

Quick Dharma Series

Commentary on the Three Treasures

By Gyoshin

From the beginning, to be a Buddhist meant to bring to life the Teachings in one's own unique way. It also meant to publicly state the Three Jewels or Refuges: that one takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. "To take refuge" brings to mind getting caught in a storm and finding a safe, dry place to come into for shelter. Keeping that common sense understanding in mind, I would like to consider these three refuges.

Buddham Saranam Gacchami - "I take refuge in the Buddha." The Buddha we are usually referring to is Siddhartha Gautama, a real person who lived in India about 2500 years ago. He studied the laws of cause and effect and taught his understandings for forty-five years until his passing at the age of eighty. However, since the term "Buddha" means "one who is fully awakened" it would be surprising if there were not more Buddhas past, present, and to come. In fact traditional Buddhism speaks of a number of Buddhas shrouded in the mists of religious myth - Amitabha, Amida, and Maitreya to name a few. Amida Buddha, emerging from ancient myths, vowed that he would not become fully awakened until all beings become fully awakened. Contemplating his example encourages the growth of compassion. However, when it is all said and done, "taking refuge in the Buddha" means simply that we acknowledge the historic Buddha as a great teacher.

Dhammam Saranam Gacchami - I take Refuge in the Dharma (Teaching). I would like to focus on just one of these teachings: the doctrine of interconnectedness. This interconnectedness is what the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls "Interbeing." This doctrine is expounded throughout the sutras. However, one of the clearest statements is found in the Avatamsaka Sutra:

"There are causes for all human suffering, and there is a way by which they may be ended, because everything in the world is the result of a vast concurrence of causes and conditions, and everything disappears as these causes and conditions change and pass away.

Rain falls, winds blow, plants bloom, leaves mature and are blown away; these phenomena are all interrelated with causes and conditions, are brought about by them, and disappear as the causes and conditions change.

One is born through the conditions of parentage; his body is nourished by food, his spirit by teaching and experience. Therefore, both flesh and spirit are related to conditions and are changed as conditions change.

As a net is made up by a series of ties, so everything in this world is connected by a series of ties. If anyone thinks that the mesh of a net is an independent, isolated thing, he is mistaken. It is called a net because it is made up of a series of connected meshes, and each mesh has its place and responsibilities in relation to other meshes.

Blossoms come about because of a series of conditions that lead up to their blooming; leaves are blown away because a series of conditions lead up to it. Blossoms do not appear unconditioned, nor does a leaf fall of itself. So everything has it coming forth and passing away: nothing can be independent without any change.

It is the everlasting and unchanging rule of this world that everything is created by a series of causes and conditions and everything disappears by the same rule; everything changes, nothing remains without change."

When we see clearly, we see ourselves in each other. An ancient Hindu picture of the nature of the universe was that it was like a giant fisherman's net called Indra's Net. At each tie in Indra's net was a faceted jewel that reflected every other point in the net. This old idea is very much like a description of the modern hologram. Like a photographic negative, the hologram contains the whole picture. When a proper light is shown through the film, the picture is seen in all its detail. However, if you cut the hologram in half and shine the light through the half, the whole picture is still projected with less detail. Even if you take half of that, and so on, of the negative, you can similarly project a reconstruction of the whole. According to the sutras, this is also the nature of the universe. Even the smallest parts of the universe contain something of the whole picture. We can conclude from this teaching that each one of us is better connected than we usually believe. When we take refuge in the Dharma we are publicly stating that we are interested in study these ideas taught by the Buddha.

Sangham Saranam Gacchami -I take Refuge in the Sangha (Community). There is an old Muslim story about the person who went to find a famous holy man. To do so meant to row a boat across the lake to a small island where the holy man lived. Upon

reaching the island, the searcher for truth heard faintly the chanting, "*La Illaha, illa Allaha Hu.*" In Arabic this phrase means, "There is no God but God." Our searcher noted, however, that the chant was being pronounced incorrectly. Being disappointed, he decided that the least that he should do would be to instruct the supposed holy man in the proper recitation. Finding him, the visitor proceeded to give instruction in the proper way to pronounce the phrase. Having completed the task, and being thanked, the disappointed visitor returned to the boat and began rowing away from the island. He was halfway across the lake when he was shocked to see the holy man running across the top of the water toward the boat. The holy man, having caught up with the boat, proceeded to apologize for having already forgotten the instruction and requested to hear the proper pronunciation again. The visitor had seen only the form: the holy person lived in the Heart.

We can ask the same question about form and the heart as we seek to understand the nature of the community we call the Sangha. The changing form of the Sangha is obvious to historians. In early Buddhism it included only those who gathered around the historic Buddha. In later times it included only the monks and nuns of the monastic system. Later, in the 1200s, a radical Japanese Buddhist, Shinran Shonin left the traditional monastery and proclaimed that the Sangha included people like you and me; householders, politicians, farmers, shopkeepers: in short, people from all walks of life. Shinran was able to make this step because he was centered in the heart rather than the form of Buddhism. To dwell in the heart is to dwell in a place that does not establish boundaries but breaks down walls, does not exclude but rather includes.

As we look at the life of Shinran Shonin we see that his heart was the same as that of Amida Buddha. Even as we look at the past, we also look to the future and realize that the work of Amida and Shinran continues to evolve. Our modern Sangha, is an ever-expanding circle of community that does not stop at the threshold of our species and next of kin. This "Sangha of the Heart" includes other species, plants, animals, environmental features, unseen ancestors, and future generations. To continue the work of Shinran is to express our gratitude for the Vow of Amida through finding the Sangha everywhere we turn. This is the Heart rather than the form of taking Refuge in the Sangha.

Over sixty years ago, as a four-year-old, I learned that when a grain of sand is inside a clamshell, it irritates the clam. In order to reduce the pain, the clam is able build up layers of protective coating around the irritant. The process by which the clam relieves its own suffering produces a beautiful pearl. Being quite fascinated with this process, I put a pebble in one of my red leather boots and limped around all day in pain so that I could produce a pearl of my very own. Needless to say the experiment ended only in pain. Alas, I could not make a pearl.

In my fiftieth year, as I slept, Kuan Yin came to me in a dream. As I looked out over the ocean, in the light of the full moon, she appeared standing on a lotus blossom. She was a beautiful pure white translucent color. Moving slowly toward me from across the waters she brought a gift for me in her outstretched palm: the most beautiful pearl I had ever seen. What I could not create for myself came many years later as a gift.

I told you this very personal story because I believe that by taking refuge in the Buddha, because he was a great teacher, by taking refuge in the Dharma, because of the many rich teachings, including interconnectedness, and by taking refuge in the Sangha, the family of all nature, you will find that Kuan Yin holds forth that jewel for you as well.