

Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem

Taking refuge means believing in the Triple Gem of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha with all one's body and mind. The unsurpassed morality and wisdom of the Buddha, and the Sangha, serve as our model for how to be human, while the principles revealed by the Dharma represent our standards for how to live.

We rely upon the Triple Gem just as a child relies upon its mother, how the people rely upon the ruler, how the weak rely upon the strong, how the lame rely upon the staff, and how those drowning in water rely upon a boat. When our body and mind find that refuge, our life will have its support and our spirit can be uplifted.

Taking refuge is a lifelong process, and is not something that only occurs during a certain period of time. Taking refuge also involves taking refuge in all three components of the Triple Gem: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

There are some people who have incorrect views about taking refuge, and thus take refuge incompletely. Some people only take refuge in one thing, such that they only venerate the Buddha, only listen to teachings, or only show respect to monastic teachers. Some people only take refuge in the first two gems, for they venerate the Buddha and chant the sutras, but they do not honour the sangha. There are still others who venerate the Buddha and listen to the Dharma, but they only honour their own teacher rather than the monastic order as a whole.

The Buddha is like a skilled physician who can cure the various different illnesses of sentient beings. The Dharma is like miraculous medicine that can reveal the correct path and show us how to free ourselves from suffering and attain happiness. The sangha is like a nurse, who can guide us to correct faith. Only the triple refuge can assure that we will be happy and peaceful in body and mind. When we take refuge, none of these elements can be missing.

After taking refuge in the Triple Gem as described above, one then takes refuge in the Triple Gem of one's intrinsic nature. They are as follows:

1. The Buddha Gem of Intrinsic Nature: Maintaining awakened awareness with every thought so that confusion does not arise.
2. The Dharma Gem of Intrinsic Nature: Holding onto correct principles in every thought so that wrong views do not arise.

3. The Sangha Gem of Intrinsic Nature: Purifying the mind with every thought so that desire for things or states does not arise.

After recognizing the Triple Gem, one's beliefs become steadfast, so that one will not practice blindly nor stray from the path.

Buddha

Buddha is a Sanskrit word which means "noble awakened one". The Buddha is one who has awakened himself, awakened others, and completed his mission of awakening. Generally, when "the Buddha" is mentioned, it refers to the founder of Buddhism, Sakyamuni Buddha.

Sakyamuni Buddha attained complete liberation under the bodhi tree; attained true, unsurpassed awakening; and brought liberation to infinite sentient beings. With his great compassion, great wisdom, and great supernatural powers, he became the founder of Buddhism for this Saha world and the "teacher of human and heavenly beings".

Dharma

Dharma is a Sanskrit word which refers to the Tripitaka, the collection of the Buddha's teachings, with its twelve divisions.

All the teachings the Buddha proclaimed at more than three hundred Dharma assemblies over the course of his forty-nine year teaching career in this world, were compiled together by his disciples Ananda and Mahakasyapa into the *sutra*, *vinaya*, and *abhidharma* divisions of the Tripitaka, that have been circulating in the world until today. The Tripitaka contains explanations of the truths of life and the universe. It is a precious raft that ferries one across the ocean of suffering, leading us away from suffering and towards liberation.

Sangha

Sangha is a Sanskrit word which means community, peace and happiness, and purity. Generally, the male and female monastics are known as the sangha, the monastic community.

The sangha is heir to the work of the Buddha and teaches the Dharma for the benefit of living beings. The monastic community guides sentient beings as they eliminate afflictions and free themselves from the cycle of birth and death.

In sum, the Triple Gem possesses unsurpassed merit. When compared to the founder, teachings, and followers of other religions, the Triple Gem is the most perfect and pure. The Triple Gem is a light that shines in darkness, a ship that crosses the ocean of suffering, the sweet rain that douses the blazing house, and the guiding star that points the way for those who are lost. That is why we take refuge in the Triple Gem.

Source: Chuang, Venerable Tzu. *Faxiang: A Buddhist Practitioner's Encyclopedia*. Translated by Robert Smitheram. Los Angeles, California: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2012. (Pages 273-275; 101-103.)