

Some Thoughts on Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures

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This article is an edited transcription of a talk given by Rev. Leon at the Columbia Zen Buddhist Priory in Columbia South Carolina. It is taken from a series of talks connecting basic Buddhist ideas to our practice of Sōtō Zen and refers to a book called Basic Buddhist Concepts by Kogen Mizuno.¹ It is reprinted with permission.

The first idea that Mizuno takes up is “Buddhism as Religion” and what that means as it relates to what we call the Three Treasures. The Three Treasures in Buddhism are, the Buddha, who is the historical Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of the religion. That’s the external meaning of the Buddha, who we take refuge in. We go to the Buddha for his advice, he’s someone who we view as being wise and who understands the nature of life. In the sense that we go to him for advice in how to lead our lives, we’re taking refuge in him. There’s another meaning of the Buddha refuge, which is our inmost nature, our real nature, the Buddha nature. And, part of the internal aspect of the refuge of the Buddha is taking refuge in our heart, our own experience, our own potential as a Buddha.

The Dharma is the second of the Three Treasures. The Dharma is the teaching, the truth, what the Buddha taught, the ideas that he passed on, the principles that he articulated. And, also, the Dharma has come to mean the teaching of those who understood what the Buddha understood, so there’s a whole vast array of Dharma, all the literature in the world that has come out of the practice of people who are his followers. I should say that there’s an inward quality of the Dharma refuge as well; this is the truth that we learn in our experience. When we know for a fact that it hurts when we smack our foot against the table, that is a minor element of the Dharma that is a part of our experience. When we know for a fact that it hurts, it causes us suffering, when we act out of anger; that’s part of our experience, that’s part of our Dharma, that’s part of our understanding. This is an aspect of the inward quality of our personal experience of the Dharma. And that inward quality, all these inward qualities, are continually evolving and expanding — continually deepening.

We take refuge in these things, these aspects of Dharma, by going to them for advice about our lives, by going to them to help us to understand the nature of our practice, the nature of our life, and our existence.

The Sangha, the third of the Three Treasures, is that group of people who practice the Dharma. Traditionally, in ancient times, the Sangha would have had the narrow connotation of being the monastic community, and those, again, who understood the teaching of the Buddha, who put the teachings of the Buddha into practice, and who understood those teachings from the point of view of practice.

Over time, that external quality of the Sangha has also expanded to mean the four classes of Buddhists, particularly in the Mahayana world. The four classes of Buddhists are: male and female monks and male and female lay people. And, within those four classes of Buddhists there is a wealth of deep understanding, about the nature of the world, about how to put the Dharma into practice, about the nature of the Dharma.

So the Sangha are those people who practice, who are practicing the Dharma and those who understand the practice of the Dharma. We take refuge, we go to them for support and help, with the understanding that we will be furthering our practice of the Dharma in learning from them. In a way, on the inward level the Sangha refuge can mean all those people with whom we live, literally. Everybody that we come in contact with, there's a quality of Sangha about them, if we see them from the inward perspective of seeing them as Buddhas. They're teaching us something. Sometimes Buddhas teach us what to do, sometimes Buddhas teach us what not to do. And when we look at our relationships from this internal quality of practice, then we're learning something on the level of Dharma and the Three Treasures in all our interactions; we have that potential.

The Three Treasures are profound and from the beginning of Buddhism all you had to do to become a Buddhist was say "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take Refuge in the Sangha." And, of course, to actually live according to the advice from those Three Treasures; that's all, just having faith that those Three Treasures embody something significant, embody something that will help us, is taking refuge in the three Treasures, and that's what it means to be a Buddhist.

I always try to be really careful not to evaluate whether someone else is really practicing or not while, at the same time, being discerning about it. I remember hearing, in an older formulation of the Precepts, that one of the ways of keeping the Precept against not being proud of ourselves and devaluing others, was to not cause other people to despair. This tone of evaluating somebody else's training, taking this position is like saying "I know what practice is and your not doing it." (Particularly as a monk and teacher I have to be really careful about this.) This is the sort of thing that can cause despair to arise in someone. At times I might look at someone and wonder to myself something like "It appears to me that so and so is doing their best to look for help anywhere other than practice," but I try to make that a private reflection, and not turn it into an evaluation of somebody else's practice. This is quite important to me; and, again, you just have to be practical and discerning.

So it becomes a personal matter whether we are Buddhists, whether we are practicing or not, and as I've said before, the Dharma is unstinting in its generosity. If we make a small effort in Dharma practice, the Dharma will give us something in return for that. If we make a moderate effort we'll get a moderate return, if we make a large effort, if we give everything to the Dharma then it will give us everything in return. It's just a matter of simple causality. So the degree to which we want to understand, and have the capacity to understand, is the degree to which we take refuge in the Three Treasures.

Now there's an interesting quality about taking refuge in the Three Treasures. In our tradition the ceremony of taking the Precepts has the quality of both giving and receiving of the sixteen Precepts.

When we take the Precepts in our tradition we're taking the Three Treasures as Precepts: we're promising to take refuge in the Three Treasures. There is a quality of the practice of taking refuge in the Three Treasures, of giving and receiving. When we start out, we might think to ourselves, and I think quite appropriately, "What can I get from practicing the Dharma? How can I use it to transform my life? How can I use it to deepen my understanding of life? How can I use it to awaken? What can I receive from the Dharma?"

But as we go into it, we realize that part of what we awaken to is our own mind of generosity, the mind of giving. And so, our taking refuge in the Three Treasures is not just about something that we receive from them, but also something we give back to them. Each person that has shown up here tonight is giving something to the Sangha. They're receiving something — hopefully — but they're giving something to the Sangha. They're giving of their time and their life and their presence, and this is really, really, really important. It is a really important aspect of the life of practice, particularly as you go along. I could personally say "I don't really need to be a monk, I don't really need to come to a group, I can just do practice, I know how to train myself, I know how to train my mind, I don't really need all this external stuff."

But, part of me recognizes that I would not be where I am today if someone else had not given their time, their effort to the Sangha. When I see those people who have given of themselves to the Sangha, I realize that my claim that I really don't need the Sangha and formal aspects of practice (relative to the understanding that I can see that those ahead of me in the Sangha have and that I don't), is pretty lame. In other words the people that have given to me of their time are people who have a much greater understanding than I do, even now, and I recognize my own potential to go deeper into practice.

Although, for myself, it's not necessarily a sense of *needing* greater depth, it's more a sense of wanting to give of my time and my life, for the benefit of the Dharma. As we practice, as we train ourselves, there's a quality of opening up, of discovering this part of ourselves which in a sense wants to give back to the Sangha, wants to give back to life.

There's a nice book written about this by Robert Aitken called "The Mind of Clover" in which he talks about how the generous mind, that we discover from Zen practice, is literally like the plant clover. You know, clover is a nitrogen fixing plant; as it grows in the ground it's putting nitrogen into the ground. Its whole life is giving something back to the ground. And that's how our practice is, where it goes to. So, for myself, I want to give. I recognize it's not absolutely essential for me to be part of the Sangha, but I want to give. And then I realize there's a very great value in my participating in the Sangha, in my participating in the Three Treasures, both for myself and for the Three Treasures. Participating in the Three Treasure enables this opening up, this continuing discovery of the mind of giving and other positive aspects of mind.

Another thing, and I think maybe it is the predominant benefit for me, is that my capacity for self delusion is quite profound. My capacity for fooling myself is quite profound. My capacity for convincing myself that things are otherwise than they actually are, is quite profound. And just the quality of showing up and associating with the Sangha day after day helps to rectify that, helps to address that issue. To me that's really one of the main things of being part of formal religious practice.

We set off down the road to awakening: we say to ourselves "there's gotta be

something more.” In whatever way we say that, maybe something like “I’ve got to find a way to get away from this awful suffering that I’m in,” or “I just have a sense that there’s something better than I can find.” And, the Buddha says “okay well, I have a sense for what that might be; if you want to follow this path, here’s what you can do.” “In general, my idea,” the Buddha says, “is that we obstruct our own self nature, we obstruct our own understanding by our mistaken views and mistaken actions. So, the first thing you need to do if you want to follow this path, is to look within and rectify your own mistaken views and mistaken acts.”

In other words, he turns us back on ourselves, turns us back on our minds. And the process of doing that, coming to understand where we obscure our own Buddha nature, where we sort of shoot ourselves in the foot, is a difficult process, and the support of the Three Treasures in general and the Sangha, in particular, is invaluable in that process. Because, we’re coming to learn a different way of being. I was talking to someone recently and they were saying “well I can’t be different than I am.” I understood that person, what they’re trying to say, but also, if we want to actually awaken, we have to be willing to be completely different than what we are. We have to be willing to look at every aspect of our mind and life, and say “I’m willing to change that thing.”

Now that’s a pretty tall order, and happily we have time and, by time I mean we have the experience of living in time, and a gradual process we can go through to come to terms with that situation. But still, there it is, a difficult thing: being willing to be different than we are.

Interestingly, the next step after being willing to be different, is we have to accept ourselves as we are. So there’s this constant tension: self-acceptance: I am as I am, and, chances are, I’m not going to become a lot different than how I am. And that’s one of the main things that we need to keep working on changing, because much of our wrong effort is trying to convince ourselves we are somebody different than we are: we need to change our non-acceptance of ourselves.

The Three Treasures are the beginning of practice, they’re the first step we take in becoming a Buddhist, in becoming a Zen practitioner. They are also the foundation of practice throughout our whole practice, all through to the end. The Buddha himself was constantly taking refuge in the Three Treasures. He lived by alms, he lived by the offerings of the Sangha. When the people in the area where he lived didn’t have much, he didn’t have much. I mean there were periods of time when they were living on horse feed — the monks — because there wasn’t enough food in the area. When he was making rules for the monastic community he would consult the lay people about what needed to be done, often-times the lay people would come to him and say: “Umm, this way of doing things doesn’t really quite work.” There is a story that illustrates this. There was a practice at the time of the Buddha where people, when they would sneeze they would say the equivalent of “bless you.” So the Buddha is giving this Dharma talk, explaining something quite complex, and these people started sneezing and everyone was saying “bless you, bless you, bless you.” It creates this interruption, and he says “all right that’s it, nobody can say ‘bless you’ anymore when you sneeze. I’m making this rule.”

I can imagine him being a bit irritated and going on with this talk. So the people tried not saying ‘bless you’ or whatever it was, and later some lay people came to him to say “you know, this doesn’t really work. It’s what we do, it’s how we’re polite to one

another, what do you think about changing the rule?" He said, effectively "oh, oh okay, we'll change it back," and he let that rule go.

He was constantly taking refuge in the community that he lived in. He of course lived according to his own Dharma, he took refuge in Buddha nature within himself and lived from that, and he took refuge in the Sangha. He lived amongst the Sangha and lived within the conditions of the Sangha.

Now one of the things about taking refuge in the Sangha—accepting the consequences of the Sangha that we live with — is that the people around us often make our lives troublesome. They do things which are difficult and (we might think) maybe somewhat crazy, sometimes. Part of our practice then, is, allowing that to happen (when there isn't a lot of harm involved) and accepting the consequences of that, and allowing that acceptance to deepen our practice. Of course the next step is that we have to recognize that sometimes I am personally going to make life difficult for my community. I am going to make life difficult for the Sangha, and boy, isn't it great that you are willing to put up with me; really, I quite appreciate that. That's part of that giving and receiving quality; we find this in taking refuge in the Sangha.

The Chinese have this idea that the Sangha is like a forest. In a healthy forest there are many trees, all the trees grow strong, straight and tall. In an area where there aren't many trees, trees can grow crooked and grow all over the place. And if you just walk around and see a forest where there are a lot of trees, it's true, this is how it is. So, as we are growing together in the Sangha, unwittingly, in a lot of ways, the Sangha is keeping us growing straight and tall.

Now to move onto the issue of religion: whether or not Buddhism is a religion, and how that's related to the Three Treasures. There are a number of reasons why Buddhism may not be considered a religion. Historically, when Buddhism came to the west, or when Westerners encountered Buddhism in the East, it was studied basically by Christian academics who often found the ideas appealing. Unfortunately, they couldn't really admit that it was a religion and still be interested in it (because the way Christianity was conceived of didn't allow for that). In part, then, (and this is a bit of an oversimplification) they started talking about Buddhism as if it was a philosophy; a philosophy of life and an ethical system.

At the center of the practice of the Three Treasures, though, is simple faith in the Three Treasures. Interestingly, I'm sitting here telling you that the Three Treasures embody great wisdom and all this stuff, and on the ground in real life, what we encounter is a bunch of people who look pretty ordinary and who have human failings. And so, there's a way in which we, as individuals, have to be willing to say "okay, what the Buddha teaches and the Sangha's efforts to practice what the Buddha teaches have the ring of truth about it and I'm going to have faith in it. I'm going to trust that there is something more going on in the Sangha, even though I may not see it, and I am going to give the practice a try. I am going to see for myself what effect the practice has on my life."

And, sometimes our faith is tested more or less. Things which we would really rather didn't happen, happen; people in the Sangha do things, which they really hadn't ought to do, and all that kind of thing. What we're asking ourselves is to continue to have faith that there's a deeper quality to the Three Treasures. I mean, even the act of sitting

down in meditation is an act of faith. It's an act of trusting something that we don't necessarily see. You sit down and you look at a wall for half an hour, it's kind of crazy. But when you do, there is some positive effect. Just getting yourself there to your seat and taking the step of sitting down is an act of faith, an act of stepping into the unknown. And it continues to be an act of faith even when we start to have the experience that it does benefit us.

I had this dog one time. I moved into this house and sort of inherited this dog. I really liked it. It was a golden Labrador originally named B4 for the cage that he came out of at the animal shelter but I changed his name to Max. So I had this dog who was pretty young and energetic and I was pretty young and energetic too. We were sort of stupid together, Max and I. One day we walked up the street to get some ice cream at the ice cream parlor and I left the dog outside. While it was outside it got hit by a car. I came out of the ice cream parlor and there's the dog in the gutter, not dead yet, but dying, and I recognize, "This is my fault, I did this stupid thing, I didn't tie the dog up properly, and he got loose." So I was trying to calm the dog who was clearly pretty beat up and on his way out, and he bit me while he was dying; he was in a lot of pain. The bite wasn't real serious or anything, although it did break the skin on my thumb. It was more like he was telling me, "Boy, I wish you had been more responsible..." It was pretty upsetting to me.

I was just starting my meditation practice at the time. I think I was nineteen or so, and I had read somewhere that a meditator, instead of going and lying down on their bed in times of difficulty, they'll go and do meditation: they'll go to meditation as their place of refuge. As I said, this was upsetting to me because I loved the dog, and I was really stupid and it resulted in the dog's death. So, after taking care of Max's remains, I went home and did meditation. This is, to me, what I'm talking about as an act of faith. This idea that just sitting still and offering merit and trying to look at my own mind was going to be the best way that I could start to deal with the turmoil that was caused by the passing away of this dog; and maybe it would prevent my future irresponsibility.

Also during this time of my life, there were all kinds of potential things to do; my friends were all having fun in various ways, and I'm deciding, "OK, I'm going to meditate, I'm going to take refuge in the Three Treasures." And that meant not having fun on Wednesday night and going to classes at the Priory in Portland. This was an act of faith. I thought to myself, "I'm going to set aside this idea of having fun for the moment and I'm going to go and learn about the Dharma." In this way, we gradually begin to take refuge in the Three Treasures. We put our time and effort into the Three Treasures as a refuge. And honestly, well — you can imagine — I have set aside a fair number of things in order to become a monk and to take refuge in the Three Treasures, and that's just what's come up for me to do. I'd be frankly quite surprised if other people do it. But again the offering of our time and life to the Three Treasures is of great merit and value, both during times of difficulty for us, but also for all beings, for the beings that we encounter. It was actually a great solace to sit in meditation after Max passed away. That helped me, that helped me to understand it and be able to deal with it. And hopefully it helped me to really look at my own irresponsibility and to come to terms with that, and be more responsible. So then I had a dog later on, who lived to a ripe old age and didn't get killed through irresponsibility. I hope you see what I'm getting at.

There is a quality of faith that we enact when we take refuge in the Three Treasures. And because of that quality of faith, what we're doing is a religious practice. There's a

deeper quality to this which is not mentioned in this book. The root of the word religion comes from the idea of re-connecting. “Re” means to do it again, “ligios” is the same root as ligature, like sewing up, or ligaments — that connection. Part of what we’re doing in our religious practice is reconnecting with that deepest quality of ourselves, with Buddha Nature. And because there is that quality in meditation as well, then, on a more profound level what we’re doing is a religious practice.

ⁱ Basic Buddhist Concepts by Kogen Mizuno, Kosei Publishing Co; December 15, 1989.