and stupas; dharma as written sutra books; and sangha as shaving the head, wearing a robe, and following the precepts.” Suzuki Roshi calls these the “cultural three treasures,” the outer forms that represent the formless meaning – but more than merely representing it, they are complete expressions or manifestations of the true three treasures, maintaining them in the world century after century up to today.

“The transformational three treasures are buddha as Shakyamuni Buddha; dharma as his turning of the dharma wheel, spreading the sacred teaching; and sangha as the first five monks to hear Buddha’s teaching and realize it.” These may be what most people first think of when they hear of the three treasures, the historical buddha, his teachings, and his community – which are also particular manifestations of the true three treasures.

“The essential-reality three treasures are buddha as the formless reality body or dharmakaya; dharma as the unconditioned freedom of nirvana; and sangha as the merit of learning dharma and going beyond learning.” These three treasures are prior to the historical buddha. Actually they are completely outside the realm of time and space, and are the formless source of the previous two versions of manifested three treasures.

“The one-body three treasures are buddha as verification of great awakeness; dharma as freedom from duality; and sangha as accord with reality, harmonious and free from obstructions.” This originally perfect all-pervading unity of the three treasures is the nature of mind itself, open presence. Refuge in these three treasures is total trust in this all-inclusive knowing without anything separate to be known, simply being this knowing. Suzuki Roshi said, “When we become one with buddha, or truth, there is no communion or interrelationship because it is just one. This is completely taking refuge in its true sense.”