

The Meaning of Conversion in Buddhism

Lecture 9: Going for Refuge - Edited Version

What Is Conversion? For many of us in the West, the word immediately conjures up the image of a missionary going forth armed with a Bible and a bottle of medicine to convert the heathen in the depths of some Eastern jungle. This is, of course, very much a stereotype, although one does come across rather alarming examples of it from time to time. I remember that when I was living in the Himalayan town of Kalimpong some forty years ago, someone showed me a copy of a Christmas card which was being sent out by a four-year-old girl, the daughter of a couple of missionaries who lived in Ghoom. This remarkable child was asking her little friends back in England to pray for the conversion of the 'heathen' - the heathen being, of course, all the Buddhists and Hindus in Ghoom and the surrounding area. In particular she asked the recipients of her cards to pray to Jesus that these heathens should stop doing their pujas. And for the benefit of those who might have been unfamiliar with this term for devotional practice, she added (in brackets) 'devil worship'.

This is obviously a very primitive conception of conversion; to be fair, Christian conversion is often misunderstood. It may popularly be thought to be the turning of the heathen from their heathenish ways to the light of the 'true faith' but it also has a much higher and more valuable meaning. The general meaning of the word conversion is clear enough; any dictionary will tell us that it means simply 'turning around'. And when one turns around, this involves a double movement: a movement away from something and also a movement towards something. So what is one turning away from, and what is one turning towards? For many people, both Christians and adherents of other faiths, 'conversion' means a turning from a lower to a higher way of life, from a worldly to a spiritual life. Conversion in this sense is often spoken of as a change of heart - a change of heart which leads you to stop running after the transitory things of this world and direct your attention and energy to the sublime, everlasting things of the spirit.

Put in this way, conversion is common to all religions in one form or another. The classic case is that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, but such sudden and dramatic conversions also occur in the Buddhist scriptures. One of the most notable examples is the case of the robber Angulimala, who changed in the course of a few days, perhaps even a few hours, into an emancipated being, if not an Enlightened one. <This story can be found in The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-nikaya), vol. II, no. 86, trans. I.B. Horner, Pali Text Society, London 1959.> Indeed, conversion can happen even faster than that, according to an epitaph written in the sixteenth century by William Camden 'for a man killed by falling from his horse'. The epitaph goes:

Betwixt the stirrup and the ground
Mercy I asked, mercy I found.

This would suggest that, even for someone whose friends might have thought him spiritually speaking a no-hoper, conversion can come at the very last minute - 'betwixt the stirrup and the ground'. More conventionally, of course, it occurs as what we call a 'death-bed conversion'. But while some people have these apparently genuinely instantaneous experiences, conversion can come about in a much more gradual way. There may be a 'moment of conversion', the experience may be sudden, even catastrophic, but then it dawns on you that actually your whole life, your whole being, has been building up to that moment over many years.

But however it comes to us, over a period of years or in a matter of seconds, the experience of conversion is of the greatest possible importance, because it marks the beginning of our spiritual life. The meaning of conversion therefore deserves our closest attention. However, although there have been many studies of the nature of conversion in Christianity, <See, for example, William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1985.> there has as far as I know been no systematic study of Buddhist conversion. Perhaps, indeed, one might consider the meaning of conversion in Buddhism to be a simple matter, hardly worth studying. People tend to think: 'Once upon a time I was a Christian. Then I read a book about Buddhism, and I changed my faith. Now I'm a Buddhist and that's that.' But it is not really that simple. If we look at what the phenomenon of conversion means in Buddhism, we find that it occurs on several different levels and presents several different aspects.

In this book, four of these aspects are explored: Going for Refuge (or the transition from the Wheel of Life to the Spiral Path), Stream Entry, the arising of the will to Enlightenment, and what the Lankavatara Sutra calls the 'turning about' (the term is paravritti, which can be translated quite literally as 'conversion'). This list, which includes some of the most fundamental of Buddhist terms, is by no means exhaustive, but it is

sufficient to illustrate, or at least throw some light upon, what conversion means, not just to the aspiring Buddhist but to practising Buddhists at all levels of spiritual attainment, right up to Buddhahood itself.

GOING FOR REFUGE

IN A SENSE, GOING FOR REFUGE is the simplest, almost the most elementary, aspect of conversion in Buddhism; but in a wider, more comprehensive sense, it includes and informs all the other types and levels of conversion. So first, what is Going for Refuge? Although the term is so widely used in Buddhism, it can be rather mystifying when you first come across it. What does one mean by 'Refuge'? And who or what does one 'go for Refuge' to? The short answer is that as a practising Buddhist one goes for Refuge to the Buddha, the Enlightened teacher, to the Dharma, or his teaching of the way or path leading to Enlightenment, and to the Sangha, the community or Order of those progressing along that path in the direction of Enlightenment. These three Refuges are also commonly known as the Three Jewels.

In many traditional Buddhist cultures, Going for Refuge has become - it has to be said - little more than a formality. Just as if you want to be formally admitted into a Christian church you have to undergo the rite of baptism, in the same way, if you wish formally to signalize the fact that you consider yourself to be a Buddhist, you receive the Refuges and Precepts from an accredited representative of the Buddhist tradition, a bhikshu, and by doing this you formally join the Buddhist community. Some people therefore consider that Going for Refuge is just a matter of recitation. By saying 'To the Buddha for Refuge I go, to the Dharma for Refuge I go, to the Sangha for Refuge I go,' in Pali or Sanskrit, and repeating it three times, one is considered to have gone for Refuge. Sometimes people even speak of 'taking Refuge', although the Pali word *gacchami* means 'I go', not 'I take'. In many parts of the Buddhist world, Going for Refuge is understood in no deeper sense than this verbal repetition of a formula. People go along to the temple, or to a Buddhist meeting, recite these sentences, then go home and forget all about it. So far as they are concerned, they have gone for Refuge, conversion has taken place. They see no need to ponder the meaning deeply or try to explore its significance, much less still put it into practice.

This degeneration of Going for Refuge into a formality is a very unfortunate development. Nothing in the Buddha's teaching is meant to be practised mechanically or as a matter of mere tradition, without an understanding of its inner meaning and its relevance to one's own life. It behoves us, therefore, to take a closer look at the phrase 'Going for Refuge' and try to see what its significance really is. To begin with, what is meant by 'Refuge'? Refuge from what? The traditional explanations are quite clear on this point: the Three Jewels are a refuge from suffering. It is the existence of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha that makes it possible for us to escape from the unsatisfactoriness, the transitoriness, the conditionedness, the 'unreality' of the world as we experience it. In a well-known passage in the *Udana*, one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha tells the monks that there exists an unborn, unmade, unoriginated, un compounded Reality, and that it is this which makes it possible to escape from the born, the made, the put-together - in other words, from the world as we experience it. <See The *Udana* - Inspired Utterances of the Buddha, 8.3, trans. John D. Ireland, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka 1990.>

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are called the Three Jewels because they represent the world of the highest spiritual values. Just as in the ordinary world jewels are the most precious of all material things, so in the spiritual world - in fact in the whole of existence - the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are those values which are the most sought after, which are ultimately the most desired and the most worthwhile, and from which all other values derive by way of direct or indirect reflection. When we call the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha the Three Jewels, we are considering them in the abstract, as it were. We are considering their value - their ultimate or supreme value - as compared with all other things. When we speak of them as the Three Refuges, however, we are considering the practical implications of that evaluation. The fact that those values exist gives us the possibility of development, evolution, and progress far beyond our present comparatively low level. Considered as refuges, the Three Jewels represent the possibility of complete liberation from suffering.

It is no linguistic accident that we speak of Going for Refuge. You don't just accept the Three Refuges; you go for Refuge. This action is a total, unqualified reorientation of your life, your existence, your striving, in the direction of the Three Jewels or Refuges. When you say 'I go for Refuge' you are not only acknowledging that the Three Jewels are the most supremely valuable things in existence; you are also acting upon that acknowledgement. You see that the Three Jewels provide a possibility of escape into a higher spiritual dimension, and so you go - you completely redirect and reorganize your life in the light of that realization. Bearing in mind the definition 'turning around', if this is not conversion it would be difficult to say what is.

It is all very well, of course, to say: 'Reorganize your life around the Three Jewels'; obviously this is something which is not easily done. We need to explore how it works out in concrete terms, and this we can do by looking at each of the Three Refuges in turn.

In practice, Going for Refuge to the Buddha means taking the Buddha (the historical Buddha Sakyamuni) as the living embodiment of the highest conceivable spiritual ideal. It means that after surveying and comparing all the great spiritual teachers, while fully appreciating each and every one of them, you nevertheless come to the conclusion that all their spiritual values and attainments are, as it were, summed up in the person of the Buddha. To your knowledge there is no attainment higher than his. If you regard any other being, any other teacher, as having gained a spiritual level or knowledge higher than that of the Buddha, then there is no Buddha Refuge for you. You may be an admirer of the Buddha, but you are not a Buddhist unless you see in the Buddha the highest embodiment of the highest spiritual ideal.

One might object, especially if one was universalistically inclined, that this is a rather narrow attitude. Why does one need to consider the Buddha to be supreme? Why not regard all great spiritual teachers as equal and have the same appreciation for them all - even go for refuge to them all? In fact, the Buddhist attitude is not narrow so much as pragmatic. We are concerned here not with matters of abstract theory, but with authentic, heartfelt, living spiritual practice. And in the spiritual life one of the most important elements, if not in a sense the most important element, is devotion. It is devotion which provides the driving power. The intellect, we might say, is like a motor car: the machinery is all there, but without the fuel, without the igniting spark, it just won't move. We may know all the philosophies and systems of religion, we may even be able to write and speak about them, but if our knowledge is just cold, intellectual, and abstract, if that living spark of inspiration, devotion, and faith is not there, we shall never make any progress.

Devotion flows most easily towards a person, or at least towards a personified embodiment of the ideal we want to reach. Because it is directed in this way, it is by its very nature exclusive. We cannot be deeply devoted to a number of spiritual ideals simultaneously. If we are going to develop devotion to an intensity which is capable of propelling us along the spiritual path in the direction of the goal, it must be fixed on just one figure, the one which we consider to be the highest. The Sanskrit term for faith or devotion, *sradha*, comes from a root which means 'to place the heart'; devotion is necessarily to some degree exclusive because the heart can truly be placed only on one object.

At the same time, intolerance has no place in Buddhism. In regarding the Buddha as pre-eminent, as the supremely Enlightened One above all other religious teachers, Buddhism does not dismiss, much less still condemn, any other religious teacher. Indeed, whilst Buddhists honestly and straightforwardly regard the Buddha as the greatest of all spiritual teachers that have ever lived, they are at the same time quite prepared to respect and even admire other spiritual leaders. Many Chinese Buddhists, for instance, entertain deep admiration and respect for Confucius and Lao Tsu. It is one of the great beauties of Buddhism that while Buddhists have a faith which is exclusive in the sense of being concentrated - they direct their whole heart's devotion to the Buddha - this faith is not exclusive in the sense of being intolerant or fanatical.

The word *dharma* has many meanings; as the second Refuge, the Dharma, it has two principal ones. Firstly it refers to the teaching of the Buddha, the *Buddhavacana* or word of the Buddha; secondly it means the spiritual Law, Truth, or Ultimate Reality. These two meanings are obviously interconnected. The Buddha had a certain spiritual experience of Reality, and out of that experience he gave his teachings; so the formulated Dharma is the external expression, in terms of human thought, conceptions, and speech, of the Buddha's experience of the Dharma as Ultimate Reality.

On the intellectual plane, Going for Refuge to the Dharma means being convinced of the essential truth of the Buddha's teaching. One must be convinced that it exhibits clearly and unambiguously, above all other teachings, the way leading to Enlightenment. Obviously Going for Refuge to the Dharma in this sense involves knowledge of it, and in order to know the Dharma you have to study it. This, I am afraid, is where many of us fall down. However many Buddhist lectures we attend, however many books we read, if we cannot answer a simple factual question about the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path or the twelve *nidanas*, what has been the point? Without any lasting knowledge of the Dharma, we can hardly be said to be Going for Refuge to it.

I once attended a talk by Krishnamurti in Bombay. It was a beautiful talk, absolutely crystal clear; but at the end a woman got up, almost tearing her hair out in frustration, and said in a voice quivering with emotion (as people's voices tended to in Krishnamurti's meetings): 'Sir, we have been following you and listening to you for forty years, but we do not seem to have got anywhere.' If as Buddhists we have not got anywhere, at least on the intellectual level, after forty years, or even after four years, even four months, it may well be because we have not got down to the study of Buddhism. If we were taking up engineering

or medicine, or even pig-keeping, we would expect to have to study it; similarly, knowledge of Buddhism does not just come automatically when we say 'dhammam saranam gacchami' ('To the Dharma for Refuge I go'). Even the most devout Buddhist cannot bypass an intellectual acquaintance with the Buddha's teaching.

In one of his essays T.S. Eliot makes a caustic little remark which goes right to the point: 'People talk of transcending the intellect, but of course first one must have an intellect.' While we have to go beyond an intellectual understanding of the Dharma, we cannot afford to look down upon that understanding until we possess it. It is no good being 'deep and mystical', and thinking that we can skip the hard intellectual study of Buddhism. Study has its limitations, of course - we have to bear in mind that we are studying the expression of spiritual truths which ultimately have to be realized - but it is important to know the basic doctrinal principles thoroughly and be convinced of their truth. So in order to go for Refuge to the Dharma, you have to read books about it, talk about it, hear lectures about it, and develop a clear intellectual understanding of it - without in the end being confined or limited by that understanding.

This clear understanding is necessary but not, of course, sufficient. Going for Refuge to the Dharma means not just understanding the doctrines but realizing for oneself the principle or Reality which the doctrinal formulations represent. To put it more simply, Going for Refuge to the Dharma means the actual practice of the Dharma, through observance of Buddhist ethics, through meditation, and through the cultivation of transcendental Wisdom.

Just as Going for Refuge to the Buddha does not preclude intelligent receptivity to teachers from other traditions, so Going for Refuge to the Dharma need not exclude appreciation of other spiritual teachings, whether Hindu, Christian, Taoist, Confucian or whatever. Indeed, after leaving behind some other religion and penetrating deeply into Buddhism, we may be surprised to discover that we now understand our former religion better. As we begin to make sense of Buddhism we begin to find that all the other religions also make sense. The Buddhist would say that this is because the part cannot really be understood apart from the whole. Buddhism, as well as being a sublime and noble teaching, is comprehensive, neither rejecting nor repudiating any truth however humble, any spiritual discovery wheresoever made, but weaving them all into one great system, as it were, in which they all find the appropriate place. It is not, of course, that Buddhists take all other religions on their own valuation - if they did that they could not be Buddhists - but from a Buddhist perspective many teachings make sense at a level even deeper than their own estimation, and what is imperfect in them finds its fulfilment, its culmination, in the Buddha's teaching.

While having this comprehensive approach, however, Buddhism is not simply prepared to embrace all so-called religious teachings willy-nilly, and there are many teachings which it explicitly rejects. For instance, as far as Buddhism is concerned, the idea of a supreme being, a personal God who created the universe, is a wrong view which hinders the attainment of Enlightenment. A belief in God may be widely believed to be practically synonymous with religious faith, but it completely contradicts Buddhism's vision of Reality. If one accepts a doctrine which Buddhism regards as untrue then obviously one is no longer Going for Refuge to the Dharma. Here, as elsewhere, Buddhism follows a middle path, neither indiscriminately accepting all the teachings of other faiths, nor rejecting them wholesale. Like the pioneer in search of gold, Buddhism sifts and sorts out, rotating the pan so that all the dirt and water falls out, to reveal whatever grains of shining gold are there.

In all the cultures to which Buddhism has spread it has never totally rejected the existing religious traditions, but at the same time it has always gone beyond them, and jettisoned elements in those traditions which are incompatible with its own vision. That is why we find Buddhism having a purifying and refining influence on Hinduism in India, on Taoism in China, and on Shinto in Japan. Even in the West there are many Christians whose conception of Christianity has been elevated by their acquaintance with Buddhism, even though they have not chosen actually to become Buddhists.

In the West we tend to put up barricades and station ourselves either on one side or the other, as if to say 'Either take a religion or leave it. Either you are of it or you are not of it.' But Buddhism does not see things quite like that. It is more objective, more balanced. It does not hesitate to discard doctrines it considers to be immature, false, or untrue, even if they are sanctified by the name of religion. A teaching may be time-honoured, it may have been believed by millions of people for thousands of years, but this does not matter. If it is untrue, Buddhism rejects it. At the same time, if there is Reality, if there is beauty, in any other tradition, Buddhism is ready, willing, and even eager to accept and make use of it. This is what we find it doing in all ages and in all countries, and there is every reason to hope that the same process will continue in the West.

In the context of Going for Refuge, the third Jewel, the Sangha, is to be understood in three principal ways. Firstly, it means the transcendental hierarchy of Enlightened and partly-Enlightened persons existing on a purely spiritual plane. Things get rather complicated here, because this is not to say that these beings do not exist simultaneously here on earth. They are not necessarily organized into one spiritual community on a worldly level, however, because the unity of these beings is on a transcendental level. In Buddhist terminology, they are the Buddhas, Arhats, Bodhisattvas, and other great Enlightened and partly-Enlightened beings who have reached a level far above that of ordinary mundane life and consciousness. Secondly, Sangha means all those who have been ordained as Buddhists - traditionally this refers to the monastic Order of bhikshus or monks and of bhikshunis or nuns. And thirdly, there is the Mahasangha. Maha is Sanskrit for 'great', so this is the whole Buddhist community - all those who, to whatever degree, go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. $\\$F$In the Western Buddhist Order, founded in 1968, ordination is neither monastic nor lay, but is based on effective Going for Refuge. This in a sense combines aspects of the second and third meanings of Sangha described here, and avoids the lay-monastic split which has been in many ways a hindrance to the spiritual vitality of Buddhism in the East.>

We can go for Refuge to the Sangha in all these three senses. We go for Refuge to the Sangha as the spiritual or transcendental hierarchy when by our own spiritual attainments we become members of that hierarchy. We go for Refuge to the Sangha in the second sense either by being ordained into a Buddhist order or by supporting the order and relying on its members for spiritual advice and instruction. And we go for Refuge to the Mahasangha, the whole Buddhist community, simply by our fellowship with that community on whatever level, even simply on the ordinary social plane. $\\$F$These three senses of the Sangha Refuge overlap to some extent with the different levels of Going for Refuge - provisional, effective, real, and absolute - outlined in Sangharakshita, Going for Refuge, Windhorse, Glasgow 1983.>

Of course, the Sangha Refuge cannot really be understood in isolation from the context of the Three Jewels as a whole. Those who go for Refuge to the Sangha also necessarily go for Refuge to the Buddha and the Dharma. In other words, before you can effectively go for Refuge to the Sangha, you and all the people who form that Sangha need to have a common spiritual teacher or ideal and a common spiritual teaching or principle. It is this which makes it possible for people to come together into the spiritual community or Sangha. The fact that they go for Refuge to the Buddha and the Dharma naturally draws people together.

But is this all? What do we mean by 'together'? It does not mean just physical proximity. Coming together to sit in a kind of congregation is not enough to form a Sangha. We may all quite sincerely take the Buddha for our spiritual teacher, and we may all be sincerely trying to practise, follow, and realize the Dharma. We may all agree on doctrinal questions, and even have the same meditation experiences. But these things do not in themselves mean that we constitute a Sangha. Going for Refuge to the Sangha is rather more subtle than that. It is essentially a matter of communication. When there is communication among those who go for Refuge to the Buddha and the Dharma, then there is Going for Refuge to the Sangha.

The communication which characterizes the Sangha is not merely an exchange of ideas and information. If I say to someone 'Last week I was in Norwich,' they will no doubt understand that statement perfectly - a successful exchange of ideas will have taken place - but there has not necessarily been any communication. If we find our contacts with others, even our friendships, frustrating and disappointing, if we find the exchanges we have with people at work or at parties a bit meaningless, it is because we are not using them as a medium for communication. So what is communication? It isn't very easy to say. For the purpose of exploring the Sangha Refuge, a working definition might be: 'a vital mutual responsiveness on the basis of a common ideal and a common principle'. This is communication in the context of Going for Refuge: a shared exploration of the spiritual world between people who are in a relationship of complete honesty and harmony. The communication is the exploration and the exploration is the communication; in this way spiritual progress takes place. It may not be clear exactly how it happens, but happen it certainly does.

The most common, or the most generally accepted, mode of this kind of communication is the relationship between spiritual teacher and disciple. When in this relationship there is a mutual responsiveness on the basis of a common allegiance to the Buddha and the Dharma, there is also a common refuge in the Sangha. Such depth of communication is however not limited to that between teacher and disciple. It may also take place between those who are simply friends, or kalyana mitras - 'good friends' in the spiritual sense - to each other. Going for Refuge to the Sangha takes place when, on the basis of a common devotion to the Buddha and the Dharma, people explore together a spiritual dimension which neither could have explored on their own. Of course, beyond a certain point there is no question really of any sort of mutual relationship at all. In the process of communication and Going for Refuge to the Sangha, a dimension is eventually reached in which distinctions between the people involved no longer have any meaning - such distinctions have been transcended.

From all this we can begin to understand what Going for Refuge means, and in what sense it constitutes conversion. It is clearly not just a question of conversion from, say, Christianity to Buddhism, or of exchanging one set of ideas for another, even wrong ideas for right ones. It is infinitely more profound than that. Fundamentally it is a question of conversion from an ordinary mundane way of life to a spiritual, even a transcendental, way of life. More specifically, it consists of three distinct processes of turning around: firstly from limited ideals to an absolute, transcendental ideal; secondly from what Tennyson calls our 'little systems' that 'have their day' to a path based on unchanging spiritual principles and truths; and thirdly from meaningless worldly contact to meaningful communication. All these things are involved when we say: 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.'