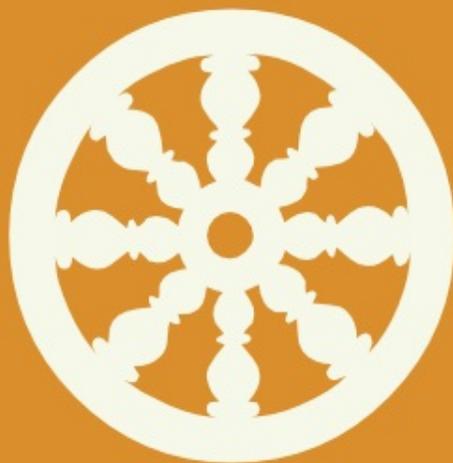


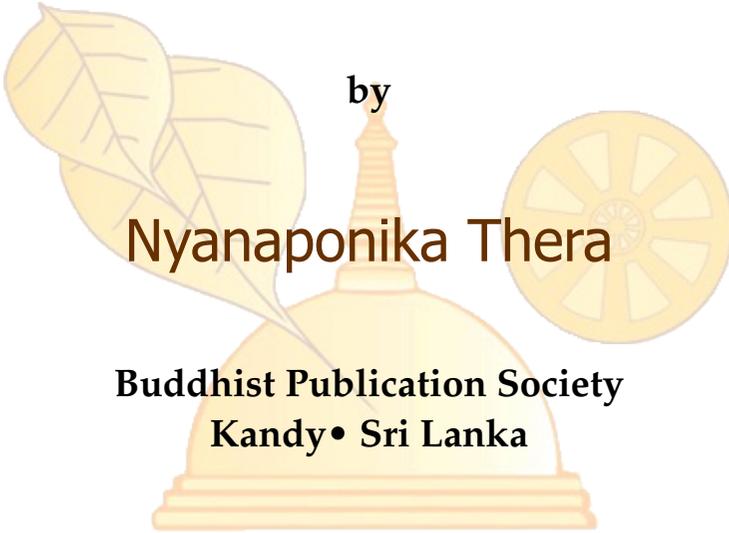
*Wheel Publication No. 76*

# **The Threefold Refuge**

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# Buddhaghosa's Exposition

Translated from the Commentary to the "Middle Collection"

(MN 4: Bhayabherava-sutta)

After listening to the Buddha's Discourse called "Fear and Dread," the Brahman Jānussoni becomes a lay follower of the Buddha, by taking the Threefold Refuge. The words used by him differ slightly from the usual formula in so far as in the latter the words "the Lord Gotama" are replaced by "the Buddha." Buddhaghosa's comment, here slightly abridged, runs as follows:

"I go for refuge to the Lord Gotama" (*Bhavantam Gotamam saraṇam gacchāmi*). This means: The Lord Gotama is my refuge and my guiding ideal. [1] I am going for refuge to the Lord Gotama. I resort to him, follow and honor him, in the sense of his being the Destroyer of Affliction and the Provider of Weal. Or: I know and understand him to be of such a nature.

This last explanation is based upon the fact that in the Pali language, the verbal roots denoting "going" (*gati*) may also

have the meaning of “knowing” (*buddhi*). Therefore the words “I go for refuge to the Buddha” may also be taken to express the idea: “I know and understand him to be the refuge.”

“I go for refuge to the Dhamma.” The word *dhamma*, i.e., the Doctrine or the Law, is derived from the verb *dhareti*, to keep or to bear. In accordance with that derivation, the Dhamma may be regarded as refuge, because it keeps, upholds, and supports the beings by way of preventing their fall into the states of woe [2] by way of enabling a life according to instruction (as given by the Dhamma), by way of attainment of the Path, and by realization of the extinction (of suffering). Accordingly, the Dhamma (meant in the formula of refuge) is the (supramundane) Noble Path as well as Nibbāna. Besides, it is the attainment of the noble fruitions (of the stream-enterer, the once-returner, the non-returner, and the saint), and also the Dhamma of Learning (laid down in the Scriptures: *pariyatti-dhamma*).

“I go for refuge to the Sangha.” The Sangha is (here) the community of (holy) monks which is united by the communion of right view and virtue (*ditṭhi-sīla-saṅghāṭena saṃhato’ ti saṅgho*).

That is to say: the Sangha (meant in the formula of refuge) is the group of the eight noble beings (*ariya-puggala*: those in possession of 1) the path of stream-entry, 2) the fruition thereof, etc.).

In order to gain proficiency with regard to this subject of

“refuge,” one should be acquainted with the following method of exposition, dealing with 1) the word *saraṇa*; 2) the going for refuge (*saraṇāgamana*); 3) Who is going for refuge? 4) the divisions; 5) the results; 6) the defilements; 7) the breach.

1. As to the meaning of the word *saraṇa*, the commentator relates it, not in the sense of a linguistic derivation, but for the purpose of exposition, to the verb *sarati*, “to crush,” having the same meaning as *hiṃsati*, “to kill.” The refuge is explained in that way, because, for those who are taking that refuge, it kills and destroys danger and fear, suffering, and the defilements leading to evil destiny. The refuge is a name of the Triple Gem. Another explanation: The Buddha destroys fear in beings by promoting their happiness and by removing harm from them. The Dhamma does it by making the beings cross the wilderness of existence and by giving them solace. The Sangha does it by (enabling devotees) to obtain rich results even from small religious acts (like homage, offerings etc.)
2. The going for (or taking) refuge is a state of mind in which defilements are destroyed owing to the faith in and veneration for, the Triple Gem; a state of mind which, without relying on others (*apara-paccayo*) [3] , proceeds by way of taking the Triple Gem as its guiding ideal (*parāyaṇa*).
3. Who is going for refuge? It is a being endowed with a

state of mind as described above.

4. The going for refuge has two main divisions: it may be mundane or supramundane.

The supramundane refuge is taken by those who have a (true) vision of the Noble Truth (*diṭṭha-sacca*; i.e., by the eight noble beings). In the path-moment (of stream-entry, where any trace of the fetter of doubt has been removed), the supramundane refuge succeeds in exterminating any blemish that may still attach to the going for refuge. It has Nibbāna as its object, and in its function it comprises the entire Triple Gem (in that object of Nibbāna).

The mundane refuge is taken by worldlings (*puthujjanas*; i.e., all those, monks or laymen, who are still outside of the four stages of sanctity). It succeeds in effecting a temporary repression of the blemishes attaching to their going for refuge. Its objects are the noble qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. It consists in the acquisition of faith (*saddhā*) in these three objects. It is this faith in the Triple Gem that is referred to when, among the ten meritorious acts (*puññakiriyavatthu*), the “straightening of views” (*diṭṭhujjukamma*) is defined as Right Understanding rooted in faith (*saddhāmūlika-sammā-diṭṭhi*).

This mundane refuge is of four kinds: (a) the surrender of self (*atta-sanniyyātana*); (b) acceptance (of the Triple Gem) as one’s guiding ideal (*tapparāyaṇatā*); (c) acceptance of discipleship (*sissabhāvūpāgamana*); (d) homage by prostration (*paṇipāta*). [4]

a. The surrender of self [5] is expressed as follows:

“From today onward I surrender myself to the Buddha... to the Dhamma... to the Sangha.”

*Ajja ādiṃ katvā ahaṃ attānaṃ Buddhassa niyyādemi  
Dhammassa Saṅghassā 'ti.*

This is the giving over of one's self to the Triple Gem. It may also be done in this way:

“To the Exalted One I am giving my self, to the Dhamma I am giving my self, to the Sangha I am giving my self. I am giving them my life! Given is my self, given my life! Until my life ends, I am taking refuge in the Buddha! The Buddha is my refuge, my shelter and my protection.”

*Bhagavato attānaṃ pariccajāmi. Dhammassa Saṅghassa  
attānaṃ pariccajāmi, jīvitañca pariccajāmi. Pariccatto  
yeva me attā, pariccattaṃ yeva me jīvitaṃ. Jīvita-  
pariyantikaṃ Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi. Buddho me  
saraṇaṃ leṇaṃ tānaṃ 'ti.*

b. The acceptance of the guiding ideal. [6]

“From today onward the Buddha is my Guiding Ideal, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Thus may you know me!”

*Ajja ādiṃ katvā ahaṃ Buddhaparāyaṇo Dhammaparāyaṇo  
Saṅghaparāyaṇo. Iti maṃ dhāretha.*

It is illustrated by the following verse spoken by Āḷavaka:

“From village to village, from town to town I’ll wend my way, lauding the Enlightened One and the perfection of His Law.”

Sn 1.10 (verse 192)

Thus the acceptance of the guiding ideal by Āḷavaka and others has to be understood as equaling their going for refuge.

c. The acceptance of discipleship:

“From today onward I am the Disciple of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Thus may you know me!”

*Ajja ādiṃ katvā ahaṃ Buddhassa antevāsiko Dhammassa Saṅghassa. Iti maṃ dhāretha.*

This is illustrated by the following passage expressing Kassapa’s acceptance of discipleship that has to be understood as equaling his going for refuge:

“Fain would I see the Master, The Exalted One, him I would wish to see! Fain would I see the Blessed One! The Exalted One, him would I wish to see! Fain would I see the Enlightened One! The Exalted One, him I would wish to see!

“Then I prostrated myself before the Exalted One and addressed him thus: The Exalted One, O Lord, is my Master, and I am his disciple!”

d. Homage by prostration:

“From today onward I shall give respectful greeting, devoted attendance, the añjali-salutation (by folding the palms and raising the hands) and homage only to those three: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Thus may you know me!”

*Ajja ādiṃ katvā ahaṃ abhivādana-paccuṭṭhāna-añjalikamma-sāmīcikammaṃ Buddhādīnaṃ yeva tiṇṇaṃ vatthūnaṃ karomi. Iti maṃ dhāretha.*

This way of going for refuge consists in showing deep humility towards the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. (It is illustrated by the Brahman Brahmāyu’s homage after his being deeply stirred by a stanza spoken by the Buddha. See the Discourse “Brahmāyu,” MN 91.)

Homage by prostration may be of four kinds: being paid towards (senior) relatives, out of fear, towards one’s teacher, and towards those deserving highest veneration. Only the latter case—i.e., the prostration before those worthy of highest veneration—is to be regarded as “going for refuge”; the three other cases do not count as such. Only if referring to the highest (in one’s scale of values), refuge is taken or broken, respectively.

Therefore if a member of the Sakya or Koliya clan worships the Buddha, thinking: “He is our relative,” no refuge is taken in that case. Or, one may think: “The recluse Gotama is honored by kings and has great influence. If he is not worshipped, he might do me harm.” If, thinking thus, one

worships out of fear, no refuge is taken in that case. Furthermore, a person remembers to have learned something from the Blessed One while he was a Bodhisatta, an aspirant to Buddhahood; or, after his attaining Buddhahood, one has received from the Master advice relating to worldly knowledge. If for these reasons, one regards the Buddha as one's teacher and worships him, no refuge is taken, in that case too. But if one pays worship to the Buddha in the conviction "This is the most venerable being in the world," only by such a one is refuge taken.

On the other hand, the going for refuge remains unbroken in the following situations. A male or female lay devotee who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem, worships a (senior) relative, thinking: "He is my kinsman." Even if that relative is a recluse of another faith, the refuge in the Triple Gem is unbroken; still less can it be said to be broken if it is not a recluse or a priest. When prostrating before a king, out of fear: "If he who is honored by the whole country is not worshipped, he will do me harm!"—in that case too the refuge is unbroken. If one has learned any science, art, or craft even from a non-Buddhist, and one worships him in his capacity as one's teacher, in that case too the refuge remains unbroken.

1. **Results.** The fruit of the supramundane refuge, in the sense of being its karmic result (*vipāka-phala*), is the four fruitions of monkhood (*sāmañña-phala*), viz. the fruition of stream-entry, etc. The fruit in the sense of advantage or blessing (*ānisaṃsa-phala*) is the destruction of

suffering; further, the blessings mentioned in the following scriptural passage:

“It is impossible, O monks, that a person endowed with insight (*ditṭhi-sampanno*—i.e., stream-enterer, etc.) should regard any conditioned thing as permanent, enjoyable, or an ego; that he should take the life of his mother, his father, or a saint; that, with a thought of hate, he should shed the blood of the Blessed One; that he should cause a split in the community of monks; that he should choose another teacher. There is no possibility of that.”

But the fruit of the mundane refuge is only the attainment of favorable rebirth, and the attainment of property and enjoyment.

2. **Defilements.** In three cases the mundane refuge is defiled and without great brightness and radiating influence: if connected with ignorance, doubt, and wrong views. The supramundane refuge is free from any defilements.
3. A **breach** of the mundane refuge might be blameable or blameless. It is blameable when occurring as a going for refuge by self-surrender, etc., to other religious masters: in that case the breach will have undesirable results. The breach is blameless at the time of death, as it will not cause any karmic result. The supramundane refuge is without breach. Even in another existence a holy

disciple will not turn to another master.

# The Threefold Refuge

In all Buddhist lands the followers of the Buddha profess their allegiance to him and his liberating doctrine by the ancient, simple, and yet so touching formula of *going for refuge* to the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

The “going for refuge,” as this figurative expression itself suggests, should be a conscious act, not the mere profession of a theoretical belief or a habitual rite of traditional piety. The protecting refuge *exists*, but we have to go to it by our own effort. It will not come to us by itself, while we stay put. The Buddha, as he repeatedly declared, is only the teacher, “pointing out the way.” Therefore, the going for refuge, expressive of Buddhist faith (*saddhā*), is in the first place a conscious act of *will* and determination directed towards the goal of liberation. Hereby the conception of faith as a mere passive waiting for “saving grace” is rejected.

In the Pali commentaries there is a remarkable statement that the expression “going for refuge” is meant to convey, in addition, the idea of “knowing” and “understanding.” This points to the second aspect of going for refuge—namely as a conscious act of *understanding*. Hereby unthinking credulity

and blind faith based on external authority are rejected.

The commentator emphasizes this aspect by describing the going for refuge as a state of mind that does not rely on others (*aparapaccaya*). On many occasions the Master warned his disciples not to accept teachings out of mere trust in him, but only after personal experience, practice and reflection. Here it may suffice to recall the famous sermon to the Kālāmas: “Do not go by hearsay, nor by tradition, nor by people’s tales, nor by the authority of scriptures. Do not go by reasoning, nor by logic and methodical investigations, nor by approval of speculative views, nor moved by reverence, nor by the thought: ‘The recluse is my teacher!’ ” (AN 3:65).

It is a threefold knowledge that is implied in the act of going for refuge. It is a knowledge answering the following questions: Is this world of ours really such a place of danger and misery that there is a need for taking refuge? Does such a refuge actually exist? And what is its nature?

There are many who do not see any need for a refuge. Being well pleased with themselves and with the petty, momentary happiness of their lives, they are fully convinced that “all is well with the world.” They do not wish, or are not able, to look beyond their narrow horizons. For them neither the Buddha nor any other great religious teacher has yet appeared. But the majority of human beings know very well, by their own bitter experience, the hard and cruel face of the world which is only temporarily

hidden by a friendly mask. There are others who, sufficiently aware of a fellow being's actual existence, add to that personal experience by observation of other lives. And there is a still smaller number of people who are able to reflect wisely on both experience and observation. Particularly to those latter ones "whose eyes are less covered by dust," life will appear as a vast ocean of suffering of unfathomable depth, on the surface of which beings swim about for a little while, or navigate in their fragile nutshells of which they are very proud.

True, there are spells of calm on the waters when it is pleasant to float upon a smooth sea, or to prove and to enjoy the strength of one's body by a long swim. But those with open eyes and minds are not deceived by these short moments of respite: they know the overpowering fierceness of a storm-swept sea, its dangerous currents and whirlpools, the demons and monsters of the deep. They know that, even under the most favourable conditions, the feeble strength of man will soon be exhausted by the impact of life's elemental forces. The vicissitudes of life give no chance of maintaining permanently, during the unlimited sequence of transformations, even the lowest degree of happiness, even the lowest standard of moral worth. There is nothing to gain by traversing ever anew the infinite expanse of life's ocean, in any of its regions. There is only the same senseless repetition of the ups and downs, of ebb and tide. Faced by the ever-present perils of life and by its essential monotony, there will be only the one cry for refuge in a heart and mind

that has truly grasped its situation within the world. A refuge is the one great need of all life and “going to it” the one sane act demanded by that situation.

But, granting its necessity, does a refuge from the world’s ills actually exist? The Buddhist affirms it and proves by that affirmation to be anything but a pessimist. The refuge to which he turns his steps is the triad of the Buddha, his doctrine and the Order of noble disciples. Being what is most precious and most pure, it has been called “the Triple Gem.” But the fact that it provides the final refuge and not only a temporary shelter, those who take refuge can prove only to themselves, by actually attaining to the refuge through their own inner realization.

The Triple Gem has objective existence as an impersonal idea or ideal as long as it is known and cherished. Even in that mode it is doubtlessly a persisting and active source of benefit for the world. But it is transformed from an impersonal idea to a personal refuge only to the extent that it is realized in one’s own mind and manifested in one’s own life. Therefore, the existence of the Triple Gem in its characteristic nature as a refuge cannot be proved to others. Each must find this refuge in himself by his own efforts. The refuge becomes and grows by the process of going to it.

By effort, earnestness and self-control  
Let the wise man make for himself an island  
Which no flood can overwhelm. (Dhp 25)

The refuge exists for us only so far as something within ourselves responds and corresponds to it. Therefore the Sixth Zen Patriarch said:

Let each of us take refuge in the Three Gems within our mind!

With regard to the first refuge, in the Buddha, the Master himself said, shortly after his Enlightenment:

Like me they will be conquerors  
Who have attained to the defilements' end. (MN 26)

Concerning the second refuge, in the Dhamma, the Buddha said shortly before his decease:

Be islands for yourselves, be refuges for yourselves!  
Take no other refuge! Let the Dhamma be your island, let the Dhamma be your refuge! Take no other refuge! (DN 16 —Mahāparinibbāna Sutta)

In the commentarial literature it is said, in reference to another passage, but applicable to the one just quoted:

The Dhamma is called “self” (*attā*), because, in the case of a wise one, the Dhamma is not different from himself and because it pertains to his personal existence.

# Ṭikā to the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta

The third refuge, the Sangha, being the Order of noble disciples, is the great and inspiring model for emulation. The actual foundation of that refuge is the capacity inherent in all beings to become one of the purified noble beings who form the Sangha of the refuge.

We turn now to the third subject of the knowledge implied in taking refuge, the ultimate nature of the Threefold Refuge.

We have seen that the refuge becomes attainable only by way of the living roots, by the actual foundations it has within the average mind. Like the lotus it arises within the waters of worldly existence; there it develops and from there it takes its nourishment. But what is still immersed in the ocean of worldliness and suffering cannot be the ultimate refuge, the place of safety and bliss. It must not only assuage, but must also ultimately transcend the world of danger, fear and ill, like the lotus that rises above the surface of the water and remains unsullied by it. Therefore, the consummate refuge meant in the traditional formula is of supramundane nature—*lokuttara*, world-transcending.

Thus the first refuge is not the Recluse Gotama, but the Buddha as the personification of world-transcending Enlightenment. In the Vīmaṃsaka Sutta it is said of the noble disciple: “He believes in the Enlightenment of the Exalted One” (MN 47).

The Dhamma of the second refuge is not the faint, fragmentary, or even distorted picture of the doctrine as mirrored in the mind of an unliberated worldling. It is the supramundane path and its consummation in Nibbāna. The commentator underlines the supramundane nature of the second refuge by saying that the Dhamma, as an object of learning, is included in the refuge only in so far as it is a formulation of the consummate knowledge acquired on the path to liberation.

The Sangha of the third refuge is not the all-inclusive congregation of monks, having all the weaknesses of its single members and sharing in the shortcomings attached to any human institution. It is rather the Order of noble disciples who are united by the invisible tie of common attainment to the four stages of liberation. In other words, it too is of supramundane nature: the assurance of possible progress to the world-transcending heights of a mind made holy and pure.

By this threefold knowledge about the need, existence and nature of the refuge, the going for refuge becomes a conscious act of *understanding*.

This knowledge and understanding forms the firm basis of

the third, the emotional aspect of taking refuge, which has three facets: confidence, devotion and love. The knowledge of the existence of a refuge provides the basis for a firm and justified confidence, for the calmness of inner assurance and the strength of conviction. The knowledge of the need for a refuge instills unswerving devotion to it. And the understanding of its sublime nature fills the heart with love towards the highest that can be conceived. Confidence is the firmness in faith; devotion is the patient endurance in loyal service and effort; and love adds the element of ardour, warmth and joy. In the sense of these three constituents, the going for refuge is also a conscious act of wise *faith*.

We may now define the going for refuge as a conscious act of will directed towards liberation, based upon knowledge and inspired by faith; or briefly: a conscious act of determination, understanding and devotion.

These three aspects of taking refuge have their counterparts in the volitional, rational and emotional sides of the human mind. Thus for a harmonious development of character the cultivation of all three is required.

Will, understanding and faith support each other in their common task. Will, transformed into purposive action, frees faith from the barrenness and dangers of emotional self-indulgence; it prevents intellectual understanding from stopping short at mere theoretical appreciation. Will harnesses the energies of both emotion and intellect to actual application. Understanding gives direction and

method to will; it provides a check to the exuberance of faith and gives to it its true content. Faith keeps will from slackening, and is the vitalizing and purposive factor in intellectual understanding.

The presence of these three aspects is the distinguishing feature of true Buddhist faith. In the conception of faith, as found in other world religions, the emotional aspect tends to be over-stressed at the expense of will and understanding. Against such an over-emphasis on emotional faith, Buddhism moves from the very beginning of its spiritual training towards wholeness and completeness, towards a harmonious development of mental faculties. Therefore, the act of going for refuge in its true sense is accomplished only if there is connected with it at least a minimal degree of purposeful will and genuine understanding. Only in that case will faith have the quality of a “seed” attributed to it by the Buddha, a seed productive of further growth. The element of will in that seed of faith will grow until maturing into the irrepressible desire for liberation (*muñcitukamyatā-ñāṇa*), one of the advanced stages of insight (*vipassanā*). The element of initial understanding in true faith will grow into the penetrative wisdom that finally transforms the assurance of faith into the inner certitude conferred by realization.

Taking refuge by way of thoughtless recital of the formula is a degradation of that venerable ancient practice. It deprives it of its true significance and efficacy. “Going for refuge” should be the expression of a genuine inner urge, in the

same way as, in ordinary life, one may be urged by the awareness of a great danger to seek without delay the refuge of a place of safety.

When taking refuge, one should always keep in mind the implications of this act, as outlined above. This will be, at the same time, a beneficial training in right mindfulness. One should always ask oneself how the presently undertaken act of going for refuge can be translated into terms of will and understanding. Seeing that the house of our life is ablaze, it will not do merely to worship the safety and freedom that beckons outside, without making an actual move to reach it. The first step in that direction of safety and freedom is taking refuge in the right way, as a conscious act of determination, understanding and devotion.

The commentarial literature preserves a precious document of ancient Buddhist practice showing the thoughtful and discriminating way in which the devotees of old took refuge in the Triple Gem. The document mentions four different methods of going for refuge, each represented by the utterance of its own specific formula, each entailing a different degree of commitment. Ranked in ascending order, the four begin with homage by prostration, evolve through the acceptance of discipleship and the acceptance of the Triple Gem as the guiding ideal, and culminate in complete self-surrender. The formulas all commence with the words "From today onwards ...," which mark the day of the first utterance as initiating a new period in the life of the devotee

and stress that the act is a definite and personal dedication as distinguished from an impersonal ritual. The three lower formulas conclude with the words “Thus may you know me!”—a call to witness, giving to those declarations the strong emphasis and solemnity of a vow. Both the beginning and end of these modes of refuge echo the earliest expression of commitment reported in the suttas: “I go for refuge to the Lord Gotama, the Dhamma and the Order of monks! May the Lord Gotama know me as a lay follower! From today onwards, as long as life lasts, I have taken refuge!”

From the formulas it is clear that the ancient devotees who coined and used them were highly sensitive to the deep significance of going for refuge. They perceived this apparently simple act as a most momentous step decisive for life, entailing sacred responsibilities. By means of their fourfold distinction demanding a definite personal choice, they safeguard the process of taking refuge from degenerating into a routine habit and enable it to accommodate a growing intensity and earnestness of dedication. The structure of the gradation shows that the ancients were aware that the going for refuge is actually consummated only by complete self-surrender to the Triple Gem, without any reservations. In the lesser modes of the act, there is still something of the presumed self that is kept back; it is a going for refuge with reservations. Nevertheless, these lesser modes are definite steps towards the highest, and should be consciously cultivated. As in any harmonious

mental development, here too the higher level does not exclude the lower but absorbs it into its wider compass. In trying to obtain a clearer picture of those four modes, we shall therefore start from the lowest level and work up to the highest.

I. The first mode of going for refuge is *homage by prostration* (*pañipāta*), expressed by the formula: "From today onwards I shall give respectful greeting, devoted attendance and salutation only to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Thus may you know me!" Homage is the mental attitude, and the bodily and verbal expression, of reverence, resulting from the recognition and appreciation of something higher than oneself. It breaks through the first and hardest shell of pride and self-contented ignorance that knows of nothing better than one's own petty self. When encountering something higher, animals and undeveloped people, whether "primitive" or "civilized," usually react by distrust, fear, flight, attack, resentment, hostility or persecution; for they can view that higher form of life only as something different, alien, and therefore suspect. It is the sign of a truly developed human mind that it meets the higher with due respect, with admiration, and the wish to emulate. Recognition and appreciation of something higher is therefore the preliminary condition of spiritual growth, and the true respect resulting from it forms the basis of moral education as well.

For this reason, in man's relation to the highest, the Triple Gem, true homage comes first. As a way of taking refuge,

homage is the spontaneous expression of the deep veneration felt when becoming aware of the existence and significance of the supreme refuge. It is the emotional reaction in gratitude, devotion and joy when feeling the full weight of the tremendous fact that there is actually a refuge from this universe of suffering. Thus, in the commentary this mode of taking refuge is illustrated not by the habitual act of worship by confirmed devotees, but by the highly emotional conversion of an aged brahmin who, deeply stirred, prostrates himself before the Exalted One, embracing and kissing his feet.

Homage represents the emotional side of taking refuge, being its aspect as a conscious act of faith. Through its single-heartedness and humility, the act of doing homage by body, speech and mind prepares the disciple emotionally for complete self-surrender. It is an indispensable step to it, but, being deficient with regard to understanding and determination, it requires supplementation by the following two stages.

II. While homage is still a distant and one-sided relationship to the Supreme, the devotee still being in the outer court of the sanctuary, the next step—*the acceptance of discipleship* (*sissa-bhāv' ūpagamana*)—ushers him through the door. The disciple declares: "From today onward I am a disciple of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Thus may you know me!" and through that declaration goes for refuge to supreme wisdom, opening himself to its permeating influence.

The respect and humility acquired earlier by true homage has earned for the disciple the right of entry into the sanctuary of wisdom. Only if approached in that reverential attitude will the guru, the spiritual teacher of the East, impart his knowledge, as these qualities are the first indication that the disciple is ready to receive.

If refuge is taken in the sense of discipleship, life becomes a constant act of learning, of adapting the mind to the standards set by the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. It is the character of the wise man that he is always willing and anxious to learn. The process of learning establishes a mutual relationship between teacher, teaching and pupil, such that a gradual and partial identification takes place and the pupil can absorb the teacher's wisdom and make it his own.

The acceptance of discipleship represents the rational side of taking refuge, which is here a conscious act of understanding. It supplies the full and satisfying reasons for the act of homage, and in that way adds to the strength and loyalty of devotion. But man is not always a devotee or learner. There remains much in life that cannot be mastered easily by faith and understanding alone. It requires a strong will and determination, as well as the skill of long experience, to change the course of the manifold habitual activities of life into the direction of the refuge. This task of gradually making the refuge the centre of one's life is performed by the third mode of taking refuge.

III. At the third level, the disciple accepts *the Triple Gem as his guiding ideal (tapparāyanatā)*, avowing “From today onward the Buddha is my guiding ideal, and so too the Dhamma and the Sangha. Thus may you know me!” In taking this form of refuge, the disciple pledges himself to subordinate, step by step, all the essential activities of his life to the ideals embodied in the Triple Gem. He vows to apply his strength to the task of impressing this sacred threefold seal upon his personal life and upon his environment, too, as far as he can overcome its resistance. The Threefold Refuge in its aspect as the guiding ideal, the determining factor of life, calls for complete dedication in the sphere of external activities.

But this dedication to the service of the Triple Gem is not yet the highest form of taking refuge. There still exists in the disciple’s mind a difference between the noble objective and the person working for it. The delusive ego has been retained: it rejoices at the success of the work and grieves when it fails. In a subtle way, instead of the Triple Gem, the work itself becomes the refuge. If identification of self and work is not complete, the ego, as it were, hides in the work and evades the call for full surrender to the true refuge. Progress beyond this step is possible only if the service of the guiding ideal is done in a highly detached way, without looking for any reward.

IV. This detached attitude towards work will be one of the many fruits of the last step: complete *self-surrender* to the Triple Gem (*attasanniyyatanā*). This form of refuge taken by

the worldling leaves no room for reservations. Yet also, in a sense, it demands nothing; for if true understanding has told us before that nothing can be gained in saṃsāra, which is the objective aspect of self, then nothing can be lost by the surrender of self, which is the subjective aspect of saṃsāra. However, though this surrender of self is only the surrender of a delusion, it is a very hard sacrifice, as all of us know. But if we ever wish to be free of the bonds of saṃsāra, at one time or another this self-surrender must be done, and thus it may as well be done today as tomorrow.

The highest prize is won only by the highest stake, by the sacrifice of that illusive self that has assumed so much power that it requires the highest effort to break it. In taking refuge by way of self-surrender, the disciple will follow in his own modest way the example of the Exalted One who, in the last great struggle before his Enlightenment, addressed his inner opponent, personified as Māra, with the following words: "It's muñja grass I wear! Shame on life! I would rather die in battle than live on as a vanquished one!" (Sn v. 440). Muñja grass was the crest of those ancient Indian warriors who entered battle with the vow "to do or die." It should be the symbol of the spiritual warrior too. If any reservations, regrets or reluctance are retained, there will be merely a half-hearted attempt instead of that single-minded effort which alone can bring victory.

If the grave step of taking refuge by self-surrender has once been taken, a feeling of lightness, unconcernedness and fearlessness will enter the heart of the disciple. A self that

has been renounced cannot and need not have any fear for a life that has been surrendered and that is now kept only on trust for the definite purpose of being used for the highest realization. Therefore, in the early days of the Dhamma, when those of determined mind entered the “field of spiritual action,” taking up a subject of meditation to be cultivated up to Arahathship, they would start their work by taking the vow of self-surrender, as advised in the following passage of the *Visuddhimagga* (III, 123-127):

Having approached his Noble Friend (i.e., the meditation master), the meditator should first surrender himself to the Buddha, the Exalted One, or to his teacher, and then, possessed of a strong desire and a high resolve, he should ask for the subject of meditation. His surrender of self to the Buddha should be as follows: “This personal existence of mine, I offer to thee, O Exalted One!” For one who, without such a surrender of self, lives in lonely places will be unable to stand firm against fearful objects that approach him. He may return to the village, and, associated with lay folk, might take up a search that is wrongful and come to distress. But to one who has surrendered his self, no fear arises even when approached by fearful objects. Only gladness will arise in him when he reflects: “Hast thou not, O wise man, on that earlier day surrendered thyself to the Buddha?”

And again, in surrendering himself to his teacher, he should say, “This personal existence of mine, Revered Sir, I offer to thee!” For without such a surrender of self, he will be

unruly, stubborn, unwilling to accept advice; he will go about at his own will without asking the teacher's leave. And the teacher will favour him with neither material nor with spiritual help and will not instruct him in difficult books. Not receiving this twofold favour, he will become unvirtuous, or return to lay life.

This way of taking refuge by self-surrender is, of course, still far from the complete abolition of egotism and self-delusion, but it is a powerful means to that end. It may mark the transition from the worldly or mundane refuge to which it still belongs, to the supramundane refuge at which it aims.

The refuge by self-surrender is given in the commentarial text by the following formula:

“From today onward I surrender myself to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. To the Exalted One I am giving my self, to the Dhamma I am giving my self, to the Sangha I am giving my self. I am giving them my life. Until my life ends, I take refuge in the Buddha. The Buddha is my refuge, my shelter, my protection, and so too the Dhamma and the Sangha.”

Even in its external form, this mode of refuge differs from the preceding three in that it lacks the concluding call to witness, “Thus may you know me!” From this we may conclude that this gravest of all vows was to be taken in the secrecy of one's heart, as befits the sacredness of the resolve. Here the presence of a witness as a kind of moral support

for keeping the vow should no more be required; such a requirement would only prove that it is premature to take this step. Any public avowal would only detract from the supreme dignity of the vow, and would render its observance more difficult by making the disciple too self-conscious or even proud. Needless to say, a deliberate parading of the vow would defeat its very purpose, by reinstating the self that was to be surrendered.

The longer formula of self-surrender enlarging upon the short sentence in the *Visuddhimagga* has been rendered here into a Western language for the first time. Its Pali original also seems to have evoked little attention in our day. If we reproduce that formula here, we do so in the hope that it will be received with the reverence due to that precious document of ancient devotion, hallowed by the efforts and achievements of those who may have practised in accordance with it. We add the earnest request that it not be made use of lightly for the purpose of ordinary devotion, and that the vow not be taken rashly on the spur of a moment's enthusiasm. This solemn pledge should be taken only after having tested one's strength and perseverance for a long time by minor observances and renunciations. We should beware of making those highest things of the spirit cheap and common by approaching them in too facile a way, by talking too glibly about them, or by taking them into our hands and dropping them again when interest fades or our feeble fingers get tired. Therefore, if we are not sure of our strength, we should not take upon ourselves the

severe demands of self-surrender, but take our refuge by way of those lesser modes. For these will likewise prove to be powerful helpers to high spiritual achievements.

In making an intelligent use of that fourfold devotional road of the ancients, we shall preserve the most popular religious practice in the Buddhist world, the going for refuge, from becoming stale and ineffective. We shall be able to turn it into a strong, life-giving current of devotion that will carry us one day to the Isle of Final Peace, to Nibbāna, where refuge and refuge are merged into one.

# Notes

1. See note 6.
2. I.e., rebirth as animal, ghost, Titan, or in hell.
3. Addition in the *Paramatthajotika*, the commentary to Khuddakapāṭha.
4. In the following passage the sequence of the text has been partly changed.
5. “Performed, e.g., by those devoting themselves to a subject of meditation” (addition in *Paramatthajotika*).
6. *Parāyana* is, in ordinary usage, a synonym of *saraṇa*, having the meaning of resort, support, etc. Here when denoting a particularly distinguished way of taking refuge, it is probably intended to be taken in a strict sense, as often used in religious literature, Pali as well as Sanskrit: the going to the highest, the way to the beyond, the chief or best aim; the essence. We have therefore ventured upon the above free rendering by “guiding ideal.

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