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The Preparatory Path

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Merit and Meditation

Buddhism is essentially practical, and what is rather loosely called 'meditation' is its key practice. Meditation largely replaces the ritual of other religions and completely replaces prayer. Indeed, Buddhism lays the greatest emphasis on *bhāvanā*, meditation, or more correctly, the development of the mind and what may be termed its spiritual faculties.

An aspect of this practicality is the systematic way the Buddhist path is presented. Throughout its long history, beginning with the actual teaching of the Buddha and continuing in the literature that has built up around it down the centuries, the spiritual path has been carefully mapped out, step by step. However, for us today it may (mistakenly) appear to be unnecessarily complex, and there is therefore the temptation of seeking for a short cut and missing out steps that in our ignorance we may regard as nonessential. An example of this is inattention to the rules of moral conduct (*sīla*) laid down by the Buddha and not cultivating the social virtues of generosity, patience, kindness, helpfulness towards others and similar duties. However, these things are essential as they obviate purely selfish motives and lay the

foundations for effectively progressing towards the final goal of our spiritual career.

The practice of moral and other 'good' acts within our social environment produces what is called 'merit' (*puñña*), The Buddha's teaching regarding this has certainly been subject to abuse, as when people think of it as a kind of heavenly bank account where good deeds can be stored for the later reward of the good results due. But this is actually a travesty of its true meaning and demonstrates a misunderstanding of the Buddhist theory of moral causation (*kamma*).

The realisation of the goal, Enlightenment, does not happen by chance nor is it even the inevitable result of practising certain meditation exercises to develop calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). These are certainly some of the conditions that lead to the realisation of the Unconditioned or Nibbāna, but are by no means all of them. There are many factors involved and it is only when all these conditions have accumulated and ripened that that experience will take place. This state of 'ripeness' or 'spiritual maturity' also needs an accumulation of merits or *puñña*, not only from this life but going back through many lives, so we are told. This is often mentioned in the discourses of the Buddha, where certain individuals came to Him and immediately gained realisation, whereas others did not or, rather, could not, due either to the presence or

absence of sufficient merit from the past.

The practice of meritorious acts, such as self-discipline and self-sacrifice, have one important thing in common; that is attenuation of 'self,' the absence of self-centred motivation. This is the key to the whole Buddhist path, for the chief characteristic of one who has reached its consummation is his complete lack of self-reference, emotional or instinctive. He has fully realised and acts from the standpoint of *anattā*—non-self.

A characteristic of one who has sufficient *puñña* and 'self-attenuation' is the ease with which he can place his faith in the teacher, the Buddha, and put aside doubt or reservations arising from self-clinging and act and think spontaneously and wholeheartedly, thus quickly realising any instruction given. It is the unwholesome emotions of greed, hate and delusion arising from demerit (*pāpa*—deeds that are the very opposite of meritorious) that cloud the intellect and give rise to conflict and doubt. And it is these that are the main stumbling-blocks to spiritual advancement.

Going for Refuge

It is generally understood that, among the preliminaries to the practice of the Buddhist path, what is known as 'going for refuge' is one of the most

important. It is intended here to go into this in some detail and to set forth something of what is meant and implied by 'going for refuge' The importance of the refuges cannot be overstressed and whatever other things should be cultivated will be found to be included by implication within this process of refuge taking.

The three refuges are: Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The basic meaning of these is that Gotama, who lived about 2500 years ago, was a Buddha or Enlightened One, the doctrine He taught was the Dhamma and the community of disciples that gathered around Him was the Sangha. But as they stand, these are not really sufficient to be understood as the Triple Refuge and so we must delve a little deeper to discover how these three can be of importance for us here and now.

Although Gotama the Buddha is no longer with us, the principle or capability within ourselves to realise Enlightenment is, and it is this that constitutes the Buddha as Refuge. The Dhamma is the path leading to that Enlightenment, and the Sangha as refuge is the community of those who have attained the state of Ariya. [1]

Now, to begin with, in what way are these three to be understood as refuges? A refuge is a shelter or

protection from danger and distress, that is, these three Refuges are one's resort to avoid the suffering of wandering in the round of birth and death; the *samsāra*. To set out in search of a refuge we *must* first realise the nature of this mental and physical world we are living in, we must understand something of at least the first of the four Noble Truths, the Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*). Those who are quite happy and contented with life, who do not feel the deep stirrings of dissatisfaction, of 'uneasiness' (a literal meaning of *dukkha*), will naturally see no need to seek a refuge. But for those who do, there is only one course open to them—to work towards the liberation that is Nibbāna, the final refuge from *dukkha*.

Although we may refer to Nibbāna as the ultimate refuge, in practice going for refuge is completed at a certain stage of our spiritual progress when we reach certainty and assurance within ourselves as to the final realisation of the goal and the path we should follow to realise it; this is technically called 'entering the stream' (*sotāpatti*). The practice of the Noble Eightfold Path gradually culminates in the correct practice of *samādhi-vipassanā*. *Samādhi* here means a calm, even, balanced and integrated state of mind, a mind that is whole (*ekodi*), that is, a mind that functions at all levels, intellectually, emotionally and volitionally, as a unity, with the sole purpose of working towards final

liberation. Such a mind is well equipped 'to see things as they really are' and act without conflict within itself according to this 'clear seeing,' or *vipassanā*.

The completion of going for refuge is characterised by a deep and unshakeable faith and a certainty of knowledge in the three Refuges as being the highest and only secure refuge it is possible to conceive of—but from which beings have strayed, through delusion and attachment to the illusory things of this world.

To return from these rarefied heights to more practical considerations, how does one actually begin this process of going for refuge?

At the outset there should be the understanding that this is a serious step to take; something that is not undertaken lightly, for it is a step that may well alter the whole course of one's life. Therefore it should be a deliberate and conscious act, decided upon only after careful thought. The traditional method of going for refuge is to approach a bhikkhu respectfully and ask him for the Refuges; it is usual to ask three times and one then repeats the formula three times after him—this is to impress upon one the seriousness of the step one is taking. With the Refuges one also takes upon oneself the responsibility of cultivating the moral precepts, either the five or the eight precepts for laymen.

Besides repeating the Refuge formula, one goes for refuge, according to the commentary on the Majjhima Nikāya, in four ways: [2]

- (1) by paying homage,
- (2) by the acceptance of discipleship,
- (3) by acceptance of the guiding ideal, and
- (4) by self-surrender.

(1) Paying homage means having a reverential attitude and respect for the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. It includes such acts as placing one's hands together, bowing down and prostrating oneself before the Buddha and his representatives (the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*) and the performance of worship and devotion (*pūja*). Also, listening attentively and with a humble attitude to expositions of the Teaching and so forth.

(2) Acceptance of discipleship means one accepts the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as one's teacher, wishing to learn from them.

(3) Acceptance of the guiding ideal is the accepting of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as one's only true guide, ideal and refuge. And one does not seek for guidance outside of them, that is to say, one does not look to any other religion to help one nor place any reliance upon superstitions, luck, charms, etc.

(4) Finally, there is self-surrender. One surrenders oneself completely—one's hopes, ambitions, even life itself—to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. One turns away from worldly things and devotes oneself to the task of treading the path leading to Enlightenment and freedom.

It may be noted that another aspect of going for refuge, and perhaps this is what makes it so important, is that it corrects any one-sided tendencies and deficiencies of character, helps bring the mind to spiritual maturity, and gives confidence and fearlessness. It thus makes one fit to tread the difficult path to Enlightenment and lessens the likelihood of going astray or stopping halfway, which is very probable without this security or faith as foundation and the certainty of knowledge that accompanies it.

The Preparatory Path

In the previous section there was set forth something of the theoretical and practical aspects of 'going for refuge' as the basic requisite of faith in the Buddha's Teaching, and as being the most important preparatory task for gaining entry into it. The Ch'an (Zen) master Hui Hai says in his treatise:

"You ought first to discover whether a man is sincere in his faith and qualified to practise it

without backsliding before you expound it to him....” [3]

The ‘it’ refers to the profounder instructions for gaining realisation in the Ch’an school. However this idea of sincerity of faith is true of any school or Buddhist tradition and is something quite fundamental. A similar idea is expressed in one of the most ancient texts of Buddhism, the Sutta Nipāta, where the Buddha says to the Brahmin Dhotaka,

“I cannot free anyone in the world who still has doubt.” (Sn 1064)

However, faith does not usually stand alone but is incorporated with other factors in several of the traditional ‘lists’ of which there are a large number in Buddhist literature. It is the first of the five spiritual faculties (*indriya*), for example, and in this scheme faith is balanced and harmonised with wisdom. For without wisdom, faith would become mere blind belief, and without faith, wisdom would just be intellectual sophistry.

The other three factors in the list of faculties are *samādhi*, which gives depth; energy, which activates; and mindfulness, that controls and balances the development of the other four.

Besides cultivating the five spiritual faculties there is another more general list found in a discourse from the Udāna, the Meghiya Sutta (Ud. 4.1.). In this discourse there are found five things that, in the words of the discourse, “mature a mind immature for release,” that is, they prepare and lead the mind to the spiritual maturity necessary for correctly treading the path that leads to final Enlightenment. It is this spiritual maturity that qualifies one to practise the Dhamma ‘without backsliding’ or going astray and it is this that distinguishes the ‘wise man’ (*paṇḍita*) from the ‘fool’ (*bāla*; ‘the immature one’).

Summarised, the five things (*dhammā*) are

1. the spiritual friend,
2. moral discipline,
3. conversation centred around the practice,
4. strenuous effort, and
5. wisdom.

It is perhaps the first, the spiritual friend (*kalyāṇamitta*), that is the real basis, for it is from him that all good and necessary qualities cultivated by one ultimately stem. It is from the spiritual friend that one learns the Dhamma, both by precept and example, and the unequalled Friend of all beings is the Buddha

himself who, by handing down His Teaching to us, exemplifies, through the wisdom and compassion contained in it and in His life, the quintessence of what a spiritual friend should be. Lower down the scale, the spiritual friend is the ordinary human teacher who introduces us to the Dhamma and its practice. Inspired by his example, one goes for refuge, cultivates the moral precepts and makes a beginning in unfolding one's spiritual potentialities.

In the discourse to Meghiya it is specifically mentioned that the moral precepts laid down by the Buddha are to be followed scrupulously and that one should 'see danger' in the slightest deviation from them. This is not to say one should rigidly adhere only to the 'letter of the law' at the expense of its spirit, for one without the other is both harmful and useless. The proper cultivation of the moral precepts produces a clear conscience or 'non-remorse' (*avippaṭisāra*), which is an essential step in clearing the way to further advancement. Remorse, worry and regret over acts committed and omitted is a great obstacle, especially for the practice of meditation, and it is by keeping a strict moral discipline that one can move forward, unhindered by self-reproach.

The discourse mentioned above also lists the kinds of talk helpful in producing spiritual maturity: that is, talk on moral discipline, meditation practice and so

forth, and by implication the non-indulgence in frivolous, idle chatter and worldly topics of conversation. For this one needs to associate with like-minded friends and to avoid those not in sympathy with one's spiritual aspirations. It should be obvious that without perseverance and effort nothing worthwhile, even in worldly matters, can be achieved and this is even more true in the most difficult task of all—to realise Enlightenment. And to proceed correctly in all that has been indicated so far needs, above all, wisdom. For this preparatory stage, it is not necessary to take into consideration the higher reaches of wisdom as a transcendent state that views reality face to face, but in its down-to-earth aspect, more akin to ordinary common sense; the ability to discriminate right from wrong, to accept wisely what is useful and helpful and reject what is useless and harmful in one's spiritual career. One needs wisdom to be able to see things objectively and judge the best course to take, to assess oneself with all one's faults rightly and to develop a clear view of one's ultimate goal and the obstacles that must be surmounted to realise it. Of course it is inevitable that we will all make mistakes at some time or another, but it is just these and the ability to learn from them that help the faculty of wisdom to grow—one's own direct experience.

When this preliminary work has been done there

should come a time when one's practice of the path becomes easy and natural and the obstacles less. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN 35:230,) the Buddha uses the simile of the log of wood floating on the Ganges—that, if unobstructed, will inevitably reach the ocean. So will we, skilfully guided by the spiritual friend and our own understanding and wisdom, eventually reach the ocean of Nibbāna.

Notes

1. *Ariya-puggala*: Noble Personality. The formal description of this Sangha includes the phrase: *Cattāri Purisa yugāni aṭṭha-purisa puggalā esa Bhagavato sāvaka saṅgho*:

“The four types of individuals, embracing eight classes of (Noble) personality ...” This signifies those who have attained the state of Stream winner, Once-returner, Non-returner or Arahant, either at the stage of Path (*magga*) or Fruit (*phala*) These eight comprise the Ariya Sangha as (distinguished from the Puthujjana Sangha. (*Puthujjana*: all those, either of the Sangha or the laity, who are still bound by all the Ten Fetters (*saṃyojana*). —Editor. [\[Back\]](#)

2. The following list of four is abstracted from *The Threefold Refuge* by Nyanaponika Thera ([Wheel No. 76](#), Buddhist Publication Society, 1965). [\[Back\]](#)
3. *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, pp. 77–8 translated by John Blofeld (Rider and Co.1962). [\[Back\]](#)

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