

## Our one true refuge

Monks and nuns are not our refuge. The conventional sangha, no matter how well attained or titled or born-again, are no refuge to others. The simple reason is that they have their own practice to keep up. They still have their own human weaknesses to deal with. The robes or tonsure do not define a renunciant, but his body, speech and mind do (Dh 264). Even renunciants must go for refuge, that is, to the 3 jewels.

“Refuge” (*sarana*) in early Buddhism means “a safe place,” one that keeps us from fear and danger. It is not something external, but in a personal, mental and spiritual sense. The historical Buddha has passed away, so we do not go to him as a person for refuge, but as an ideal. He is like a great doctor who has discovered the nature of a deadly disease, its diagnosis, its treatment, and healthy state. We honour that doctor by learning all this, so that we, too, are healthy, and teach others to be healthy, too.

In **the Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), the Buddha places the Dharma above even himself. In his great wisdom, he knows that in this way, even when he has passed away, the true teaching will survive, and continue to benefit us. Studying, practising and realizing the Dharma through the suttas, we truly take refuge in the Dharma. Even though we can learn the Dharma from others, we have to realize it for ourself.<sup>1</sup>

The monks and nuns we see today are the conventional “community.” They are composed of those who have taken the vow to live morally and mentally upright lives for the sake of awakening in this life itself. They are, in no way, “superior” to any of us, except in their inner peace, compassion and wisdom. The respect we show them is to remind them that they are renunciants who are working for awakening in this life itself. They are not “gurus” or power figures – there is no “fourth” refuge in the early teachings.

We take refuge in the spiritual community of awakened individuals and those on the path to awakening. These saints can be monastic or lay who are streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats.<sup>2</sup> Even if we do not actually meet such individuals, we know many of their stories which testify to the possibility and necessity of self-awakening in this life itself. We only need to carefully examine any of the 10 suttas of **the Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25) to understand this.<sup>3</sup> In short, we can awaken in this life itself, without resorting to any vows or rituals, free from superstitions and religious beliefs.

Occasionally, some of us approach a monastic with our personal problems. This can be a mutually risky business when the monastic is not properly trained to counsel, and when we transfer our own emotions onto the monastic. Some monastics even loath the fact that lay people come to them with such “petty” problems which they could have solved themselves, but feel obliged to listen to them.

The fact remains that monastics are not married, or could have been affected in some way by bad marriages. How then can they counsel lay people with marriage problems, and it is inappropriate for us to approach them with such problems. It’s almost like a deer going to a lion or tiger asking for succour.

Indeed, the personal experiences of love and sex that we share with monastics may build up to trouble them, as they have taken the training to abstain from sex and from having any social engagements with anyone (even with other monastics). Such forced exposure to worldliness may deepen repressed resentment in the monastic, or be compensated into zealous fund-raising, or sublimated into being overly engaged socially, bending monastic rules, even breaking them. For this reason, the Vinaya clearly warns monks to completely distance themselves from women and money.

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<sup>1</sup> See **Gārava Sutta** (S 6.2), [SD 12.3](#).

<sup>2</sup> On these 4 kinds of saints, see **Aṭṭha Puggala Sutta 2** (A 8.60), [SD 15.10a\(2\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> See eg **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), [SD 16.7](#).

Dharma-spirited and experienced monastics may, of course, train the laity to be Buddhist counsellors. If a monastic has experience in counselling, then he should be sure to keep to monastic rules when counselling the laity, when they are most vulnerable (and the monastic, too, might be vulnerable). The two Aniyata rules of the Patimokkha does not allow any monastic to be up close with a lay person of the opposite sex, either out of sight or out of earshot.<sup>4</sup>

Impropriety may also arise when a monastic is alone with another person of the same sex. A weak monastic may be aroused in inappropriate ways on account of the ambience. For this reason, it is wise to ensure that a chaperone is present during such sessions, and that it is done in an appropriate place (that is, with unlocked doors, with people in the adjoining room with a common door).

Better still, the laity should be encouraged by their teachers to be self-counsellors, and to be self-reliant in personal issues. After all, we are the ones facing the issues, and living daily with them. If we know the Dharma, then we are in the best position to heal ourselves. This is a good example of helping others to help themselves, of taking self as refuge (Dh 160).<sup>5</sup>

We have clear statements in the suttas regarding to whom we should go for refuge. In **the Madhurā Sutta** (M 84), when king Avantī,putta of Madhurā declares that he is going to the elder Mahā Kaccāna for refuge, the elder (an arhat himself) at once tells the king that we all go to the Buddha, and no one else, for refuge.<sup>6</sup>

In **the Ghoṭa,mukha Sutta** (M 94), too, the elder Udena instructs the brahmin Ghoṭa,mukha not to go to the elder, an arhat himself like Mahā Kaccāna, but to the Buddha, for refuge.<sup>7</sup> We go for refuge to the Buddha as the ideal of awakening. This means that we take him as the best example for our best conduct and aspiration to awaken in this life.

We do not become *who* the Buddha is (as in the views of some later Buddhists), but become *what* the Buddha *is*, that is, awakened. We see the Buddha as neither “dead” (in the human sense) nor eternal, but as having attained nirvana, like a fire that has gone out goes nowhere. To say the Buddha is “dead” tends towards annihilationism; to view him as being eternal is eternalism. These are the two extreme views which are false and to be avoided.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, even though we go for refuge before a monk or a nun, that monastic only acts as a witness to our public declaration to practise the Dharma with the Buddha as the ideal. Indeed, refuge-taking, is *not* merely a ritual, but a declaration to commit ourselves to practise the true Dharma and live accordingly. According to **the Kāraṇa,pālī Sutta** (A 5.194), even a layman – in this case, Piṅgiyāṇī, a lay follower in Vesālī – can be a witness to our refuge-going.<sup>9</sup>

**The Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records the Buddha as declaring to us, “Dwell with yourself as an island, with yourself as refuge, with no other refuge – dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge.”<sup>10</sup> The Buddha goes on to define this statement as referring to meditation, that is, the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*).

<sup>4</sup> Aniyata 1, V 3:188; Aniyata 2, V 3:191. See Ariyesako, *The Bhikkhus' Rules: A guide for laypeople*, 1998:58 f.

<sup>5</sup> See also **Atta,dīpa Sutta** (S 22.43), SD 93.8.

<sup>6</sup> **Madhurā Sutta** (M 84,10 f/2:89 f), SD 69.8. See also [SD 3.1 \(1.1\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> **Ghoṭa,mukha Sutta** (M 94,31-33/2:162 f), [SD 4.22](#).

<sup>8</sup> See **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), [SD 1.1](#).

<sup>9</sup> **Kāraṇa,pālī Sutta** (A 5.194,2.2/3:238 f), [SD 45.11](#).

<sup>10</sup> **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16,2.26 + 26.1), [SD 9](#); also at S 22.43/3:42, 47.9/5:154, 47.13/5:163, 47.14/5:164.

The word “island” here is *dīpa* in Pali and *dvīpa* in Sanskrit. Some Chinese translations take it wrong as *dīpa* in both Pali and Sanskrit, and rendered it as “lamp,” which does not fit the context here (which is meditation).

The 4 focuses of mindfulness are (1) body-based meditations, such as the breath meditation; (2) feeling-based meditation, that is, noting the impermanence of feelings, and so on; (3) mind-based meditation, that is, noting our thoughts and letting them go, and so on; and (4) reality-based meditation, that is, reflecting on the truths that arise confirming the sutta teachings.<sup>11</sup>

When we properly meditate, we are like an island, safe from the floods of suffering all around us. We are in the still eye of the world's storm. As we become more still within, and our minds become clearer, we are then truly our own refuge. As an island, we can also comfort others who are dragged along and drowning in the currents of suffering, and we teach them to rise out of the floods as Dharma islands. When we have awakened, all the waters around us are drained away, so that we see that we are all beautiful mountains free from the waters of suffering and ignorance.

Even when we are not yet awakened – indeed, especially so – we need self-refuge. Whether we are able to meditate or not, our refuge is further strengthened by our commitment to study and practise the true Dharma, which is found in the early suttas, the teachings of the historical Buddha. The suttas teach us to be free of self-centred ideas (from which all kinds views arises), of doubt (from which fear and uncertainty arise), and of superstition (which make us resort to rituals, magic and imaginative views).

The suttas are full of inspiring stories of those who have suffered greatly and how the Dharma has helped and healed them by their own self-awakening. If we know the suttas, they help us to meditate better and know ourselves better. The Dharma, through the suttas, is our most trustworthy and effective teacher. When we practise the Dharma for inner calm and clarity, then we have found our true refuge.<sup>12</sup>

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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<sup>11</sup> This is only a summary. For details, see **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), [SD 13.3](#).

<sup>12</sup> See **The one true refuge**, [SD 3.1](#).