

Tony Bernhard 5-5-2010

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### The Three Refuges

Most of us are dissatisfied with life in general. On a scale of 1 to 10, we would want life to be at least a 7 all the time. In pursuit of this, we chase after the pleasant and push away the unpleasant. However, things are the way they are, and wanting them to be different does not change anything.

The Bruce Springsteen song "Cover Me" expresses this dissatisfaction and longing:

*The times are tough now, just getting tougher  
This old world is rough, it's just getting rougher  
Cover me, come on baby, cover me  
Well I'm looking for a lover who will come on in and cover me  
Promise me baby you won't let them find us  
Hold me in your arms, let's let our love blind us  
Cover me, shut the door and cover me  
Well I'm looking for a lover who will come on in and cover me*

*Outside's the rain, the driving snow  
I can hear the wild wind blowing  
Turn out the light, bolt the door  
I ain't going out there no more*

*This whole world is out there just trying to score  
I've seen enough I don't want to see any more,  
Cover me, come on and cover me  
I'm looking for a lover who will come on in and cover me  
Looking for a lover who will come on in and cover me*

In ancient Hawaii, the laws were very strict. Any commoner who walked in the footsteps of the chief or let his shadow fall on royal grounds would be put to death. The only escape from this fate was if the transgressor could reach a City of Refuge. There, he would be safe. If a priest conducted a purification ceremony, all was forgiven, and the transgressor could return home.

A place of refuge does not change the world, but allows you to be left alone. In Buddhism, The Three Refuges likewise do not change the world, but do provide a sanctuary from dissatisfaction. The Three Refuges, which are at the core of Buddhist practice, are: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

*They go to many a refuge, to mountains and forests, to park and tree shrines: people threatened with danger. That's not the secure refuge, not the supreme refuge, that's not the refuge, having gone to which, you gain release from all suffering & stress. But when, having gone to the Buddha, Dhamma, & Sangha for refuge, you see with right discernment the four noble truths — stress, the cause of stress, the transcending of stress, & the noble eightfold path, the way to the stilling of stress: that's the secure refuge, that, the supreme refuge, that is the refuge, having gone to which, you gain release from all suffering & stress.*

### *Dharmapada 188-192*

#### *The Buddha*

The Buddha is a refuge in that he provides a model of what is possible. He was a person, just like any of us, and he gave up the delusion that he could make himself happy by getting what he wanted. Getting what you want is at best a temporary joy – it does not last.

The Buddha shows us that we can live in amity, free of hate or malice, devoid of coveting, devoid of ill will, undeluded, and clearly comprehending and mindful, with compassion, gladness, and equanimity.

#### *The Dharma*

The Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha. As the Buddha is the model, the Dharma is the map. The non-doing of any evil, the performance of what's skillful, the cleansing of one's own mind: this is the teaching of the Awakened.

Dharmapada 183

As Stephen Batchelor points out in *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* (<http://www.amazon.com/Confession-Buddhist-Atheist-Stephen-Batchelor/dp/0385527063>), there are four principle teachings that are unique to the Buddha.

The first is self-reliance:

Focus, not on the rudenesses of others, not on what they've done or left undone, but on what you have & haven't done yourself.

Dharmapada 50

Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher." Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised

by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter on and abide in them."

### Kalama Sutta

The second is that Mindfulness is a direct path to awakening.

The third is The Four Noble Truths.

*Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five aggregates for sustenance are stressful.*

*And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming — accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there — i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.*

*And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release and letting go of that very craving.*

*And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this Noble Eightfold Path — right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.*

*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion;  
Sammyutta Nikaya 56.11*

The fourth principle is Dependent Origination, also known as Interdependent Origination. This is the doctrine that all things are connected. A common teaching story for this concept is Indra's Net:

*Buddhism uses a similar image to describe the interconnectedness of all phenomena. It is called Indra's Net. When Indra fashioned the world, he made it as a web, and at every knot in the web is tied a pearl. Everything that exists, or has ever existed, every idea that can be thought about, every datum that is true—every dharma, in the language of Indian philosophy—is a pearl in Indra's net. Not only is every pearl tied to every other pearl by virtue of the web on which they hang, but on the surface of every pearl is reflected every other jewel on the net. Everything that exists in Indra's web implies all else that exists.*

*Vermeers Hat by Timothy Brook.*

The Sangha

Originally, *Sangha* referred to the group of 500 enlightened disciples of the Buddha. Later, it came to mean the monastic community. Today, however, *Sangha* is the Buddhist community in general including both lay and monastic practitioners.

*... Ven. Ananda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, "This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie." [1](#)*

*"Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & comrades, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path.*

Upaddha Sutta: Half (of the Holy Life); Samyutta Nikaya 45.2

One way to look at this is that the Buddha is the doctor, the Dharma is the medicine, and the Sangha is the nurse that administers the medicine. The Sangha is the culture of awakening that supports and motivates following the Dharma.

Buddham saranam gacchami

I go to the Buddha for refuge.

Dhammam saranam gacchami

I go to the Dhamma for refuge.

Sangham saranam gacchami

I go to the Sangha for refuge.