

Going for Refuge

by Sangharakshita

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Foreword

There are no moral absolutes: that seems to be modern man's only ethical certainty. Of course, many people still cling to the revelations of a creator God as a basis of value. Some again persist in believing that science can uncover guiding truths in nature. But the post-modern world leaves most people *de facto* sceptics, whatever they believe they believe. The meeting of many cultures and the rush of change in every field of human experience are eroding traditional moral habits. There seems to be no clear point around which the world can be ordered, no moral foundation upon which values can be built. We are left with moral relativism – which in the end is no morality at all.

Buddhists of today base their morality neither upon God nor upon science, yet they are not moral relativists. Like Buddhists of the past, they take their stand upon the Buddha. They see the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment as the example that gives direction to their own lives. From his enlightened teaching they derive the principles by which their actions are guided. The Buddha is Buddhists' source of value.

This marks the difference between the Buddhist and the non-Buddhist: the acceptance of the Buddha as the pole star in the moral firmament. That acceptance is not merely rational, but shows itself in stirred emotions and directed will. One's whole life is now centred more and more upon the Buddha, together with the Dharma, as the Buddha's teaching that leads to Enlightenment, and the Sangha, as the community founded upon that teaching, the community of those who move together towards Enlightenment. In traditional terms, used since the time of the Buddha himself, one goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. One goes for Refuge to them as the ultimate and only source of existential security, meaning, and value.

Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels is what distinguishes the Buddhist. By Going for Refuge one becomes a Buddhist. Most Buddhists today will, if pressed, acknowledge this. The formula of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is a familiar repetition almost universal throughout the Buddhist world. Yet its full significance is not generally understood. It is usually uttered as a superficial and conventional indicator of one's belonging to the Buddhist social group, an affirmation of cultural identity. To make up for the loss of deep significance to the phrase 'Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels', other terms have arisen to describe and express the essential act of a Buddhist: for instance, in

the Mahayana there is the language of the Bodhisattva Ideal, and in the Vajrayana, of Tantric initiation. As Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels has been understood more and more superficially, the unity of the Buddhist tradition in a single act has been lost sight of in proliferating doctrines and practices.

Sangharakshita, after many years of study and practice, has come to see Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels as the central and definitive act of the Buddhist life in all its levels and stages. This re-emphasis is undoubtedly his most important contribution to modern Buddhism, since it restores the unity of the tradition without denying the spiritual value of the rich abundance of later Buddhist teachings. Sense can be made of the vast proliferation of practices and doctrines since each can be seen as being concerned with a different aspect of the act of Going for Refuge. Above all, this approach defines the Buddhist life in terms of an existential act, rather than a narrowly doctrinal formula or an act of conventional ceremony. Buddhism is concerned with a profound shift, both inner and outer, away from the mundane world towards the Buddha. 'Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels' gives expression to that shift as it is made on deeper and deeper levels at every phase of the Buddhist life.

The realization that Going for Refuge was the central act of the Buddhist life did not come immediately to Sangharakshita. His spiritual career was followed in a Buddhist environment in which the place of Going for Refuge was not properly understood. Though he recited the formula many times, notably at his ordinations as a sramanera and as a bhiksu, he was not conscious that this was the crucial Buddhist deed – and no one suggested to him that it was (his preceptor being more concerned, on the former occasion, with his correct pronunciation of the formula in Pali than with its spiritual meaning).

'The full significance of that supremely important Act became apparent to me only gradually as, over the years, I acted upon the imperfect idea of Going for Refuge which I already had and as, my idea of it being clarified to some extent, I again acted upon it and it was again clarified – the act becoming more adequate to the idea as the idea itself became clearer, and the idea becoming clearer as the act became more adequate.' (Sangharakshita, *The History of My Going for Refuge*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1988, p.19.)

It is not surprising, therefore, that he describes the history of his deepening discovery of the significance of Going for Refuge as following 'a rather erratic course'.

In *The History of My Going for Refuge* Sangharakshita charts that erratic course, showing how the realization of the crucial significance of Going for Refuge slowly dawned upon him. By the time he founded the Western Buddhist Order in 1968, its central place had become fully evident to him. On that basis he was able to initiate an Order that transcended the accustomed categories of monastic and laity. If the central and definitive act of the Buddhist life was Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, then the performing of that act was far more important than the

kind of life-style one followed – though life-style, for all that, was not therefore unimportant. Nonetheless his understanding of Going for Refuge still needed to be elaborated further to make fully clear its central position.

The talk that is published here provides the final keys to his understanding. He shows that Going for Refuge is a dynamic act, taken again and again on deeper and deeper levels until Enlightenment is reached. He also shows that it is an act that has many dimensions. He traces the connection between a number of important Buddhist formulations and Going for Refuge, demonstrating that each draws out another aspect of that central and definitive act. In this entirely new interpretation of Buddhist ideas, he demonstrates the unity of the Buddhist community on the vertical and horizontal planes.

In so far as Going for Refuge has different levels, all Buddhists, whatever their stage of spiritual realization, are united in the act of Going for Refuge. Whether one is a beginner on the Path or a Bodhisattva on the threshold of Enlightenment, one goes for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. At the same time, the many ways of talking about the path in the various Buddhist schools can be seen as drawing out different aspects of that central and definitive act of Going for Refuge. Whatever school one belongs to and however one may conceive and express what one is doing, if one is a genuine Buddhist one will be Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

This, then, is a truly historic talk. It was given on 31 December 1981 at Theosophy Hall in Bombay. The audience was a mixed one, consisting of both well-educated and often socially privileged Indian Theosophists and ‘ex-Untouchable’ Buddhist followers of Dr Ambedkar. The audience brought together two strands in Sangharakshita’s life in India, for during his twenty years’ work in the land of the Buddha’s birth he had often lectured at Theosophy Hall and had also made many preaching tours among the newly converted ‘ex-Untouchables’. The audience met in the context of a visit by Sangharakshita to the newly established Indian centres of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (known in India as Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana), the new Buddhist movement he had founded in London in 1967. It was a fitting setting for the presentation in broad outline of the centrepiece of his thinking.

Subhuti
Madhyamaloka
August 1996

Going for Refuge

After his Enlightenment the Buddha spent a great deal of time wandering from place to place making known the Dharma or Truth he had discovered, and the Way leading to its realization. Much of what he said is preserved in the Pali scriptures, but although in some cases we have what may well be the Buddha's actual words, we probably do not appreciate the powerful effect of those words on the listener when spoken by the Enlightened One himself. What we usually find happening is that in the course of his wanderings the Buddha meets someone, whether a wealthy brahmin, a fellow-wanderer, or a young prince, and the two of them get into conversation. As the conversation deepens, the Buddha begins to speak from the depths of his spiritual experience. In other words, the Buddha expounds the Dharma: the Dharma *emerges*.

Sometimes, when reading the Buddhist scriptures, we get the impression that the Dharma is a matter of *lists*, the five of this and the six of that and so on – an excessively schematized and tabulated thing. But it certainly wasn't like that at the beginning. It was all fresh, original, and creative. The Buddha would speak from the depths of his spiritual experience. He would expound the Truth and show the Way leading to Enlightenment, and the person to whom he was speaking would be absolutely astounded and overwhelmed. In some cases he might not be able to speak or do more than stammer a few incoherent words. Something had been revealed to him. Something had burst upon him that was above and beyond his ordinary understanding. For an instant, at least, he had glimpsed the Truth, and the experience had staggered him. Time and again, on occasions of this sort, the scriptures tell us that the person concerned exclaimed, 'Excellent, lord, excellent! As if one should set up again that which had been overthrown or reveal that which had been hidden, or should disclose the road to one that was astray, or should carry a lamp into darkness, saying, "They that have eyes will see!" even so hath the Truth been manifested by the Exalted One in many ways.' In this manner would he express himself. Then, out of the depth of his gratitude, such a person would fervently declare, '*Buddham saranam gacchami! Dhammam saranam gacchami! Sangham saranam gacchami!* To the Buddha for refuge I go! To the Dharma for refuge I go! To the Sangha for refuge I go!'

These words from the ancient past reveal to us the origin of an act which lies at the heart of Buddhist life: Going for Refuge. They also tell us something of the tremendous spiritual significance of this act. Going for Refuge represents your positive emotional response – in fact your total response – to the spiritual ideal

when that ideal is revealed to your spiritual vision. Such is its appeal that you cannot but give yourself to it. As Tennyson says, 'We needs must love the Highest when we see it.' Going for Refuge is a bit like that. You've seen the 'Highest' – it has been shown to you – so you needs must love it, needs must give yourself to it, needs must commit yourself to it. That commitment of yourself to the 'Highest' is Going for Refuge. It is this topic, which has been close to my heart for many years, that I want to address here.

As the words of the Buddha's followers suggest, the object of Going for Refuge is threefold. One goes for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha – known in Buddhism as the Three Jewels. But what does it mean in practice to 'go for refuge' to each of these Three Jewels?

The Buddha is an Enlightened human being. He is not God or a messenger of God, but a human being who, by his own efforts, has reached the summit of human perfection. He has gained the ineffable state which we call Enlightenment, nirvana, or Buddhahood. He is, indeed, not only a Buddha but a *samyak sambuddha*, a Fully and Perfectly Enlightened One. When we go for Refuge to the Buddha, we go for Refuge to him in this sense. Not that we just admire him from a distance. We admire him indeed, and certainly he is very distant at present, but great as the gap between the Buddha and ourselves may be, that gap can be closed. We can close it by practising the Dharma. We too can become as the Buddha. We too can become Enlightened. *That* is the great message of Buddhism. Each and every human being who makes the effort can become what the Buddha became. When, therefore, we go for Refuge to the Buddha, we go for Refuge to him as the living embodiment of a spiritual ideal which is a spiritual ideal *for us*, a spiritual ideal we can actually realize. When we go for Refuge to the Buddha it is as though we say, 'That is what I want to be. That is what I want to attain. I want to be Enlightened and develop the fullness of Wisdom and Compassion.' Going for Refuge to the Buddha means taking the Buddha – taking Buddhahood – as our personal spiritual ideal, as something we ourselves can achieve.

The Dharma is the Path or Way. It is the path of what I have sometimes called the higher evolution of man, a stage of purely spiritual development above and beyond biological evolution. As a Path, the Dharma exists in a number of different formulations. We speak of the Threefold Path: of morality (*sila*), meditation (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*prajña*). There is the path of the Bodhisattva, otherwise known as the path of the Six Perfections (*paramitas*): giving (*dana*), morality (*sila*), patience and forbearance (*ksanti*), vigour (*virya*), higher consciousness (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*prajña*). These are just two among many other formulations, but the basic principle of the path is always the same. The path is essentially the Path of the Higher Evolution.

The Dharma is not to be identified with this or that particular teaching. According to the Buddha's own express declaration the Dharma is whatever

contributes to the spiritual development of the individual. When his maternal aunt and foster mother, Mahaprajapati the Gotamid, asked him for a criterion by means of which she could distinguish between what was his teaching, his Dharma-Vinaya, and what was not, he replied, 'Of whatsoever teachings Gotamid, thou canst assure thyself thus: "These doctrines conduce to passions, not to dispassion; to bondage, not to detachment; to increase of (worldly) gains, not to decrease of them; to covetousness, not to frugality; to discontent, and not content; to company, not solitude; to sluggishness, not energy; to delight in evil, not delight in good": of such teachings thou mayest with certainty affirm, Gotamid, "This is not the Dharma. This is not the Vinaya. This is not the Master's Message." But of whatsoever teachings thou canst assure thyself (that they are the opposite of those things I have told you), of such teachings thou mayest with certainty affirm: "This is the Dharma. This is the Vinaya. This is the Master's Message."' "

When we go for Refuge to the Dharma we commit ourselves to the path of the higher evolution. We commit ourselves to whatever helps us to develop spiritually – to whatever helps us to grow towards Enlightenment.

Sangha means 'Spiritual Community'. Primarily this is the community of all those who are spiritually more advanced than we are: the great Bodhisattvas, the Arhants, the Stream Entrants, and so on. (I will have a little to say about each of these later on.) Together they form the *Aryasangha*, the 'noble Sangha', the Spiritual Community in the highest sense. Secondarily, it is the community of all Buddhists, all those who go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In the case of the Aryasangha, Going for Refuge to the Sangha means opening ourselves to the spiritual influence of the sublime beings of whom it consists. It means learning from them, being inspired by them, reverencing them. In the case of the Sangha in the more ordinary sense, that of the community of all Buddhists, it means enjoying spiritual fellowship with one another and helping one another on the path. Sometimes you may not need a highly advanced Bodhisattva to help you. All you need is an ordinary human being who is a little more developed spiritually than you are, or even just a little more sensible. Only too often people are on the lookout for a great, highly developed guru, but that is not what they really need, even if such a person was available. What they need is a helping hand *where they are now*, on the particular stage of the path which at present they occupy, and this kind of help can generally be given by an ordinary fellow Buddhist.

This, then, is what it means to go for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha; and it is this threefold Going for Refuge – in the way that I have described – that makes one a Buddhist. Going for Refuge is therefore of crucial importance in the Buddhist life. But having said that one must sound a note of regret. Unfortunately, Going for Refuge, despite its crucial importance, is often undervalued in the Buddhist countries of Asia, about which I shall say something below. In the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) it is certainly not

undervalued and some people might think we overvalue it, but I would say that is not possible. You *cannot* overvalue the Going for Refuge because the Going for Refuge is the basis of everything else. When in the FWBO we emphasize the importance of the Going for Refuge we are trying to get back to the way things were in the Buddha's own time. We are trying to restore the original significance of the Going for Refuge.

Returning once more to the Buddha's own time we find something else of great interest happening. Not only may someone be so impressed and thrilled by the Buddha's exposition of the Truth that he goes for Refuge but, even as he listens, actual Insight into that Truth may arise in his mind. In the language of the Buddhist scriptures, there arises for that person the pure and stainless eye of Truth (*dharma-caksus*) – a profound spiritual experience. This 'eye of Truth' is one of five 'eyes' distinguished by the Buddhist tradition. Firstly, there is the 'eye of flesh' (*mamsa-caksus*), which is what we usually mean by an eye, the organ of physical sight, by means of which material objects are perceived. Secondly, there is the 'divine eye' (*divya-caksus*). If you were able to see what was happening on the other side of the city, or even in another country, it would be this eye you would be using. This is known as the faculty of clairvoyance and it is one of the supernormal powers that may arise spontaneously in the course of meditation practice. Thirdly, there is the 'eye of Truth' (*dharma-caksus*), the inner spiritual eye, or inner spiritual vision, with which you 'see' the truth of things. Fourthly, there is the 'eye of Wisdom' (*prajña-caksus*) which 'sees' even further than the eye of Truth, and arises only when one becomes an Arhant (an Arhant being one in whom Transcendental Insight has arisen). Fifthly and lastly, there is the 'universal eye' (*samanta-caksus*), also known as the 'Buddha eye', which arises when one is fully Enlightened, when one's spiritual vision is total and absolute.

So let us look more closely, as it were, into this 'eye of Truth', this Dharma eye or Dharma Vision. There is a formula in the Buddhist scriptures which gives succinct expression to the particular Insight which is seen through this 'eye'. This formula simply states that whatever arises – whatever comes into existence – must pass away. This is so simple and straightforward that you might think you knew it already. But the opening of the eye of Truth represents not a theoretical knowledge of the fact of universal impermanence or transitoriness but a deep spiritual Insight into it, a real understanding. The fact that all things are impermanent – that you have to give up everything and lose everything in the end – may seem to some people a very terrible message indeed. Yet this is not really so. Impermanence implies not only change but also development and transformation. If things were *not* impermanent and did *not* change – if you were the same today as you were yesterday, and the same yesterday as you were the day before – that would be terrible indeed, for then you would not grow and develop. The law of impermanence guarantees the possibility of development.

And this is what you see when your Dharma eye opens. You see not only the fact of impermanence, the fact that everything changes, but also the possibility of

human growth and development, the possibility of the transformation of ordinary humanity into Enlightened humanity or Buddhahood.

When that kind of Insight is developed, and your Dharma eye opens, something tremendous happens. To use another traditional Buddhist image, you 'enter the stream' – the stream that leads directly to nirvana. Your whole being now flows irreversibly in the direction of Enlightenment. This is the 'real' Going for Refuge, the 'Transcendental' Going for Refuge. By entering the stream, by Going for Refuge in this higher, transcendental way, you at once break three of the Ten Fetters binding you to mundane existence. It is, indeed, by breaking these three fetters that you enter the stream, thus becoming a Stream Entrant (*srotapanna*). Since they occupy an important place in Buddhist teaching, let me say a few words about each of the three fetters in turn.

The first fetter is that of 'Self-View' (*sakkaya-drsti*). When you are the victim of Self-View your attitude is that what you experience as the self or ego is something fixed, irreducible, and ultimate. You think there is a core of selfhood in you which is never going to change, and which is the real 'you'. Such an attitude blocks change and inhibits growth, because you think that as you are now so you will be for ever. It is very difficult to break this fetter, and imagine oneself as different from what one is now. But it can be done. If you are genuinely committed to the spiritual path the time will come when you will be able to look back and see that great changes *have* taken place. You will see that you *have* grown, even that you have been transformed. But so long as the fetter of Self-View remains unbroken there is no real spiritual development.

The second fetter is that of 'Doubt' (*vicikitsa*). This is not doubt in the intellectual sense so much as indecision – deliberate, culpable indecision. You actually *refuse* to make up your mind and commit yourself. Rather than give yourself wholeheartedly to something you prefer to keep all your options open. You make excuses, you wobble, you shilly-shally, you delay, you hesitate, you temporize, you rationalize. This is the fetter of Doubt. It is Doubt that prevents you from throwing yourself into the spiritual life – from plunging in at the deep end. Consequently you get nowhere with the spiritual life: you fail to make real spiritual progress.

The third fetter is that of 'Dependence on Moral Rules and Religious Observances' (*silavrata-paramarsa*), which could be paraphrased as the belief that 'going through the motions' will do. You go through the motions when your heart is not really in what you are doing. You think that if you keep up appearances externally, if you observe the moral rules because that is what society requires, and maintain the religious observances because that is what your co-religionists require, then everything will be all right. There is a split between the external observances and your inward state of being. Although the things you are doing may be good in themselves, your heart is not in them and therefore your performance of them is empty, mechanical, rigid, and artificial.

Hence they don't really help you to develop: they don't get you anywhere spiritually,

Such are the three fetters. All these different images – breaking the three fetters, entering the stream, opening the Dharma eye – correspond. When you enter the stream, the three fetters are broken; when the fetters are broken, you enter the stream. When your Dharma eye is opened you see the truth of impermanence, including the truth of the possibility of total transformation, and it is that Insight, or higher spiritual vision, that causes the three fetters to break. Thus we have two things happening together. We have the (Transcendental) Going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha and, at the same time, we have the opening of the Dharma eye, or higher spiritual vision, leading to the breaking of the three fetters and to entering the stream. Indeed, these two things – (Transcendental) Going for Refuge and Stream Entry – do not just happen together; they are different aspects of one and the same spiritual experience or spiritual process.

Still remaining in the Buddha's own time, we can go a little further. Suppose someone hears the Buddha expound the Dharma. Suppose he is impressed and thrilled and goes for Refuge; suppose, even, he gains Stream Entry. There is still something else that may happen at this point. He may leave home and become a monk or bhiksu. Not that this was invariably the case. Sometimes people went for Refuge and, at the same time, their Dharma eye opened, but they did not leave home. But sometimes, in fact very often, they did. In such cases we have not two but three things happening at the same time: Going for Refuge, Stream Entry, and what subsequently became known as 'ordination' – 'Going Forth' into homelessness and becoming a bhiksu or monk. This was the situation during the Buddha's lifetime.

After the Buddha's death, or what we call his *parinirvana*, many changes took place. Perhaps inevitably, a certain spiritual deterioration set in. Stream Entry became rarer and rarer. As centuries went by, the emphasis came increasingly to be placed on becoming a monk in the more formal sense, and Going for Refuge gradually lost its significance as the central act of the Buddhist life. This happened especially in the Theravadin countries of South-east Asia. Today, if you visit these countries or talk to Theravadin Buddhists, they will not say very much to you about the importance of Going for Refuge. They will be much more likely to speak in terms of becoming a monk in the more formal sense: shaving one's head and donning the yellow robe. For the Theravadins there are two kinds of people: the monks and the lay people. On *this* side there are the monks, who are the 'real' Buddhists; on that side the lay people, who are the 'not-so-real' Buddhists. One could even say that the distinction made seems to be between first-class Buddhists and second-class Buddhists.

Looking at things from a different point of view, however, and seeing them more as they were in the Buddha's day, one might say that though there certainly is a

difference, it is of a different kind. The real difference is not between monks and lay people but between those who go for Refuge and those who do not go for Refuge. Whether you are a monk who goes for Refuge or a layman who goes for Refuge, a man who goes for Refuge or a woman who goes for Refuge, is of secondary importance. That you live in a certain kind of way, or follow a certain discipline, is of secondary importance. What is of overriding importance is your spiritual commitment, your Going for Refuge. This is why in the FWBO we have a sort of saying, or slogan: 'Going for Refuge – or commitment – is primary; life-style is secondary.'

Now although in the Theravadin countries the distinction between monk and layman was unnecessarily insisted upon, and the significance of the Going for Refuge lost sight of, this did not happen in the Mahayana countries to nearly so great an extent. As their designation itself suggests, the Mahayana countries followed the Mahayana – the Great Way. They followed the Bodhisattva Ideal, the ideal of attaining Enlightenment not just for one's own individual sake but for the sake of all. Ultimately, of course, the distinction between the two ideals falls to the ground. You cannot really gain Enlightenment for the benefit of others unless you are a person of considerable spiritual development yourself, and you cannot develop spiritually yourself unless you are at the same time mindful of the needs of other people. In the long run spiritual individualism and spiritual altruism coincide. But as a necessary corrective to the earlier, more individualistic approach of the Theravada, and of the Hinayana generally, the Mahayana stressed the Bodhisattva Ideal. The attitude of the Bodhisattva is: 'I don't want Enlightenment only for myself. If it's to be only for myself, in a sense I'm not interested. I want Enlightenment for all. I am therefore working for Enlightenment for all – including myself.' Not that the Bodhisattva leaves himself out. He includes himself, but only as one among many. His or her mission is to work for the spiritual progress, the ultimate Enlightenment, of all living beings.

Since the Mahayana adopted, or developed, the Bodhisattva Ideal, all lesser distinctions lost their significance. The Mahayana insisted that *everybody* should aim to be a Bodhisattva, *everybody* should follow the Bodhisattva Ideal. Be they monk or lay person, literate or illiterate, rich or poor, spiritually developed or spiritually not so developed, all should aspire to Enlightenment for the sake of all living beings. On account of the presence of the Bodhisattva Ideal, therefore, we find that in the Mahayana there is less of a difference between monk and layman, or at least that the difference is less insisted upon.

But what is a Bodhisattva, and what does it mean to aim for Enlightenment for the sake of all? According to Mahayana tradition a Bodhisattva, in the real sense, is one in whom the Bodhicitta or 'Will to Enlightenment' (as I translate the term) has arisen as a vital spiritual experience. The Bodhicitta is not a mere pious aspiration, nor a concept, nor an abstract ideal. When, within the depths of your being, there arises an immensely powerful impulse towards Enlightenment for

the benefit of all, and when that impulse dominates your whole life and becomes the master-current of your being, *that* is the arising of the Bodhicitta.

Here an interesting question arises concerning the nature of the relation between on the one hand the Bodhicitta, or the arising of the Bodhicitta, and on the other hand the Going for Refuge, the opening of the Dharma eye, Stream Entry, and even Going Forth into homelessness and becoming a monk. The Bodhicitta, or the arising of the Bodhicitta, represents, we may say, the more altruistic dimension of these four other experiences. Or rather, all five of them, including the Bodhicitta itself, represent the five different aspects of a single basic, crucial, and unique spiritual experience. The Going for Refuge draws attention to the emotional and volitional aspect of this experience, the opening of the Dharma eye to the Unconditioned depth of its cognitive content, Stream Entry to the permanent and far-reaching nature of its effects, while Going Forth into homelessness draws attention to the extent of the reorganization which, regardless of whether or not one becomes a monk in the formal sense, the experience inevitably brings about in the pattern of one's daily life. As for the Bodhicitta, it represents, as I have said, the other-regarding aspect of the experience.

This perhaps gives some idea of the broad conception of Going for Refuge. Much more is implied by it than people usually think. Incidentally, the use of the word 'refuge' sometimes creates confusion, because it is associated in people's minds with 'refugee'. Expressions like 'taking refuge' or 'going for refuge' have, in fact, distinct connotations of running away from difficulties, taking the easy way out, and so on. From what I have already said it should be clear that Going for Refuge in the Buddhist sense has nothing to do with running away. However, to avoid the possibility of misunderstanding, I often speak not of 'Going for Refuge' but of 'commitment'. Commitment is rather a favourite word in the West at the moment; an 'in' word, as we say. So I often speak not of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha but of committing oneself to the Buddha, committing oneself to the Dharma, committing oneself to the Sangha. Nor is that all. In the course of years I have come to distinguish four levels of Going for Refuge, four levels of commitment.

First of all there is 'provisional' Going for Refuge, sometimes called 'ethnic' Going for Refuge. This consists in simply reciting the Refuge-going formula in Pali, or some other language, just because it is part of your national culture. In Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma, one often finds people reciting the Refuge-going formula, *Buddham saranam gacchami* and so on, without understanding its meaning. It is just part of their culture; it has no real spiritual significance for them. That one should recite the Refuge-going formula, even though without understanding it, is by no means a bad thing, but it is certainly not sufficient.

In much the same way, one sometimes finds people in the Buddhist countries of Asia describing themselves as 'born Buddhists'. But how can you be a born Buddhist? Do you issue from your mother's womb reciting '*Buddham saranam gacchami*'? A 'born Buddhist' is a contradiction in terms. You can become a Buddhist only consciously and deliberately, as a result of personal choice. You cannot possibly be *born* a Buddhist. The Buddha himself criticized 'brahmins' of his day for thinking that one could be born a brahmin. You were a brahmin, he insisted, only to the extent that you acted like one. If truth and righteousness were in you, then you could be called a brahmin; not otherwise. Similarly you cannot be a Buddhist by birth. People in Buddhist countries who say they are Buddhists by birth are no better than the ancient brahmins who said that they were brahmins by birth. What it really means is that Buddhism, so called, has simply become Brahminism. This is a very important point. The Going for Refuge must be a true Going for Refuge. If you are a Buddhist it must be on account of your own, individual, independent volition, your own understanding. Thus you cannot be born a Buddhist. If you think you can, you are still on the level of 'provisional' Going for Refuge, the significance of which is cultural rather than genuinely spiritual.

Secondly, there is 'effective' Going for Refuge. This is a wholehearted, conscious commitment to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Though such commitment is sincere and genuine, it is not powerful enough to break the three fetters and does not amount to Stream Entry. From 'effective' Going for Refuge you can fall away.

Thirdly, there is 'real' Going for Refuge. This coincides with Stream Entry, which occurs with the breaking of the three fetters. From this Going for Refuge you cannot fall away.

Fourthly and lastly, there is 'Absolute' Going for Refuge. On this level there is, in a sense, no Going for Refuge. Though you indeed go for Refuge to the Buddha, now that Enlightenment has been attained you are yourself the Buddha. Here, the goal of your quest having been reached, the subject of Going for Refuge and the object of Going for Refuge are one and the same. Buddha goes for Refuge to Buddha.

In the Mahayana it is sometimes said that ultimately there is only one Refuge: the Buddha. In a sense there is a Dharma Refuge, and a Sangha Refuge, but again in a sense there is not. After all, the Dharma comes from the Buddha. It is the product, the creation, of the Buddha's Enlightenment experience – the means by which that experience is communicated to other human beings in such a way as to help them. Similarly, the Sangha is the Spiritual Community of those who practise the Dharma. Just as the Dharma is dependent on the Buddha, the Sangha is dependent on the Dharma, so that the Sangha is also dependent on the Buddha. Thus there is only the Buddha: only the Buddha Refuge. Though we speak of three Refuges, ultimately the three Refuges are one Refuge. For the time being,

however, it is no doubt helpful for us to think in terms of the Three Refuges, or the Threefold Refuge.

On the basis of these Three Refuges a whole Buddhist movement has grown up in the West. It began in 1967, when I returned from India to set up the first centre of what has become a network of urban centres in many countries, known as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. At these centres we conduct a wide range of activities including lectures and study courses on Buddhism, meditation classes, hatha yoga classes, and arts events. From time to time retreats are held which involve spending the whole day at the centre – or sometimes a weekend in the countryside – engaged in meditation, study, discussion and communication.

People come to hear about our activities in various ways – sometimes through our publicity, but more often simply by word of mouth. One friend tells another that there is a place where you can meditate, or where you can learn about Buddhism, or practise hatha yoga. Anyway, by one means or another people make contact with their local FWBO centre. At first they may be interested simply in meditation or Buddhist philosophy, and come to us just for that. In most Western countries, there are thousands of people who are engaged in sampling all kinds of spiritual groups. They go along to one group for a while, then to another, and so on, and in this way they sample quite a number of groups. Some of the people who come to us are of this type. They come to us for a time, then leave to continue their search elsewhere.

In the FWBO we have no membership in the ordinary sense. You cannot ‘join’ by filling in a form and paying a subscription; we have a different system. Anybody who comes along and participates in any of our activities to however small an extent is regarded as a Friend (with a capital F). You don’t have to join in any formal sense; you are free to derive whatever benefit you can from our activities without incurring any obligation or responsibility. We are quite happy for you to do this.

But some people, when they have been coming to the centre for a while, decide to stay with us because they like our approach and feel at home. They become more deeply involved in our activities and one day it dawns on them that they would like to identify themselves with us and, in a word, ‘belong’. When they reach that point they can become what we call a Mitra (*mitra* being simply the Sanskrit word for friend). If you decide that you want to become a Mitra, you make your wishes known and, if your desire is genuine and you have a real interest in the work of the FWBO, a simple public ceremony is held at which you offer flowers, a lighted candle, and a stick of incense before an image of the Buddha. In this way you become a Mitra.

The fact that you have become a Mitra means that your search for a spiritual group to which you can belong has now ended, and that henceforth your time, energy, and interest will be devoted exclusively to the FWBO. A Mitra is expected: (1) to attend their local FWBO centre regularly and participate in its

activities, (2) to keep up a daily meditation practice, (3) to maintain contact with local Order members and develop *kalyana mitrata* ('spiritual fellowship') with them, and (4) to help the centre, and the Movement generally, in any practical way he or she can.

As a Mitra you will probably find yourself becoming increasingly involved with the Movement and increasingly attracted by the beauty of the Buddhist spiritual ideal, the ideal of human Enlightenment. You may find that your experience of meditation is becoming deeper, that your communication with other people is expanding, and that psychological problems are being overcome. Eventually, you may find that the centre of gravity of your whole existence has subtly shifted, and that you now want to give up your old interests and activities and commit yourself wholly to Buddhism, to the Dharma, to the spiritual life. When that point is reached you start thinking in terms of 'joining the Order' or, to put it more traditionally, in terms of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

If the existing Order members are convinced that your aspiration is genuine, and that you truly are able to go for Refuge – by no means an easy thing to do – then your 'application' is accepted and in due course the very beautiful ordination ceremony is held. You become a Dhammacari (m.) or Dhammacarini (f.), one who goes for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha and who, in addition, takes upon himself or herself the 'Ten *Silas*' or Moral Precepts by means of which body, speech, and mind are progressively and systematically purified.

The Order is at the heart of the FWBO. It is a spiritual community of people who have gone for Refuge – that is to say, who have 'effectively' gone for Refuge. Few of them, perhaps, if indeed any, have got so far as the 'real' Going for Refuge, but at least they have transcended the 'provisional' Going for Refuge, to make the act of Going for Refuge central in their lives, and place the emphasis there. Some of them live at home with their wives or husbands and families. Some live in communities. (There are communities for men and communities for women.) A few of them are Anagarikas who have taken a vow of celibacy. As I mentioned, all members of the Order observe the Ten Precepts: abstention from injury to living beings; from taking what is not given; from sexual misconduct (in the case of the Anagarikas, from non-celibacy); from false speech; from frivolous, idle, and useless speech; from speech which divides and disunites people; from craving; from hatred; and from wrong views. According to Buddhist tradition, bhiksus or monks observe 227 (or 250) precepts, but in the course of ages quite a few of these have been lost on the way, so to speak, and are nowadays honoured more in the breach than in the observance. We therefore decided to have a short list of precepts that people would take and actually observe.

Thus we have this Order, this Sangha or Spiritual Community, of people who have gone for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha: people who actually practise the Dharma; who observe the Ten Precepts. Some of them have been

members of the Order for a number of years, and are gathering experience all the time – taking meditation classes, giving talks, and running our team-based Right Livelihood businesses. It is, in fact, this dedicated, committed core of people at the heart of the Movement which is responsible for running everything.

I hope that I have said enough to show the vital importance, both for each of us individually and for the society to which we belong, of the Going for Refuge. It is my hope that we will be able to create a Sangha, a spiritual community, of people who have gone for Refuge not just in the West but in many countries throughout the world. If we are to do this, however, it can be only on the basis of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It can be only on the basis of the Going for Refuge.