

## The One True Refuge

A reflection on the early Buddhist teachings

(Excerpt from [SD 3.1 The One True Refuge](#), Piya Tan ©2003)

In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta [D 16], which details the demise of the Buddha, the Buddha advised the monks to take the Dhamma-Vinaya as their Teacher after He passed away. This is a very important statement the significance of which has been overlooked by many Buddhists. Because many Buddhists have not heard this advice or grasped its significance, they search far and wide for a teacher; a teacher they can be proud of and brag about his attainments, etc. Some even travel halfway [a]round the world or more in such a search.

These people create personality cults based on the teacher's perceived goodness rather than on the Dhamma-Vinaya itself. In some cases, after many years, the followers have not made much progress and have failed to taste the essence of the Dhamma. They would feel empty. As such, we must always remember that the Dhamma-Vinaya is our Teacher.

(Dhammavuddho Thera, "Liberation: Relevance of Sutta-Vinaya," 1999:3)

### 1 To whom do we go for refuge?

#### 1.1 MADHURĀ SUTTA (M 84,10 f/2:89 f), SD 69.8

**10** When this was said, king Avantī,putta of Madhurā said to the venerable Mahā Kaccāna:

"Excellent, master Kaccāna! Excellent, master Kaccāna! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been made clear by master Kaccāna.

*I go to the master Kaccāna for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Kaccāna remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth, for life."*

"Do not go to me for refuge, maharajah. Go for refuge to that same Blessed One to whom I have gone for refuge."

"Where is he living now, master Kaccāna, that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one?"

"That Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one, has attained nirvana, maharajah." **[90]**

**11** "If we heard that the Blessed One was within 10 leagues, we would go ten leagues in order to see that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one. If we heard that the Blessed One was within 20 leagues, ... 30 leagues, ... 40 leagues, ... 50 leagues, ... a 100 leagues, we would go a hundred leagues in order to see that Blessed One, accomplished,

fully self-awakened one. Even though the Blessed One has entered nirvana, I go to that Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Kaccāna remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth, for life."

### 1.3 Kāraṇa,pālī Sutta (A 5.194,2.2/3:238 f), SD 45.11

The Kāraṇa,pālī Sutta is a short but significant discourse highlighting the fact that refuge-going can be taken even with a layperson as witness. The brahmin Kāraṇa,pālī, noticing the deep devotion and joy of the brahmin Piṅgiyānī, is moved to go for refuge to the 3 jewels. The Sutta closes with Kāraṇa,pālī's refuge-going, thus:

When this was said, the brahmin Kāraṇa,pālī, rose from his seat, arranged his upper robe onto one shoulder, placing his right knee on the ground, saluted the Blessed One with the lotus palms, uttering this udana [inspired utterance] ... *namo tassa ...*

Excellent, master Piṅgiyānī! Excellent, master Piṅgiyānī!

Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned,

or were to reveal what was hidden,

or were to show the way to one who was lost,

or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms ...

(A 5.194,2), SD 45.11)

The formula then closes with these very significant words by Kāraṇa,pālī:

(1) In the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been declared by master Piṅgiyānī.

(2) Master Piṅgiyānī, I go to master Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks.

(3) May master Piṅgiyānī remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.

(1) **The Dharma teaching.** Piṅgiyānī declares his joy in the Dharma in five parables. In other words, the Dharma has significantly removed his sufferings so that he has overcome his desires and is habitually joyful. Clearly, this suggests that he is a man of deep faith. In fact, the Commentary tells us that he is a non-returner (AA 3:312).

(2) **The refuge-going.** Refuge-going marks the beginning of a spiritual transformation, especially that of seeing the Buddha as the ideal of spiritual awakening, applying the Dharma as the means of personal transformation, and envisioning our own capacity for spirituality as exemplified by the saints, the noble Sangha, throughout Buddhist history. In short, refuge-going is a declaration that we are walking the path to self-awakening.

(3) **The witness.** The layman Piṅgiyānī is non-returner.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the person witnessing our refuge-going should ideally be a spiritually awakened person (as shown in the

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<sup>1</sup> On the non-returner (and 4 kinds of saints), see **Alagaddûpama S** (M 22,42-47), [SD 3.13](#) ≈ **Ānâpâna,sati S** (M 118,9-12), [SD 7.13](#).

suttas). Otherwise, such a witness should at least be someone who inspires us in the truth and beauty<sup>2</sup> of the Dharma, and motivates us to work towards our own self-transformation, even self-awakening, without relying on any other beliefs or external agency.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On Buddhism as truth and beauty, see [SD 40a.1 \(8.1.2\)](#); [SD 46.5 \(2.4.2\)](#) as aesthetics; [SD 37.8 \(2.3\)](#) in right livelihood. See also Piya Tan, Reflection, “[No views frees](#),” R255, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed explanation, see **Kāraṇa, pāli S** (A 5.194), [SD 45.11 \(3\)](#). On refuge-going, see **The one true refuge**, [SD 3.1](#). On the different levels of refuge-going, see [SD 43.4 \(5.7\)](#).