

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION of the verse of the Triple Treasure in the MZMC sutra book is:
I take refuge in the Buddha, vowing with all sentient beings, acquiring the Great Way, awakening the unsurpassable mind.

I take refuge in the Dharma, vowing with all sentient beings, deeply entering the teaching, wisdom like the sea.

I take refuge in the Sangha, vowing with all sentient beings, bringing harmony to all, completely, without hindrance.³⁷

When we become Buddhists, we first make repentance and take refuge in the Three Treasures of Buddhism: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. These refuges are the first three of the sixteen precepts we receive in the Japanese Sōtō Zen tradition established by Dōgen Zenji. Without these three there is no Buddhism. Shakyamuni Buddha, born in India about twenty-five hundred years ago, is our original teacher. He awakened to the reality of our life. Both his teachings about this reality and the reality itself are called Dharma. Sangha is the community of people who study the Buddha's teaching and follow his way of life. His first students were the five monks who had practiced with him before his enlightenment. They understood, became his disciples, and established the first sangha. That was the birth of Buddhism. From the very beginning, the Buddha as teacher, the Dharma as teaching, and the Sangha as community have been the essential elements of Buddhism.

TAKING REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA

When we become Buddhists, we vow to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. When we accept the Buddha's teaching as a student of the Buddha, we make this vow with all sentient beings. It would be better to translate this as "all living beings." The original word in Japanese is shujō. Shu means "many" or "various"; jō means "life" or "living beings." The next phrase, taige taidō, or "acquiring the Great Way," is an interesting expression. Tai means "body" and ge means "to understand," so this can be translated as "understanding with the body." We have to understand the Great Way with our bodies. The Buddha's teaching is not something we can understand merely with our intellects; we have to practice it in our day-to-day lives. To understand and agree with his

teaching is not enough. If we agree with his teaching, we have to carry it out, to live it. Taige means to embody, study, learn, or incorporate into our everyday lives. Taidō, or "Great Way," means "awakening." Here the "Way" is a translation of the Sanskrit word bodhi. This phrase means we have to embody the Great Awakening of the Buddha in our daily lives.

The first refuge includes the phrase "awakening the unsurpassable mind." Unsurpassable mind (mujō-shin) is the same as bodhi-mind (bodai-shin). Both are abbreviations of the Sanskrit anuttarā-samyaksambodhi-citta. Anuttarā means "unsurpassable," "supreme," or "highest." Bodhi means "awakening." Mujō is the translation of anuttarā and bodai is the transliteration of bodhi. When we embody the Great Awakening, we awaken to the awakening mind. It's a strange expression, but that is the reality. We awaken the awakening mind in order to wake up. We usually think we are awake except when we are asleep at night or napping, but actually we are usually asleep and dreaming. We imagine this world, our lives, and ourselves. We create dream-worlds and then believe that they are reality. And yet, they are only constructs of our mind. We create a story in which we are the hero or heroine. We think we are the center of the world, and all other people and things are resources to make a happy ending for our story. This is how we live in a dream. To awaken means to drop off body and mind, become free from dreaming and encounter reality. We try to act based on the reality that exists before we process the world through the intellect. Our intellection is based on our education and all our experiences since birth. But these experiences are a limited way of viewing the world, so we must wake up to reality.

Another aspect of "unsurpassable mind" is compassion for all beings. When we awake to the reality that has not yet been processed by our ego-centered mind, we cannot help having compassion for all beings. We realize that we live together with all beings, supported by networks of interconnection. We share air, water, and life by offering ourselves to each other. We live supported by all beings. In turn, we must support all other beings. This is compassion. We have to awaken to the reality that we live together as knots within Indra's net. We do not and cannot live independently, as limited and conditioned individuals. This is the meaning of taking refuge in the Buddha.

TAKING REFUGE IN DHARMA

The next section begins, "I take refuge in the Dharma." The Sanskrit word dharma has many meanings, but two are important here—the Buddha's teaching and the reality of all beings. It continues, "Vowing with all sentient beings, deeply entering the teaching." The original word for "the teaching" is kyō zō. Kyō means "sutra," and zō means "warehouse," "storehouse," or "treasury." Buildings in Buddhist temples where sutras or texts are stored called kyō zō. Jin nyū kyō zō means "deeply entering into the storehouse of sutras." Another possible interpretation of this word kyō zō is "sutra piṭaka," that is, one of the three "baskets" (piṭaka) of Buddhist scriptures: sutras, commentaries on the sutras (Abhidharma), and precepts (Vinaya). Either way, we vow to study the sutras thoroughly.

In a chapter of *Shōbōgenzō* titled “*Sansuikyō*” (Mountains and Waters Sutra), Dōgen Zenji wrote, “These mountains and waters of the present are the manifestation of the Way of the ancient buddhas.” This implies that the reality of all beings is itself a sutra. Not only the mountains and waters but also the birds singing, the sun shining, and everything happening around us are sutras teaching us the reality of being. They teach impermanence and interdependence. Nothing lasts forever, everything is always changing, and there is no fixed ego or substance. All beings in the universe teach this reality, but we don’t listen; we don’t really see it. We think, “I want to do this” or “I wish to do that,” and we are blind to the reality of impermanence and interdependence. The phrase “deeply entering the teaching” doesn’t require that we read all the Buddhist texts. Although reading is an important part of entering the teaching, the deeper meaning is really to awaken to the reality before our eyes, the reality that we actually live.

The phrase “wisdom like the sea” refers to an unlimited and boundless perspective. We are like a frog in a well that can see only a small patch of sky. Our view is limited, yet we think we are the center of the world and know everything. We base our actions on our conditioned understanding, perceptions, and opinions. The beginning of wisdom is to see that our view is limited. The view we have at sea is wider than in a well. There is no limitation to something so vast and boundless. By studying the Buddha’s teaching we become free from our limited views and open ourselves to boundless reality. The meaning of taking refuge in the Dharma is that we value Dharma more than our own limited opinions and views based on our personal karma.

TAKING REFUGE IN SANGHA

The third vow begins, “I take refuge in the Sangha.” Sangha is a Sanskrit word meaning an association or union of people. In India at the time of the Buddha, cities were forming, and some people were freed from the daily labor of agriculture. Classes of merchants, craftsmen, warriors, and nobles arose. People established unions or associations called sanghas (or *gaṇas*). A sangha is a democratic community of members who share the same interests and status. The vow continues with “vowing with all sentient beings, bringing harmony to all.” The phrase “bringing harmony” is a translation of the Japanese word *tori*, which means “unify.” Buddhist sangha members are unified by the Dharma. To have a community instead of a collection of individuals, to have harmony, we need something that unifies. To make soup we chop the ingredients and put them in a pot, then add seasoning and cook it until the individual flavors blend to make one taste. Similarly, we need to cook ourselves and make these individuals into one community with one taste—the taste of Dharma. Harmony unifies a collection of individuals into a community in which we can take refuge.

The next phrase is “completely, without hindrance.” With harmony and unity, there is no hindrance. When individuals think “me first,” endless problems and obstacles arise. But when we wake up to impermanence and egolessness, and share the life of this moment, there is no hindrance. Of course, there are still difficulties to overcome, but with

harmony we can work on them. If we have discord, we cannot. This is the meaning of sangha and of taking refuge in the Three Treasures.

THE REASON FOR TAKING REFUGE

Shōbōgenzō is a collection of about ninety-five of Dōgen Zenji's independent writings. One of the chapters is called "Taking Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha" (Kie-buppōsōbō). Here he quotes a section from Kusharon (Abhidharmakośa bhāṣya), chapter 14, about why we take refuge in the Three Treasures. This text was originally written in India and translated into Chinese. The Indian text says, "Many people out of fear take refuge in the deities of mountains, forests, trees, gardens, shrines, and so on."³⁸ We take refuge in gods because of fear. We need shelter—in this case spiritual shelter—because we are weak and afraid. Human beings are not necessarily the strongest animals. We are not as big as elephants, as fast as cheetahs, or as strong as gorillas. All phenomenal elements, such as too much or too little rain, cause suffering in our lives. Full of fear and uncertainty, primitive people needed something to worship, to rely on. Even in civilized society it's dangerous to rely on things outside of ourselves. Everything outside of us is uncertain, always changing and unreliable. We worship, pray to, or rely on this thing that we believe to be eternal and unchanging. This is one of the reasons we need religion. Buddhism, of course, is one of the religions. But the Buddha didn't teach us to take refuge in a deity beyond this phenomenal world. He taught us to find refuge within this world, within ourselves. This is the basic teaching of the Buddha and a difference between Buddhism and other religions.

The Indian text continues, "Taking refuge in such deities, however, is not excellent and worthwhile. It is not possible to be released from various pains or sufferings by means of taking refuge in such kinds of deities." So we cannot find security through worship of things in nature or beyond nature. "If people take refuge in the Buddha and take refuge in the Dharma and the Sangha, they will, in keeping with the four noble truths, constantly contemplate with wisdom: they know suffering, they know the cause of suffering, they know eternally going beyond suffering, and they know the eightfold noble path." Shakyamuni Buddha taught that people who take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are able to see with the wisdom expressed in the four noble truths. Wisdom is important in Buddhism, together with compassion and faith. In other religions, we can't understand, so we believe. But in Buddhism we have faith because we have the wisdom to see. This is an important point. By taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, we learn to find stability, peace, and liberation from fear by examining what's happening. We see that the cause of fear is inside us.

With the four noble truths, the Buddha taught the reality of suffering or duḥkha. In Buddhism it said that there are four kinds of suffering: birth, aging, sickness, and death. All of us are born crying with pain. Life is filled with suffering, as is death. Another four kinds of suffering are often mentioned: separating from beloved people, meeting with people we don't like, not being able to gain what we want, and not being able to control

the five skandhas. The first three are the painful experiences all of us often experience in our social lives. Sometimes we have to separate from people we love, and at other times we have to associate with people we don't like. That is the reality of our life. Often we cannot acquire something we really want, and so we suffer. The most fundamental form of suffering is the last one, which is inherent in human nature. We are collections of five skandhas or aggregates: form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. These elements, of which we and all other beings are formed, are impermanent and always changing. They cannot be controlled because there is nothing to control them. We cannot control our lives. This body and mind is not a possession that can be mastered. Therefore, human existence itself is always unsatisfactory and we feel suffering. This is the meaning of suffering in Buddhist teachings.

The second of the four noble truths is the cause of suffering. The Buddha taught that delusive desires and attachments based on fundamental ignorance are the cause of all suffering. We are always thirsty and hungry and chase after things to fill our empty stomachs, and when we can't find anything we suffer. When we are successful, we want more, or we fear losing what we have.

Third is the truth of the cessation of suffering, or nirvana. When we first hear that Buddhism teaches that life is full of suffering, we think it must be very pessimistic or nihilistic. But the Buddha taught that it's possible to be in nirvana, to become free from suffering. This is because suffering has causes and conditions. If we work on changing those causes and conditions, we can release ourselves from suffering. Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching is not at all pessimistic.

The fourth noble truth, the way to eradicate the causes of suffering, is the eightfold noble path. To follow this path we must view things correctly, base our thinking on reality instead of egocentricity, speak truthfully, act in accord with the right view, engage in a wholesome livelihood, make diligent efforts, and practice right mindfulness and meditation. The Buddha gave us these eight guidelines for our practice. He taught that we can find the real foundation for a peaceful life within ourselves, within this phenomenal world, without relying on a deity. This teaching and practice of the Middle Way to which the Buddha awakened are the shelter and foundation of our life.

The Abhidharmakośa text continues, "Therefore, taking refuge in the Three Treasures is supreme and most venerable." We take refuge in various things in this world. In a financial context, taking refuge might mean trusting money or insurance. We rely on insurance to provide security when we are unable to work. We do this to be free from fear, but when life insurance is actually paid you are no longer there. So it's really no benefit to you at all. We rely on many different things, but nothing is really certain; nothing has a truly stable foundation. The only stable foundation for our life, according to the Buddha, is the Dharma and the self. In the Dhammapada the Buddha said:

Your own self is
your own mainstay,
for who else could your mainstay be?
With you yourself well-trained

you obtain the mainstay
hard to obtain.³⁹

In another old scripture, the Suttanipāta, the Buddha said:

The independent man does not tremble or get confused. But a man who is dependent on something is clutching, grasping at existence in one form or another, and he cannot escape from existences.⁴⁰

The Buddha's advice to us is not to count on others but depend on the Dharma and rely on our own self. Neither the Dharma nor the self is eternal, and everything is changing. We can't really rely on anything, yet this reality of egolessness (no-self) and impermanence is itself the foundation of our life. We can find peace and liberation by seeing deeply the impermanence and egolessness of life itself. This is the only possible stable, peaceful foundation of us because it is the only reality that is here and now. Nothing in the past, nothing in the future, nothing beyond this reality is reliable. Reality is ever changing and therefore ever fresh and new. My teacher, Uchiyama Roshi, urged us to open the hand of thought and awaken to the reality that is always changing. This is the most reliable foundation of our life. This refuge is supreme and most venerable.

In Abhidharmakośa the final reason to take refuge in the Triple Treasure is that "By taking refuge, people are surely released from various sufferings." This is why the Buddha and other masters encourage us to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I think that of these three, the sangha is most significant to us today. Of course, the Buddha and the Dharma are the basis of Sangha. However, without Sangha, a living community of people, the Buddha is someone who lived in the past, and his teaching is something printed in a textbook. Because there is a community of practitioners who follow his teaching and manifest reality in their daily activities, the Buddha and the Dharma come alive right now, right here. I have been a monk-priest for about twenty-five years. I don't think that I could have lived the Buddha's teaching and practiced by myself for so long. With the help of my teacher, my dharma brothers, and the people who practice with me, I can practice. A sangha of practitioners is most important. We really have to take refuge there. This vow brings Sangha vividly alive.

THREE MEANINGS OF THE TRIPLE TREASURE

The basic original meaning of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is straightforward. "Buddha" refers to Shakyamuni Buddha, who was born in India about twenty-five hundred years ago. "Dharma" is both the reality to which he awakened and his teachings about that reality. "Sangha" is the community of the Buddha's students. As Buddhism evolved, the understanding of the Three Treasures became more complex. The death of Shakyamuni Buddha was a great loss for his students. He was not only their teacher, he was the only teacher. None of his disciples could become a second Buddha

and assume his position in the sangha. They were sad and also confused as to who could be their teacher. Then they remembered that Shakyamuni said that people who see the Dharma see the Buddha. For them, Shakyamuni Buddha was not just a person who had a physical body and had died. The Buddha was still there as the teaching and as the reality. They called this the dharma-body (dharmakāya) of the Buddha, as opposed to the material body (rūpakāya) that perished with Shakyamuni's passing away. They believed that the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, was the Buddha himself.

The Buddha said, "Monks should not take care of the Buddha's dead body." Monks were supposed to concentrate on practice not the past. Consequently, Shakyamuni Buddha's funeral was left to lay students. They performed the funeral, separating his ashes or relics into eight sections, which were enshrined at eight different sites in India. Lay followers built stūpas and made pilgrimages to them to pay homage to the Buddha. The Buddha's statue or relics enshrined in a stūpa symbolized Shakyamuni Buddha. So there are three meanings of Buddha: the historical Buddha, the Buddha as dharma-body, and the Buddha as a statue, image, or relic.

People also started to think that there were three kinds of Triple Treasure. Historically "Dharma" meant the Buddha's teachings, but in "dharma-body" it refers to reality itself. This reality was there before Shakyamuni awakened to it. He said, "I didn't invent the truth, teaching, or reality. I was like a person who finds an old castle hidden in a forest." This reality is the original meaning of dharma. All beings and all things in this universe are the manifestation of this original reality. Since all beings manifest this reality, they are always awakened because they are reality itself. All beings in the universe can be called members of the universal sangha. Ultimately speaking, the dharma-body is the Buddha Treasure; the Dharma, the true way of things as they are, is the Dharma Treasure; and all beings as an expression of Dharma are called the Sangha Treasure. This very idealistic interpretation of the Three Treasures is known as Ittai Sanbō. Sanbō means "three treasures"; ittai means "one body." In this context one means "absolute." So the Three Treasures are one body, one reality. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are just one reality. Ittai Sanbō is referred to as the Absolute Three Treasures or the Unified Three Treasures.

The historical Three Treasures—Shakyamuni Buddha, his teaching, and his community of students—are called Genzen Sanbō (Manifesting Three Treasures) because they are historical, real-world manifestations of the Absolute Three Treasures. After the Buddha's death, his followers continued to practice his teaching. For several centuries the sutras were transmitted as an oral tradition. Eventually they were written down in Sanskrit or Pāli. In India the sutras were written on the leaves of tala trees. The Buddha's teaching was recorded as a kind of a scripture and called the Dharma Treasure. The Buddha's images or relics were considered symbols of the Buddha, or the Buddha Treasure, and the sangha was called the Sangha Treasure. These were called jūji sanbō. Jūji means "maintaining." In order to maintain the Buddha's teaching after he died, the Buddha's image, sutras, and the communities of practitioners were considered to be Three Treasures. When we become Buddhists, we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. There are three kinds of Three Treasures and we take refuge in all of them.

There are sanghas, or communities of the Buddha's students, throughout the world. The Buddha's teachings have been translated into many different languages, and each translation is a dharma treasure and should be respected.

THE TRIPLE TREASURE AS TEACHER, MEDICINE, AND FRIENDS

In the chapter of *Shōbōgenzō* entitled "Taking Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha," Dōgen Zenji mentions the reason why we take refuge in those three. He says, "We take refuge in the Buddha because the Buddha is our great teacher, we take refuge in the Dharma because the Dharma is good medicine for us, and we take refuge in the Sangha because the people in the Sangha are excellent friends for us."

Dōgen's word for "excellent friends" is *shōyū*. *Shō* means "excellent," "superior," or "good." We have three kinds of good friends in Buddhism: teachers, fellow practitioners, and people who support our practice. According to Dōgen Zenji, the Buddha is a great teacher, the Dharma is good medicine, and the Sangha is a community of good friends. Another text says that the Buddha is like a doctor, the Dharma is good medicine, and the people of the Sangha are our nurses. The doctor makes a diagnosis and gives a prescription. To study the Dharma and practice according to the teaching is taking the medicine. Sangha is the community of co-practitioners—people who like nurses take care of the practice with each other. In modern society nurses are professional people, but in ancient times there were no nurses. Family or friends took care of the sick. So here "nurse" doesn't mean a professional but rather a member of the sangha. The people of the sangha should care for one another.

To say that the Buddha is a doctor, the Dharma is medicine, and Sangha members are nurses implies that we are sick. According to the Buddha's teaching, all people are indeed sick. We may be sick physically and are usually sick spiritually. What kind of sickness do we have? Before Shakyamuni Buddha left home and started to seek the Way, he was a prince. He was healthy and wealthy, certainly not sick in the common sense. But he needed something, and so started to practice. He came to see all sentient beings as sick and practiced to find a way to release them from sickness. Eventually he realized that the cause of our sickness is ignorant egocentricity and the desires that arise from it.

Many religions originate in our weaknesses and fears. Before civilization conditions of life were very severe. There were many dangers and people needed something to pray to. In many primal religions people worshiped natural phenomena: the ocean, mountains, thunder, or ancient trees. They worshiped things larger, more powerful, and longer lasting than themselves. Gradually civilization developed and human beings became better at survival. We then became each other's enemies. We started to fight, and at the time of Shakyamuni, about the fifth century BCE, people had enough wealth to fight over territory. They fought each other to establish countries and kingdoms. Stronger nations conquered weaker ones. We needed some principle to live together in harmony. This is the second reason for religion: to teach us to live together with other people. I think this

is the point of all religions and philosophies in the history of humanity. We live in civilizations that have developed over twenty centuries in America, Japan, and Europe, and yet we are still spiritually sick. We still don't know how to live in peace with people from different national, racial, religious, or cultural backgrounds. The Buddha's teaching is a prescription for curing this sickness.

FINAL PLACE TO RETURN

Dōgen Zenji quotes another phrase from an old Buddhist scripture titled *Daijō-gi-shō* about why we take refuge in the Three Treasures. It says, "We take refuge in these Three Treasures because they are the final place to return."⁴¹

Dōgen's word for "final place to return" is *hikkyō-kisho*. *Sho* means "place," *ki* means "to go back or return," and *hikkyō* means "finally," "final place," and "to go back." Our life is a journey. Childhood is like our home, where we are born. We don't need to go anywhere. We are happy simply to be there. When we grow up, we become travelers. We search here and there for treasure—something valuable or meaningful. We yearn for something better. We seek happiness and satisfaction. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes sad. Finally, at the end of our lives we face death. Regardless of our success or failure, each of us has to face it. When we do, we are afraid. Wealth, fame, and social position don't help us then. We face death alone.

Where, then, is the final place to which we return? This is, I think, the fundamental question we have to keep in mind. In modern society it's easy to forget. In the past people were born, lived, got sick, and died, all at home. Life and death were right there in front of everyone. But in our modern society people are born at the hospital. When they are sick, they go to the hospital, and when they die, it's usually in the hospital. Life and death are hidden from us. While we are young and healthy, we can forget about life and death. Suddenly we are aging or sick; the matter of life and death is in front of our eyes, and we are afraid. This is the reality of our life. Before we have to face death, we should try to think about life and death, to awaken from the dream of success even while dreaming it. We must wake up to the reality of the impermanence of our lives. Because of impermanence, our death is inevitable. We must find the best and most peaceful way of life. Success, wealth, and fame are not significant in the final stage of our lives. The important point is to return to the matter of life and death, to wake up to the reality of this body and mind, and on that basis create a way of life. This, I think, is the meaning of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

You don't have to become a Buddhist and take refuge. Buddhism is only one of many paths, one way to wake to the reality of our life. When we become a Buddhist due to various causes and conditions, we follow the path of the Buddha. We seek to manifest the universal life force which we have been given. We live on this earth with everything we need as a gift from nature. It seems that our society doesn't live in accordance with nature. It acts like a cancer, independently, in its own way. When a cancer becomes too strong, the body dies. When the body dies, the cancer also must die. Cancer is

paradoxical. Modern civilization is similar. We have no direction. We just try to live in an ever more convenient way. We chase after prosperity. We live separate from nature and build an artificial world around us. As we get stronger and stronger, we destroy more of the environment. When nature dies, we die.

How can we go back to nature, to the vital life force? This is the essential koan for us, the question we have to work on. In a sense this whole universe is like a hospital. We are all sick. How can we recover from this human sickness? The Buddha's teaching and the Buddhist Way can be one of the paths to recovery. The Buddha is the doctor who guides the healing process; dharma practice is the medicine he prescribes; the sangha, and all living beings in this universe, are nurses to aid our recovery. This is what the text means by "These three treasures are the final place to return." They release us from the suffering of a life based on egocentricity and return us to the original, wholesome way of life.