

How to be a non-Buddhist

Faith and love for the Buddha

A reflection on **the Sarakāni Sutta 1** (S 55.24), SD 3.6

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Even a non-Buddhist who has not “gone for refuge” can benefit from faith and love in the Buddha. “Gone for refuge” means that we fully accept the 3 jewels – the Buddha, the Dhamma (the truth and teaching), and the sangha (the community of saints) – into our lives. We are practising Buddhists. Yet, a non-Buddhist can still follow the Buddha with great blessings.

A drinker attains streamwinner

The Sarakāni Sutta 1 (S 55.24) relates how the Buddha declares that Sarakāni the Sakya, who took to intoxicating drinks (*majja, pānaṃ apāyi*), died a **streamwinner**. When some people protested, the Buddha explained that Sarakāni may have been a drinker and so “failed in the training.”

Then, he gave two reasons for Sarakāni’s streamwinning.

- (1) “When a layman has gone for refuge over a long time to the Buddha, to the Dhamma, to the sangha, **how could he go to a lower world?**”
- (2) Sarakāni kept to the training at the time of his death, which also means that his last thought was a wholesome one.

Truth-follower

The Buddha then describes the 4 kinds of saints: the streamwinner, the once-returner, the non-returner and the arhat. In addition, he mentions 2 **other kinds of individuals** or “path seekers”:

- (1) the truth-follower (*dhammānusārī*), and
- (2) the faith-follower (*saddhā’nusārī*).

Basically, a **truth-follower** may be one who is not committed to the 3 jewels—he is not officially a Buddhist. In other words, he may be a follower of some other religion or follow none. However, he takes the trouble to intelligently examine the Dhamma. Constantly reflecting on this, he is convinced of the truth of the Buddha Dhamma.

Whether he declares himself to be a Buddhist or not, it remains that he “goes not to hell, ... the animal womb, ... the preta (ghost) realm, goes not to the woeful state, suffering state, lower world.” He will not fall into any subhuman state.

Faith-follower

The second kind of “path-seeker” is the **faith-follower**. While the truth-follower is strong in his **wisdom** faculty (*indriya*), the faith-follower is strong in his **faith** faculty. He may not be a committed or official Buddhist, and belong to some other religion or none, but “he has just a measure of faith ... just a measure of love” for the Buddha. Such a person “goes not to hell, ...

the animal womb, ... the preta (ghost) realm, goes not to the woeful state, suffering state, lower world.” He will not fall into any subhuman state.

Full freedom

Now, there is a catch here: the Buddha only declares that the truth-follower and the faith-follower “goes not” to any subhuman state. The **streamwinner** and other saints, on the other hand, are said to be “**fully freed** from hell, ... the animal womb, ... the preta (ghost) realm, **fully freed** from the woeful state, suffering state, lower world.”

This means that the streamwinner and other saints, who are committed “Buddhists,” will never fall from into the subhuman states right up to their attaining nirvana. The truth-follower and the faith-follower, on the other hand, will not fall into any subhuman state **this time**. There is no certainty that this will be the case in the next or future lives.

Aspiration for streamwinning

Clearly, there is a way around this future-life uncertainty. As truth-followers and faith-followers, we can be certain of not falling into the subhuman states and be sure of awakening by **ASPIRING TO STREAMWINNING** in this life itself. Again, we need not declare to others that we have done so (especially when, for some reason, we are following some other religion or none).

To do this, we need to understand the teaching of any of the 10 suttas in the **Okkanta Saṃyutta** (S 25), such as **the (Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

Refuge-going

One last point we should note is about **refuge-going**. The Buddha declares that when we have gone for refuge for a long time, we are sure of not falling into any of the subhuman states. It is vital to understand that this is **not** a ritual going for refuge. It will not work if we merely go to a monk, nun or teacher as “refuge.” Or, we only go for refuge externally, without any commitment of the 3 doors: speech, body and mind—in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the sangha of saints.

Refuge-going means

- (1) we take only the historical Buddha as our one true teacher (just as we need only one father);
- (2) we take only the Buddha’s Dhamma (teaching) as our guide in our practice and life (just as we need only 1 mother); and
- (3) we respect and emulate the arhats, and at least aspire for streamwinning in this life itself (just as we should keep our own home in order).

Then, not only are we certain of not falling into any subhuman states, but we are also guaranteed to attain the path of awakening (at least as a streamwinner) in this life itself.

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