

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 8: The Dharma (2) – The Many Dimensions of the Dharma

Richness and diversity

Last week we looked at the Four Noble Truths, one of the most concise and widely accepted formulations of the Buddha's teaching. One way to paraphrase these Truths might be to say that life as it is normally lived is unsatisfactory; that the cause of our dissatisfaction is our craving and narrow self-obsession; and that the way to liberate ourselves from this is to follow a path of ethical integrity, meditation, and increasing spiritual vision. In his first discourse the Buddha used the formula of the Noble Eightfold Path to sum up this path of liberation. But he also used other formulations, and in the millennia since his death his followers have developed even more. Some of these different versions emphasise one element of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom more than the others. Some are particularly adapted to the needs of different times, cultures, or types of people. Some emphasise particular lifestyles, qualities, or practices, such as a simple monastic life, long hours of meditation, selfless altruism, or deep faith.

This diversity and richness of Buddhism can seem confusing, but it is in keeping with the Buddha's original teaching. The Buddha said clearly that the Dharma is whatever helps us to develop spiritually. He also said that the teachings he had given during his lifetime were just a small fraction of the genuine Dharma teachings that could be offered to sentient beings – as he put it, like a handful of leaves compared to all the leaves in the forest. In saying this he was in effect giving his approval for his more highly developed followers in later ages – those who had followed the path and realised its fruits - to develop the teachings for their own time and place.

The Path of Regular Steps

But although the diversity and richness of the Dharma is a natural development of the Buddha's teaching, it can still pose a problem for present day Buddhists. In any bookshop we have easy access to a vast range of different teachings, aimed at many different levels of experience, and from many different schools, in a way that has never been the case for Buddhists in the past. How can we make sense of it all, let alone go for refuge to this confusing mass of practices and ideas?

One answer is that we need to commit ourselves – at least provisionally – to practising one version of the path, and then see *that* as the most important part of the Dharma, for us, for the time being. If we pick up a bit from one book here, then practise something else from another tradition when we get bored, then move on to the next thing that catches our eye, we will not get far. (As one teacher has put it, it may be possible to get from Bombay to New York by travelling either east, west, north, or south; but if we go a few miles east, then a few miles north,

then a few miles west, then a few miles south, we will end up back where we started.) At some point we need to stop trying out a bit of this and a bit of that, and start treading the 'Path of Regular Steps'. We need to follow a coherent, progressive path of practice, where each step lays the foundation for the next, in a context where we can get advice and support from other people who have trodden the same path themselves.

The Dharma is a path of growth, and growth happens in a systematic, organic way, with one step following another, as with the growth of a plant. There is no point in trying to get a recently sprouted seedling to produce flowers. At the present moment it needs to produce leaves and roots. If the way we treat it is not appropriate for its stage of growth, it will not benefit, and we may actually harm it. Practising the Dharma is much the same.

So we need to follow a progressive path of practice. This normally means following the path as set out by one particular tradition, especially in the earlier stages. When we become Mitras we commit ourselves provisionally to the FWBO as our context for practice. Along with this we commit ourselves to practising the path as set out by the FWBO – at least provisionally, for the time being. We need to give this path an honest try, and see if it works. The path offered by the FWBO is an attempt to apply the fundamental teachings and practices of Buddhism in a balanced way, which is firmly rooted in the basic Buddhist tradition, yet adapted for present-day needs and conditions. Committing ourselves to this particular path does not mean that we cannot get inspiration from other traditions. But it does give us the basic framework of understanding and regular practice that allows us to benefit from what inspires us in the whole Buddhist tradition, rather than just being confused and distracted by the diversity of teachings on offer.

What Going for Refuge to the Dharma is

Confidence and commitment to practice

So the most basic level of Going for Refuge to the Dharma is to be committed to practising the teaching as it applies to us here and now, in the particular version of the path we are following, and among the spiritual community we are in contact with – in our case the FWBO. For most of us this starts with a recognition that the parts of the Dharma we have been introduced to make sense, and that the practices we have tried have had a positive effect on us. We may also see that the path seems to have had a positive effect on other people who have been practising longer than we have. So we develop some basic confidence in the main teachings of Buddhism.

Our confidence then leads us to a firm decision to practice what is relevant to us now, at our particular stage of the path, for the sake of our own well-being, and also for the well-being of others around us. This commitment to practising the teachings that we need at our present stage of progress is probably the most important part of going for refuge to the Dharma. For one person it might be a commitment to meditate every day, to express less negativity in speech, or to spend time with other Buddhists. For someone else it might take a different form

because of different needs; and even in the case of a single individual it will change over time.

‘Sense of rightness’

Beyond this everyday commitment to putting the teachings into practice, Going for Refuge to the Dharma may, for some people, involve an intuitive, heartfelt sense of the rightness of the teachings. We may experience a sense of certainty that can seem too deep for words, a sense of the profound importance of what we have come across, or a sense of personal connection, almost as though we were remembering the teachings rather than coming across them for the first time. We may have a sense that what is essential in the Dharma does in fact emanate from a consciousness higher than our own, and a commitment to approach it with the respect and even reverence it deserves. It may involve a sense of gratitude, fuelled by a recognition that without a viable spiritual path life would be meaningless. And this gratitude may express itself in a desire to help make the Dharma available to others, knowing that other people need the Dharma just as much as we do.

The mythic dimension

To go for refuge to the Dharma in the fullest way we need to get rid of any sense that the Dharma consists of normal (if rather clever) ideas, stemming from people much like ourselves – on a similar level to the books on self-improvement we can find in any bookshop. Much of the written Dharma emanates from the historical Buddha himself. Other parts originate from other individuals who were also Enlightened, or perhaps were able to contact the Enlightened Mind in deep meditation. In each case the origin is the Enlightened Mind, a level of consciousness far beyond our own.

Recognising that the Dharma comes from a higher consciousness or level of being can open us up to a more poetic or mythic vision, which will enrich our experience of going for refuge to the Dharma. The Dharma is sometimes spoken of as ‘the voice of the Buddha’, with ‘the Buddha’ here standing not just for a historical individual, but for a principle at work both in the universe and in the depths of our being – a principle that is seeking to help us to grow and evolve. This ‘voice of the Buddha’ is sometimes traditionally said to speak to each individual in their own language, telling them exactly what they need to know at their present level of development.

Sangharakshita has spoken of the Dharma as the action of the Enlightened Mind as it seeks to communicate with unenlightened beings like ourselves. He goes on to say that concepts and language are not the only way the Enlightened Mind communicates with us. In fact words are the grossest form the Dharma can take – symbols and images are a richer form of communication:

‘The Enlightened mind comes down a step, as it were, to the level of ...images. On this level are... images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas...

images benign and wrathful; images, perhaps above all, that are brilliantly coloured and luminous, arising out of the depths of infinite space. They are not created by the individual human mind, nor by the collective consciousness, nor even by the collective unconscious. Perhaps these images are not created at all, but are as it were, co-eternal with the Enlightened consciousness itself... These images... reveal everything. They reveal it in terms of form or colour. On this level, no thoughts, no ideas, or words are necessary.’¹

Other Buddhist teachers have also emphasised that the Dharma need not be limited to words and ideas:

‘The language of religion is not the language of concepts but of symbols. When these symbols are conceptualized, they lose their vitality, their multi-dimensionality, and are reduced to mere clichés. The multi-dimensionality of a symbol makes it the representative of a higher reality, in which the religious person, like a true poet or artist, is at home. Symbols are the key to the “other reality”, they open up for us new dimensions of experience. Wherever Buddhism established itself, art and literature flourished. Sculpture, painting and architecture, poetry and philosophy, music and dance-drama became forms of expression for a religious world-feeling, and nature herself became a living textbook for inner vision, as the Zen landscape painters and poets of the Far East show us. The “other reality” cannot be described using the categories of our everyday consciousness, it can only be discovered by means of certain symbols or archetypal forms.’²

This more poetic way of talking about the Dharma will not appeal to everyone. Many people will prefer a more down-to-earth approach, and will be quite happy to relate to the Dharma as the written teachings. But for those who think more in terms of symbols and images than words and concepts, this way of seeing the Dharma can bring a greater depth to our Going for Refuge. And even for the most rationalistic a little of this approach can be helpful. If we can relate to the Dharma imaginatively in this way, our Going for Refuge to the Dharma becomes a commitment to be responsive to the promptings of what is higher in the universe and in ourselves, whatever form this takes - whether this be an intuitive sense of faith, a heartfelt response to a Buddhist image or mantra, our admiration of a spiritually developed person, or our strong sense of rightness and certainty about a piece of Dharma expressed in words.

What Going for Refuge to the Dharma is Not

Not limited to one formulation

The Dharma is mainly a set of methods for spiritual growth, rather than a statement about the nature of reality. The Buddha was very reluctant to say much about reality or Enlightenment, knowing that people would only misunderstand if they had not experienced it for themselves. Nevertheless, we humans need some basic statements about the nature of truth to put us on the right track. So the

Buddha did on occasions try to convey certain truths about reality in words – although these usually related to the human condition rather than to abstract metaphysics.

The Four Noble Truths, which we looked at last week as a basic formulation that in some ways underlies the whole Dharma, are one such statement. But no set of words or ideas can ever truly communicate Enlightenment, and even the Four Noble Truths are no exception. The Four Noble Truths give us a concise and helpful concept to start us off, but in our desire for understanding and clarity we must not think that they, or any other idea expressed in words, could ever sum up the Dharma. The Four Noble Truths just express one angle on Enlightenment, the fact that it is the ultimate cure for dissatisfaction. But the Buddhist tradition makes it clear that Enlightenment is much more than that. Certainly, when we get close to Enlightenment we will rise above all suffering and dissatisfaction. We will experience true happiness, even bliss. But that does not begin to fully describe what it would be like. In reality Enlightenment is a higher state of being with many dimensions, arrived at by a process of growth and evolution, and it is quite beyond our present imagination

Not dogmatism or fundamentalism

So Going for Refuge to the Dharma does not mean blind faith or dogmatism. Neither does it mean accepting uncritically everything that is in the Buddhist scriptures. The scriptures were passed down as an oral tradition for hundreds of years, then written down and copied over and over, as well as being translated from one language to another. In the process parts were no doubt left out or added, and parts were misunderstood and distorted. So we need to check the written words against experience – we need to ask, ‘what actually works’? This is another reason why we need to practice within a living tradition, learning from other people who have been practising longer than we have, who have had a chance to find out from experience what works in our situation, and who in their turn learned from others before them.

Notes:

1. Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, p72.
2. Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Creative Meditation and Multidimensional Consciousness*

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Has practising the Dharma had a positive effect on you so far? What practices or teachings have had most effect?
2. Which aspects of the Dharma do you have most confidence in? Which parts are you sure are right?
3. If you were to sum up your commitment to the Dharma in a few points you are committed to practising on a daily basis, what would these be?
4. Are there any aspects of the Dharma that particularly inspire you?
5. How do you relate to the idea that the Dharma can also be communicated through symbols and images? Have any symbols or images had an effect on you? Are there any other ways the Dharma can be communicated?