



# The Triple Gem

**Buddhism in Every Step** (D5)

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# The Triple Gem

As a response to the needs of beginners on the Buddhist path, this booklet offers an explanation of the Triple Gem by exploring the meaning of taking refuge in the Triple Gem, also called the Triple Gem Refuge. The content of this booklet serves as a gateway to Humanistic Buddhism.

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is one of the most meaningful activities one can embark upon in life—something truly gratifying and laudable. Many consider that the greatest advantage one can have in life is fame and fortune, including all the money and wealth these bring. In truth, all the advantages in the world added together would fall far short of the advantage gained by taking refuge in the Triple Gem, as well as undertaking and observing the Five Precepts, which is explained in the companion booklet *The Five Precepts*.

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is the starting point for becoming a Buddhist follower, that is, for learning and practicing Buddhism. The Buddha, the

Dharma, and the Sangha—referred to as the Triple Gem—are the focus of faith for every Buddhist follower. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are considered the noble wealth that transcends all worldly forms. The Buddha is like sunlight that can mature and perfect living beings, for the Buddha is the teacher of this world; the Dharma is like water that can nurture living beings, for the Dharma is the truth of life; and the Sangha is like a field that can cultivate the Dharma wealth of merit for the believer, for the Sangha is the community of spiritual friends who sustain the Dharma. The importance of the Triple Gem is comparable to sunlight, water, and soil, for none of these can be lacking. The life of wisdom is planted through taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Undertaking the Triple Gem Refuge allows us to elevate the spiritual world of our mind and transcend the confines of mundane life.

The merit of taking refuge in the Triple Gem is limitless and immeasurable. Not taking refuge surely deprives us of the opportunity to enjoy the merit—the blessings of the Dharma and wholesome karma—to be obtained from this action. It is quite common to express hesitation and doubt before requesting to take refuge in the Triple Gem. “Am I qualified to take refuge in the Triple Gem?” is a question frequently asked by those considering taking refuge. However, there is no need to worry. Requesting to take refuge

in the Triple Gem can only offer a multitude of benefits without doing any harm. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is about establishing one's own faith. In the event that you change your mind for some reason and no longer believe in Buddhism or even end up converting to another religion, at the very most you might suffer some decline in character and credibility, but no negative karma will result.

Whether you simply want to know about taking refuge, are exploring the idea of taking refuge, or are about to take part in the ceremony of the Triple Gem Refuge, you might have some questions. This booklet addresses some common issues, provides a clear explanation of the meaning and significance of taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Finally, this booklet looks at the act of taking refuge from a Humanistic Buddhism point of view, that is, how the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha can be a refuge in your everyday life.

## **I. Some Questions Addressed**

### *Taking Refuge and Commitment to the Buddhist Path*

To officially become a Buddhist, one must undergo the procedure of taking refuge in the Triple Gem. When we take refuge, we devoutly make a mind-

to-mind connection with the Buddha, and then the Buddha infuses our mind and body with the power of loving-kindness and compassion. It is only after this spiritual connection has been made that we can be considered a Buddhist follower. If we have not undergone this refuge ceremony, but merely worship and burn incense, we are someone who honors Buddhism, but we cannot truly be considered Buddhists.

One might question the need of taking refuge saying, “I already believe in Buddhism, and I regularly worship and burn incense at the temple. Why do I need to participate in the refuge ceremony?” We all understand that if we want to join a political party but have yet to make the pledge, we cannot become a member of that political party. Serving in a public office, such as president of a country, also requires the taking of an oath of office before formally assuming the post. When a couple wishes to marry, they must hold a marriage ceremony and be acknowledged by society, for only then is their union legally binding. Taking refuge is very similar to this, because it formalizes and acknowledges one’s commitment to the Buddha’s path.

### *Taking Refuge and Being a Vegetarian*

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem does not require becoming a vegetarian. Vegetarianism is a lifestyle and

a moral question. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is a confirmation of faith unrelated to vegetarianism. People who have not taken refuge become vegetarians based upon such factors as health, morality, or custom, but those who aspire to take refuge need not become vegetarians. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is about declaring one's faith in Buddhism and becoming a Buddhist follower, taking Buddhism as one's primary spiritual path. After taking refuge in the Triple Gem, we strive to elevate our character and not follow other religions. That is to say, to change the negative aspects of our character while not converting to another religion. Although vegetarianism is not required after taking refuge, striving to reduce the taking of life is still an important spiritual practice.

### *Taking Refuge and Non-Buddhist Religions*

If circumstances arose that caused one no longer to believe in Buddhism or even to convert to another religion, would Heaven strike the person down with lightning, as is commonly said, bringing about some terrible calamity? Not at all! Faith in Buddhism is not dominated by a divine agency. Buddhism is a religion that values freedom of belief. Historically there have been many people who converted to Buddhism from other religions; in Buddhism they are simply

seen as having been “promoted to a higher course of instruction.” If for some reason a Buddhist no longer believed in Buddhism after taking refuge, at most they would only suffer some damage to their own trustworthiness, but Heaven would not strike them with lightning. The idea of punishment by a divine power has been employed by religious cults as a means to control people. This notion is not a part of Buddhism. Buddhist faith is established upon our own free will to generate aspiration to attain enlightenment and make the vow to liberate living beings. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas do not strike us down with disasters.

Actually, in various parts of the world today there is no lack of examples for belief in two religions. The Buddhist faith, of course, pays particular attention to purity and concentration, what are known as “reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name with single-minded effort,” “upholding Amitabha Buddha’s name with single-minded effort,” and “taking refuge with single-minded effort.” Within one family, members might follow different religions. Being able to follow one teacher and one path with all one’s heart and mind is best of all, but if this is impossible for some reason, then all you can do is carry on through skillful means and respect your family.

### *Taking Refuge and Allegiance to a Teacher*

Some Buddhist leaders view their devotees as their own private possessions, which is why you sometimes hear: “devotee so-and-so is the disciple of master so-and-so.” In fact when taking refuge in the Triple Gem, the monastic in charge of the refuge ceremony is merely there to certify the pledge you are undertaking, certifying the followers of the Triple Gem, certifying that you are becoming a Buddhist. Taking refuge is not becoming the disciple of a certain teacher. Taking refuge is an expression of a sacred faith. Formally accepting someone as a teacher is a secular ceremony. Even though I have officiated at many Triple Gem Refuge ceremonies, I, too, am merely a certifying teacher because I am also a follower of the Triple Gem—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The only difference is that I have entered the path earlier than any of you. Taking refuge expresses our belief in Buddhism and our willingness to accept the Dharma as a guide to life. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is cherishing and revering the Buddhist truth, but not becoming the disciple of a certain teacher.

### *Taking Refuge and Cultural Deities*

If one has worshiped cultural deities, as is the case in Taiwan with the Goddess Mazu, the city god, and the

Celestial Lord, after taking refuge one can still worship them. We regularly offer our respect whenever we meet our elders, teachers, and noble worthies, and will also shake hands and nod our heads to those of other faiths as an expression of courtesy. Mutual honor and respect are necessary between people, so why can't we express our reverence and worship towards gods and deities? We must understand, however, that reverence and worship are not the same things as taking refuge and placing faith in them. Paying homage differs from having a belief. An act of worship is something momentary; taking refuge is for a lifetime. What is important is that after taking refuge we can transcend the belief in gods and deities, so that we are no longer controlled by divine powers.

### *Taking Refuge and Ancestral Practices*

The Chinese people have always valued filial piety and promoted the Confucian concept of “taking care of one's parents until they die and offering sacrifices to one's ancestors.” Ancestors are worshipped on festival celebrations every year. This is why people of Chinese ancestry might wonder whether if after taking refuge in the Triple Gem they can still worship their ancestors in order to fulfill the filial duties. Certainly! After taking refuge, you can still worship wholesome deities and spirits, as long as this practice

is not carried into the realm of sorcery and black magic. Buddhism is a religion that promotes filial piety, thus we can continue worshipping and making offerings to our ancestors and clan elders.

### *Taking Refuge and Your Root Temple*

After taking refuge with the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, Fo Guang Shan becomes the Dharma home for your life of wisdom, but you most certainly can go to other Buddhist temples to worship the Buddha. Although Buddhist temples are different, the Buddha is one and the same. So regardless of where you go to worship the Buddha, there is no need to make any distinctions.

No matter where one takes refuge, whether at Fo Guang Shan or another temple, there are certainly differences between temples and sangha communities in terms of lineage. Thus there is one point that everyone should be clear about: If taking refuge at a Fo Guang Shan temple, Fo Guang Shan becomes the root Dharma community for your refuge. Fo Guang Shan belongs to the Dharma lineage of the Linji School, thus, you, too, join the Dharma lineage of the Linji School of Buddhism. Other Buddhist temples outside of the Fo Guang Shan Dharma community are just like friends. This is comparable to society's laws which stipulate that only two people may marry

and become a couple; subsequently, they then relate to other people as their friends. Thus, everyone taking refuge through Fo Guang Shan can afterwards go to other temples and participate in their activities with joy, but remember that Fo Guang Shan will always be your root Dharma home where you requested and were certified as taking the Triple Gem Refuge.

### *Taking Refuge and Living by the Triple Gem*

When we take refuge in the Triple Gem, we are saying that we believe in Buddhism and have become a follower of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and that we do not place our primary faith in another religion. Taking refuge is an expression confirming the object of faith; no requirement is made concerning the observance of any rules or commands in any way. However, if some rule or commandment admittedly must be observed, then there is only one, and it is that those taking refuge must be true to the pledge they made to themselves upon taking refuge; that is that taking refuge in the Buddha means no refuge will be taken in demonic spirits or in non-Buddhist paths for as long as one lives. Taking refuge in the Dharma means no refuge will be taken in the false teachings of non-Buddhist paths for as long as one lives. Taking refuge in the Sangha means no refuge will be taken in the community of non-Buddhist

followers for as long as one lives. The vows that we make in the Triple Gem Refuge to take Buddhism as our spiritual path do not prohibit us from learning from other legitimate religions; rather, they apply to becoming involved in cults or sects that have no history, no lineage or tradition, and no religious doctrine, especially leaders and activities based on false teachings that prize contriving popular success by deceitful means. Under no circumstances should refuge be taken in such cults and false teachings. Taking refuge means that you place your faith in the spiritual path of Buddhism.

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is not constrained by rules and commandments; however, our actions in word and deed will manifest some changes after taking refuge. For example, constantly think to yourself: I'm a Buddhist now; I will reflect and be consciously aware; I will act Buddha-like and be compassionate; I will join in Buddhist activities; I will support Buddhist projects; and so on. In addition, after taking refuge in the Triple Gem we will strive to develop correct knowledge and view; we will strive to understand and rely deeply on the law of cause and effect; and we will strive to avoid doing anything unwholesome and perform all that is wholesome. In this way we are sure to experience the enjoyment of the Dharma and obtain the benefits of faith.

## II. The Meaning of Taking Refuge

### *The Significance of Taking Refuge*

Human life cannot be without faith, and the first step along the path to faith is taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem enables human life to become more enriched, as well as more solid and secure. The word “gem” can refer to mundane wealth or it can refer to supramundane wealth. Mundane wealth is represented by gold, diamonds, pearls, carnelian, and so forth; supramundane wealth is represented by the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The possession of mundane wealth can enrich our material life, while obtaining the supramundane Triple Gem of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha can enrich our spiritual life. Thus if we want to live a rich and abundant life, we must first take refuge in the Triple Gem.

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is the confirmation of faith and the path leading to the truth. We can only know ourselves by taking refuge in the Triple Gem, and so each one of us should take refuge in the Triple Gem. We should treat it as the most important event in our lives.

“Taking refuge” here means finding refuge and support. Living in this world, there are times when we acknowledge to ourselves that our strength is not enough, which leads to the hope that someone with

greater power will come and be our support. But what in this world can really and truly serve as our secure refuge and support?

A well-known Chinese proverb says: “Rely upon parents when at home, and rely upon friends when away from home.” Children know to rely upon their parents as soon as they are born. But even a bond as close as between parents and children does not mean that parents can take your place when illness strikes the body or death draws near. Even if you rely upon gods and deities, you will find that they too are unreliable. This is because gods and deities themselves will one day manifest the five signs of decay<sup>1</sup> and will fall away. Therefore, the Buddha repeatedly reminds us not to rely upon such divine agencies as gods and deities, fortune telling, divination, or geomancy to control our lives for good or ill.

In that case, what is life’s best refuge and support? *The Way to Buddhahood*<sup>2</sup> states:

*Seeking refuge here and there;  
seeking it throughout the ten directions;  
the place of ultimate refuge  
is the Triple Gem, the most auspicious.*

The Dharma tells us that what is the most reliable support is the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Only the Triple Gem is a

worthy object of our trust, and only by taking refuge in the Triple Gem can we find the best way to seek support. Therefore, we must seek refuge and support in the Triple Gem, beseeching the Triple Gem to help and protect us with the expectation that we can be liberated from suffering.

This is why taking refuge actually contains the meanings of “succor” and “protection.” In this world, children must rely upon their parents, for only then will their lives be made secure; the aged must rely upon a sturdy cane, for only then can they walk safely; seafarers must rely upon their compass, for only then will their return voyage be assured; and those in the dark must rely upon a bright lamp, for only then will their direction become clear. The Triple Gem is like our parents, so when a child feels bullied, even though its parents are not nearby, all the child needs to do is call out “Mommy!” and no one will dare to try and take advantage, because the child has a mother. In the same way, there are many wicked ways, bad people, and bad things happening in this world, but with the Triple Gem for support, we always have a safe refuge.

The Triple Gem is also like our compass that can guide us through the vast sea of people and sail into a safe harbor for shelter against the storm. Everyone knows that when it gets dark when away from home, it is time to head back. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem and constantly calling to mind the merits of the

Triple Gem will enable us to rely on the divine protection of the Triple Gem and its merits. By availing ourselves of such a precious raft, we may transcend the cycle of life and death and bravely cross the bitter sea of suffering, so that we may return to our true selves, our original home. Therefore, taking refuge in the Triple Gem allows us to find a place where we can settle down and live in peace within this present world, allowing us to have a home to which we can return in the future!

### *Defining the Triple Gem*

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha constitute the Triple Gem. The Buddha is a Sanskrit term that refers to a perfectly awakened being who has realized the truth of the universe and is further able to teach that truth to living beings for their liberation based upon his inexhaustible vow of compassion. Due to his self awakening, awakening to others, and the perfection of his enlightenment and practice, he has attained unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment (*anuttara samyaksambodhi*), and is therefore called “the Buddha.” Here this refers to Sakyamuni Buddha, the original teacher and founder of Buddhism, but it may also refer generally to all the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three time periods—past, present, and future.

“Dharma” is a Sanskrit term that connotes “the rule and its observance,” what is known as the Fourfold Dharma Gem of the Buddha’s teaching, its meaning, its practice, and its fruit. Dharma is the rule-governed path that can lead to the attainment of unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment, just as the Buddhist canon is able to do, hence the name. Here Dharma refers to the fundamental Buddhist teachings such as the Four Noble Truths,<sup>3</sup> the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination,<sup>4</sup> the Noble Eightfold Path,<sup>5</sup> and the Three Dharma Seals,<sup>6</sup> but it may also refer generally to the Twelve Divisions of the Buddhist Canons.<sup>7</sup>

“Sangha” is a Sanskrit term which can be translated as “harmonious community.” Here it refers to the monastic order whose members practice the Dharma and live together in harmony which possesses two aspects: “harmony in principle” and “harmony in action.” Harmony in principle refers to unanimity of understanding about the afflictions to be removed and the truth to be realized. Harmony in action refers to the conformity of observance about six main points regarding the three karmas of body, speech, and thought. No action should run counter to these six main points which form the foundation of the Buddhist monastic order.

- Maintain harmony in view by sharing the same understanding, which means establishing a consensus of thought.
- Maintain moral harmony by observing the same precepts, which means that everyone is equal under the rules.
- Maintain economic harmony by sharing things equally,” which means distributing benefits equally.
- Maintain mental harmony by sharing happiness, which means having common spiritual goals and objectives.
- Maintain verbal harmony by avoiding disputes, which means avoiding verbal arguments.
- Maintain physical harmony by living together, which means not violating others.

The two harmonies of “in principle” and “in action,” that is, to propagate the Dharma and to liberate sentient beings, represents both the liberation of self and the liberation of others, and so it is called the monastic order or Sangha. Here Sangha refers to the initial five bhiksus (male Buddhist monastics) who followed the Buddha in joining the monastic order and cultivating the Buddha’s path, as well as the twelve hundred and fifty great bhiksus and arhats; but it may also refer generally to the present Buddhist monastic order and greater community of bodhisattvas and monastics.

Indeed, ultimately speaking, the term “Buddha” refers to ourselves because everybody possesses the Buddha nature. In taking refuge in the Buddha, we are taking refuge in our Buddha nature. What is called “Dharma” constitutes the truth; it is the Dharma nature of self-awakening within each one of us, as well as the undying life of wisdom and Dharma body. What is called “Sangha” represents the field of merit. It is as if we were in possession of a great land or field in which we can plant and build things after having opened up the land within the mind field. In this way one is able to have unwavering faith in one’s own merit.

In simpler terms, the Triple Gem means taking refuge in the Buddha as founder, the Dharma as truth, and the Sangha as mentor. All three constitute important causes and conditions that enable living beings to attain liberation. This is why the Buddhist scriptures give the following analogy of the Buddha as a good physician, the Dharma as profound medicine, and the Sangha as a nurse. Those suffering from illness can only find its cure when in possession of all three at the same time. Human life is also just like this, for it is only by relying upon the power of these three—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—that we can end suffering, enjoy happiness, and reach the realm of liberation. This is why the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are called the Triple Gem.

### *The Benefits of Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem*

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem can enable us to recognize our intrinsic nature and to develop the gem-like treasury within our minds. This is because taking refuge in the Buddha means that the Buddha is the one who fully experiences truth in the human world. He proclaims the brightness of truth and guides us towards the light, just as the sun and moon in the sky can cause those who have lost their way to find the right path.

Taking refuge in the Dharma, the unchanging rule, can set the standard for our moral conduct in daily life. Acting in reliance upon it, we can gain right knowledge, and by applying it directly in our practice, we can reach the other shore of enlightenment. This is just like a railway, in that by going along the tracks the train can reach its destination.

Taking refuge in the Sangha, represented by those who seek liberation through practicing the Dharma, is the equivalent of having teachers who can serve as our spiritual friends. Although they have yet to eliminate affliction or realize true nature, they can guide everyone in constant learning and practice through the Dharma. Drawing near to them can enable us to purify our body and mind and to elevate our spiritual aspect.

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is like obtaining a wonder drug that can cure our mental diseases of

greed, anger, and ignorance. It is like lighting a lamp or using the stars and moon, which can lead us out of the wrong path. It is also like finding a boat amid the sea of people, one that can deliver us from the ocean of suffering that is *samsara*—the cycle of birth and death.

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem not only can enable us to attain ultimate liberation, it can also present us with many benefits in this present life. These include:

- Becoming a disciple of the Buddha: People who take refuge in the Buddha are making Sakyamuni Buddha, the greatest and noblest figure in the universe as their teacher, to formally become a disciple of the Buddha.
- Not falling into the negative realms: As the scriptures state, people who take refuge in the Triple Gem will: not fall into the hell realm by taking refuge in the Buddha; not fall into the animal realm by taking refuge in the Dharma; and not fall into the hungry ghost realm by taking refuge in the Sangha. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem strikes one's name from the negative realms and confers one's share in the human and heavenly realms.
- Ennobling the moral character: Faith is elevated by degrees upon taking refuge in the Triple Gem, just as the human body can wear the fine clothing

and jeweled crown of morality. In this way then one's moral character is ennobled.

- Being supported and protected by Dharma guardians: The Buddha once enjoined the *naga* and *deva* Dharma protectors and all guardian spirits to safeguard disciples of the Triple Gem in this age of the Dharma's decline. Therefore, taking refuge in the Triple Gem means that one will be safeguarded by the eight classes of heavenly beings such as the *naga* (dragon) and *deva* (heavenly being) as well as the guardian spirits who protect the Dharma.<sup>8</sup>
- Obtaining honor and respect: People who take refuge in the Triple Gem are able to obtain the honor and respect of humans and heavenly beings.
- Accomplishing good works: Reliance upon the blessings of the Triple Gem's power can enable those who have taken refuge to lighten their karmic obstacles and to enjoy peaceful good fortune. All good works can then be accomplished.
- Accumulating merit: As recorded in the *Sutra on the Marvelous Incomparable Virtue as Spoken by the Buddha*<sup>9</sup> those who possess the four kinds of support (food and drink, clothing, bedding, and medicine) and even construct a stupa made of the seven precious substances (gold, silver, lapis lazuli, pearl, carnelian, coral, and amber) to

house a relic of the Buddha, the merit obtained from all of that does not amount to one percent of the merit obtained by taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Clearly, the benefits of taking refuge in the Triple Gem are vast and extraordinary.

- Having encounters with good people: Taking refuge in the Triple Gem reduces the afflictions we experience and enables us to encounter good people as friends. Everywhere we go is an opportune experience for us for good causes and conditions will await us.
- Providing a foundation for undertaking the precepts: Only people who take refuge in the Triple Gem are qualified to take the next step by requesting to undertake the five precepts, the eight precepts retreat,<sup>10</sup> and even the lay bodhisattva precepts, etc.
- Fulfilling Buddhahood: Everyone who takes refuge in the Triple Gem, even if they do not cultivate the Buddhist practice during this lifetime, will do so in the future due to their faith and positive connections. All will be able to attain liberation during the Dragon-flower Assemblies<sup>11</sup> when Maitreya Bodhisattva appears in the human world.

The importance of the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—is comparable to

sunlight, air, and clean water. They appear quite ordinary, but in reality they are the most precious things for human life!

*Sunlight, air, and water  
are the three precious gems of human life;  
The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha  
are the Triple Gem of the transcendent  
world.*

Without these, no spiritual life of wisdom can possibly develop; and without these, no sacred world can ever be ennobled.

### *The Initial, Ever-Abiding, and Intrinsic Triple Gem*

The Triple Gem also has various differences in terms of level. There are the initial Triple Gem, the ever-abiding Triple Gem, the intrinsic Triple Gem, and so on. What is the initial Triple Gem? Prince Siddhartha, born in India during the 5th century BCE, renounced the royal throne to cultivate the spiritual austerities in Uruvilva Forest, after which he became the Buddha, or as some call him, Sakyamuni Buddha. The Buddha is a noble one who is able to awaken self and awaken others with compassion, wisdom, holiness, and majesty. After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha preached the Dharma at more than three

hundred assemblies over the course of forty-nine years. The great arhats and disciples who accompanied him numbered more than a thousand, and each time he preached the Dharma there were millions of people and deva-gods in attendance. He is the one who achieved the great awakening, and so he is known as the precious gem of the Buddha.

The initial precious gem of the Dharma is represented by the Four Noble Truths, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, the Noble Eightfold Path, and other foundational teachings, as preached by the Buddha. These are all known as the precious gem of the Dharma only so long as they conform to the Three Dharma Seals of “all conditioned phenomena are impermanent,” “all phenomena are without an independent self,” and “nirvana is perfect tranquility.” The precious gem of the Dharma is the truth of the universe and human life, and so long as there are the scriptures revealing the truth, there you will find the path to life that remains unchanging for all time and is always fresh across myriad eons. If one can enter nirvana, forming a resonance with the true reality of suchness and oneness with the great transformations of space itself, then they will have found the precious gem of the Dharma, neither arising nor ceasing.

The initial precious gem of the Sangha is represented by the five bhiksus who were the first to follow the Buddha in joining the monastic order, as well as

such disciples of the Buddha like bhiksunis (female monastics), arhats, and bodhisattvas. The names of some include Maitreya Bodhisattva and Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, as well as the twelve hundred and fifty bhiksus including the great arhats Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, besides all the bhiksunis far too numerous to count. This was the earliest monastic community present at the time of the Buddha, representing as well the initial precious gem of the Sangha.

Upon mentioning the Buddha, his image with its thirty-two marks of excellence and eighty noble characteristics will naturally appear in our minds. It is just so unfortunate that we were not able to see the Buddha, hear his teachings directly, and be part of his original sangha. But although we lack the merit for seeing the initial Triple Gem, we are still fortunate in being able to view Buddha statues, read Buddhist scriptures, and meet with great spiritual friends; these are known as the ever-abiding Triple Gem.

Of course what is most important about taking refuge in the Triple Gem is to proceed from the ever-abiding Triple Gem, which is then to be elevated to the intrinsic Triple Gem. This so because the Triple Gem is not merely akin to precious substances of gold and silver on the outside, but more so the true Buddha nature of purity on the inside. Only concerted efforts at excavation and mining will produce these precious gems.

Twenty-six hundred years ago when the Buddha attained perfect enlightenment sitting on the Diamond throne under the bodhi tree he said, “Marvelous, marvelous! All sentient beings have the Tathagata’s wisdom and virtue, but they fail to realize it because they cling to deluded thoughts and attachments. This is telling us that the intrinsic nature of each individual is already perfectly endowed with the immeasurable merit of the Triple Gem. Thus, everyone possesses the Buddha nature, which is the precious Buddha gem; everybody possesses the Dharma nature that is equal and non-discriminating, which is the precious Dharma gem; and everybody possesses a character that loves purity and harmony, which is the precious Sangha gem. Therefore, the real refuge in the Triple Gem is to take refuge in our intrinsic Triple Gem.

### *Self, Other, and the Triple Gem*

People will say: I’m such and such a person; I have such and such a personality; I have such and such a character. Yes, our character is different for every one of us; even a microphone has its character, too. Some microphones can be purchased for only \$200 or \$400, but then there are those that cost a fortune, such as \$30,000 or \$60,000 for a single one. Naturally, going from a few hundred dollars to several tens of

thousands of dollars means that the gap between their capacities is huge.

The same things hold for people's basic nature as well. Some people can get up early and stay up late, while others can get up early but lose energy late in the evening. Some people can both eat and bear being hungry, while others lack energy when their stomachs are empty and are unable to do anything. Some people can be idle or be busy, but then there are some people who can be idle but not be busy, for as soon as they become the slightest bit busy, they start complaining they cannot take it. Some people can do with or can do without, can be great or can be small, or can advance or can retreat; and some can accept honor and can also accept humiliation.

Actually, the Buddha's teaching that "all the living beings on earth possess the Buddha nature" means that all living beings possess the capability to attain Buddhahood. Everyone's Buddha nature will become much stronger after taking refuge in the Triple Gem. And given that we all are able to attain Buddhahood, what else is there that we cannot do? It is just that everyone must have the courage to carry it all the way through. Everybody is able to obtain benefits only so long as you dare to utter "I am Buddha." Loudly saying "I am Buddha" in an earth-shaking way enables one to obtain great benefits.

Before taking refuge we consider ourselves as ordinary. After taking refuge in the Triple Gem, we recognize ourselves as the Buddha in that we can be the same as the Buddha. For example, having smoked in the past, we will now think: Would Buddha hold a cigarette between his lips like this? Having consumed alcohol in the past, we will now think: Would Buddha drink alcohol like this? Sometimes we might quarrel and bicker with our family members, but now we will quickly become mindful and think: Does Buddha quarrel with people? If we will now always think “I am Buddha” in all matters, then we will not do bad things.

Nowadays, large numbers of people with all manner of outstanding talents appear throughout the world, but in my mind such things do not hold the most importance. Every time a human being takes the Triple Gem Refuge, there are that many more Buddhas in the world. That and only that is the grandest thing of all in the world!

Not yet having achieved liberation, it is very important for us to pay homage to Buddha images, because in the mind of a devout believer, the Buddha statue sculpted in clay or carved in wood is the Buddha. Once refuge is taken, we must come to have faith in the law of cause and effect, and to believe in the Dharma as a part of daily life. We should also maintain a form of spiritual practice. Therefore,

taking refuge in the Triple Gem is nothing more than availing ourselves of another power that can guide us towards the recognition and affirmation of our sense of self, then by relying upon our sense of self we can actualize it, so what we can recover the intrinsic Triple Gem that lies within our own minds.

Each and every one of us is like a precious mother-lode of minerals, and taking refuge is mining that mother-lode within our own minds. Not taking refuge is the same as never having mined that mother-lode at all, making it impossible to take out any gold. Therefore, just before his final *nirvana*, the Buddha enjoined his disciples by saying:

*Take refuge in oneself and in the Dharma,  
and nothing else.*

Herein lies the true meaning for how we can take refuge in the intrinsic Triple Gem.

Furthermore, the Chan School stresses "do not attach to seeking the Buddha; do not attach to seeking the Dharma; and do not attach to seeking the Sangha. You should seek nothing." This reflects the concern that we will seek the Dharma outside of the mind and that we will be unable to shoulder our responsibilities. Thus the real refuge is represented by taking refuge in the intrinsic Triple Gem.

There once was a devotee who asked a Chan master, “We are supposed to take refuge in the intrinsic Triple Gem. What is the intrinsic Triple Gem?”

“I can’t tell you until the stone tortoise speaks,” the Chan master replied.

The devotee too considered himself quite adept in the Chan School, and so he said, “The stone tortoise has spoken.”

The Chan master then countered, “Then what did the stone tortoise say to you?”

The meaning here is that taking refuge in the intrinsic Triple Gem is inexpressible, and what is expressed is false. Taking refuge in the intrinsic Triple Gem is therefore taking refuge in one’s own marvelous intrinsic Triple Gem that is without partiality and without form. This then is also the Triple Gem of non-form.

Our intrinsic Triple Gem remains unchanging for all time and is always fresh across myriad eons. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem gives one unsurpassed merit. And the reason the Triple Gem is designated as “precious gem” is because it retains the following six significant characteristics:

- Rare: The precious treasures of the world are unobtainable by the poor. The same holds true for the Triple Gem as well, for living beings that lack wholesome karma will not meet with it even

- in a billion eons, hence the name precious gem.
- Free of defilement: The precious treasures of the world are in essence unflawed and unstained. The same holds true for the Triple Gem as well, for it is free of all defilement like ignorance, delusion, and contamination. It is the purest and brightest of all, hence the name precious gem.
  - Powerful: The precious treasures of the world are so powerful they can eliminate poverty and bring about cures for viruses. The same holds true for the Triple Gem as well, for it is endowed with awe-inspiring spiritual power, hence the name precious gem.
  - Glorifying: The precious treasures of the world can glorify this world. The same holds true for the Triple Gem as well, for it possesses immeasurable undefiled merit that can glorify the supramundane world, hence the name precious gem.
  - Most supreme: The precious treasures of the world are the most supremely excellent among all other things. The same holds true for the Triple Gem as well, for it is the supramundane Dharma so undefiled, representing what is most supremely excellent and unsurpassed, hence the name precious gem.
  - Immutable: The real gold of this world remains unchanged in its innate character no matter how it is heated, hammered, or tempered. The same

holds true for the Triple Gem as well, for since it is undefiled Dharma, it remains unaffected by the eight winds of praise, blame, defamation, honor, gain, loss, pain, and pleasure. It is forever constant and unmoved, hence the name precious gem.

As for the importance of the Triple Gem, the Buddha is like light, the Dharma is like water, and the Sangha is like a field, none of which can be lacking, for the three constitute the causes and conditions that enable living beings to attain liberation. The Triple Gem is also like a lamp on a dark night, a boat upon the surging sea of suffering, and rain that falls upon a burning house in flames. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is like building an electrical power company, establishing a water supply plant, and developing a plot of fertile land, all for the sake of one's own life.

Besides confirming for oneself that one is a devout Buddhist, the true meaning of "taking refuge" is to be found in doing the following as a part of one's daily life: Be generous and joyful in giving to others; be thankful and gracious towards the world; develop contentment with respect to material needs; recognize positive connections in dealing with matters; and cultivate such things as industrious and thrifty habits for life. It is by such means that one builds wholesome Buddhist images.

In particular, one must apply the Dharma as the standard for one's physical and mental conduct after taking refuge. Be resolute in faith and transformative in moral character: transform past greed into joyous giving; transform hatred into compassion; transform laziness and indolence into perseverance and courage; and transform negative pessimism into positive optimism. Then take the next step by requesting to undertake the Five Precepts, the Eight Precepts Retreat, and so on, that pertain to the laity, in order to elevate one's own faith to a higher level and plant bodhi seeds for enlightenment.

### **III. Democracy of the Heart**

Let us now consider the meaning of the Triple Gem Refuge in the context of Humanistic Buddhism. The Triple Gem Refuge is the first step along the Buddhist path. This first step actually reflects how Buddhism and the idea of modern democracy reach across the vast span of time.

In Buddhism, by taking refuge in the Triple Gem, we assert that all living beings on earth possess the Buddha nature—everybody is Buddha. This is equivalent to modern politics in a democracy where the people rule; anyone can become president, because the president is chosen by the people in a general election. In Buddhism, anyone can become a

Buddha. In Buddhism undertaking and observing the Five Precepts, which is the second step, expresses the spirit of freedom in the precepts, because people who have undertaken the precepts will not be violating others. As long as they can discipline themselves, they will not be breaking the laws of the secular state either. So the sanction and restraint of the law will not be imposed upon them, and they can thus enjoy a free and independent life. This is why the Triple Gem Refuge and Five Precepts then actually are akin to today's ideas of democracy and freedom.

Not only is Buddhism adapting to the times, it also transcends them. It has taken thousands of years for the world to slowly advance to the modern age of freedom and democracy, but the Triple Refuge and Five Precepts promoted by the Buddha had already expressed the spirit of freedom and democracy more than twenty-five hundred years earlier.

In the Triple Gem Refuge ceremony, we take refuge in the Buddha, but what is the point of the Buddha having us take refuge in him? The real taking of refuge in the Triple Gem is actually to take refuge in oneself, to recognize oneself, and to discover oneself. All along we have been in the world like walking corpses, totally ignorant of where we came from in birth and where we will go in death. A verse says:

*I was lost in oblivion  
when the Buddha was in the world  
and appeared in this world  
after the Buddha's parinirvana.  
I repent for all my many karmic obstacles,  
that stopped me from seeing  
the Buddha's glorious body.*

After taking refuge in the Triple Gem, each one of us can suddenly discover that "I am Buddha," that we each possess the same wisdom and compassion as the Buddha, and the same limitless potential. Each one of us is also the same as the Buddha in his suchness and intrinsic nature. By relying upon the faith of taking refuge in the Triple Gem, each one of us can be elevated to a oneness and equality with the Buddha. Isn't that something quite incomparably wonderful?

In regards to the advantages of taking refuge in the Triple Gem,

*Taking refuge in the Buddha means  
one will not fall into the hell realm;  
taking refuge in the Dharma means  
one will not fall into the animal realm;  
and taking refuge in the Sangha means  
one will not fall into the hungry ghost  
realm.*

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem strikes one's name from the negative realms and confers one's share in the human and heavenly realms. This is why taking refuge in the Triple Gem is so precious. Taking refuge in the precious gem of the Buddha is lighting the lamp of one's spirit; that is like a single lamp illuminating a room left in darkness for a thousand years. Taking refuge in the precious gem of the Dharma is opening up the source of flowing water; once the source is open, the water of life will naturally flow forth continuously. Taking refuge in the precious gem of the Sangha is planting in our own field of merit. As long as these precious gems are present, our field of merit will always be able to grow positive karmic rewards for us.

In taking refuge in the Triple Gem we must certainly understand the following clearly: As for taking refuge in the Buddha nature, the Buddha's existence can be historically documented; he was born and raised by his parents, attained realization through spiritual cultivation, and has the power to liberate from suffering. As for taking refuge in the Dharma nature, the Dharma is eternal truth that is universally applicable, operates as an inevitable standard, and is characterized by equality. In taking refuge in the Sangha, "sangha" means harmonious community in which people conduct themselves in accordance with this fourfold manner: peacefully, harmoniously,

compatibly, and happily. All living beings are, thus, able to experience oneness and coexistence.

After taking refuge in the Triple Gem we must work hard to protect and nurture these beginnings of the faith that we have generated, just like one watches over new seedlings. One thing we can do is to recite the *Heart Sutra*<sup>12</sup> every day. Maintaining our practice with consistency helps us to develop our wisdom.

The Triple Gem Refuge represents the motivating force for the purification of society. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem, along with undertaking the Five Precepts, constitutes the highest spirit for implementing freedom and democracy. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is an act of respecting ourselves and affirming our own Buddha nature. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem represents democracy. Most of all, taking refuge in the Triple Gem is taking refuge in our own hopes of fulfilling the potential of our wonderful human life.

## Notes

1. The *Nirvana Sutra* states that (1) their clothes become soiled, (2) the flowers on their heads wither, (3) their bodies become dirty and smell bad, (4) they sweat under the armpits, and (5) they do not feel happy, wherever they may be.
2. *The Way to Buddhahood 成佛之道 (chengfo zhi dao)*. An important work in Mahayana Buddhism by the 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese master Yinshun (印順導師 1906-2005).
3. Four Noble Truths. The truth that the Buddha taught about suffering which states (1) that there is a mass of suffering in this world, (2) that this suffering is caused by ignorance, greed, and anger, (3) that it is possible for this suffering to cease with the tranquility of *nirvana*, and (4) that there is a path to the cessation of suffering.
4. Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. The Buddhist analysis of the causes and conditions which lead to life. Each link in the chain is the cause that gives rise to the next link, and each link can be broken by removing the link preceding it. The twelve links are (1) ignorance, (2) mental formations, (3) consciousness, (4) name and form, (5) the six sense organs, (6) contact,

- (7) feeling, (8) craving, (9) clinging, (10) becoming, (11) birth, and (12) aging and death.
5. Noble Eightfold Path. The path leading to the cessation of suffering. The eight components are right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditative concentration.
  6. The Three Dharma Seals are laws of the universe and of human life that apply to all things universally and equally, and are eternal, certain, transcendent, and confirmable. The Three Dharma Seals are (1) all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, (2) all phenomena are without an independent self, and (3) nirvana is perfect tranquility.
  7. Twelve Divisions of the Buddhist Canons. The divisions constitute twelve ways in which the Buddhist scriptural texts are categorized in terms of narrative format and content, and they are (1) prose narrative, (2) repetition in verse, (3) detached verse, (4) parables and allegories, (5) causes and conditions, (6) impromptu statements, (7) past lives of the Buddha, (8) past events, (9) wonders and miracles, (10) universal meaning, (11) discussion and debate, and (12) predictions of enlightenment.
  8. Eight Classes of Heavenly Beings. Originally drawn from India's mythology, they are (1) deva,

- (2) naga, (3) yaksha, (4) gandharva, (5) asura, (6) garuda, (7) kimnara, and (8) mahoraga.
9. *Sutra on the Marvelous Incomparable Virtue as Spoken by the Buddha*. A Mahayana Buddhism sutra known in Chinese as 佛說希有較量功德經 (*foshuo xiyou jiaoliang gongde jing*).
  10. Eight Precepts. These include the Five Precepts plus additional precepts to refrain from eating at inappropriate times, attending performances of music and dance, wearing perfumes, and sleeping in luxurious beds. The Eight Precepts are typically taken by laypeople on retreat or when they wish to sample monastic life for a short time. Some lay Buddhists will take the eight precepts on certain special days throughout the year.
  11. Dragon-Flower Assemblies of Maitreya Bodhisattva. As predicted by Sakyamuni Buddha, Maitreya Bodhisattva will descend and appear in our world, then attain Buddhahood under the Dragon-flower tree and preach the Dharma in three assemblies, known as the Three Dragon-Flower Assemblies.
  12. *Heart Sutra* (般若波羅蜜多心經, *bore bolomiduo xin jing*). An essential sutra from the Perfection of Wisdom group of sutras; known in Sanskrit as the *Prajnaparamita-hrdaya-sutra*.

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