



Refuge in the Buddha

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

The first step in entering the Buddhist path is going for refuge to the Triple Gem, and the first of the three gems that we approach as refuge is the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Because the act of going for refuge to the Buddha marks the beginning of a new chapter in our life, it is worth our while to repeatedly pause and reflect upon the significance of this momentous step. Too often we are prone to take our first steps for granted. Yet it is only if we review these steps from time to time in a deepening awareness of their implications that we can be sure the following steps we take will bring us closer to our desired destination.

The going for refuge to the Buddha is not a single action which occurs only once and is then completed with absolute finality. It is, or should be, a continually evolving process which matures in tandem with our practice and understanding of the Dhamma. To go for refuge does not imply that at the outset we already possess a clear grasp of the dangers that make a refuge necessary or of the goal towards which we aspire. Comprehension of these matters grows gradually over time. But to the extent that we have actually gone for refuge with sincere intent, we should make an earnest effort to sharpen and deepen our understanding of the objects to which we have turned as the basis for our deliverance.

In going for refuge to the Buddha it is most essential at the outset to clarify our conception of what a Buddha is and how he functions as a refuge. If such clarification is lacking, our sense of refuge can easily become tainted by erroneous views. We may ascribe to the Buddha a status he never claimed for himself, as when we regard him as the incarnation of a god, as the emanation of the Absolute, or as a personal saviour. On the other hand, we may detract from the exalted status to which the Buddha is properly entitled, as when we regard him simply as a benevolent sage, as an unusually astute Asiatic philosopher, or as a genius of meditative technology.

A correct view of the Buddha's nature would see him in terms of the title he assigned to himself: as a Fully Self-Enlightened One (*sammā sambuddha*). He is self-enlightened because he has awakened to the essential truths of existence entirely on his own, without a teacher or guide. He is fully enlightened because he has comprehended these truths completely, in all their ramifications and implications. And as a Buddha he has not only fathomed these truths himself, but has also taught them to the world so that others may awaken from the long sleep of ignorance and attain the fruits of liberation.

Taking refuge in the Buddha is an act anchored in a particular historical individual: the recluse Gotama, the scion of the Sakyan clan, who lived and taught in the Ganges valley in the fifth century B.C. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we rely upon this historical individual and the body of instruction that stems from him. It is important to stress this point in view of the fashionable notion that taking refuge in the Buddha means that we take refuge in "the Buddha-mind within ourselves" or in "the universal principle of enlightenment." Such ideas, allowed to go unchecked, can lead to the belief that anything we contrive in the flights of our imagination can qualify as true Dhamma. To the contrary, the Buddhist tradition insists that when we go for refuge to the Buddha, we place ourselves under the guidance of one who is

distinctly different from ourselves, one who has scaled heights that we have barely begun to glimpse.

But when we rely upon the recluse Gotama as our refuge, we do not apprehend him merely as a particular individual, a wise and sensible sage. We apprehend him rather as a Buddha. It is his Buddhahood—his possession of the full range of excellent qualities that come with perfect enlightenment—that makes the recluse Gotama a refuge. In any cosmic epoch, a Buddha is that being who first breaks through the dark mass of ignorance encompassing the world and rediscovers the lost path to Nibbāna, the cessation of suffering. He is the pioneer, the trail-blazer, who discovers the path and proclaims the path so that others, by following his tracks, may extinguish their ignorance, arrive at true wisdom, and break the fetters that tie them to the round of repeated birth and death.

For the refuge in the Buddha to be genuine, it must be accompanied by a commitment to the Buddha as an incomparable teacher, as unexcelled and unsurpassed. Strictly speaking, the historical Buddha is not unique since there have been earlier Fully Enlightened Ones who have arisen in past epochs and there will be others who will arise in future epochs as well. But in any one world system it is impossible for a second Buddha to arise while the teaching of another Buddha is still extant, and thus in terms of human history we are justified in regarding the Buddha as a unique teacher, unequalled by any other spiritual teacher known to humanity. It is this readiness to recognise the Buddha as “the unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, the teacher of gods and humans” that is the hallmark of an authentic act of taking refuge in the Buddha.

The Buddha serves as a refuge by teaching the Dhamma. The actual and final refuge, embedded within the Dhamma as refuge, is Nibbāna, “the deathless element free from clinging, the sorrowless state that is void of stain” (Itiv. 51). The Dhamma as refuge comprises the final goal, the path that leads to that goal, and the body of teachings that explain the practice of the path. The Buddha as refuge has no capacity to grant us liberation by an act of will. He proclaims the path to be travelled and the principles to be understood. The actual work of walking the path is then left to us, his disciples.

The proper response to the Buddha as refuge is trust and confidence. Trust is required because the doctrine taught by the Buddha runs counter to our innate understanding of ourselves and our natural orientation towards the world. To accept this teaching thus tends to arouse an inner resistance, even to provoke a rebellion against the changes it requires us to make in the way we lead our lives. But when we place trust in the Buddha we open ourselves to his guidance. By going to him for refuge we show that we are prepared to recognise that our inherent tendencies to self-affirmation and grasping are in truth the cause of our suffering. And we are ready to accept his counsel that to become free from suffering, these tendencies must be controlled and eliminated.

Confidence in the Buddha as our refuge is initially awakened when we contemplate his sublime virtues and his excellent teaching. It grows through our undertaking of the training. At first our confidence in the Buddha may be hesitant, punctured by doubts and perplexity. But as we apply ourselves to the practice of his path, we find that our defilements gradually lessen, that wholesome qualities increase, and with this comes a growing sense of freedom, peace and joy. This experience confirms our initial trust, disposing us to advance a few steps further. When at last we see the truth of the Dhamma for ourselves, the refuge in the Buddha becomes inviolable. Confidence then becomes conviction, the conviction that the Blessed One is “the speaker, the proclaimer, the bringer of the good, the giver of the Deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata.”

Publications

Recent Releases

- *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. Nyanaponika Thera. This is the first BPS edition of our Patron's great classic, kept in print for 30 years by the original British publisher. Translated into seven languages, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* has been an important bridge in the spiritual encounter of East and West. With the combined powers of deep personal insight and clear exposition, the author conveys the essential principles making up the Buddha's way of mindfulness. "A work of unique importance ... written with great depth, extraordinary knowledge, deep humanity" (Erich Fromm).

Softback: 224 pages 140 mm x 214 mm

U.S. \$9.50; U.K. £5.50; SL Rs.200. Order No. BP 5095

- *Middle Land, Middle Way: A Pilgrim's Guide to the Buddha's India*. Ven. S. Dhammika. This is the first comprehensive guidebook for the modern Buddhist wishing to undertake a pilgrimage to the places in India made sacred by the Buddha's presence. The author begins with an inspiring account of the significance and history of pilgrimage in Buddhism. Then sixteen places are covered, the Buddha's association with each place, their later history, and a detailed description of the monuments found there. With maps and colour photos, an essential companion for pilgrim and general traveller.

Softback: 208 pages 140mm x 214 mm

Rs. 200. Order No. BP 6095

- *In This Very Life: The Liberation Teaching of the Buddha*. Sayadaw U Pandita. This book contains teachings given during an intensive retreat. It starts with basic instructions on sitting and walking meditation, and goes on to describe in detail the stages of practice, including recognising and dealing with problems that arise as insight deepens. Drawing on 40 years of teaching experience, the author's instructions are simple and concrete, ideal for the beginner and advanced meditator alike. Sayadaw U Pandita is one of the outstanding teachers in the tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw and the abbot of Panditarama monastery and meditation centre in Rangoon.

(For sale in Asia only. Elsewhere order from Wisdom Publications, 361 Newbury Street, Boston, MA 02115, U.S.A. or from bookshops stocking books on Asian religions.)

Softback: 298 pages 140 mm x 214 mm

U.S. \$9.50; U.K. £5.50; SL Rs.300. Order No. BP 508S

- *The Discourse on Right View: The Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta and its Commentary*. Translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli; edited and revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi. In this sutta, issued in the Wheel Series, Ven. Sāriputta Thera, the Buddha's chief disciple, succinctly explains all the essential principles that must be comprehended to arrive at the liberating insight into truth. The inclusion here of the classical commentary allows for an in-depth study of the sutta.

Softback: 88 pages 124 mm x 182 mm

U.S. \$3.95; U.K. £2.50; SL Rs.75. Order No. WH 377/379

Back in Print

- *The Life of the Buddha according to the Pali Canon*. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. Composed entirely from texts of the Pali Canon, the oldest authentic record, this highly acclaimed work portrays an image of the Buddha which is vivid, warm and moving. The ancient texts are rendered in a language marked by lucidity and dignity as befits the beauty of the original.

Softback: 400 pages 140 mm x 214 mm
U.S. \$16.00; U.K. £9.00; SL Rs.350. Order No. BP 101S

- *The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions*. K.N. Jayatilleke. Drawing upon his extensive learning and philosophical training, the author shows how Buddhism has managed to combine a firm commitment to a highly precise doctrine with an open-minded tolerance towards other systems of belief.

Softback: 40 pages 124 mm x 182 mm
U.S. \$1.95; U.K. £1.30; SL Rs.30. Order No. WH 216

In Preparation

- *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*. Edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi.
- *A Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms*. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.
- *Tranquillity and Insight: An Introduction to the Oldest Form of Buddhist Meditation*. Amadeo Solé-Leris.
- *The All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajala Sutta and its Commentaries*. Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (reprint).
- *The Discourse on the Root of Existence: The Mūlapariyāya Sutta and its Commentaries*. Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (reprint).
- *The Seven Stages of Purification & the Insight Knowledges*. Matara Sri Ñāṇārāma Mahathera (reprint).

Notes and News

Khmer Dhammapada. During the reign of the Khmer Rouge almost all Buddhist scriptures within Cambodia were destroyed, and in the intervening years the lack of Buddhist books has been one of the major obstacles to the revival of Buddhism in that country. As a step to remedying this problem, late last year the Buddhist Relief Mission undertook to print a Khmer translation of the Dhammapada for free distribution. The BPS made a generous donation to this project; in this connection we wish to mention especially a very liberal contribution we received from Mr. Lloyd W. Perera of Colombo. The BRM succeeded in raising funds to print 4,000 copies of the Dhammapada, which are being distributed both within Cambodia and among Cambodian refugees. For further information about this project, and about future projects to support the Buddha Sasana in areas where urgent help is needed, contact: Buddhist Relief Mission, 266-27 Ozuku-cho, Kashihara-shi, Nara-ken 634, Japan.

Translations. Two of our more important titles have recently appeared in Spanish translations. One is Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera's *The Word of the Buddha*, which has been translated (from the original Pali texts rather than from the English) by Amadeo Solé-Leris and published under the title *La Palabra del Buda* (Indigo: Casanova 82, 08011 Barcelona). The other is Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's *The Noble Eightfold Path*, translated by Almudena Haurie and published as *La Esencia del Budismo: El Noble Sendero Octuple* (EDAF: Jorge Juan 30, Madrid).

Visiting Thailand? If so, a useful handbook for those seeking Buddhist teachings and meditation instruction is *A Guide to Buddhist Monasteries and Meditation Centres in Thailand*, by Bill Weir. This new third edition of the guide provides the address of each centre, directions for getting there, a description of the meditation system used, and information about teachers, daily

routine, food, lodgings, etc. Order from World Fellowship of Buddhists, 33 Sukhumvit Road, Bangkok 10110, Thailand.

In Memoriam. With regret we announce the passing away of two of our outstanding authors, both exemplary members of the Sangha. One is Ven. Ajahn Chah, the well-known meditation master of northeast Thailand, who expired peacefully on 16 January after a long period of illness. The other is Ven. Matara Sri Ñāṇārāma Mahathera, the meditation master of Nissarana Vana Hermitage in Mitirigala, Sri Lanka, who expired on 30 April at the age of 90. Both men, in their different ways, represented the highest ideals of Buddhist monkhood and we are privileged to include works by both among our publications.

A Happy Note. In the previous newsletter we included a “tragic note” on the apparent loss of the computer files for our projected *Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms*. We are happy to announce now that we did manage to find an uncorrupted backup disk with the files intact. Work on the glossary is now almost complete and the copy should be going to the printer soon.

Book Reviews

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Venerable U Silananda. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1990. 232 pp. PB \$12.95.

Transformation & Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990. 180 pp. PB \$10.00.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is the Buddha’s most complete discourse on the methodical development of right mindfulness, and thus our main source of guidance in the practice of insight meditation. The sutta announces “the only way” to the extinction of suffering and the attainment of Nibbāna to consist in the four foundations of mindfulness: contemplation of the body, feelings, mind and mental objects. Given the importance of this sutta, it is gratifying that two thorough studies of it have recently been published, each containing a translation of the sutta, a detailed commentary by the author, and sets of exercises for practice. What makes these two books especially interesting, and warrants their being read together, is that they are both the works of monks who have trained deeply in very different Buddhist traditions yet have found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the primary inspiration for their meditation practice.

Ven. U Silananda, author of *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, is a Burmese bhikkhu who is regarded as one of the foremost Dhamma authorities in his native Burma. His training in meditation took place under the renowned meditation master, Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw, who commissioned him to teach Dhamma in the West.

Ven. Silananda bases his exposition of the sutta on the longer version found in the Dīgha Nikāya, which includes an elaborate explanation of the Four Noble Truths lacking in the middle-length version of the Majjhima Nikāya. His exposition adheres closely to the exegetical tradition of Theravada Buddhism, grounded firmly upon the Pali commentaries of Acariya Buddhaghosa. In fact, he explains the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta somewhat in the manner of a classical commentary, taking up each significant phrase in the text for explanation. At the same time, however, the author’s style of presentation is simple and clear, though I must take exception with a few puzzling statements towards the end of the book which I assume got through due to careless editing. For those who would like a thorough “orthodox” explanation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta in lucid language, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness* will fill their need.

Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who now heads a Buddhist community in France. Although his background training lies in the Vietnamese Zen tradition, and includes a wide knowledge of the Mahayana philosophies, he has grounded his meditation practice on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which may have entered Vietnamese Buddhism through the Chinese translations of the Buddhist canon. While he uses the Pali version as the main basis for his *Transformation & Healing*, the book includes an appendix with English translations of two different Chinese versions of the sutta.

Ven. Nhat Hanh comes to the sutta from a very different philosophical background than a Theravadin commentator like Ven. Silananda, and thus the insights he derives from it also differ in important respects. His commentary bears testimony to the influence of the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness, the Yogachara concept of mind-only, and the Hwa-Yen concepts of inter-penetration and inter-being. While a Theravadin reader may find these different points of emphasis an interesting complement to his own perspective, there is one theme stressed by Ven. Nhat Hanh that he would have to object to strongly. This is the idea that our experiences of natural beauty (“the blue sky, the white clouds, the golden fields of wheat, the shining eyes of a child”) somehow counter the Buddhist perception of the universality of dukkha, which the author seems to regard almost as morbid. Not only does this idea presuppose as correct the literal equation of dukkha with actual suffering (rather than with the radical unsatisfactoriness of everything conditioned), but it leads to a new slant on the practice of Satipaṭṭhāna. The development of mindfulness is no longer taken up as the path to liberation from conditioned existence, but as the means of arriving at a pure and untainted enjoyment of life—questionable to the Theravadin as the final aim of the practice.

Nevertheless, despite some serious reservations I hold about Ven. Nhat Hanh’s approach, his commentary on the sutta includes some extraordinarily fine passages which reveal a highly sensitive mind and a gifted writer. I found particularly noteworthy his sections on the contemplation of mind and mental factors, which are enriched by a number of striking similes. His commentary closes with an illuminating comparison of the three versions of the sutta, and the inclusion of the two Chinese versions in English allows the reader to compare the three texts and draw his or her own conclusions.

The same publisher, Parallax Press, also issues two other commentaries on Pali suttas by Thich Nhat Hanh: *Breathe! You Are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing* and *Our Appointment with Life* (on the Bhaddekaratta Sutta).

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Guidelines to Sutta Study

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

The third formal discourse of the Buddha, as recorded in the Mahāvagga's account of his early ministry, is the Ādittapariyāya Sutta, commonly known as The Fire Sermon. This sutta, quoted obliquely by T.S. Eliot in his famous poem "The Waste Land," illustrates one of the most characteristic teaching methods of the Buddha: the framing of his exposition in terms and imagery drawn directly from the immediate day-to-day experience of his audience. While the gripping message of the Fire Sermon may resonate even with readers like ourselves, whose lifestyles are culturally light years away from that of its original recipients, the Buddha's words must have made an extremely powerful impact on the thousand monks to whom they were first addressed, for these monks had only recently entered the fold of the Sangha after having been, for many years, fire ascetics whose lives were devoted to worship of the holy flame.

In the period immediately following the Discourse on Non-Self, the Buddha passed the rainy season in the Deer Park at Isipatana, where he had met his first five disciples. During the rains he encountered several groups of young men, all from prominent families in the region, to whom he taught the Dhamma. Impressed by this new and radically different teaching, these young men requested admission to the Sangha, which the Buddha readily granted. Soon after entering the Order, guided by the Master's instructions, they all attained the supreme goal of the holy life, the destruction of the defilements. At the end of the first rainy season, the Buddha assembled his sixty monk disciples, now all arahants, and enjoined them to wander over the country "for the welfare and happiness of the many," teaching the Dhamma and proclaiming the pure and perfect holy life.

The Master himself went to Uruvela, near the site of the Bodhi Tree where the previous spring he had attained the Supreme Enlightenment. At that time three matted-hair ascetics, brothers, were dwelling in the vicinity of Uruvela, each in his own hermitage on the banks of the Neranjara River. These three ascetics were highly revered by the people, and by reason of their learning, spiritual power, and reputation for sanctity had each acquired a large retinue of disciples. The eldest, Uruvela Kassapa, was the leader of a community of 500 ascetics; the second brother, Nadi Kassapa, was the head of 300 ascetics; and the third brother, Gaya Kassapa, had a retinue of 200 ascetics. The main observance of these ascetics, it seems, was maintaining the sacred fire and performing the fire sacrifice, probably in accordance with the traditional rules and rites laid down in the ancient Brahmanical scriptures, the Vedas.

The Buddha approached the hermitage of Uruvela Kassapa, whose spiritual stature was so high that he considered himself an arahant or perfect one. By means of a series of miraculous feats, detailed in the Mahāvagga, the Buddha impressed on Uruvela Kassapa his own spiritual superiority, until he could tell him frankly that he was neither an arahant nor one on the path to arahantship. Far from becoming chafed, Kassapa immediately declared his confidence in the Blessed One. He relinquished his status as a spiritual teacher, discarded the paraphernalia of the fire sacrifice, and along with his 500 followers took ordination under the Buddha. In turn the other two brothers and their bands of followers did the same.

Having thus acquired a new entourage of a thousand disciples, the Buddha proceeded towards Gaya's Head. There he stopped and addressed the thousand bhikkhus with the words that have come down to us as the Fire Sermon. This sutta appears twice in the Pali Canon: in the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya Piṭaka, in the narrative of the Buddha's early ministry; and in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, Saḷāyatana Saṃyutta, of the Sutta Pitaka (S.35:28). It is included in *Three Cardinal Discourses of the Buddha* (Wheel No. 17), in a translation by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli.

The Fire Sermon is structured upon another one of the schemes of classification that the Buddha uses to sort out the constituent factors of experience. This scheme deals with the same basic material as the five aggregates, but it classifies this material in accordance with a different principle. The scheme of the five aggregates emphasises the differentiation among the mental factors involved on any occasion of experience. Thus it collects all instances of material form (*rūpa*) under the aggregate of material form, while it distinguishes the mental side of experience by way of four aggregates: feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. The Fire Sermon takes as its basis the scheme of categories known as the six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*): the six sense faculties and their respective sense objects, through the interaction of which the six types of consciousness arise. Thus the sutta employs an analysis of experience in terms of the sensory field in which it occurs. Though our ordinary experience presents itself to us superficially as a monolithic whole, a solid and substantial continuum, when it is attended to carefully it is found to be a succession of distinct occasions of consciousness each of which arises in dependence on a particular sense faculty and takes as its object a particular sense datum. Thus any individual occasion of experience is either a seeing of visible forms through the eyes, a hearing of sounds through the ears, a smelling of odours through the nose, a tasting of flavours through the tongue, a sensing of tangibles through the body, or a cognising of mental objects through the internal mind faculty. As obvious as this fact may be when pointed out, when it is taken as the starting point for a deep critical examination of the nature of experience, it yields consequences that are startling and profound. These consequences the Buddha will show in the Fire Sermon.

(to be continued)



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