

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 2: What is a Buddhist?

Introduction

When we become a Mitra we assert that:

- “I think of myself as a Buddhist”
- “I am trying to practice the Five Precepts”
- “The Triratna Buddhist Community is the main context in which I want to practice, at least for the foreseeable future”

Part 1 of this Foundation Course is intended to help us explore the first of these declarations, giving us a better understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist.

But as soon as we ask what it means to be a Buddhist we run into a difficulty. In traditional Buddhism there is no word equivalent to our word ‘Buddhist’. For us in the West, to become an ‘ist’ of any sort usually means that we have accepted a set of ideas and beliefs. But Buddhism is not really an ‘ism’ in this sense. Buddhism is not so much a ‘faith’ as a path of practice. So to ‘be a Buddhist’ does not mean that we have signed up to a set of beliefs. It is more likely to mean that Buddhism has influenced the way we live, or that we are committed to Buddhist practices, or that we resonate with Buddhist ideas, or that we feel a link with the other Buddhists we have come across.

At the time of the Buddha the closest anyone got to saying “I am a Buddhist” was to say “I Go for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.” But when we first come across it this phrase probably means nothing to us. We need to decode it, and we need to break through the strange-sounding words to the inner experience they stand for. This is an experience you will already have had to some extent, otherwise you would not be taking part in this course. It is an experience that leads to a shift in our world-view, a shift in what we place our heart on, and a shift in how we act.

So the first part of this course aims to decode this phrase ‘Going for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.’ It aims to help us relate it to our own experience, partly to get a clearer idea of what it means to be a Buddhist, and more importantly to deepen and strengthen the experience it refers to.

In the following excerpt from his talks, Sangharakshita gives a brief introduction to the meaning of Going for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In doing so he rather mischievously uses the term ‘conversion’. For some people this word will have unwelcome ‘religious’ echoes, but we need to set these aside and focus

on its real meaning - the 'turning around' that leads us to shift our priorities in life. In this text Sangharakshita talks about 'going for refuge' to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as an intense experience that leads us to completely re-orientate our life. You may not experience such a deep sense of commitment, but this does not mean that you are not 'going for refuge' at some level, or that you cannot be a Buddhist. The experience of going for refuge occurs at a number of different levels, and a less intense commitment is also a valid and valuable experience. But you may find it useful to hear about what 'going for refuge' to the Three Jewels can be like in its fullness, and to reflect on the revolutionary, liberating effect such a commitment would have.

The Meaning of 'Going for Refuge'

(Text composed of combined extracts from lectures: 'Going for Refuge', 'Commitment and the Spiritual Community', 'Dimensions of Going for Refuge', and 'Levels of Going for Refuge', all by Sangharakshita.)

'Conversion' in Buddhism

'Conversion' in the spiritual sense may popularly be thought to be the turning from heathenish ways to the light of the 'true faith', but it also has a much higher and more valuable meaning. The general meaning of the word conversion is clear enough: any dictionary will tell us that it means simply 'turning around'. And when one turns around, this involves a double movement: a movement away from something and also a movement towards something. 'Conversion' means a turning from a lower to a higher way of life, from a worldly to a spiritual life. Conversion in this sense is often spoken of as a change of heart.

One of the most notable examples of a sudden 'turning around' is the case of the robber Angulimāla, who changed in the course of a few days from a murderous thief into an emancipated being. But while some people have these instantaneous experiences, conversion can come about in a much more gradual way. There may be a 'moment of conversion', the experience may be sudden, even catastrophic, but then it dawns on you that actually your whole life has been building up to that moment over many years.

But however it comes to us, over a period of years or in a matter of seconds, the experience of conversion is of the greatest possible importance, because it marks the beginning of our spiritual life. The meaning of conversion therefore deserves our closest attention.

'Going for Refuge'

Going for Refuge is the simplest aspect of conversion in Buddhism. So what is Going for Refuge? Although the term is so widely used, it can be rather mystifying when you first come across it. What does one mean by 'Refuge'? And who or what does one 'Go for Refuge' to? The short answer is that as a practising Buddhist one Goes for Refuge to the Buddha, the enlightened teacher; to the

Dharma, or his teaching of the path leading to Enlightenment; and to the Sangha, the community of those progressing along that path in the direction of Enlightenment. These three Refuges are commonly known as the Three Jewels.

The meaning of ‘refuge’

To begin with, what is meant by ‘refuge’? Refuge from what? The traditional explanations are quite clear on this point: the Three Jewels are a refuge from suffering. It is the existence of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha that makes it possible for us to escape from the unsatisfactoriness, the transitoriness, the conditioned-ness, the ‘unreality’ of the world as we experience it.

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are called the Three Jewels because they represent the world of the highest spiritual values. The fact that those values exist gives us the possibility of development, evolution, and progress far beyond our present comparatively low level. Considered as refuges, the Three Jewels represent the possibility of complete liberation from suffering.

It is no linguistic accident that we speak of *going* for refuge. You don’t just accept the Three Refuges; you *go* for refuge. This action is a total, unqualified reorientation of your life, your existence, your striving, in the direction of the Three Jewels. When you say ‘I Go for Refuge’ you are not only acknowledging that the Three Jewels are the most supremely valuable things in existence; you are also acting upon that acknowledgement. You see that the Three Jewels provide a possibility of escape into a higher spiritual dimension, and so you *go* – you completely redirect and reorganize your life in the light of that realization.

‘Going for Refuge’ at the time of the Buddha

Sometimes, when reading the Buddhist scriptures, we get the impression that the Dharma is a matter of lists. But it certainly wasn’t like that at the beginning. It was all fresh, all original, all creative. The Buddha would speak from the depths of his spiritual experience. He would expound the Truth. He would show the Way leading to Enlightenment, and the person to whom he was speaking would be absolutely astounded and overwhelmed. In some cases he might not be able to speak or to do more than stammer a few incoherent words. Something had been revealed to him. Something had burst upon him that was above and beyond his ordinary understanding. For an instant, at least, he had glimpsed the Truth, and the experience had staggered him. Time and again, on occasions of this sort, the scriptures tell us that the person concerned exclaimed,

‘Excellent, Lord, excellent! As if one should set up again that which had been overthrown, or reveal that which had been hidden, or should disclose the road to someone that was astray, or should carry a lamp into darkness, saying, "They that have eyes will see!" even so has the Truth been manifested by the Exalted One in many ways.’

He or she would feel deeply affected, deeply moved, deeply stirred, and sometimes there were external manifestations of this. Their hair might stand on end, they might even shed tears, or they might be seized by a violent fit of trembling. They would have a tremendous experience, an experience of illumination. They would have a tremendous sense of freedom, of emancipation, as though a great burden had been lifted from their back, or as though they'd been just suddenly let out of prison or as though they could at last see their way. The questioner, the listener, would feel spiritually reborn, would feel like a new man or woman.

Then, out of the depth of his gratitude, such a person would fervently exclaim,

‘To the Buddha for refuge I go! To the Dharma for refuge I go! To the Sangha for refuge I go!’

We can now see not only where the Going for Refuge had its origin, but also something of its tremendous spiritual significance. It is the heartfelt response of one's total being to the impact of the truth, the impact of Reality. One commits oneself to the truth, one surrenders to the truth, one wants to devote one's whole life to the truth.

The Going for Refuge represents our positive emotional reaction – in fact our total response – to the spiritual ideal when that ideal is revealed to our spiritual vision. Such is its appeal that we cannot but give ourselves to it. As Tennyson says, ‘We needs must love the Highest when we see it.’ Going for Refuge is a bit like that. You've seen the ‘Highest’, therefore you needs must love it, needs must give yourself to it, needs must commit yourself to it. That commitment of yourself to the ‘Highest’ is the Going for Refuge. The person would commit himself, because the vision that the Buddha had shown him, the vision of truth, the vision of existence, was so great that all he could do was give himself to that vision, completely. He would want to live for that vision.

And this was how one could know who was a Buddhist, this was the criterion: a Buddhist was one who goes for refuge in that sort of way as his response to the Buddha and his teaching. A Buddhist was one who commits himself, gives himself, if you like, to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. So this was the criterion in the Buddha's day two thousand five hundred years ago, and it remains the criterion today.

Now the object of refuge is threefold. One goes for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. What then do these three things mean? We can understand in a general way this feeling of committing oneself to the ‘Highest’, but what does it mean to go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha specifically?

The Buddha

The Buddha is an Enlightened human being. He is not God, nor an Avatar or messenger of God. He is a human being who, by his own efforts, has reached the summit of human perfection. He has gained the ineffable state which we designate Enlightenment, Nirvana, or Buddhahood. When we go for refuge to the Buddha, we go for Refuge to the Buddha in this sense. Not that we just admire him from a distance. Great as the gap between the Buddha and ourselves may be, that gap can be closed. We can close it by following the path, by practising the Dharma. We too can become as the Buddha. We too can become Enlightened. That is the great message of Buddhism. Each and every human being who makes the effort can become even as the Buddha became.

When, therefore, we go for refuge to the Buddha, we go for refuge to him as the living embodiment of a spiritual ideal that we can actually realise. When we go for refuge to the Buddha it is as though we say, 'That is what I want to be. That is what I want to attain. I want to be Enlightened. I want to develop the fullness of wisdom, the fullness of compassion.' Going for Refuge to the Buddha means taking the Buddha – taking Buddhahood – as our personal spiritual ideal, as something we ourselves can achieve.

The Dharma

The Dharma is the Path or Way. It is the path of what I have sometimes called the higher evolution of man, a stage of purely spiritual development above and beyond ordinary biological evolution. As a path, the Dharma exists in a number of different formulations. We speak of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, as well as the path of the Six Perfections of giving, morality, patient forbearance, vigour, higher consciousness, and wisdom – the Path of the Bodhisattva.

There are many different formulations, but the basic principle of the path is the same. The path is essentially the path of the higher evolution. It is whatever helps us to develop. The Dharma, or the path, is not to be identified with this or that particular teaching. According to the Buddha's own express declaration, the Dharma is whatever contributes to the spiritual development of the individual. When we go for refuge to the Dharma we therefore commit ourselves to whatever helps us develop spiritually – to whatever helps us to grow into Enlightenment, into Buddhahood.

This clear understanding is necessary, but not sufficient. Going for refuge to the Dharma means not just understanding the doctrines, but also the actual practice of the Dharma, through observance of Buddhist ethics, through meditation, and through the cultivation of transcendental wisdom.

The Sangha

Sangha means ‘Spiritual Community’. Firstly this is the community of all those who are spiritually more advanced than we are: the great Bodhisattvas, the Arahants, the Stream Entrants, and so on. Together they form the Āryasangha, or the Spiritual Community in the highest sense. Secondly, it is the community of all Buddhists, all those who go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha¹. In the case of the Āryasangha, going for refuge to the Sangha means opening ourselves to the spiritual influence of the sublime beings of whom it consists. It means learning from them, being inspired by them, reverencing them. In the case of the Sangha in the more ordinary sense – that of the community of all Buddhists – it means enjoying spiritual fellowship with one another and helping one another on the path. Sometimes you may not need a highly advanced Bodhisattva to help you. All you need is an ordinary human being who is a little more developed spiritually than you are, or even just a little bit more sensible. Only too often people are on the lookout for a great guru, but that is not what they really need, even if such a person was available. What they need is a helping hand where they are now, on the particular stage of the path which at present they occupy, and this an ordinary fellow Buddhist can generally give.

Of course the Sangha Refuge cannot really be understood in isolation from the context of the Three Jewels. Those who go for refuge to the Sangha necessarily go for refuge to the Buddha and Dharma. Before you can effectively go for refuge to the Sangha, you and all the other people who form the Sangha need to have a common spiritual ideal. It is this that draws them together.

But coming together in a kind of congregation is not enough to form a Sangha. We may all agree on doctrinal issues and even have the same meditation experiences, but this does not make us a Sangha. Sangha is a matter of communication – communication on the basis of spiritual ideals. If we find our contacts with people at work and at parties a bit meaningless, it is because we are not communicating on the basis of spiritual ideals. We could define the sort of communication that happens in a Sangha as ‘a vital mutual responsiveness on the basis of a common ideal and a shared principle’. This is communication in the context of Going for Refuge – a shared exploration of the spiritual world, between people who are in a relationship of complete honesty and harmony.

The most generally accepted mode of this communication is between spiritual teacher and disciple, but it is not limited to this. It may also take place between those who are simply friends, or *kalyāṇa mitras* – good friends in the spiritual sense. Going for refuge to the Sangha takes place when, on the basis of a common devotion to the Buddha and the Dharma, people explore together a spiritual dimension which neither could have explored on their own.

Notes

1. In some forms of Buddhism, most notably the Theravada school of South-east Asia, Sangha is taken to refer exclusively the monks and nuns, and excludes those who live a lay life. In Sangharakshita's view this gives too much importance to a matter of lifestyle, and not enough to the commitment that makes a person a Buddhist.

In Triratna we therefore use the word 'Sangha' to mean all seriously practising members of the Buddhist community, regardless of whether they live the life of a monastic, a householder, or a solitary practitioner.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What does 'being a Buddhist' mean to *you*? Can you relate this to the commitment to Buddha, Dharma or Sangha that Sangharakshita describes?
2. Was the process that led you to Buddhism sudden or gradual? What steps did it involve?
3. What do your non-Buddhist friends 'go for refuge to'? What do you 'go for refuge' to, apart from the Three Jewels?
4. Which of the Three Jewels do you relate to most strongly?
5. In what ways have you "redirected and reorganised your life" since becoming a Buddhist? Are there any ways you would like to redirect your life that you haven't got round to yet?