

**THÍCH VIÊN LÝ**



**TAKING REFUGE IN THE  
BUDDHA, DHARMA, SANGHA  
AND RECEIVING  
THE FIVE PRECEPTS**



# Introduction



Buddhism is a religion with a massive following on the Asian continent. It is, however, a way of life that was begun by an Indian sage by the name Siddhartha, born as a prince of the Sakya clan in the Gautama family in the year 660 B.C.E. At the age of twenty nine, he became disillusioned by his privileged way of living when he witnessed real human suffering for the first time. This led him to spend the six years that followed seeking to understand what causes people's suffering and how they could be freed from that suffering. His journey started by seeking communication with the cosmic spirit whereby he initially submitted himself to ascetic training under famous masters. However, these teachings left him disillusioned which led him to engage in

extreme asceticism through self-mortification. This approach also did not work. It just weakened his mind and body instead of leading him to enlightenment. At this point he began taking solid foods resulting in his fellow monks leaving him. However, he realised the importance of the Middle Way which caused him to abandon the extremes of asceticism and hedonism and to fully embrace the life of meditation. Eventually, through meditation, he gained enlightenment on this issue and decided to devote the rest of his life to teaching other people how to relieve their suffering. Thus, it is clear that the word 'Buddha' means someone who is enlightened and who works to lead others to enlightenment.

Buddhism can be referred to as a path of practice as well as spiritual development which leads to insight into life's true nature. The practices of Buddhists, such as meditation, play a great role in developing

the qualities of awareness, wisdom and kindness. Therefore, the methods that have been developed in the Buddhist tradition for more than two thousand years have led to the creation of an incomparable resource for all who are willing to follow a path which ultimately culminates in the state of individual enlightenment.

In addition, since Buddhism is not based upon worship of a creator deity, some people do not normally perceive it as a religion, per se. They prefer to call it a philosophy. Whatever the case, the basic and fundamental tenets of the teachings of Buddhism are actually straightforward and very practical. That is, there is nothing which is permanent or fixed, actions that people undertake have consequences, whether good or bad, and change is possible. Therefore, Buddhism serves the fundamental role of addressing itself to everyone irrespective of their nationality,

race, or gender. It also plays a crucial role in teaching practical methods which, including meditation, enable people to realise as well as utilise its teachings. Consequently, they are able to transform their experience, become fully responsible for their own lives, and develop such qualities as wisdom and compassion.

There is an estimated population of around 850 million Buddhists around the world which continues to grow tremendously, with most of the recent converts being Westerners. However, there are various distinct forms of Buddhism. In these variations, all of the traditions share such similar attributes as non-violence, tolerance of differences, a lack of dogma, and the usual practice of meditation in one form or another. While these common components cannot be overlooked, Buddhism, just like many of the world's other great religions, is also divided into

various forms, which are different but mostly share a set of common beliefs.

One of the most essential beliefs in Buddhism is reincarnation. This is the belief in which people are usually reborn after death. It is believed that most individuals end up going through a cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth numerous times. However, a practicing Buddhist is capable of differentiating between the concepts of rebirth and reincarnation. For instance, in reincarnation, an individual may end up returning repeatedly. However, in rebirth, an individual may not necessarily return to earth as the initial entity he or she was again. In the concept of rebirth, these individuals are compared to leaves growing on a tree whereby after one leaf withers and falls off, another new leaf eventually grows to replace it. The second leaf is actually similar to the original one but not identical. However, after a being goes through a

number of such cycles, they are likely to release their attachment to the self and desire, thereby attaining *Nirvana*, which is a state of liberation from suffering.

# The Enlightenment of the Sakyamuni Buddha



Despite Siddhartha Gautama's princely life in his early years, he came to face the reality of life upon venturing into the streets of the city to perform his princely duties, where he saw the inevitability of sickness, old age and death, and that the beings of the world were lacking true happiness. Hence, he became dissatisfied with his life as a prince, and wanted to be able to help all human beings to overcome their suffering. Therefore, at the age of twenty-nine, Prince Siddhartha left the palace, giving up the crown that held the promise of power and glory. In the guise of an ascetic, he retreated into the forest to live in solitude to seek a solution for the

problems of life. His quest was to discover the ultimate security from bondage to the cycle of innumerable births and deaths. Dedicated to this noble task, he sought guidance from famous religious teachers hoping these masters of meditation would show him the path to liberation. However, their spiritual experiences were not enough so he sought the supreme enlightenment he thought they had on his own. He left them, and five beggar-monks known as “mendicants” joined him as his first disciples. He was driven to soar to the heights of liberation, thinking that his deliverance could be gained only through self-mortification as an ascetic.

However, after six years of this life of self-denial, undernourished and starving, he came to death's door and found himself no closer to his goal. He then went to Gaya and sat under a fig tree and decided to sit there until he reached enlightenment. For seven

days and nights he applied himself to mindfulness focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. During the three watches of the seventh night, he began his progression to full enlightenment. He experienced the basic life events common to all human beings and saw that the ills of greed, hatred and self-delusion were the causes of pain and suffering in this life. Siddhartha knew their presence and later taught that growth out of these states was necessary for enlightenment.

During the four hours of the first watch of the night, Siddhartha was able to recognise and admit that he was self-deluded in regard to his own condition of ignorance, which causes conflict and disharmony in all attempts at happiness. In the second watch it became clear to him that the release of striving, yearning and attachment to self and things can open into insight as to the causes of suffering. In the

four hours of third watch of the night, he saw virtue as a condition of harmony with life events, and the practice of loving-kindness and compassion as the way to eliminate selfish desires. During this period he fought off visions of evil spirits which tempted him to return to his life of wealth and luxury in his father's palace.

To root out all ills of the mind and body by mindful concentration was the clarity which came to Siddhartha at dawn of the last watch. He experienced all intoxicants, impurities and biases passing from his body and mind; he understood that the desire to seek pleasure and comfort from without causes ignorance of the inward calm which is needed for the enlightened state. With this, he developed insight that the Middle Way was the manner to achieve balance in one's life and laid out the conditions of The Noble Eightfold Path as a way to end human suffering.

Thus did Siddhartha Gautama, on a full-moon day at the age of thirty-five, attain Supreme Enlightenment and become the Buddha. The stages of his coming to see the ultimate truth of his teachings were clear; and were later to be revealed to the world as the *Dharma* (called *Dhamma* in the Theravada tradition): the understanding of, and release from, suffering by gaining insight into The Four Noble Truths and through the practice of the Eightfold Path.

As he taught the *Dharma*, his original five disciples joined him, as did thousands more throughout his 45 years of ministry up to his death at the age of 80 years. In this, his words were preserved by his disciples (*Sangha*), and their followers have in turn taught these beliefs and practices to millions throughout the world. Buddhism spread peacefully; the only weapon used being that of universal loving-kindness and compassion.

The Buddha proved by his own experience that enlightenment and deliverance lie entirely in the hands of each one of us. Being an exponent of a disciplined life, by modelling the precepts and being the example to follow, the Buddha encouraged his disciples to cultivate self-reliance with no dependence on external agents. The ills and disharmony of life must be rooted out by each person as the path is cleared toward one's own salvation.

# The Reasons for Taking Refuge



Buddhism, like any other religious tradition, consists of its own distinct foundation, beliefs and practices. In the case of Buddhism, entrance into the *Dharma* can only be achieved through taking refuge in the Triple Gem. That is, in the *Buddha* who was a fully enlightened teacher; in the *Dharma* as his teaching, and; in the *Sangha*, which is the religious community of his enlightened followers. Since ancient times, going for refuge has served the crucial role of acting as the entranceway to the Buddha's dispensation, thereby giving admission to his teaching from the most ignorant sentient beings to those that have been enlightened. Therefore, everyone who

embraces Buddha's teaching always does so as a result of taking refuge in the Triple Gem and embracing the Five Precepts.

As slight, simple and as easy as this initial step might seem, when considering the lofty achievements that lie beyond, its significance can not to be underestimated, since it is actually this first act which is responsible for imparting direction as well as forward momentum towards the practice of Buddhism. Therefore, since the process of going for refuge has such a crucial role in the Buddhist tradition, then the need to properly understand this act is inevitable both as a distinct act and in terms of the envisaged future implications that may arise along the path.

When it is frequently said that practicing the Buddha's teaching always begins with taking refuge, there is always a very vital question that arises. That is, why

do we need to take refuge? However, upon keen consideration of refuge, it is evident that the objects of refuge are a person, thing or place that gives protection from danger or harm. Therefore, whenever we begin practicing Buddhism by first taking refuge in the Triple Gem, it signifies that this practice is intended for protecting us against danger and harm, specifically the danger and harm we cause ourselves through ignorance. Thus, as the main purpose of Buddhism is actually to find freedom from suffering, taking refuge is that initial step towards the process of full enlightenment and liberation from suffering. Despite having most of the material things we require such as food, money, shelter and security, this does not mean we have no need of taking refuge. This is because taking refuge will be followed by the observation of the Five Precepts that regulate our lives on a daily basis by discouraging us from

engaging in undesirable deeds.

In order to more fully understand why we need refuge we need to learn how to clearly see the truths of our circumstances as human beings. Therefore, from the perspective of a Buddhist, the human condition is quite comparable to an iceberg whereby only a minute fraction of its entire mass tends to appear above the surface. The larger part of the iceberg remains hidden below the water's surface and out of view. Owing to our limited mental capacity due to ignorance, our insight often fails to penetrate below the surface and so we are unable to perceive our real circumstances. However, Buddhism teaches subtle ways through which our minds are more likely to perceive things precisely and accurately by considering the entire situation without being blinded or distracted by just a few aspects of life.

# The Benefits to Taking Refuge



Taking refuge in the Three Jewels provides numerous benefits that are likely to be reaped in our present and future lives, thereby leading to ultimate happiness as a result of full liberation from the cycle of suffering. As such, the benefits gained can actually be grouped into eight categories, such as being a follower of the Buddha, establishing a concrete foundation for receiving the precepts, having the ability to accumulate vast amounts of merit, diminishing karmic obstacles, avoiding being reborn in lower forms of existence, having the potential to accomplish all virtuous deeds, and having the ability to not be disturbed by both humans and non-

humans.

The benefits of taking refuge have also been adequately covered in many parables and stories in various Buddhist scriptures. For example, when a person takes refuge in the Three Jewels, they will acquire an amount of merit that is inexhaustible in the future. Hence, taking refuge functions like a repository of great wealth. Therefore, the merit that is actually derived by someone who takes refuge is, in a real sense, a thousand times greater in comparison to the wealth in such a repository. In addition, taking refuge ensures that someone is not reborn in a lower form of existence, thereby making sure they live better lives throughout the cycle of rebirth.

Taking refuge is also precious. This is mainly because once you take refuge in the Three Jewels, you gain protection from the four guardian gods responsible for the

protection of the four quarters of the universe. These gods send guardian angels who are thirty-six in number to protect the recipient of refuge from harm. Each of the guardian angels prevents various kinds of harm. Some of them prevent aversion, sickness, fear, hunger, thievery, delusion, and greed among other things.

Lastly, when you take refuge in the Three Jewels, this is actually the first step towards becoming a Buddhist. Hence, upon taking refuge there is the need to embark on the path of spiritual cultivation which involves finding a teacher as well as developing a regular practice. Therefore, by doing so, it will be a decisive step on the Buddhist path of accumulating the wisdom and compassion necessary for awakening. This means that taking refuge will undoubtedly ensure that someone eventually becomes a genuine Buddhist, thereby gaining access to all the benefits

# Some Basic Buddhist Concepts Karma



In Buddhism, karma is mainly used to mean the results or fruits of one's actions. Therefore, karma is actually understood as cause and effect, whereby someone reaps what they sow. This means that good actions will have good effects while bad actions will have bad effects. Therefore, any action is perceived as a creation of karmic seeds in the mind that eventually sprout, ultimately leading to a result whenever they are met by the right conditions. In the Buddhist view, most karma, with either bad or good results, will keep one within the wheel of samsāra, whereas other karma will lead one to nirvāna. Furthermore, karma is directly linked to the motives that lead someone to a

certain action. Hence, our motivation will always makes the difference between bad and good actions.

# The Four Noble Truths



Buddhism also consists of the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering (*duhkha*); suffering occurs as a result of attachment (*trishna*) ( and, by extension, aversion); it is possible to overcome attachment (and attain *Nirvana*); and this is accomplished by following the Noble Eightfold Path. For instance, the first noble truth is *duhkha*, meaning suffering. This word can also be used to refer to something stressful, imperfect, or filled with anguish. It also involves the *anitya* (impermanence) which contributes to anguish, and that all things are not permanent, especially living things like human beings. In addition, there is also the concept of *anatman*, meaning “not-self.” This meaning “not-self.” This means that all compound phenomena are

made up of parts, including we humans. Therefore, we are impermanent and lack a true, inherent self and all things arise because of various causes and conditions. This implies that all the things are interdependent and interconnected. Hence nothing, even human beings, can exist separately from anything else.

Secondly, *trishna* is the other noble truth, meaning attachment, and can be translated as “clinging,” “desire,” “craving,” “greed,” or “lust.” Thus, since we are impermanent, imperfect, and not separate, we usually try to cling to things and to each other forever in an effort to create permanence. Besides *trishna*, *dvesha* is also an important concept which means “hatred” or “avoidance.” However, hatred is also in its own capacity a kind of clinging-clinging to the opposite of something. Finally, *avidya* means “refusal to see” or “ignorance,” and is also another part of

attachment.

Thirdly, *Nirvana* is the other most crucial noble truth in Buddhism which means overcoming attachment. However, it is mostly mistakenly used to refer to complete nothingness or Buddhist heaven. However, it is correct to say that the promise of Nirvana motivates us to let go of hatred, clinging and ignorance by cultivating acceptance of impermanence, imperfection, and interconnectedness.

Finally, the fourth noble truth is the path of *Dharma* (specifically the Noble Eightfold Path) which is the path towards *Nirvana*. Buddha called this path the “middle way” and perceived it as such among the constantly competing philosophies such as idealism and materialism, or asceticism and hedonism.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the set of directions laid out by the Buddha as the way

towards ending suffering. It is a very crucial, practical set of guidelines to both mental and ethical development, aimed at freeing the individual from delusions and attachments which finally leads them to understand the truth about all things.

In conjunction with the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path constitutes the foundation of Buddhism. However, great emphasis is actually laid upon the application of the Buddha's teaching, since it is only by practicing that an individual is able to achieve a higher state of existence and finally reach *Nirvana*. Therefore, the eight aspects involved in the path do not need to be perceived as a series of single steps taken in sequence. Rather, they are principles that are highly interdependent and closely related to each other which include:

**Right Understanding:** understanding

wholesome deeds as well as unwholesome deeds and also comprehending the law of karma.

**Right Thought:** the intention to avoid greed, hatred and delusion.

**Right Speech:** abstaining from malicious speech, false speech, harsh speech as well as idle chatter.

**Right Action:** abstaining from stealing, killing, as well as sexual misconduct.

**Right Livelihood:** abstaining from corrupt and wrong means of livelihood that cause suffering for sentient beings.

**Right Effort:** awakening zeal for the effort to abandon the states of unwholesomeness and to sustaining wholesome states.

**Right Mindfulness:** involves the four foundations of mindfulness such as the

contemplation on the body, contemplation on the mind, contemplation on feelings as well as contemplation on mental objects.

**Right Concentration:** abandoning the hindrances toward enlightenment such as lust, ill-will, worry, agitation as well as doubt through developing the *jhanas* which are mental states cultivated through meditation.

# The Refuge Ceremony

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Anyone wishing to become a Buddhist is required to go through a short, formal ceremony referred to as the “Refuge Ceremony.” It is usually conducted by a person who is authorised to do so and belonging to one of the lineages or traditions such as the *Mahayana* (“Great Vehicle”), *Theravada* meaning “School of the Elders” or *Vajrayana* (the “Diamond Vehicle” or “Indestructible Vehicle”). The short ceremony of taking refuge actually indicates that someone has formally accepted Buddhism as their spiritual practice. However, it does not mean that people of other religions are not capable of practicing the Buddhist methods of meditation. Nonetheless, the actual “Taking Refuge Ceremony” serves as the

demarcation between Buddhist followers and the followers of other religions such as Christianity, Islam or Hinduism. Therefore, the refuge taking ceremony is very significant because it usually marks the beginning of an individual's commitment to the Triple Gem (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). Hence, only a person who has taken refuge can be referred to as a true Buddhist.

During the ceremony, the basic refuge follows a certain order which is as follows: "I go for refuge in the Buddha, I go for refuge in the Dharma, I go for refuge in the Sangha." Additionally, during the ceremony, the refuge candidate is actually requested to make a commitment for a minimum of 24 hours to any one of the five precepts. Regardless, the candidate is not restricted to only one precept hence he or she is free to either take any or even all of them as far as they are interested in doing so.

Such precepts include: to abstain from killing, to abstain from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from cheating and lying and finally abstaining from taking drugs and intoxicating drinks likely to cause heedlessness.

# The meaning of taking refuge in the Triple Gem

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The “Triple Gem” in Buddhism is mostly used to mean the *Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*. However, each of these has a meaning. *Dharma* is used to refer to the Buddha teachings, and *Sangha* refers to the collective name for the Buddhist spiritual community. Therefore, in taking refuge, somebody seeks guidance by turning to the Triple Gem for liberation as well as salvation from suffering. A Buddhist can be referred to as someone who has already taken refuge as their first step on the Buddhist path. Thus, whenever someone takes refuge, he or she declares to be a disciple of the Triple Gem. Taking refuge is actually regarded as a public way of

proclaiming the acceptance of *Buddha* as the teacher, *Dharma* as the Buddhism teachings, and the *Sangha* as the spiritual community. In addition, the initial step of practicing Buddhism is usually to take refuge in the Triple Gem.

In our endeavours of striving for perfection as well as liberation from the suffering and stress of life, the Triple Gem, that is, *Buddha*, *Dharma* and *Sangha* are very crucial. This is because *Buddha* refers to one who is fully enlightened. This is due to the fact that out of deep compassion the Buddha Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha) devoted his entire life to teaching people the way to end suffering while at the same time how to gain enlightenment. Next, *Dharma* refers to his teachings on how to overcome desire, ignorance and ill-will in the process of liberating people from the birth and death cycle. Additionally, *Sangha* refers to the Buddhist community which

consists of both the monks and nuns forming the spiritual community in which a Buddhist is a member.

There are, however, two main features that characterise the monastic community, first, that all the members have a common goal of trying to end their attachments. Second, in order to achieve group harmony, or spiritual community, all the members are supposed to strictly adhere to the rules, such as: unity in thought, ensuring equal rights among all the community members, promoting as well as sharing of the issue of common interest, being courteous and kind to each other in words and finally good will and being considerate to others. Therefore, this results in a monastic community that endeavours to provide an ideal environment for personal cultivation and formation of a crucial foundation for the *Dharma* teachings in the wider community.

# The Five Precepts



After taking refuge, a Buddhist is required to observe the five precepts that illuminate all virtuous actions as well as the moral standards of the human race. Despite the existence of different precepts for the laity and monastics, they are all rooted in the five precepts. Hence they are called the “Foundation Precepts.” Therefore, taking the precepts can be compared to a student following the school rules and regulations or people within a community abiding by that society's common laws. However, the distinction between the two is that school rules and public laws are external restrictions to people's behaviour, whereas Buddhist precepts are usually a form of self-discipline and are therefore internal

regulations. Furthermore, if anyone in the Buddhism religion fails to obey these precepts they will naturally create the causes of suffering that these precepts are intended to help us avoid. Buddhists must therefore always ensure they observe these precepts. The contents of the five precepts are as follows:

*1. To abstain from killing.*

A Buddhist is not supposed to kill because killing is always a source of harm to oneself and others. This is because it does not do any single good whatsoever; it creates fear and pain in those whom we attack and suffering for their loved ones. If we kill someone, we are stealing from them the opportunity to come closer to awakening in this life as well. Taking life therefore generates bad karma for oneself. Also, if someone kills another person their friends and family might be motivated to

take revenge upon us, thereby leading to a vicious cycle of violence that will only serve to create more suffering for everyone. This is very true in almost every part of the world.

*2. To abstain from stealing.*

Taking other people's property without their permission amounts to stealing and causes harm to oneself as well as others. For instance, a thief will always spend most of the time hiding in order to avoid getting caught. Also, the stolen goods have to be hidden secretly and used cautiously. Therefore, this creates a great mental burden and bondage to anyone who gets involved in the act of stealing. It is even worse when such an individual becomes obsessed with stealing as they will spend most of their life fleeing from authorities. In addition, once the thief is caught the one who has lost their property may seek the

court's intervention leading to punishment under the law. A thief can never have a peaceful and happy mind, not to mention the suffering caused to the victim of thievery. It is therefore important that absolute abstinence from stealing is maintained.

### *3. To abstain from sexual misconduct*

Abstaining from sexual misconduct is very crucial since it is an act that can be a cause of harm to friends and family. Hence, it does not do any good to oneself or others. For instance, men who seduce other people's wives suffer in hell for an eternity beyond the suffering they incur for themselves and cause to others in this life. In addition, they will end up being women in other cycles of rebirth. Similarly, when a woman seduces the husband of another woman she will also suffer these consequences. As for suffering in this life, one who seduces another person's wife or

husband suffers a poor reputation and may lose friendships and destroy family relationships. This is mainly because their acts are actually based upon lust and only serve to increase enemies and create conflict. Thus all Buddhists are required to totally abstain from sexual misconduct.

#### *4. To abstain from lying*

More often than not, people lie due to lust or greed. For instance, one may lie in order to obtain profit or even to take advantage of others. Also, when people lie they demonstrate a lack of confidence in themselves. Hence, whenever someone is used to lying they develop inner insecurity, which makes them uncomfortable with themselves. However, serious instances of lying create problems for the individual who lies and also inconvenience others. For example, when someone is actually found to be lying in a court of law, they may end up

in jail. Furthermore, the phenomenon of lying is likely to lead to the creation of numerous misunderstandings, disagreements and possibly even wars and so on. Therefore, it does not do any good for oneself or for others. People do not like those who are fond of lying as lying prevents the establishment of trust. Therefore, it is in the best interest of every Buddhist to abstain from lying.

*5. To abstain from intoxicants:*

Many people around the world are addicted to intoxicating drugs including alcohol. There are also others who consume limited quantities of alcohol. The claim that drinking a little wine will enable one to live a healthy and longer life remains questionable. This is mainly because there are very many monks and nuns who have never consumed alcohol in their lives but end up living up to a hundred years. Despite

the use of self control in justifying alcohol consumption, it would be unfair to blindly indulge in it without considering the long-term consequences. This is mainly because drinking debilitates one's immune system and also inhibits one's intelligence and capacity for reasoning in the long run. Additionally, for those with households, drinking may result in them leaving their spouse, children, homes and wealth unprotected, as well as causing themselves harm if they drink and drive. Moreover, drinking not only causes one to lose wealth, family, and friends but also impairs one's health and self control in cases of addiction. Therefore, these serious consequences of drinking are the ones which necessitate abstinence from drinking.

In conclusion, Buddhism can be regarded as a path of practice as well as spiritual development that results in insight

into the true nature of reality. However, meditation, which is a key practice in Buddhism, acts as means of changing oneself in the attempt to develop qualities such as kindness, awareness, and wisdom. Moreover, the wisdom that has been cultivated within the Buddhist tradition over many years has led to the creation of an incomparable resource for people who follow this path which ultimately culminates in full enlightenment. Therefore, someone who is enlightened is capable of seeing clearly the nature of reality as it is, thereby enabling him or her to live fully in accordance with that vision which is the eventual goal of the Buddhist's spiritual life; the end of suffering. However, the basic tenets of the Buddha's teaching are practical and straightforward, primarily the truth that nothing is permanent or fixed, actions always have their consequences as well as the truth that change is inevitable.

This means that Buddhism usually addresses itself to everyone regardless of nationality, race, gender, or sexuality. This is due to the fact that it teaches practical methods that usually enable people to realise the use of its teachings in transforming their experiences as well as being fully responsible for their own lives.



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