

# Buddhist Ethics

## The Path to Nīrvāna

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### 3 The Significance of the Refuges

#### THE THREEFOLD REFUGES

In Buddhism there is no formal code of prohibitions. A follower of the Buddha lives according to the Buddha's teaching and declares his intention to do so in using the following formula called '*Tisarāṇa*', or '*Three Refuges*'.

Since the full implication cannot be conveyed in short English phrases, it is necessary to consider the Pali words. They are: *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.* They may be translated, word for word, as: To the Buddha as a refuge I go; to the Dhamma as a refuge I go; to the Saṅgha as a refuge I go.

'*Saraṇam*', however, does not denote exclusively 'refuge', and in the comprehensive sense in which it should be taken lies the relationship of the 'Buddhist' to the Buddha which will eventually determine his whole attitude towards life. '*Saraṇa*' is common to both the Sanskrit and Pali languages, and for the Sanskrit Monier Williams gives:<sup>78</sup> '*Saraṇa*: protecting preserving. (Vedic. *say rakṣhake*, *Rgveda* VI. 47. 8); one who protects or preserves; a protector, preserver, defender. (a) n. help, defence; a refuge, place of refuge, sanctuary, asylum (sometimes applied to a person); a private apartment, closet; a house, habitation, abode, lair, resting-place (of an animal).' Regarding the Pali we have from Rhys Davids and Stede: '*Saraṇa*: (Cp. Vedic.) ... shelter, house, refuge, protection, etc.'<sup>79</sup> Buddhadatta Mahāthera gives: 'Protection, help, refuge, a shelter.'<sup>80</sup>

'Refuge' is therefore the most acceptable short-form translation of *saraṇam*, but in no sense can the declaration of taking the

Three Refuges be interpreted as an undertaking to comply with blind, unreasoning obedience to a series of orders or commandments. In contrast to the monotheistic religions which depend entirely on faith, and to the systems which have developed *bhakti*, devotion, as an end in itself, the Buddha denounced blind faith, pointing out that it is merely a form of ignorance which retards one's purification and therefore development. When consulted by the Kālāmas of Kesaputta as to how they should choose between the various pronouncements of their many visiting teachers, each of whom claimed that his dogma or method was the only one leading to the desired perfection, the Buddha replied: 'Whenever you find out for yourself ... "these things are bad, reprehensible, condemned by the wise, are not rightly taken upon oneself, lead to harm and suffering", you should abandon them. ... Whenever you find out for yourself "these things are good, blameless, extolled by the wise, are rightly taken on oneself, lead to welfare and happiness", you, having attained to this, should there remain.'<sup>81</sup> Frequently throughout this address he observed: 'Do not accept anything because of report, tradition, hearsay, the handing on in the sacred texts, or as a result of logic or inference, through indulgent tolerance of views, appearance of likelihood, or as paying respect to a teacher.'<sup>82</sup> Of his own teaching the Buddha said: 'As a wise man uses gold as a touchstone, heating and cutting, so you, bhikkhus, should take my words after investigation and not because of reverence for me.'<sup>83</sup> So is achieved *śraddhā*, confidence, an attitude directly opposed to that of blind faith. Of it the Buddha said: 'Confidence is the greatest wealth of man in the world.'<sup>84</sup>

Concerning *saraṇa* as 'protection', the Buddha has never made any declaration to the effect: 'Abandoning all duties (*dharmāṇi*), come to me as the only shelter. Do not be grieved; I will liberate thee from all evils.'<sup>85</sup> But he does make clear that one will achieve liberation as a result of one's own efforts made in accordance with the refuge described in the following passage: 'Many persons, indeed, driven by fear, move quickly to mountains, forests, the parks and trees of shrines, as a refuge. That is not a

safe refuge; it is not the best refuge. Having come to this refuge one is not freed from all suffering. But he who goes for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, by right wisdom and insight perceives the Four Noble Truths: Suffering, the Origin of Suffering, the Passing-Beyond Suffering, and the Way to the Calming of Suffering. This is the safe Refuge, this is the best Refuge. Having come to this Refuge one is freed from all suffering.<sup>86</sup>

It should be noted that the protection sought is not only from worldly ills but from the whole mass of suffering to which mankind is subject. The true nature of the Refuges was to be understood as follows: '... the disciple of the Noble Ones is possessed of this clear confidence in the Buddha; that the Exalted One is rightly named the Fully-Enlightened One, perfect in knowledge and conduct, wise as to the words, an incomparable guide to man's self-mastery, happy, a teacher of devas and men, a Buddha, an Exalted One. The disciple of the Noble Ones is possessed of this clear confidence in the Dhamma: the Dhamma is well-preached by the Exalted One, is evident in this life, is not subject to time, invites every man to come and see for himself, and brings near that which should be known to the wise each for himself. He has this clear confidence in the Saṅgha: that the Saṅgha of the followers of the Exalted One is entered on the direct right path, is walking in the right path, the proper path, namely the four pairs of persons, the eight classes of individuals.<sup>87</sup> that the Saṅgha is worthy of offerings, of hospitality, of gifts, or being honoured; that the Saṅgha is the incomparable source of merit for the world, that it is possessed of the precepts believed in by the wise, in entirety, without defects, continuously, which bring freedom to men, are extolled by the wise, which are uncorrupted, and which lead to *Samādhi*.<sup>88</sup> It is now quite clear that the taking of Refuge means resolving to follow the guidance or shining example of the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha.

#### THE FIRST REFUGE: THE BUDDHA

Taking refuge in the Buddha implies no personal guarantee that the Buddha himself will effect the arrival at the Goal of any of his

followers. To the contrary, he says: 'Surely by oneself is evil done, by oneself one becomes pure. Purity and impurity are of the individual. No one purifies another.'<sup>89</sup> When referring to progress to the Goal he frequently used the expression '*sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā*', having thoroughly understood and experienced for oneself.

#### KARMA

According to the doctrine of (karma) future happiness is a direct result or continuation of the maintaining of a satisfactory standard of conduct in the present. But there were wrong actions in the past which must produce their effects in the present and in the future. If inevitably one reaps the results of one's actions, good or bad, and there is no means of avoiding the results on the strength of the moral excellence of another person, the best that can be done to gain secure and lasting well-being is to cut down the evil actions and increase the good ones. There is freedom of will in making a choice, but clearly there must be cultivation of vision and discernment to detect when a choice should be made. Of cultivation of will-power and cultivation of discernment the Buddhist teaching stresses the latter more than the former, for, since blind obedience is not encouraged, unless a person is convinced that he is pursuing a wrong course he is unlikely to abandon it if it seems to be attractive. It says in the *Dhammapada*: 'If by renouncing a relatively small happiness one sees a happiness great by comparison, the wise man abandons the small happiness in consideration of the great happiness.'<sup>90</sup> It is therefore necessary that one should be willing to discern a possible comparison and be able to draw it.

Such matters are not always evident in the devotion and pageantry associated with Buddhism in the Buddhist countries, and the mental attitude of persons participating in these must be made clear. Nowadays the central tangible object of a ceremonial display consists, almost invariably, in a Buddha-*pratimā*, or image of the Buddha, but such figures were unknown until the first century BC. When before that date it was desired to reproduce a scene including the Buddha, his presence was indicated by a symbol such as a Bodhi tree, wheel, lotus or feet, these being also employed to represent certain ideas of Buddhism. It is

generally considered that non-Indian influences, notably perhaps the Greek, brought about the representation of the Buddha in the manner of a human figure. But a Buddhist goes before an image and offers flowers or incense not to the model but to the Buddha as the perfection; he goes as a mark of gratitude and reflects on the perfection of the Buddha, meditating on the transiency of the fading flowers. As he offers the flowers the Buddhist recites: 'With divers flowers to the Buddha I do homage (*pūjā*), and through this merit may there be release. Even as these flowers must fade, so does my body progress to a stage of dissolution.'<sup>91</sup> This is not a canonical text but is a very old traditional verse.

Though an image or some such symbol is useful to the ordinary person in helping him to concentrate his attention, an intellectual could dispense with it since he would direct his thoughts, probably concentrating on a passage such as the following: 'Such indeed is the Exalted One, Worthy One, Fully Enlightened One, Perfect One in wisdom and virtue, the Happy One, the Knower of the world, an Incomparable Guide to man's self-mastery, a Teacher of gods and men, the Blessed One.'<sup>92</sup>

But genuine reverence for the Buddha is to be measured only by the extent to which one follows his teaching. 'He who, having entered on the course, lives in conformity with the Dhamma, having engaged in practices in conformity with the Dhamma, pays reverence to the Tathāgata.'<sup>93</sup>

How does this attitude affect the moral outlook of the Buddhist? In contrast to the theistic religions where man is a subservient creature, for ever below God or the gods until such being or beings should feel inclined to raise his status, the Buddhist has it in his own power to rise as high as he likes provided he is willing to make the effort. The Buddhist's mentality is never enslaved; he does not sacrifice freedom of thought or freedom of will. Here is the advantage of *śraddhā*, *saddhā*, confidence born of understanding, over blind faith. The Buddhist pilgrim starts out on a worthwhile journey in happy expectancy, with plenty of equipment and good chance of success; he is never a 'miserable sinner'.

## THE SECOND REFUGE: THE DHAMMA

'He who sees the Dhamma, Vakkali, sees me; he who sees me sees the Dhamma,'<sup>94</sup> said the Buddha to one of his disciples who was anxious to get a glimpse of him.

We have already considered the term 'Dhamma' as 'things in general' and from its derivation can attribute to it a meaning as of duty or duties; we now take 'dhamma' in the sense of 'teaching' or 'doctrine', and here distinguish between the teaching itself and the sacred texts recording that teaching.

Regarding notable pre-Buddhistic doctrines the Brahman-Ātman ideal and the derivatives of the personification of Brahman as Brahmā have been mentioned, but in order to appreciate fully the innovations of the Buddha's teaching we consider in some detail the current opinions with which he had to deal. Many of them have figured in philosophic and religious thought throughout the centuries, and still form subjects of considerable debate.

In one of the oldest records that have come down to us, namely, the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, otherwise Discourse on the 'Net' of Brahmā, *Dīgha Nikaya* I, dating from the sixth to fifth century BC, the Buddha described various classes of beliefs and gave reasons adduced by holders as support. He dealt first with persons who attempted to reconstruct the ultimate beginnings of things and who deduced the eternity of the world and the self. In this case, by reason of extreme ardour, striving and right attention, a Samaṇa or Brahman is able to call to mind his earlier existences. He recollects: 'In such-and-such a place my name, ancestry, food, happy and sorrowful experiences were thus and thus, coming to an end at such-and-such an age. Then my consciousness died down, arising again in such-and-such a place. There my name, ancestry, appearance, food, happy and sorrowful experiences were thus and thus, coming to an end at such-and-such an age. Then my consciousness died down, arising again in such-and-such a place. There my name, ancestry, appearance, food, happy and sorrowful experiences were thus and thus, coming to an end at such-and-such an age; my con-

sciousness died down and arose again here.' In such fashion he calls to mind, point by point, the activities and circumstances of the existences in which he was previously engaged. He says: 'The self is eternal; and the world, producing nothing new, stands out immovable as a strong pillar. Living beings moving continuously through existences, pass away and rise up again; yet it is eternally the same.'<sup>95</sup> With greater application the ascetic or Brahman remembers existences more remote, while a similar conclusion may also be reached by the sophist-logician who is practised in specious argument and is possessed of a ready wit.

The second class comprises the belief that some things are eternal and others are not. Here it is suggested that the sometime inhabitants of the present world have been reborn as devas, in this case in the realm of the radiance (*Ābhassara*). After a lengthy period one of these beings, either because his merit is exhausted or because his duration of life is spent, re-arises in a lower sphere equivalent to that of Brahma. This is still a 'Fine-material' sphere<sup>96</sup> and birth and death still occur. The fallen one is lonely and wishes for companions. These appear, also from the *Ābhassara*, and for similar reasons. To the first arrival in the Brahma-world they seem to have come in accordance with his wish; to them, from his being there first, he is the ruler of the realm. He is therefore the 'Great' Brahmā, 'Overlord', the Unvanquished, to be perceived by others as 'Be-It-So' (*i.e. self-existent*), wielding power, the Master, the Maker by Creation, the Most Excellent to be produced having power, the Father of all produced in the states of existence.<sup>97</sup> Subsequently one of the Brahma-world re-arises in the present world. Disgusted with the conditions prevailing, he becomes a *samana*, or homeless wanderer. He recalls his former existence in the Brahma-world, though not elsewhere, and thinks of Brahmā in the terms described above. But to him it seems also: 'We were created by Brahmā because he is permanent, constant, eternal, a changeless thing; he stands eternally the same, the Truth. Moreover, we who were created by Brahmā have come to the present state as being impermanent, subject to change, of short life, as things that fall away and die.'<sup>98</sup> Hence, said the Buddha, arises the opinion that some things are

eternal and some are not, that the 'self' and the world are partly eternal and partly not eternal.

Other instances of this belief arise from the falling from the state of gods 'blemished by pleasure' (*khiddāpadosikā*), or 'blemished in mind' (*manopadosikā*). These re-arise in the *kāmaloka*, become recluses, and, realising their former existence, come to the conclusion reached by the beings fallen from the Brahma-world. A fourth case cited is that of the sophist-logician accustomed to specious argument and to use of his own ready wit. Such a person holds: 'That which is called eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, that "self" is impermanent, subject to change, non-eternal, a changing thing. That which is called thought, or mind, or consciousness, that "self" is eternal, a changeless thing, standing eternally the same and thus the Truth.'<sup>99</sup>

Other classes of beliefs which confronted the Buddha and on which, together with the two classes just mentioned, he pronounced a verdict, consisted in the following: the belief in limitation or infinite extension of the world in one or more directions, the existence of the world as occurring by chance, the conscious or unconscious existence of the self after death (with variations as to form, duration, modes of perception, states of happiness or misery), the belief in total annihilation, and the highest bliss obtainable in this world. A short dissertation concerning persons who, through lack of understanding, avoid expressing definite opinions is also included. Of these foregoing, the supporters of the theory of limitation, the fortuitous origin of the world, and the conscious or unconscious existence of the self after death, rely for their evidence largely on experience of an exalted state of mind which is here not clearly defined. The Annihilationists and the supporters of the particular states of bliss in this world adduce evidence from their experiences of the Jhānic states.

We come now to the verdict passed by the Buddha. Of the ascetics and Brahmans who reconstruct the past and arrange the future, or both, he says: 'These view-points, thus taken up, thus adhered to, will have for result future rebirth. That the Tathāgata knows, and he knows immeasurably beyond. But he is not