

# The Paradox of “Taking Refuge” in a Non-theistic Religion

by Domyo Burk | Mar 6, 2012

When someone wishes to become a Buddhist, they “take refuge” in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, after passing through the “gateway of contrition.” Yet Buddhism is not a theistic religion, and the Buddha’s last teaching was “be a lamp unto yourself.” Who or what is providing refuge to a Buddhist, and to whom are we confessing our shortcomings? How are the acts of taking refuge and being contrite compatible with being “a lamp unto yourself”?

Some people have no trouble summoning devotional spiritual feelings, but many of us are too much a product of our skeptical culture to readily give ourselves over to something that seems “outside” of ourselves. Whether the thing inviting surrender is a religion or a person, we want to preserve our dignity and autonomy. We feel some alarm, if not outright aversion, when we read the phrase in our scripture containing the Zen Buddhist precepts, the *Kyōjūkaimon*, “We should repeat with bowed heads... I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.” (The Buddha is the historical Buddha but also our own ability to awaken; the Dharma is the Buddhist teachings but also the truth; the Sangha is the community of Buddhists but also all living beings.) Why are we bowing? Does this bowing imply unworthiness? Doesn’t “refuge” imply these things will give us something we can’t give ourselves? Why can’t we just meditate and try to be a good person?

The answer to that last question, of course, is that we can just meditate and try to be a good person, and that in itself is of essential importance. However, we will be missing an extremely valuable and potent aspect of spiritual practice if we skip too quickly over the paradox of refuge.

Essentially, human beings can rarely tap into their full potential if they do not, in some way, acknowledge and align themselves harmoniously with That Which Is Greater, with the Ineffable that inspires our deepest hearts. Even our individual life is much, much greater than the part we usually identify as “self,” or “I, me and mine.” We are supported by, challenged by, and influenced by an infinite number of causes and conditions. In a very literal way, we are only who we are because of where we stand in relationship to the rest of the universe.

When we get some inkling that there is something beneficial, beautiful, noble or even benevolent in the “rest of the universe,” we can turn toward it with interest at the very least, and perhaps even with gratitude or devotion. This is what Huston Smith calls turning toward the “more.” Fortunately, this does not require belief in a deity, or even in something good that is inherently separate from ourselves. As Huston Smith describes in *Why Religion Matters*:

“...the finitude of mundane existence cannot satisfy the human heart completely. Built into the human makeup is a longing for a “more” that the world of everyday experience cannot requite. This outreach strongly suggests the existence of the something that life reaches *for* in the way the wings of birds point to the reality of air...

“The reality that excites and fulfills the soul’s longing is God by whatsoever name. Because the human mind cannot come within light-years of comprehending God’s nature, we do well to follow Rainer Maria Rilke’s suggestion that we think of God as a direction rather than an object.”

If you can imagine the wonder and order of evolution proceeding without a being to direct it, why not imagine a moral and spiritual order in the universe without a being to oversee it?

Still, although “It” might not be a “being,” it is important to bow our heads and take refuge. Isn’t part of you touched when you place your hands palm-to-palm in reverence? Such reverence is about acknowledging connection and aspiration, amongst other things. It gets us past our limited self and allows us to access a greater energy and potential. This is what has been proved again and again in 12-step programs; there is usually a limit to the change someone can make until they surrender, in some way, to a “higher power.” This step has been troubling to many addicts who are agnostics and atheists. Buddhism offers a way to take refuge without belief in a deity – but it’s not the no-deity part that is important, it’s the emphasis on *refuge* itself. The act of taking refuge is consistent with a profound aspect of our humanity, or of our being part of this amazing universe.