

Theme 4A Going for Refuge

Key concepts

- Tisarana (three refuges) or Triratna (three jewels) refers to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. The chanting practice of the refuges refers to reciting: (1) Buddhāṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I go to the Buddha for refuge); (2) Dhammāṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I go to the Dhamma for refuge); (3) Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi (I go to the Sangha for refuge).
- Taking refuge implies ‘finding shelter from the outside world’. At the same time, a refuge is a place where a person can find safety, strength, healing, guidance and wholeness before going back into the world. That they are called three jewels shows their great value and importance for Buddhists. In the same way that a three-legged stool stands firm on the ground, the three refuges together provide stability for the community of Buddhist followers.
- The refuges may have different meanings for heritage and convert Buddhists depending on the school of Buddhism being followed. Thus, taking refuge in the sangha for convert Buddhists in the West where there are not many viharas or members of the monastic sangha, might mean something very different for heritage Buddhists in those parts of Asia where there are a large number of viharas (Buddhist monasteries).
- For Buddhism, the refuges provide something unchanging, secure and safe which cannot be found in other refuges in the modern world. These all have the potential to promote the Three Poisons of ignorance, greed and hatred, e.g. materialism provides only a temporary refuge and can lead to corruption; relationships depend on trust which can often be misplaced, secular values and political beliefs are always subject to change and can rise and fall over time.

Key quotes

‘The purpose of taking refuge is to awaken from confusion and associate oneself with wakefulness. Taking refuge is a matter of commitment and acceptance and, at the same time, of openness and freedom.’ (Chogyam Trungpa)

‘Your friends in the sangha provide a continual reference point which creates a continual learning process. They act as mirror reflections to remind you or warn you in living situations. That is the kind of companionship that is meant by sangha. We are all in the same boat; we share a sense of trust and a sense of larger-scale, organic friendship.’ (Chogyam Trungpa)

Key words

Tisarana	Triratna	refuge	Lotus Sutra	Amida
tengyur	kangyur	Three Bodies	sammasambuddhasa	

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

The general focus is on the meaning of the concept of refuge as a positive concept rather than as one involving simply hiding and sheltering from the outside world.

Key questions

Given the different understandings of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, how important should going for refuge be for Buddhists?

Are the three refuges of equal value or is one more important than the other – does this depend on whether a person is a heritage or convert Buddhist?

- The first refuge is the Buddha who is sammasambuddhasa – the perfectly self-enlightened one. In Theravada, he is an exemplary historical human being whose life and example gives a model Buddhists might follow, e.g. the need to meditate, to reflect carefully on reality and to be mindful. In Mahayana, he is much more of a godlike figure who through the Three Bodies theory can be immanent and transcendent. At the same time other schools of Buddhism focus on the Buddha-nature within or on the countless Buddhas through space and time. Pure Land Buddhism, for example, takes refuge in Amida Buddha. There is no doubt that it is the image of the Buddha meditating that is most associated in people’s minds when they think about Buddhism.
- The second refuge is the Dhamma (Dharma), which refers to the entirety of the Buddha’s teaching. In Theravada this refers to the Pali Canon/the Tipitaka regarded as the authentic words and teaching of the historical Buddha. A complex picture emerges in Mahayana where sacred texts believed hidden at the time are referred to such as the Lotus Sutra. Similarly, in Tibetan Buddhism the dhamma refers to the kangyur (translated words of the Buddha), which incorporates the Pali Canon and other texts, and to the tengyur (commentaries on these texts). In Zen, written dhamma is not highly regarded because what is key is a transmission outside of written words.
- The third refuge is the Sangha. It can be seen as referring to the Buddhist community in general where like-minded Buddhists join in wholesome activity to gain spiritual progress and enlightenment.