

# *The Three Jewels*

## Thich Nhat Hanh

### The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings

*I take refuge in the Buddha, the one who shows me the way in this life.  
I take refuge in the Dharma, the way of understanding and love.  
I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness."*

Taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is a fundamental practice in Buddhism. These are universal values that transcend sectarian and cultural boundaries. When we were in our mother's womb, we felt secure, protected from heat, cold, hunger, and other difficulties. To seek for refuge means look for a place like that that is safe, a place we can rely on.

Faith (*shraddha*), in Buddhism, does not mean accepting a theory that we have not personally verified. The Buddha encouraged us to see for ourselves. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is not blind faith; it is the fruit of our practice. At first, our Buddha may be a book we've read, our Dharma a few encouraging words we've heard, and our Sangha a community we've visited once or twice. But as we continue to practice, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha reveal themselves to us more fully.

Faith is important for all religions. Some people say, "If we believe in God and it turns out that He does exist, we'll be safe. And if He doesn't, we won't have lost anything." Theologians speak of a "leap of faith," like a child jumping off the table into the arms of his father. The child is not one hundred percent sure his father will catch him, but he has enough faith to jump. In Buddhism, our faith is concrete, not blind, not a leap. It is formed by our own insight and experience. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we express trust in our capacity to walk in the direction of beauty, truth, and deep understanding, based on our experience of the efficacy of the practice. When we take refuge in the Dharma, we enter the path of transformation, the path to end suffering. When we take refuge in the Sangha, we focus our energies on building a community that dwells in mindfulness, harmony, and peace. When we touch these Three Jewels directly and experience their capacity to bring about transformation and peace, our faith is strengthened even further. The Three Jewels are not notions. They are our life. In Chinese and Vietnamese, practitioners always say, "I go back and rely on the Buddha in myself." Adding "in myself" makes it clear that we ourselves are the Buddha. When we take refuge in Buddha, we must also understand, "The Buddha takes refuge in me." Without the second part, the first is not complete. There is a verse we can recite when planting trees and other plants:

*I entrust myself to Earth,  
Earth entrusts herself to me.  
I entrust myself to Buddha,  
Buddha entrusts herself to me.*

To plant a seed or a seedling is to entrust it to the earth. The plant will live or die because of the earth. But the earth also entrusts herself to the plant. Each leaf that falls down and decomposes will help the soil be alive. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we entrust ourselves to the soil of understanding. And the Buddha entrusts himself or herself to us for understanding, love, and compassion to be alive in the world. Whenever I hear someone recite, "I take refuge in the Buddha," I also hear, "The Buddha takes refuge in me."

*"Going back, taking refuge in the Buddha in myself,  
I vow, together with all beings, to realize the Great Way in order to give rise to the highest mind  
(bodhichitta).*

*Going back, taking refuge in the Dharma in myself  
I vow, together with all beings, to realize understanding and wisdom as immense as the ocean.*

*Going back, taking refuge in the Sangha in myself,  
I vow, together with all beings, to help build a Sangha without obstacles*

During the Buddha's last months, he always taught

*"Take' refuge in yourselves, not in anything else.  
In you are Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.  
Don't look for things that are far away.  
Everything is in your own heart.  
Be an island unto yourself."*

Whenever you feel confused, angry, or lost, if you practice mindddful breathing and return to your island of self, you will be in a safe place filled with warm sunlight, cool shade trees and beautiful birds and flowers. Buddha is our mindfulness. Dharma is our conscious breathing. Sangha is our Five Aggregates working in harmony.

If I am ever in an airplane and the pilot announces that the plane is about to crash, I will practice mindful breathing while reciting the Three Refuges. When you receive bad news, I hope you will do the same. But don't wait until a critical moment to go back to your island of self. Go back each day by living mindfully. If the practice becomes a habit, when difficulties arise, it will be easy for you to touch the Three Jewels in yourself. Walking, breathing, sitting, and eating mindfully are all ways to take refuge. This is not blind faith. It is faith based on your real experience. Dharma books and tapes are valuable, but the true Dharma is revealed through our life and our practice. Whenever the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are practiced, the living Dharma is there. There are said to be 84,000 Dharma doors. Sitting meditation is one door, and walking meditation is another. To take refuge in the Dharma is to choose the doors that are most appropriate for us. Dharma is great compassion, understanding, and love. To realize these qualities, we need a Sangha.

Sangha is the fourfold community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, as well as the other elements that support our practice - our cushion, our walking meditation path, the trees, the sky, and the flowers. In my country, we say that when a tiger leaves his mountain and goes to the low lands, he will be caught by humans and killed. When a practitioner leaves her Sangha, she may abandon her practice and "die" as a practitioner. Practicing with a Sangha is essential. Even if we have a deep appreciation for the practice, it can be difficult to continue without the support of friends. It is well worth investing n a Sangha. If you sow seeds in arid land, few seeds will sprout. But if you select a fertile field and invest your wonderful seeds in it, the harvest will be bountiful. Building a Sangha, supporting a Sangha, being with a Sangha, receiving the support and guidance of a Sangha is the practice. We have individual eyes and Sangha eyes. When a Sangha shines its light on our personal views, we see more clearly. In the Sangha, we won't fall into negative habit patterns. Stick to your Sangha. Take refuge in the Sangha, and you'll have the wisdom and support you need. When members of a Sangha live in harmony, their Sangha is holy. Don't think that holiness is only for the Pope or the Dalai Lama. Holiness is also within you and within your Sangha. When a community sits, breathes, walks, and eats together in mindfulness, holiness is there. When you build a sangha that has happiness, joy, and peace, you'll see the element of holiness in the Sangha. King Prasenajit, a close friend and disciple of the Buddha, told the Lord,

"When I look at the Sangha, I have faith in the Buddha and the Dharma." Looking at the monks and nuns who were calm, peaceful, joyful, and free, who walked, stood, and sat in mindfulness, he saw the Buddha and the Dharma in them. Dharma and Sangha are the doors through which we enter the heart of the Buddha.

One day, the Buddha went with Ananda to a monastery in Koshala. All the monks had gone out on alms round except one monk who had dysentery. He was lying exhausted, his robes and bedding covered in filth. When the Buddha saw this, he asked,

"Where have the other monks gone? Why is no one looking after you?"

The unwell monk replied,

"Lord, all my brothers have gone out on alms round. At first, they looked after me, but when I was getting no better, I told them I would look after myself.

"The Buddha and Ananda bathed the monk, cleaned his room, washed his robes, and gave him a fresh robe to wear. When the monks returned, the Buddha said, "Friends, if we do not look after each other, who will look after us? When you look after each other, you are looking after the Tathagata".

There are true jewels and jewels that are not authentic. If someone gives spiritual teachings that contradict the Three Seals of impermanence, nonself, and nirvana, that is not authentic Dharma. When a community has mindfulness, peace, joy, and liberation, it is a true Sangha. A Sangha that does not practice mindfulness and is not free, peaceful, or joyful cannot be called a true Sangha. The Buddha also can be true or false. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha says, "If you look for me in forms and sounds, you will never see the Tathagata. "Looking into any of the Three Jewels, you see the other two. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha inter-are. If you look after the Sangha, you are looking after the Buddha. When your Sangha is happy and advancing in the practice, the holiness of the Sangha increases, and the presence of the true Buddha and true Dharma become clearer. When you walk in mindfulness, you are taking good care of the Dharma. When you make peace with another member of your Sangha, you are looking after the Buddha. Going into the meditation hall, offering incense, and tidying the altar are not the only ways to look after the Buddha. Taking someone's hand or comforting someone who suffers is also to look after the Buddha. When you touch the true Sangha, you touch the Buddha and the Dharma. The Dharma cannot exist without a Buddha and a Sangha. How could the Dharma exist if there were no practitioners? A Buddha is a Buddha when the Dharma is in him or her. Each jewel contains the other two. When you take refuge in one jewel, you take refuge in all three. This can be realized in every moment of our life. Traditionally, we chant the Three Refuges three times.

During the first recitation, we turn in the direction of greater mindfulness, understanding, and love.

During the second recitation, we begin to embody the Three Jewels.

When we recite the third time, we vow to help others realize the Way of Understanding and Love and become a source of peace.

Our problems today are no longer as simple as those encountered by the Buddha. In the twenty-first century, we will have to practice meditation collectively - as a family, a city, a nation, and a community of nations. The Buddha of the twenty-first century - Maitreya, the Buddha of Love - may well be a community rather than an individual. Sanghas that practice loving kindness and compassion are the Buddha we need. We can prepare the ground for bringing that Buddha to life, for our sake and for the sake of countless others transforming our own suffering and cultivating the art of Sangha-building. It is the most important work we can do.

*Buddha is the teacher showing the way,  
the perfectly awakened one,  
beautifully seated, peaceful and smiling,  
the living source of understanding and compassion.*

*Dharma is the clear path leading us out of ignorance,  
bringing us back to an awakened life.*

*Sangha is the beautiful community  
that practices joy,  
realizing liberation,  
bringing peace and happiness to life*

*I take refuge in the Buddha, the one who shows me the way in this life.  
I take refuge in the Dharma, the way of understanding and of love.  
I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness.*

*Dwelling in the refuge of Buddha, I see clearly the path of light and beauty in the world.  
Dwelling in the refuge of Dharma, I learn to open many doors on the path of transformation.  
Dwelling in the refuge of Sangha, I am supported by its shining light that keeps my practice free  
of obstacles.*

*Taking refuge in the Buddha in myself, I aspire to help all people recognize their own awakened  
nature and realize the mind of love.*

*Taking refuge in the Dharma in myself, I aspire to help all people grasp the way of practice and  
walk together on the path of liberation.*

*Taking refuge in the Sangha in myself, I aspire to help all people build fourfold communities  
and encourage the transformation of all beings.*