

chapter seven

THE THREE REFUGES: *The Body of Buddha's Mind*

I take refuge in buddha

I take refuge in dharma

I take refuge in sangha

—The Bodhisattva Initiation Ceremony

I TAKE REFUGE IN BUDDHA, I take refuge in dharma, I take refuge in sangha: these are the first three bodhisattva precepts. So simple, so common, so ordinary for disciples of Buddha, and so essential for the true practice of the way.

According to Dogen, the essence of the true transmission of the buddha dharma is taking refuge in the Triple Treasure.¹ Dogen was an energetic and creative person, brilliant, gifted, and sincere. He sat in meditation with awesome intensity and profound stillness. He studied the ocean of Buddha's teachings with impeccable thoroughness and care. Out of boundless compassion for his students and for all future generations, he wrote the incomparable Treasury of True Dharma Eyes (*Shobogenzo*), which has been translated into many languages and is studied deeply worldwide. He is one of the most innovative, profound, and influential thinkers in the history of the buddha way.

As Dogen approached death, what practice did he choose? Did he enter into the utmost serene and radiant concentration? Did he perhaps give his final, transcendent exposition of the authentic dharma? This is what he did: on a long piece of white paper he wrote

three large black characters: *buddha*, *dharmā*, and *sangha*. He hung this paper on a pillar in his sickroom. In his great illness he roused himself to walk around that pillar, and as he walked he chanted, "I take refuge in buddha, I take refuge in dharma, I take refuge in sangha." He brought his whole life energy forward to walk around these three jewels. He gave his whole life to buddha, dharma, and sangha, which means that he gave his whole life to all living beings.

The expression "take refuge" is translated from the original Pali, *sarana-gamana*. *Sarana* refers to "a shelter, protection, or sanctuary, some place of peace and safety." *Gamana* refers to "the act of returning." The English word *refuge* seems quite appropriate, because it carries the sense of both "place" and "going back." It is synonymous with *shelter* and *protection*. It is anything to which you may turn for help or relief. The Latin root *refugere* means "to flee" or "to fly back."² When we take refuge in the Triple Treasure, we are flying back to our true home.

Buddha, *dharmā*, and *sangha* each have at least three different levels of meaning. *Buddha* is "unsurpassed, correct, and complete awakening"; it is "a person who realizes such awakening"; and it is also "the transformation of beings." *Dharma* is "freedom from any difference between ourselves and buddha"; it is also "the truth that is realized by a buddha"; and it is "the transformation of that truth into scriptures and other forms of teaching." *Sangha* is "harmony"; it is "the community of those who practice the truth realized by a buddha"; and it is "the release of beings from suffering and bondage to the world of birth and death."

Suzuki Roshi said that we can't practice the way without adoring the Triple Treasure, and that taking refuge is an act of adoration: adoration of awakening, adoration of the teaching of awakening, adoration of the community of beings who practice the way of awakening, and adoration of all life. In all traditions of Buddhism, veneration of the Triple Treasure is the basis of ethical practices and compassionate vows.

Taking Refuge in Buddha

To take refuge in buddha means to take refuge in what you really are. What you really are is already attained, always, every moment. What you really are is buddha. You don't have to work at what you are. Part of what you are is what you think you are, but what you think you are is not all of what you are. It is just an aspect of what you are. Being buddha means being unattached to your thoughts about what you are. If you think you are a worthy person or an unworthy person, not grasping those thoughts is buddha. But, in fact, being a person who has such thoughts is a necessary condition for realizing buddha.

Another part of what you are is a human being who keeps running away from what you are, who keeps trying to be something else. If you think that you are worthy, then you want to hold on to feeling worthy. If you feel unworthy, then you may want to change or somehow fix yourself. In other words, you can be distracted and undermined by your ideas about yourself. In that sense, you flee from yourself. Of course, you can never really run away from yourself: that is only a delusion. You need to balance this delusion of running away with the recognition that it is a delusion, that you didn't run away. Returning to buddha is an antidote to running away from yourself. To come back, to just be the way you are, including all your delusions, is to take refuge in buddha.

When you take refuge, you are not trying to be something else. If you are a person who is trying to attain something, then in the act of taking refuge you don't try to be somebody who is not trying to attain something. If you're someone who is not trying to attain something, then you don't try to become someone who is trying to attain something. You work with what you are. Taking refuge in buddha means trusting that you are buddha.

Trusting that you are buddha does not mean that you identify yourself with buddha. It's not something special about you that makes

you buddha. It is simply you being you that is buddha. It is not that you're a virtuous person, so virtuous that you're a buddha, but that you being you is virtue. Maybe relatively speaking, you have a little bit of virtue or maybe you have a great deal of virtue, but that is not important. The point is that being what you are is your fundamental virtue. Even though people vary in relative levels of virtue, each of us completely possesses this buddha virtue.

When I take refuge in buddha, I don't take refuge in my good points or my skillful behavior, and of course I don't take refuge in my shortcomings. I take refuge in me being me. That is my indestructible virtue, which never is lost except by me forgetting it or not facing up to it. To take refuge means to give up running away from home. It means to recognize my responsibility to live in accord with my buddhahood.

When you take refuge in buddha, when you go back to being fully yourself, you begin to see how you are connected to and depend on everybody, and how everybody depends on you. In other words, the first refuge really contains the other two. When you take refuge in buddha, you begin to understand the teaching of interdependence, which is taking refuge in dharma, and you honor your connection with other beings, which is taking refuge in sangha.

In fact, the practice of taking refuge in buddha opens your eyes to all the other precepts. Not killing, not stealing, right conduct, and working to help other beings: all these come from the condition of you being you. The condition of you being you is the source of peace and the source of love.

In essence, to take refuge is to give up all alternatives to being buddha, to being yourself. When you see and accept that you have no such alternatives, you naturally and spontaneously go forward on the path of buddha. When you are willing to throw yourself completely into your everyday life, moment by moment, you are taking refuge in buddha, dharma, and sangha.

Appeal and Response

Wholeheartedly taking refuge in the Triple Treasure brings forth all our life functions: effort, courage, energy, and vulnerability. In this coming forth, there are also elements of appeal, request, and inquiry.

If taking refuge is the return flight to our own true nature, the appeal is not made to something outside ourselves nor to something inside ourselves. It is made to the great openness of being that transcends outside and inside and from which nothing is excluded.

If we want buddha's wisdom and compassion to be revealed through our lives, we must commune with buddha. Referring to this communion, the Song of the Jewel Mirror Awareness says,

The meaning is not in the words,
Yet it responds to the arrival of effort.³

The meaning of saying, "I take refuge in buddha" is not in the words, but it responds to our devotion in saying these words. Complete awakening comes forth to receive the gift of our living effort when we think and say, "I take refuge in buddha."

If our devotion is total, if we give our whole lives to being awake, then there will be a complete response: awakening will be realized. If we devote our entire lives to the dharma, then the teachings of awakening will come alive. And if we dedicate our whole being to sangha, the community of all beings, then the community will appear in this world. This is the meaning of the jewel mirror awareness. It clearly reflects our devotion, whether our efforts are partial or total. In this realm we get back exactly what we give. When we hold back from awakening, it may seem that awakening holds back from us. Even this reflection of our holding back is spiritual communion. The Song of the Jewel Mirror Awareness also says that "appeal and response come up together."⁴ In the realm of this intimate communion, we don't appeal now and get a response later. Past and future are cut off, which means that they are completely present.

Katagiri Roshi once stood in front of the altar in our meditation hall and said, "Line up the incense burner with Buddha's nose, the center of the Buddha statue. If you place them in a straight line, then your mind will be straightforward." Lining them up straight corresponds with the arrival of your energy. You thus appeal to your relationship with buddha. As soon as you make this effort, your mind and heart are aligned with buddha. It's not that you line up these objects and then later, as a result of such effort, your mind becomes aligned. At the moment of alignment, your mind is straight and honest.

The straightforward mind is the mind of a bodhisattva. This straightforward mind does not expect anything in return for its being thus. Its being thus is its own reward, its own realization of freedom from suffering. Childlike acts of devotion, such as arranging objects on an altar, are immediately and inconceivably the realization of complete awakening. Our wholehearted effort of lining up an incense burner with a statue's nose is the extreme boundless joy of the buddhas in ten directions, past, present, and future. Still, the human mind may doubt that such straightforwardness is liberation itself.

Suzuki Roshi once told us about a young monk whose father was also a Zen priest. When the boy was about to enter the practice at Eihei-ji, the Monastery of Eternal Peace, his father gave him this advice: "When you get to Eihei-ji, you will see that there is a big bell there. You will probably get a chance to ring it, early in the morning. You will ring the bell, and after each ring you will bow. When you ring the bell, just ring the bell. Still, when you ring it, remember that with every ringing of the bell, the great wheel of buddha dharma turns one degree."

The boy went to Eihei-ji, and he did get his chance to ring the bell. He rang it joyfully, with his whole heart, just as his father had taught him. When the abbot heard the ringing of the bell, he was deeply impressed. He wondered who was ringing the bell that way and asked to meet the young monk. The boy later became a great teacher.

The person who gives naturally receives joy, and the person who

receives gives joy. Just ring the bell with your whole heart, out into the great whatever-it-is. When you ring it in this way, you are putting your life on the line, and you are being met. In such a meeting, buddha is coming alive, dharma is coming alive, and sangha is coming alive.

When you take refuge and give your devotion to the buddha way, there is always a response. All the buddhas and ancestors say, Welcome home. Glad to see you. We've been waiting. Now the family is back together. It's a concert, not a solo performance.

Even if you deeply want to return to your true home, still the question may arise, If buddha nature is all-pervading and completely present in ordinary daily life, then isn't it a contradiction to do anything to realize this? Why is there the need for concerted effort, such as sitting upright and taking refuge in the Triple Treasure? These two practices offer opportunities to engage this contradiction. Unless we find a way to exercise our contradictory nature, we are not fully being ourselves. It seems that we must do something extraordinary in order to realize our ordinariness. It seems necessary to enter into some special practice with our whole hearts in order to see that we don't need to do anything special at all. This contradiction, if unengaged, can become a stumbling block rather than an opportunity for self-fulfillment.

Taking refuge in buddha, dharma, and sangha, we return home to our true nature. Having returned, we are ready to receive the Three Pure Precepts: the design of our original true nature.

chapter eight

THE THREE PURE PRECEPTS:

The Shape of Buddha's Mind

I vow to embrace and sustain forms and ceremonies

I vow to embrace and sustain all good

I vow to embrace and sustain all beings

—The Bodhisattva Initiation Ceremony

THE THREE PURE PRECEPTS describe the structure and fundamental design of the enlightened mind. All buddha ancestors have vowed to constantly practice them. For those who dedicate their lives to the welfare of all beings, these precepts indicate a straightforward and unobstructed path to realization of their vows.

According to Soto Zen tradition, the Three Pure Precepts evolved from the Teaching of All Buddhas, which is one of the best-known and most highly revered teachings among all schools of Buddhism:

Refrain from all evil,

Practice all that is good,

Purify your mind:

This is the teaching of all buddhas.¹

The first recorded instance of this ancient formulation is found in verse 185 of the Dhammapada, one of the earliest texts of Theravada Buddhism, written in the Pali language in the fifth century C.E. The Dhammapada is a collection of *galha* (four-line verses) attributed to Shakyamuni Buddha himself.