



The Dharma

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

Some meanings of the term 'Dharma'

The word *dharma* (Sanskrit) or *dhamma* (Pali) has many different meanings. The following meanings are relevant to the Buddhist Refuge.

1. Dharma denotes the universal truth, the laws or order inherent in nature. This truth or order has no beginning nor end. It exists whether human beings are aware of it or not. All Indian religions share a belief in universal truth and cosmic order.
2. Dharma specifically denotes the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni and, in particular, the record of those teachings contained in the various collections of scriptures. The Buddhist understanding is that what the Buddha taught was no other than the universal truth.
3. Dharma is a term used for the path that one follows when one applies and practises the teachings of the Buddha. This meaning is especially emphasised in the Refuges, so that taking refuge in the Dharma means, above all, following the Buddhist path.
4. Dharma also refers to the personal realisation of the truths of Buddhism attained through learning the teachings, reflecting on them and meditating on them.
5. In English, Dharma is commonly used as a generic word meaning 'Buddhism'. Sometimes the expression 'Buddha Dharma' is used.

When one takes refuge in the Dharma, then, the understanding is that the Buddha's teachings are there to be heard and read, studied and understood, practised in formal sessions as well as in everyday life, and finally they are to be fully realised so that the practitioner comes to embody them him or herself.

It is possible to argue that the Dharma is the most important of the three Refuges, especially since the scriptures quote the Buddha as saying:

*He who sees the Dharma sees me; he who sees me sees the Dharma.*¹

To understand the nature and significance of the Buddha is to understand his teaching, and by understanding his teaching we come to understand who the Buddha really is. The key that opens the meaning of all Three Refuges is therefore an understanding of the Dharma.



The Mahayana understanding

All schools and traditions of Buddhism share a common understanding of the meaning of this refuge. The main point that differs from one tradition to another is the precise composition of what is accepted as the body of scriptures. However, in Mahayana there is an emphasis on taking Refuge in Dharma as truth, that is, as the universal truth, and not necessarily restricting oneself to the words of the Buddhist scriptures or those of Buddha Shakyamuni. Dharma as universal truth is the meaning behind the words. Since the ultimate truth is beyond words, the use of words to express it can become a hindrance rather than a help to understanding. In this context, refuge in the Dharma will emphasise Dharma in the sense of practice and realisation of the teachings (meaning 4) rather than the scriptures themselves (meaning 2).

Respect for the Dharma

What does 'taking Refuge' in the Dharma mean precisely? While Refuge in the Buddha primarily means feeling gratitude, appreciation and respect for what the Buddha achieved and gave us, in the case of the Dharma, Refuge is a matter of developing a fundamental trust in the teachings and a personal commitment to understanding them and practising them.

Buddhists are not required to have uncritical trust in the Buddha's teachings or to develop blind faith in the truth of what he said. On the contrary, they are very much encouraged to use their intelligence to think through the arguments for themselves, and to put the teachings to the test by reflecting and meditating on them. In this way, every individual personally experiences for themselves how true these truths are. Taking refuge in the Dharma therefore includes a commitment to engaging in this process of discovery.

Taking refuge in the Dharma is therefore not a form of escapism. The Buddhist approach is not to surrender one's intelligence or one's ability to reason, and to fall into blind belief in dogmatic truths. Refuge in the Dharma entails personal effort and discipline, and a willingness to learn and to change. It is an active process, not a way of avoiding responsibility.



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i Samyutta Nikaya, III.120.