

Week 2 - Going for Refuge

Buddhism level 2 – What makes you a Buddhist?

GOING FOR REFUGE (GFR)

At time of Buddha, there was no Buddhism – he just had a crowd of ragbag followers. The Buddha wasn't a Buddhist. People didn't declare themselves Buddhist; so what did they do?

Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama -- through many lines of reasoning -- made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Sangha of monks. May Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life.

In formulaic language we have recorded, they went to refuge to three Jewels:

One way to translate GFR is as **commitment**. Commitment to the path – to practising in ways that mean we become more like the Buddha, see the world and act in the world in ways according with the Dharma, and interact with others – especially fellow Buddhists – in ways conducive towards Sangha. Buddhism isn't foremost a faith or belief system: it's a path of practice – to increasingly actualise the Three Jewels in our life.

Our Refuges

We are all taking refuge in some way, but from what? In a word, suffering. The Buddha's quest was to find refuge from old age, sickness & death. We are faced with the same problems, albeit less obviously.

Some of our refuges are ways to shelter from psychological pain, such as loneliness, despair, boredom, stress. And at a more existential level – looking for refuge from meaninglessness. We act to give our lives meaning.

But the Buddha said that some refuges are better than others:

Many people, out of fear, flee for refuge to sacred hills, woods, groves, trees and shrines.

In reality this is not a safe refuge. In reality this is not the best refuge. Fleeing to such a refuge one is not released from all suffering.

He who goes for refuge to the Enlightened one, to the Truth, and to the Spiritual Community, and who sees with perfect wisdom the Four Noble Truths--

Namely suffering, the origin of suffering, the passing beyond suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Way leading to the pacification of suffering --

(for him) this is a safe refuge, this is the best refuge. Having gone to such a refuge, one is released from all suffering.

Dhammapada (trans. Sangharakshita) v. 188-192

We have our own versions of "sacred hills, woods & groves".

Existential flight precipitates us into absorption with the particular entities of the world. In this way we are able to divert ourselves from the uncanniness of life and death. We are free to concern ourselves with the much more manageable reality of well-defined things enclosed in limited situations.

Stephen Batchelor, in Flight, An Existential Conception of Buddhism

At the outer level, we can gain a feeling of security from absorbing ourselves with accumulating objects and wealth, home, job, partner, family, hobbies, alcohol, drugs, stimulation of TV, movies etc.

At the inner level, we absorb ourselves in planning, remembering, building worlds in the past & future. Some of this is necessary, in a tentative way, most of it isn't...

THE THREE JEWELS AS THE BEST REFUGES

To a Buddhist, the Three Jewels are the ultimate, or the most true refuges, because only they represent possibility of complete liberation from suffering.

The Buddha represents the highest ideal for a human, and embodies Enlightenment which is the final refuge from suffering.

The Dharma – as the Buddha’s teaching - is initially a support to move towards Enlightenment and so reduce suffering; but ultimately it is the wordless truth that we embody, and that allows us to stand on no-thing.

The Sangha represents the human context of friendship & relatedness within which we grow & find support; ultimately as a refuge it is the body of spiritual heroes who prove that Enlightenment can be attained by others.



The Experience of Going for Refuge to the 3 Jewels

When we see the inadequacy of our old refuges, the natural tendency is to let go of them; sometimes called “going forth” (echoing the Buddha’s leaving his home) or “renunciation”. This could be physical or mental: eg we could give up drinking, or simplify our life by downsizing; or we could simply place less emotional “weight” eg. on being a high achiever at work or looking for financial security.

We can see this especially within meditation: simply letting go of fantasies and returning to presence is a form of moment-to-moment going for refuge to the 3 Jewels, letting go of unhelpful refuges. Or outside meditation, the simple actions of behaving skilfully where previously we may not have done.

HOME PRACTICE

We’re going to be looking for our refuges – safe or unsafe. Suggestions of where to look:

- Check what’s motivating us to do things– eg. being liked, admired, wanting to do good in world, achieve. Reflect why we are doing what we’re doing. Why am I meditating?
- Where does our mind go when we’re in difficulty – eg. Blame, defensiveness, distraction?
- Where does our mind go when we’re distracted, bored or idle? Eg in meditation, or walking along the street?

Remember, this is an exercise in understanding ourselves better, not in beating ourselves up.

Draw them out on sheet of paper – a mandala. Put yourself in the middle, and write on the “refuges” around the central point, with the distance from the centre representing how important you consider them to be.

Bring it with you next week so you can discuss it (to the extent you’re willing)

FURTHER READING

Going for Refuge, Sangharakshita, in *The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism* or CD 009.

Flight, an Existential Conception of Buddhism, Stephen Batchelor, Wheel Publication 316/317, Buddhist Publication Society

Sangharakshita, A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition, chapter 4, Subhuti, Windhorse Publications