

Buddhist Scriptures

Edited by DONALD S. LOPEZ, JR.

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THE THREE JEWELS

The recitation of the formula 'I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge to the dharma. I go for refuge to the saṅgha' (recited three times) is the most fundamental Buddhist practice, the Buddhist correlate to the confession of faith. The practice of taking refuge is said to derive from the days following the Buddha's enlightenment. He had remained in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree meditating for seven weeks, without eating. A deity informed two passing merchants that a nearby yogin had recently achieved buddhahood and suggested that they pay their respects. They offered him his first meal as a buddha (some honey cakes), which he received in a bowl provided for him by the four gods of the cardinal directions. They then bowed down before him and said, 'We take refuge in the Buddha and in the dharma.' (Because the Buddha did not yet have any disciples, there was no saṅgha.) The Buddha presented them with a lock of his hair and his fingernails and instructed them to enshrine them in a stūpa.

The refuge formula itself was prescribed by the Buddha shortly thereafter. After the conversion of his five old friends, all of whom became arhats, the Buddha taught the dharma to the wealthy merchant's son Yasa and fifty-four of his friends. They also became monks and arhats, bringing to sixty the number of enlightened disciples. The Buddha then sent them out to teach, explaining that a monk could admit a layman into the monkhood if he shaved his hair and beard, donned a yellow robe, bowed at the monk's feet, and then, sitting on his heels with joined palms, said three times, 'I go for refuge to the Buddha. I go for refuge to the dharma. I go for refuge to the

saṅgha.' (This method of ordination was later replaced; see Chapters 25 and 26.)

The Buddha, the dharma, and the saṅgha are called the three jewels (triratna), because they are rare and of great value. Given the centrality of the refuge formula as the point of entry into the practice of Buddhism and as the sign that distinguishes the Buddhist from the followers of other teachers, it is unsurprising that these three terms, their definition, their relation to each other and the significance of their order received extensive commentary, which often made clever use of true and false cognates, of which Buddhist scholars are so fond. The word dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root √dhr̥, meaning 'to hold'. It is explained, then, that the dharma is that which upholds those who follow the path and holds them back from falling into suffering. Exactly what the dharma is is much discussed, with some holding that the true dharma is only nirvāṇa, others saying that it includes both nirvāṇa and the path to it. Others speak of the verbal dharma, the spoken explication of the path, and the realized dharma, the manifestation of those teachings in one's mind. The constitution of the saṅgha is also considered. Although the term is used loosely to include the community of Buddhists, in the refuge formula it is used more exclusively to include those who have achieved at least the first level of the path and are destined to achieve nirvāṇa. The Buddha is mentioned first because he is the teacher of refuge; the dharma is mentioned next because it is the actual refuge; the saṅgha is mentioned third because it is they who help others to find that refuge.

The three jewels are also explained in terms of similes, as in the selection below. It is drawn from a text called Paramatthajotikā ('Illustrator of the Ultimate Meaning'), traditionally ascribed to the great scholar monk Buddhaghosa (fourth to fifth century CE), commenting on the refuge formula as it appears in a Pali text called the Khuddakapāṭha ('Minor Readings').

The Buddha is like the full moon; the dharma taught by him is like the shedding of the moon's effulgence; and the saṅgha is like the world inspired with happiness by the effulgence of the full moon. The Buddha is like the rising sun; the dharma as

already stated is like the web of his rays; and the saṅgha is like the world rid by him of darkness. The Buddha is like a man who burns a jungle; the dharma, which burns up the jungle of defilements, is like the fire which burns the jungle; and the saṅgha, which has become a field of merit since its defilements have been burnt up, is like the piece of ground which has become a field [for sowing] since its jungle has been burnt up. The Buddha is like the great rain-cloud; the dharma is like a down-pour of rain; and the saṅgha, in which the dust of defilement has been laid, is like the countryside in which the dust has been laid by the fall of rain. The Buddha is like a good trainer [of thoroughbreds]; the true dharma is like the means for the disciplining of thoroughbred horses; and the saṅgha is like a mass of well-disciplined thoroughbreds. The Buddha is like a dart-extractor because he removes all darts of [wrong] views; the dharma is like the means for removing the darts; and the saṅgha, from whom the darts of [wrong] views have been removed, is like people from whom darts have been removed. Or else the Buddha is like a lancet-user because he dissects away the cataract of delusion; the dharma is like the means for dissecting the cataract away; and the saṅgha, whose eye of knowledge is cleared by the dissecting away of the cataract of delusion, is like people whose eyes are cleared with the dissecting away of the cataract. Or else the Buddha is like a clever physician because he is able to cure the sickness consisting in defilement by underlying tendencies; the dharma is like a rightly applied medicine; and the saṅgha, whose underlying tendencies to the sickness of defilement are quite cured, is like people whose sickness is quite cured by the application of the medicine. Or else the Buddha is like a good guide; the dharma is like a good path to a land of safety; and the saṅgha is like [people] who enter upon the path and reach the land of safety. The Buddha is like a good pilot; the dharma is like a ship; and the saṅgha is like people who have succeeded in reaching the farther shore. The Buddha is like the Himalaya Mountain; the dharma is like the healing herbs that are given their being by that mountain; and the saṅgha is like people free from ailment owing to the use of the healing herbs. The Buddha is like a bestower of riches;

the *dharma* is like the riches; and the *saṅgha*, which has rightly obtained the noble one's riches, is like people who have obtained riches in the way hoped for. The Buddha is like one who shows a hidden treasure-store; the *dharma* is like the hidden-treasure store; and the *saṅgha* is like people who have found the hidden treasure-store. Furthermore, the Buddha is like a steadfast man who gives protection from fear; the *dharma* is the protection from fear; and the *saṅgha*, which has found complete protection from fear, is like people who have found protection from fear. The Buddha is like a consoler; the *dharma* is like a consolation; and the *saṅgha* is like people consoled. The Buddha is like a good friend; the *dharma* is like helpful advice; and the *saṅgha* is like people who have reached all their aims through following the helpful advice. The Buddha is like a mine of riches; the *dharma* is like the vein of riches; and the *saṅgha* is like people who exploit the vein of riches. The Buddha is like one who bathes a prince; the *dharma* is like the water for washing the head; and the *saṅgha*, which has been well bathed in the water of the true *dharma*, is like a company of well-bathed princes. The Buddha is like the maker of an ornament; the *dharma* is like the ornament; and the *saṅgha*, which is adorned with the true *dharma*, is like a party of kings' sons wearing ornaments. The Buddha is like a sandalwood tree; the *dharma* is like the scent given its being by that [tree]; and the *saṅgha*, whose fever has been quelled by the true *dharma*, is like people whose fever has been quelled by the use of sandalwood. The Buddha is like the bestower of an inheritance; the true *dharma* is like the inheritance; and the *saṅgha*, which is heir to the heritage consisting of the true *dharma*, is like a company of children who are heirs to the inheritance. The Buddha is like an opened lotus flower; the *dharma* is like the honey being given its being by that [flower]; and the *saṅgha* is like a swarm of bees making use of that [honey].

From 'The Three Refuges (Saraṇattayaṃ)', in *The Minor Readings (Khuddakapāṭha)*, trans. Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli, Pali Text Society Translation Series, No. 32 (London: Luzac & Company, Ltd, 1960), pp. 14-16.

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