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The One True Refuge

A reflection on the early Buddhist teachings

Theme: The balance between self-reliance and spiritual community

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0 Introduction

0.1 RELEVANCE OF THE SUTTAS

In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta [D 16], which details the demise of the Buddha, the Buddha advised the monks to take the Dhamma-Vinaya as their Teacher after He passed away. This is a very important statement the significance of which has been overlooked by many Buddhists. Because many Buddhists have not heard this advice or grasped its significance, they search far and wide for a teacher; a teacher they can be proud of and brag about his attainments, etc. Some even travel halfway [a]round the world or more in such a search.

These people create personality cults based on the teacher's perceived goodness rather than on the Dhamma-Vinaya itself. In some cases, after many years, the followers have not made much progress and have failed to taste the essence of the Dhamma. They would feel empty. As such, we must always remember that the Dhamma-Vinaya is our Teacher.

(Dhammavuddho Thera, "Liberation: Relevance of Sutta-Vinaya," 1999:3)

0.2 In this three-part study series, we shall look at the early teachings of the Buddha on taking the self as refuge (*atta,saraṇa*). In the first two suttas—the **Madhurā Sutta** (M 84) and the **Ghoṭa,mukha Sutta** (M 94)—both recording events after the Buddha's parinirvana, their protagonists, the arhat elders Mahā Kaccāna and Udena respectively declare that the Buddha is their refuge, not themselves. This, **Dhammavuddho** points out, is a reminder that *even arhats do not regard themselves (individually) as "refuge"* though they collectively (with the streamwinners, once-returns and non-returns), form the third refuge.

0.3 As such, a "fourth refuge" contradicts the Buddha's Teachings (Dhammavuddho 1999:4). In Tibetan Buddhism, the living teacher (*lama*) is taken as the very first refuge. The rationale is that he is like a parent who is the first Dharma teacher, one who initiates the pupil into the Teaching.¹

However, a more practical explanation is that from the 11th century onwards, the lamas (Tibetan monk-priests) began to assume political roles, ruling the country or a significant part of it, under the patronage of the Mongols. We first see the rise of the Sakya sect, and later, other powerful Tibetan sects, vying with one another for full loyalty to the teacher and sect. In other words, this is a cultural and political development, relevant or related to Tibetan Buddhism.²

1 To whom do we go for refuge?

1.1 MADHURĀ SUTTA (M 84,10 f/2:89 f), SD 69.8

10 When this was said, king Avantī,putta of Madhurā said to the venerable Mahā Kaccāna:

¹ See also P Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1990: 179.

² See also **Rule by incarnation**, SD 72.7.

“Excellent, master Kaccāna! Excellent, master Kaccāna! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been made clear by master Kaccāna.

I go to the master Kaccāna for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Kaccāna remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth, for life.”

“Do not go to me for refuge, maharajah. Go for refuge to that same Blessed One to whom I have gone for refuge.”

“Where is he living now, master Kaccāna, that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one?”

“That Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one, has attained nirvana, maharajah.” [90]

11 “If we heard that the Blessed One was within 10 leagues, we would go ten leagues in order to see that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one. If we heard that the Blessed One was within 20 leagues, ... 30 leagues, ... 40 leagues, ... 50 leagues, ... a 100 leagues, we would go a hundred leagues in order to see that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one. Even though the Blessed One has entered nirvana, I go to that Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Kaccāna remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth, for life.”

1.2 GHOṬA, MUKHA SUTTA (M 94,31-33/2:162 f), SD 4.22

31 When this was said, the brahmin Ghoṭa, mukha said to the venerable Udena:

“Excellent, master Udena! Excellent, master Udena! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been made clear by master Udena.

I go to the master Udena for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Udena remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth, for life.”

“Do not go to me for refuge, brahmin. Go for refuge to that same Blessed One to whom I have gone for refuge.”

“Where is he living now, master Udena, that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one?”

“That Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one, has entered nirvana, great king.”

32 “If we heard that the Blessed One was within ten leagues, we would go ten leagues in order to see that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one. If we heard that the Blessed One was within twenty leagues, ... thirty leagues, ... forty leagues, ... fifty leagues, ... a hundred leagues, [163] we would go a hundred leagues in order to see that Blessed One, accomplished, fully self-awakened one. Even though the Blessed One has entered nirvana, I go to that Blessed One for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May master Udena remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth, for life.

33 Now, master Udena, *the king of Aṅga gives me a regular donation.*³ Let me give master Udena one regular donation from that.”

“What kind of regular donation does the king of Aṅga give you, brahmin?”

“Five hundred gold coins (*kaḥāpaṇa*), master Udena.”

“It is *not* allowable for us to accept gold and silver,⁴ brahmin.”

³ “Regular donation,” *nicca, bhikkha*, lit “permanent alms,” which may be daily, but certainly at regular interval.

“If it is not allowable for master Udena to accept gold and silver, I will have a monastery built for master Udena.”

“Brahmin, if you desire to build a monastery for me, then *have an assembly hall⁵ built for the sangha at Pāṭali,putta.*”⁶

“I am still more pleased and delighted that master Udena has me undertake a gift to the sangha. So with this regular donation (offered to master Udena) and another regular donation, I shall have an assembly hall built for the sangha at Pāṭali,putta.”

Then with that regular donation and another regular donation, the brahmin Ghoṭamukha had an assembly hall built for the sangha at Pāṭaliputta. And that is now known as the Ghoṭa,mukhī.

1.3 KĀRAṆA,PĀLĪ SUTTA (A 5.194,2.2/3:238 f), SD 45.11

The Kāraṇa,pālī Sutta is a short but significant discourse highlighting the fact that refuge-going can be taken even with a layperson as witness. The brahmin Kāraṇa,pālī, noticing the deep devotion and joy of the brahmin Piṅgiyānī, is moved to go for refuge to the 3 jewels. The Sutta closes with Kāraṇa,pālī’s refuge-going, thus:

When this was said, the brahmin Kāraṇa,pālī, rose from his seat, arranged his upper robe onto one shoulder, placing his right knee on the ground, saluted the Blessed One with the lotus palms, uttering this udana [inspired utterance] ... *namo tassa ...*

Excellent, master Piṅgiyānī! Excellent, master Piṅgiyānī!

Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned,

or were to reveal what was hidden,

or were to show the way to one who was lost,

or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms ...

(A 5.194,2), SD 45.11)

The formula then closes with these very significant words by Kāraṇa,pālī:

*evam evaṃ bhotā piṅgiyāninā aneka,pariyāyena
dhammo pakāsīto,*

*eśāhaṃ bho piṅgiyāni taṃ bhavantaṃ gotamaṃ
saraṇaṃ gacchāmi dhammañ ca bhikkhusaṅghaṃ ca,*

*upāsakaṃ maṃ bhavaṃ piṅgiyānī dhāretu ajja-t-
agge pāṇ’upetaṃ saraṇaṃ gatan’ti.*

(1) In the same way, in numerous ways, the Dharma has been declared by master Piṅgiyānī.

(2) Master Piṅgiyānī, I go to master Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks.

(3) May master Piṅgiyānī remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.

(1) **The Dharma teaching.** Piṅgiyānī declares his joy in the Dharma in five parables. In other words, the Dharma has significantly removed his sufferings so that he has overcome his desires and is habitually joyful. Clearly, this suggests that he is a man of deep faith. In fact, the Commentary tells us that he is a non-returner (AA 3:312).

⁴ See Nissaggiya 18 (V 3:236 ff). *Jātarūpa,rajata*. While the Vinaya’s own Old Commentary defines *jāta,rūpa* as “gold” (that is “the colour of the teacher,” V 3:238), *rajata* is defined as “*kahāpaṇa* and *māsaka* of copper, wood, or lac, accepted as common currency” (id). For a fuller discussion, see **Money and monastics**, SD 4.19-23.

⁵ “Assembly hall,” *upaṭṭhāna,sāla*.

⁶ Pāṭali,putta. In the Buddha’s time, it was a village known as Pāṭali,gāma. The Mahā Parinibbāna S (D 16) records the Buddha’s prophecy of its illustrious future (D 16.1.28/3:87). It grew to become the capital of Māgadha and then the capital of Asoka’s empire. Today it is called Patna, the capital of Bihar state.

(2) **The refuge-going.** Refuge-going marks the beginning of a spiritual transformation, especially that of seeing the Buddha as the ideal of spiritual awakening, applying the Dharma as the means of personal transformation, and envisioning our own capacity for spirituality as exemplified by the saints, the noble Sangha, throughout Buddhist history. In short, refuge-going is a declaration that we are walking the path to self-awakening.

(3) **The witness.** The layman Piṅgiyānī is non-returner.⁷ In other words, the person witnessing our refuge-going should ideally be a spiritually awakened person (as shown in the suttas). Otherwise, such a witness should at least be someone who inspires us in the truth and beauty⁸ of the Dharma, and motivates us to work towards our own self-transformation, even self-awakening, without relying on any other beliefs or external agency.⁹

1.4 “I GO FOR REFUGE ... TO THE COMMUNITY OF MONKS”

1.4.1 A synecdoche for the noble sangha

1.4.1.1 In the suttas, the refuge-going pericope states, “I go to master Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks” (*taṃ bhavaṃtaṃ gotamaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi dhammañ ca bhikkhu,saṅghañ ca*) [1.3 (3.2)]. The impression we may get is that it is the “community of monks,” that is, the conventional monastic order that we go for refuge.

It is unhelpful and wrong even to think that we go for refuge to the conventional sangha, for the simple reason that its members are, as a rule, not awakened. Many of them are, in fact, worldly and do not keep to the Vinaya. How can we take them as our exemplars, much less our spiritual refuge? In fact, when these monastics themselves join the order, one of the very first things that they do is to go for refuge to the 3 jewels. In other words, like any lay persons, the monastics, too, “go for refuge” to the 3 jewels.

In an important sense, we keep “going for refuge” as long as we are not yet awake. This is the reason that we recite the refuge-going formula as often as we want to, especially as daily puja, or during weekly gatherings, or on special occasions. This is to remind us of the Buddha, the Dharma and the noble sangha.

1.4.1.2 In proper practice, it is well known that we go to the noble sangha (*ariya,saṅgha*) for refuge. Commentaries on the sentence “I go for refuge ... to the community of monks” (*... saraṇaṃ gacchāmi ... bhikkhu,saṅghañ ca*),¹⁰ invariably explain it as follows:

The sangha comprises those who are united through oneness of view and moral conduct. In denotation, it is the assembly of the 8 noble individuals.¹¹ For, it is said in the same [**Chatta Māṇava Vimāna**],

*Yattha ca dinna,maha-p,phalam āhu
catūsu sucīsu purīsa,yugesu*

In whom, ‘tis said, what is given bears great fruit,
the four pure pairs of persons,

⁷ On the non-returner (and 4 kinds of saints), see **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,42-47), SD 3.13 ≈ **Ānāpāna,sati S** (M 118.9-12), SD 7.13.

⁸ On Buddhism as truth and beauty, see SD 40.1 (8.1.2); SD 46.5 (2.4.2) as aesthetics; SD 37.8 (2.3) in right livelihood. See also Piya Tan, Reflection, “No views frees,” R255, 2012.

⁹ For a more detailed explanation, see **Kāraṇa,pālī S** (A 5.194), SD 45.11 (3). On refuge-going, see **The one true refuge**, SD 3.1. On the different levels of refuge-going, see SD 43.4 (5).

¹⁰ Ed **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,101.3/1:85,13), SD 8.10.

¹¹ *Diṭṭhi,sīla,saṅghātena sarṇhato’ti saṅgho, so atthato aṭṭha ariya,puggala,samūho.*

aṭṭha ca puggala,dhamma,dasā te those eight individuals, truth-seers are they—
saṅgham imaṃ saraṇ'attham upemīti. that sangha I approach for the sake of refuge. (Vv 5.3/616)
 (DA 1:229 f;¹² MA 1:131; SA 1:136; AA 1:106 f)

1.4.1.3 The 3 refuges (*saraṇa-t,taya*) are given in full in the very first chapter of **the Khuddaka Pāṭha**, or “the minor readings” (Khp 1), and is fully explained in its commentary (KhpA 13-22). Nowhere in this commentary is it ever mentioned that the phrase *bhikkhu,saṅgha* as refuge refers to only the order of monks or that it is the conventional sangha. On the contrary, the sangha as refuge is always explained as being the “noble sangha.”¹³

1.4.1.4 Clearly here, then, “the sangha of bhikshus” (*bhikkhu,saṅgha*) is a synecdoche for the four-fold noble community (*ariya,saṅgha*), that is, the streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners and arhats. They are those accomplished saints of the path that we, having taken them as “refuge” (*saraṇa*), work to emulate, so that we gain the path, too, in this life itself.¹⁴

1.4.1.5 The term “community of monks” (*bhikkhu,saṅgha*) as found in **the recollection on the sangha** (*saṅghānussati*) (SD 15,10a) or **the Dhajagga Sutta** (S 11.3), refers to the third refuge (*saraṇa*). This is the sangha whose members we must diligently emulate, for the simple reason that it is the noble community (*ariya,saṅgha*), that is, the 4 kinds of saints, both monastic and lay, described thus:

<p>These are the 4 pairs of persons, the 8 individuals: <i>this</i> community of disciples of the Blessed One is worthy of offerings,¹⁵ worthy of hospitality, worthy of gifts,¹⁶ worthy of salutation with the lotus-palms, a supreme field of merit for the world.’</p>	<p><i>yad idaṃ cattāri purisa,yugāni</i> <i>aṭṭha,purisa,puggalā</i> <i>esa bhagavato sāvaka,saṅgho</i> <i>āhuneyyo</i> <i>pāhuneyyo</i> <i>dakkhiṇeyyo</i> <i>añjali,karaṇīyo</i> <i>anuttaraṃ puñña-k,khettaṃ lokassā ti</i> (S 11.3,15), SD 15.5; SD 15.10a</p>
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1.4.1.6 The Aṭṭha Puggala Sutta 1 (A 8.59) defines the “4 pairs of persons, the 8 individuals” as follows:

- (1) The streamwinner,
- (2) the one practising for the realization of the fruit of streamwinning,
- (3) the once-returner,
- (4) the one practising for the realization of the fruit of once-return,
- (5) the non-returner,
- (6) the one practising for the realization of the fruit of non-return,
- (7) the arhat,
- (8) the one practising for the realization of arhathood. (A 8.59,2), SD 15.10a

¹² For Eng tr, see Bodhi, *The Discourse on the Fruits of Recluseship*, Kandy, 1989:172 f.

¹³ For an Eng tr of Khuddaka Pāṭha comy, see KhpA:Ñ 4-16.

¹⁴ For the term *bhikkhu,saṅgha* referring to all the assemblies of followers present, see SD 4.9 (5.3).

¹⁵ *Āhuneyyo*. That is, worthy of receiving sacrifices or offerings. The Skt cognate *āhavanīya* refers to that which was offered as an oblation, as *āhuneyy'aggī*, one of the 3 brahminical sacrificial fires (the one in the east).

¹⁶ *Dakkhiṇeyyo*. Specifically refers to offerings made for the benefit of the departed by way of dedication of merits to them.

These 8 individuals (*aṭṭha purisa, puggala*), comprising the 4 pairs of persons (*purisa, yuga*), that is, each pair consists of a saint-to-be and a saint-become, respectively. Such pairings give us a clear hint that the attaining of sainthood is not sudden, but, as a rule, a gradual and permanent process. Once we awaken, we continue to see the day, every brighter, until we fully awaken in death-free nirvana.

1.4.1.7 The point is clear then: we do not take refuge in the conventional sangha, those who are ritually ordained as monks and nuns—certainly not those who live worldly lives, pursuing careers or using money, those who break the Vinaya rules. They can never be examples for us to follow—they are the anti-thesis of the spiritual life of renunciation.

Hence, Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his article, “Going for refuge & taking the precepts,” rightly states as follows:

... the order of monks is not itself the Sangha which takes the position of the third refuge. The Sangha which serves as refuge is not an institutional body but an unchartered spiritual community comprising all those who have achieved penetration of the innermost meaning of the Buddha's teaching. The Sangha-refuge is the ariyan Sangha, the noble community, made up exclusively of ariyans, person of superior spiritual stature. Its membership is not bound together by formal ecclesiastical ties but by the invisible bond of a common inward realization. The one requirement for admission is the attainment of this realization, which in itself is sufficient to grant entrance. (Bodhi 1981:14 = §3.3)

1.4.2 The one true refuge

1.4.2.1 Traditionally, there are the 3 jewels (*ti, ratana*): the historical Buddha, the true Dharma and the noble sangha. We take refuge in the historical Buddha out of deep gratitude [1.4.4] to him as the first amongst equals of self-awakened individuals, as our spiritual teacher. We cannot take refuge in or emulate any imaginary Buddha, but only one who has been born into this world, who suffers as a human, just like us, and who awakens as the one and only Buddha. As the first refuge, he is the ideal of human awakening.

We take refuge in the Dharma because it is the liberating wisdom that the Buddha himself has discovered, and which will liberate us in turn. It is the path to awakening that we must ourselves walk, just as the Buddha himself has done. The Dharma, the liberating truth, is the universal reality discovered by the Buddha which he freely expounds for our benefit. To take refuge in the Dharma means that we walk only this path, turning to no other, and move ever onward to nirvana.

We take refuge in the sangha, that is, the noble sangha of saints of the path, not the one comprising the unawakened, not those ritually elevated to some social or religious status. The 3rd refuge is the noble community of those who have or are walking the true path, or who have reached the path's goal, arhat-hood. To “go for refuge” to the noble sangha means that we seek to emulate these saints by walking the path, so that we attain at least streamwinning in this life itself.

1.4.2.2 Although, in practical terms, we speak of the 3 refuges (*ti, saraṇa* or *ratana-t, taya*), in spirit, there is only one refuge—that is, the Dharma, the true teaching and liberating truth. **The Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2) records how the newly awakened Buddha shows his profound **gratitude** in becoming accomplished in moral virtue, mental cultivation, wisdom, liberation, and the knowledge and vision of liberation, that is, the 3 trainings and their accomplishment by way of full awakening.

An unawakened person seeking awakening would need to learn at least **the 3 trainings**—those in moral virtue, mental cultivation, and wisdom—from an awakened teacher. The Buddha himself has

done this many times over in his numerous past lives: he has learned them from various past buddhas.¹⁷ In his last life, he puts into practice what he has learned. His prolonged cycle of lives is mainly to fully acquaint him with the nature of existential suffering, so that:

- (1) he fully understands life and its vicissitudes;
- (2) he fully understands the conditions behind them;
- (3) he takes the path that liberates him from such conditions; and
- (4) he is fully liberated, which empowers him to teach others what he himself has experienced.

The Gāraṇa Sutta highlights the virtue of gratitude. Since the Buddha awakens on account of the Dharma, it is the Dharma that makes the Buddha: we might even say that the Buddha’s mind, actions and speech are Dharma—he *is* Dharma. Hence, he shows his gratitude to the Dharma. This means that he acknowledges what the Dharma has done for him (*kataññū*), and he reciprocates (*kata,vedī*) that benefit declaring that Dharma to others.¹⁸ Clearly, then, the Buddha places the Dharma—the truth and the teaching, or the “true teaching”—above himself.¹⁹

1.4.2.3 Such gratitude, then, is our joyful spiritual link, first, to the Buddha who, on his own initiative and with his own self-realized wisdom, declares the liberating Dharma to the world. Second, we are grateful to the Dharma itself, since it is still available to us. This gratitude is actively shown by our fully accepting the Dharma as it is, practising it “in accordance with the Dharma” (*dhammānudhamma,paṭtipatti*).²⁰

In doing so, we begin to understand how the saints of the path (those walking the noble eightfold path), who, through their own practice and realization of the Dharma, have preserved it down to our own times, so that we, too, can benefit from it. Hence, we go to this noble sangha for refuge—out of gratitude to their exemplary moral virtue and spirituality.

1.4.2.4 The noble sangha is “noble” (*ariya*) in the spiritual sense—fully understanding the 4 noble truths have ennobled them as true saints of the path. They have been *ennobled* because they have themselves, like the Buddha,²¹ gone for the one true refuge, that is, the Dharma. Hence, we call it **the true Dharma**.

Again here we see the Dharma being above the saints themselves: this is clearly understandable, because, the Dharma is, after all, above the Buddha himself. This means that it is the true Dharma that makes the Buddha and the saints what they are. However, since the Dharma is independent of the Buddha, the Dharma does not die with the Buddha, but lives on after him, even without him.

1.4.2.5 Furthermore, by putting the Dharma above himself, the Buddha is clearly reminding us the Dharma is not to be identified with, but to be used as a “raft” for crossing the waters of suffering. It is

¹⁷ The suttas mention 7 past buddhas with whom our Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama, practised: see eg **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14), SD 49.8b. Later tradition mentions a total of 24 such buddhas that our Buddha meets from the time of his aspiration to buddhahood until his last life: see SD 49.8b (8.2).

¹⁸ On *kataññū, kata.vedī*, “who acknowledge the done, and reciprocates accordingly,” see **Kataññū Kata.vedī S** (A 1.120/1:87); Pug 26,12 = AA 2:156,24, PugA 204,28 f; A 3:240,11; Vv 204/21.11/26; 983/63.9/91 (*kataññūtā*); VvA 263,31. Although *kataññūta* appears by itself, meaning “gratitude” (Vv 983), it is not synonymous with *kata,veditā*, nor are its adj forms (pace CPD: kata-vedi(n)). On *vedī* as “joyful, inspired,” see (1.4.3.1) §2 n below.

¹⁹ S 6.2/1:138-140 = **Uruvelā S 1** (A 4.21/2:20 f), SD 12.3.

²⁰ (**Sotāpatti**) **Phala S** (S 55.55) gives these 4 qualities as leading to streamwinning: (1) association with true individuals; (2) hearing the true teaching; (3) wise attention; and (4) practice of the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma (S 55.55), SD 3.3 (4.1).

²¹ On *buddhānubuddha*, “the Buddha and his disciples” (Tha 679, 1246), see SD 15.10a (1.1.1).

the method for personal cultivation for reaching the path of awakening as a streamwinner, and for progressing on that path.

In other words, the Dharma should never be turned into a fetish (something magical) or a cult (a guru-centred teaching). A guru-centred cult person-biased—a person usurps the place of the Buddha, our only teacher. The Dharma is impersonal (not a person), yet universal and eternal or timeless (*akālika*) in the sense of freeing us from the world. Even in this life itself, with proper practice and realization, the Dharma transforms us into a wholesome community of individuals.

1.4.3 Self as refuge

1.4.3.1 Just as the Buddha declares that the Dharma is his refuge, even above himself, so, too, in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), he famously exhorts us to take only the Dharma as refuge, thus:

Therefore, Ānanda,
 dwell with yourself as an island, with yourself as refuge, with no other refuge—
 dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge.²²
 (D 16,2.26), SD 9

The Buddha then explains that this refers to practice of **the 4 focuses of mindfulness** (*satipaṭṭhāna*), that is, we should first cultivate a body-based meditation (*kāyānupassanā*), such as the breath meditation. Then, we should meditate on feelings (*vedanā'nupassana*); and then meditate on our mind (*cittānupassanā*); and finally, to meditate on the realities that arise in us (*dhammānupassanā*).²³

1.4.3.2 To take the self as refuge (*atta,saraṇa*) means to rely on self-effort and diligence to identify and understand the conditions that bring about our problems. We need to take charge of our own lives and spiritual destiny: we must never hand our “remote” to others. If we do not master ourselves, there is no one else who can really do it for us. Only we can understand ourselves, and so work our own problems. (Dh 160, 380)²⁴

To understand ourselves (our mind), we must examine how we have been conditioned: by our family, our schooling, our community, our religion, and so on. To see ourselves as “conditioned” means that the way we *are* (how we think, speak and act) are the results of many conditions, not just a single cause. Whenever we notice any such conditions, we see them as being impermanent (they change every time we examine them), and becoming other (there is no essence in them, but they depend on how we perceive them).

1.4.3.3 When we are our own refuge, it means that understand that we can awaken just as the Buddha has done—but with must more ease, since he has opened up the path for us. Just as he has freed himself from suffering by his own effort, without resorting to any external agency (such as God, gods, demons, magic or other-power), we, too, can do the same.

He is able to liberate or save himself because he rejects negative and wrong views: such as that we are born in “sin,” or our nature is “evil,” or we need some external higher or greater force to save us.

²² *Tasmā-t-ih'Ānanda attā,dīpā viharatha attā,saraṇā anañña,saraṇā, dhamma,dīpā dhamma,saraṇā anañña,-saraṇā* (D 16,2.26/2:100 = 26.1/3:58, 26.27/77; S 22.43/3:42, 47.9/5:154, 47.13/5:163, 47.14/5:164): many of them at different venues and to different interlocutors. On the tr of *dīpa* here as “island” or as “lamp” & discussion, see (3.3).

²³ See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.2 + SD 13.1.

²⁴ See SD 27.3 (3.1.1).

The natural and universal rule is that we can all change, and it starts with how we understand our own mind., and to look within and understand this mind and so liberate ourselves.

This is just what the numerous disciples of the Buddha—the early saints, especially the arhats—have done. Before meeting the Buddha, they face with great problems with their minds—they were not really happy. From the Buddha, they learn to overcome these problems through self-effort, especially right meditation.²⁵

If these troubled ordinary people can become noble saints (*ariya*), we, too, can awake in this life itself to free ourselves from suffering. This is done by taking the true Dharma as our one and only refuge—that is, to practise the Dharma by seeing everything in and around us as being impermanent.²⁶ This is **going for the one true refuge**:²⁷ so vital is this practice that the Buddha also calls it the “supreme worship.”²⁸

1.4.3.4 When we understand the meaning of the “one true refuge,” and accept it, living in its spirit, then we are evolving to become “**true individuals**” (*sappurisa*). While an “individual” *tries* to be different from others—to be “individualistic”—a true individual is one who is able to think or see the *truth* for himself, and to feel or see *beauty* within and without himself. In other words, true individuals share the same **vision** of truth and beauty that is the Dharma.²⁹

1.4.4 Knowing kindness and gratitude

1.4.4.1 The Pubba,kārī Sutta (A 2.119) speaks of the two rare people in the world in terms of gratitude, thus:

SD 3.1(1.4.4)

Kataññū Kata,vedī Sutta

The Discourse on Gratitude and Reciprocation | A 2.11.2/1:87 [A:B 2.119]

Theme: Knowing kindness and gratitude

- 1 Bhikshus, there are these two persons that are difficult to find in the world. What are the two?
- 2 One who is the first in kindness (*pubba,kārī*), and one who knows kindness done and rejoices in the kindness done (*kataññū,kata.vedī*).³⁰
- 3 These two persons, bhikshus, are difficult to find in the world.³¹

— evaṃ —

²⁵ A famous example is that of Moggallāna, who struggles with drowsiness for a week in his meditation, but with the Buddha’s advice, gains awakening: see **Pacalā S** (A 7.58), SD 4.11.

²⁶ On how to do this, see eg (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

²⁷ On the one true refuge, further see SD 9 (6.3).

²⁸ See SD 9 (7.2).

²⁹ Further see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2); aesthetics, SD 46.5 (2.4.2); on “Beauty is truth, and truth beauty,” SD 40a.4 (8.2); SD 50.16 (1.1.1.4).

³⁰ The word **vedī** (from vīd, to know) can mean “to know”; but the context clearly shows that it comes from *vedā*, (joy, inspiration), thus, as “one who rejoices.” See (**Agata,phala**) **Mahānāma S** (A 6.10), SD 15.3 (4).

³¹ I would like to thank Ajahn Brahmali (Perth, Australia), who writes of my tr of *kataññū,kata.vedī* above: “That sounds good to me. I think you are right about the connection between *veda* and feeling. This word is related both to *vedanā* and to *vijjā*, and as such it has both an emotive side and a cognitive side. I always thought “inspiration” was a good translation, since it seems to capture both aspects of this word. However, I think rejoicing is acceptable too.” (Email 23 March 2016)

1.4.4.2 “The first in kindness” (*pubba, kārī*) refers to any of these kinds of persons who initiates good.

(1) Our **having done good before** (*pubbe ca kata, puñña*) is declared by the Buddha to be the 5th of the 32 supreme blessings (*maṅgalam uttama*).³² Technically, this refers to our having done good in the past for ourself—past karma whose good fruits we now benefit. However, we can also here include others who have been kind to us so that we enjoy the blessings here and now.

(2) Secondly, there is the one who is **the first (*pubba*) to be kind to us**. This specifically refers to our parents, especially those who have parented and raised us with love and wisdom. Even if our parent or parents may have their weaknesses, we are grateful to them for giving us a human body. We are even more grateful that they humanize us with compassion and wisdom in our formative days.³³ Then, there are those who wisely socialize us in our childhood and youth, so that we happily fit into a wholesome society.

And, above all, we should be grateful to those who taught us the spiritual path. Then, of course, there is the Buddha and the arhats, who have handed down to us the path to awakening. Our gratitude is due to them, by which we diligently and joyfully live the Dharma.

(3) Thirdly, anyone who has in some way been kind to us. We joyfully reciprocate that kindness done when we are able to do so. Even if we are unable to show gratitude to them directly, we should constantly remember them in our cultivation of lovingkindness.

1.4.4.3 “One who knows kindness done” (*kataññū*) is to be mindful of any form of kindness done by another, whether it benefits us personally or the community or society. We may not always be sure of the motive behind the kind acts of another, but when we are confident that the act will bring both personal and common benefit, we should remember it as a kind act. If we fail to immediately discern a kind act, we should do so in retrospect, as a reflection, which is effectively a kind of cultivation of loving-kindness, or of compassion, or even of gladness.

On a personal level, it makes good sense for us to be grateful to our parents, guardians, family, teachers and others whose wisdom and ways have benefitted us, so that we are able to gain greater happiness and wisdom for ourselves. In other words, we have not arisen alone in this society or the world. For much of the social goodness and human comfort we enjoy—despite many difficulties and issues in history and society—we must, in some way, be grateful to those who have championed human dignity and freedom, who have diligently advanced human and spiritual knowledge, and who have suffered and struggled so that we have some measure of a comfortable, convenient and safe world today.

We need to acknowledge the selfless sacrifices, even sufferings, of those who have worked to bring **beauty** into our life and world, who have taught us to know and appreciate beauty. We may even reciprocate by creating acts and works of beauty ourself. Above all, we need to acknowledge those who have taught and moved us to understand **truth** so that we are able to truly discern reality, and so enhance our self-understanding and wise attention of others, being sensitive to their sufferings and, in turn, inspiring their potential for truth and beauty.³⁴

1.4.4.4 As a Buddhist practitioner, our **“first doer”** (*pubba, kārī*) is, of course, the Buddha. Then, there are others, especially our parents who have loved and laboured to humanize us and teach us

³² **Maṅgala S** (Khp 5/3,6 = Sn 260b).

³³ “Parents are called God [Brahmā]; they are our first teachers” (*Brahmā’ti mātā, pitaro, pubb’ācariyā’ti vuccare*, A 3.31/1:132, 4.63/2:70 f; It 110; J 5:330 f). On our humanization process, see SD 38.4 (4.4).

³⁴ On truth and beauty, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2); as aesthetics, see SD 46.5 (2.4.2); as right livelihood, see SD 37.8 (2.3); see also Reflection, “No views frees,” R255, 2012.

some basic values of life, according to their wisdom and ability. Our “first doers” may also include our first teachers, who have imparted the Dharma to us, according to their wisdom and ability; and perhaps also some Dharma friends we have who have introduced us to the suttas and the teaching of the historical Buddha.

The access we now have to the Dharma, and the wisdom we have gained, will naturally *inspire* us to “**rejoice in such kindness done.**” We feel *joyful* to have been able to move in the way that brings us to our present experience of the Dharma, even if our parents, teachers or friends might, in some cases or in some ways, had their own weaknesses or failures. Despite their lack or incapacities, they have somehow been instrumental in giving us the support or guidance at those stages in our life when we were vulnerable and formative. We must now learn from their failures, and with compassion, let this past flower into present wisdom. [1.4.4.5]

1.4.4.5 “(Who) rejoices in the kindness done” (*kata,vedī*) is to be inspired (*vedī*) by way of remembering the goodness of those who have come before us, and to work with joyful and wise faith in the potential and power of human goodness. Despite the overwhelming odds we must face to better ourself, society and the world, we must execute our tasks wisely, diligently and, above all, joyfully, building on the legacy of good that we have inherited, and to leave behind something better for posterity.

If we feel that this is too big an enterprise at the moment, we should at least be willing to wisely acknowledge (*vedī*) whatever kindness from which we have benefitted and joyfully reciprocate that kindness even in some small way. This is our radiant light of lovingkindness, of unconditional acceptance, shining as the divine abode of gladness (*muditā*), rejoicing in the goodness of others.³⁵ This is the spark of our humanity, from which a great radiance will arise to light our own path to awakening in this life itself.

1.4.5 The 5 rare gems

1.4.5.1 The (Ratana) Piṅgiyāni Sutta (A 5.195) describes the manifestation of these events in the world as being like 5 rare gems, that is:

- (1) the manifestation of the Buddha: the Tathagata, the arhat, perfectly self-awakened one;
- (2) a person who is able to teach the Buddha’s teaching and discipline (Dharma-Vinaya);
- (3) a person who is able to understand this Dharma-Vinaya when it is taught;
- (4) a person, thus understanding it, practises the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma; and
- (5) a person who knows this and joyfully reciprocates (*kataññū,kata.vedī*). (A 5.195), SD 96.11

1.4.5.2 These 5 statements clearly form a didactic sequence—a series of related teachings to show how we should conduct ourselves. First of all, it is not easy for a Buddha to arise in our world. When he has arisen, it is still not easy to teach the Buddha’s teaching, because we must have first practised and understood it. Even if we hear the Buddha’s teaching, it may be difficult for us to understand it; or, if we ourselves teach the Dharma, our audience may have difficulties in understanding it, or they may have no access to the Dharma.

Even after understanding it, we may find it difficult to practise it, or we may not be able to attain the goal of the teaching. Finally, even if we understand the teaching, and benefit from it in some way (short of reaching the path itself), we may not be grateful for the teaching; we may take it for granted, or even try to change or use it simply to suit our own agenda. It is difficult to find those who openly acknowledge the Buddha’s teaching for what it is, and to reciprocate the goodness of the Dharma by joyfully practising it accordingly.

³⁵ On lovingkindness and gladness, see *Brahma,vihāra*, SD 38.5.

The key idea is in the last statement—**we should openly acknowledge the Dharma and reciprocate by joyfully practising it**. To “openly acknowledge the Dharma” means to take only the Buddha as our refuge, that is, as the first to awaken to the true Dharma;³⁶ to study, practise and understand that Dharma so that we can effectively teach it both by precept and example. To “reciprocate by joyfully practising it” means to directly experience the Dharma through both calm (*samatha*, which overcomes distractions and generates joy) and insight (*vipassanā*, which overcomes wrong views and generates wisdom.³⁷) This show of our gratitude to the Dharma is such a precious deed that the Buddha calls it a “gem” (*ratana*). This is because we are going or striving for the one true refuge, the Dharma. [3]

2 Even famous teachers can have wrong views

2.1 (AHITA) THERA SUTTA (A 5.88)

2.1.1 Much of the Buddhist monastic system today has changed so much that it is hardly recognizable if we apply the standards of the Vinaya and the guidance of the Dharma. Very few monastics, even the sectarian “masters,” know very much of the early Buddhist texts, which are the wellspring of all Buddhist teachings. Most of what we get today are what the suttas call “personal teachings” or “private truths” (*pacceka sacca*),³⁸ for the purpose of consolidating the sect or person rather than promoting the Dharma.

As the world globalizes, the monastic will find it more difficult to live a cloistered life dedicated to restraint, humility, celibacy, poverty, and simplicity for the sake of awakening in this life. Where ordination is available and given as a ritual status, a form of priesthood, or cult affiliation, the problem of wrong view, parochialism and worldliness—thinning, even altogether removing, the dividing line between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the worldly—become very real and dark challenges for even the best of Buddhist monastics and clerics.

2.1.2 According to **the (Ahita) Thera Sutta (A 5,88)**, an elder monk who has the following 5 qualities is not beneficial to the many, not for the happiness of the many, not for the good of the masses; but for the loss and suffering of gods and humans, that is to say:

(1) The elder is of long standing, long gone forth.

He is well known, famous, with a following of great crowds of householders and renunciants.

He is a recipient of robes, almsfood, lodging, and support for the sick and medical requisites.

He is deeply learned, an expert, a store of learning.

Those teachings that are good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, both in the spirit and the letter [both in meaning and phrasing], that affirms the holy life fully complete and pure—such teachings he has learned much, remembered, recited verbally, investigated with the mind, and penetrated well by view.³⁹

But he is of wrong view and deviant vision.⁴⁰

Having made the masses turn away from true Dharma, he establishes them in what is not true Dharma.

³⁶ See **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

³⁷ See **Samatha and vipassanā**, SD 41.1.

³⁸ On *pacceka, sacca*, see SD 40a.8 (5.2); SD 48.1 (6.1.2.5-6.1.2.10).

³⁹ That is, by his wisdom. Cf **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108.15/3:11), SD 33.5; **(Ahitāya) Thera S** (A 5.88/3:114-116), SD 40a.16.

⁴⁰ *Micchā, ditṭhiko hoti viparīta, dassano.*

(2) Thinking, “The elder monk is of long standing, long gone forth,” they come to hold this wrong view, too.

(3) Thinking, “The elder monk is well known, famous, with a great following of householders and renunciants,” they come to hold this wrong view, too.

(4) Thinking, “The elder monk is a recipient of robes, almsfood, lodging and medicine and medication,” they come to hold this wrong view, too.

(5) Thinking, “The elder monk is learned, an expert, a store of learning,” they come to hold this wrong view, too.

Bhikshus, the conduct [the way] of an elder, accomplished in these five qualities, is not beneficial for the many, not for the good of the many, not for the happiness of the many: it is for the loss and suffering of gods and humans.

Such an elder *with right view*, on the contrary, benefits the masses, both the gods and humans.

(A 5.88/3:114), SD 40a.16.

2.2 MAHĀ’PADESA SUTTA (A 4.180)

2.2.1 At **Bhoga,nagara**, the Buddha discourses on **the 4 great references** (*mahāpadesa*) which serve as the criteria for the true teaching. The term *apadesa* means “designation, pointing out; reference; witness, authority” (DP). However, in this context, it is best rendered as “reference” since we actually have only two final “authorities,” that is, the Dharma (the Suttas or Discourses) and the Vinaya (the Discipline).

2.2.2 The 4 great references are as follows:

- (1) **The Buddha.** Suppose a monk were to say: “Friends, I heard and received this teaching from the Blessed One’s own mouth: This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove of his words ...
- (2) **The order.** Suppose a monk were to say: “In such and such a place, there is a community (saṅgha) with elders and distinguished teachers. I heard and received this teaching from that community: This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove of his words ...
- (3) **Elders.** Suppose a monk were to say: “In such and such a place, there are many elders (thera) who are learned, masters of scripture (āgaṭ’āgama), Dharma-experts, Vinaya-experts, experts in the Summaries (*māṭikā*): This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove of his words ...
- (4) **An elder.** Suppose a monk were to say: “In such and such a place, there is an elder who is learned, bearer of tradition, Dharma-expert, Vinaya-expert, expert in the Summaries (*māṭikā*): This is the Dharma, this is the Discipline, this is the Master’s Teaching.” Then, monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove of his words ...

Neither approving nor disapproving, his words and expressions should be carefully noted and compared with the Suttas and reviewed in the light of the Discipline. If they, on such comparison and review, are found not to conform to the Suttas or the Discipline, the conclusion must be: “Surely, this is not Buddha Word. It has been wrongly understood by this monk,” and the matter is to be rejected. But where on such comparison and review they are found to conform to the

Sutras and the Discipline, the conclusion must be: “Surely, this is Buddha Word. It has been rightly understood by this monk.” (A 4.180 = D 16,4.7)⁴¹

3 The one true refuge

3.1 THE BUDDHA’S LAST RAINS RETREAT. After staying on in Ambapālī’s mango grove for some time, the Buddha leaves for the village of Beluva (also Veḷuva or Bilva), near Vesālī. As it is the month of Āsāḷha (June-July), with the rains approaching, the Buddha and the Order enter the rains retreat (his last) at Beluva. The Buddha instructs the monks to spend retreat in groups in different places all around Vesālī.

According to the Sarvāstivāda version, this is in response to a bad famine that has occurred there. The Pali version, however, makes no mention of any famine. The Commentary simply states that the small village where the Buddha spends retreat is neither able to accommodate nor feed so many monks. (DA 2:546)

During the retreat, the Buddha has a severe illness, accompanied by deadly pains [Tan 2002, 7:22]. This is his first attack of bodily pains recorded in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta**:

... the Blessed One was attacked by a severe sickness, with sharp pains as if he were about to die. But he endured all this mindfully, clearly comprehending and without complaining. He thought: “*It is not fitting that I should attain final nirvana without addressing my followers and taking leave of the order of monks. I must hold this disease in check by energy and apply myself to the force of life.*” He did so and the disease abated. (D 16,2.23/2:99)

3.2 SELF AS REFUGE. Ānanda is greatly alarmed by the Buddha’s illness. “Blessed One, I have seen the Blessed One in comfort, and I have seen the Blessed One’s patient enduring. And, Blessed One, my body is like a drunkard’s. I’ve lost my bearings and things are unclear to me because of the Blessed One’s sickness. The only thing that is some comfort to me is the thought: ‘The Blessed One will not attain the final Nirvana until he has made some statement about the Order of Monks.’”

The Buddha consoles him by explaining that he has no secret teachings nor regards himself as the leader of the Order, how he overcomes his bodily pains and that his followers should be self-reliant:

But Ānanda, what does the Order of monks expect of me? I have taught the Dharma, Ānanda, making no “inner” and “outer”: the Tathāgata has no “guru’s fist”⁴² in respect of doctrines. If there is anyone who thinks: “I shall take charge of the Order,”⁴³ or “The Order should refer to me,”⁴⁴ let him make some statement about the Order, but the Tathāgata does not think in such terms. So why should the Tathāgata make a statement about the Order?

Ānanda, I am now old, worn out, elderly, my time has gone, I have reached the term of my life, which is 80. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathāgata’s body is kept going by being strapped up.⁴⁵

It is only when the Tathāgata withdraws his attention from outward signs, and by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless concentration of mind, that this body knows comfort.

⁴¹ A 4.180/2:167-170 = D 16,4.7/2:123-126.

⁴² *nāsti ācārya, muṣṭi/n’atthi ācariya, muṭṭhi.*

⁴³ *saṅghaṃ pariharissāmi.*

⁴⁴ *mam’uddisako bhikkhu, saṅgho.*

⁴⁵ This seems to be like some kind of what we today call a “body-brace.”

Therefore, Ānanda, you should live as islands unto yourselves,⁴⁶ being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dharma as an island,⁴⁷ with the Dharma as your refuge, with no other refuge.

And how does a monk live as an island unto himself ... with no other refuge?

Here, Ānanda,

a monk⁴⁸ dwells⁴⁹ exertive, clearly aware, mindful,

contemplating body in the body,⁵⁰

removing⁵¹ covetousness and displeasure [discontent]⁵² in regard to the world;⁵³

he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful,

contemplating feelings in the feelings,

removing covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world;

he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful,

contemplating mind [thoughts] in the mind,

removing covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world;

he dwells exertive, clearly aware, mindful,

contemplating dharmas in the dharmas,

removing covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world.

This, Ānanda, is how a monk lives as an island unto himself ... with no other refuge.

And those who, now in my time or afterwards, live thus, will become the highest,⁵⁴ but they must be anxious to learn. (D 16,2.26 = 26,1.2+27; S 22.4, 47.9, 47.13, 47.14)⁵⁵

⁴⁶ "As islands unto yourselves," Skt *ātma,dvīpa*; P *atta,dīpa*. See S:B 1921 n143.

⁴⁷ "With Dharma as an island," Skt *dharma,dvīpa*; P *dhamma.dīpa*.

⁴⁸ Here "a monk" (*bhikkhu*) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251): see SD 13.1 (3.1.1.5). On meditation as renunciation, see **Hālidakāni S 1** (S 22.3/3:9-12), SD 10.12; **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (14.7); **Sexuality**, SD 31.7 (1.6.2). See Dh 142; also Dh 362, 260-270. Cf Bhikkhu Vagga (ch 25) and Brāhmaṇa Vagga (ch 26) of Dh.

⁴⁹ *Ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā,domanassari*. Here we find 4 of the 5 spiritual faculties (*pañc'-indriya*) in action: see SD 13.1 (4.2).

⁵⁰ "Contemplating body in the body" (*kāye kāyānupassī*). See SD 13.1 (3.4).

⁵¹ *Vineyya* can mean "should remove" (as pot, like *vineyya*, Sn 590) or as "having removed" (as ger, like *vinayitvā*, Pm 1:244), and both senses apply in Satipatthāna S. U Silananda similarly ends the sentence with "removing covetousness and grief in the world" (1990:177); also 1990:22-25. See SD 13.1 (4.2c) above.

⁵² "Covetousness and displeasure," *abhijjhā,domanassam*, alt trs: "desire and discontent," "desiring and disliking," or "longing and loathing." Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as "hankering and fretting [in regard to the world]." See SD 13.1 (4.2) above.

⁵³ "World" (*loka*). The Vibhaṅga says: "This very body is the world, and the 5 aggregates of clinging (ie, form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) are the world—this is called the world." (Vbh 195). However, in his amplified tr at Vibh 105, U Thittila has "world (ie, in ideational objects)" (*dhammā*, mental objects) (Vbh:T 139).

⁵⁴ "The highest," **tama-t-agge** ("the highest"): Comy gives a long expl, the essence of which is "cutting off all yokes to darkness (ignorance)" (*sabbaṃ tama,yogaṃ chinditvā*, DA 548); also at S 47.9/5:154, where Comy takes it as *tama-agge*, with the infix *-t-* as euphonic junction (*pada,sandhi*): see S:B 1921 n143. Bodhi notes that this word is not found in the fragments of the Turfan Skt version, but the Tib and Chin parallels, probably based on Skt texts, point to a meaning as "the highest" (S:B 1921 n143). See *Last Days of the Buddha*. (D 16), tr (rev) Vajirā & Story, Wheel 67/68/69, Kandy: Buddhist Publ Soc, 1998: n20.

⁵⁵ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.26/2:100), SD 9.1 = **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26,1.2/3:58 = 27/3:77), SD 36.10; **Atta,dīpa S** (S 22.43/3:42), SD 93.8; **(Bhagavā) Gilāna S** (S 47.9/5:154); **(Satipatthāna) Cunda S** (S 47.13/5:163); **Ukka,celā S** (S 47.14/5:164 f).

3.3 ISLAND OR LAMP?

3.3.0 Pali and Sanskrit

3.3.0.1 In early Buddhism, the path leading to arhathood is sometimes presented as one of self-reliance (*atta, vihāra*), that is, the building up of an “inner centre of calm,”⁵⁶ as seen in this quote from the opening of **the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta** (D 26) and **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16):

Bhikshus, be an island unto yourselves; be a refuge unto yourselves, with no other refuge. Here, bhikshus, a monk, having put away covetousness and displeasure in the world, dwells observing the body in the body, ... feelings in the feelings, ... mind in the mind ... mind-objects in the mind-objects,⁵⁷ ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful.⁵⁸ Thus, monks, a monk lives as an island unto himself; as a refuge unto himself, with no other refuge.

Keep to your own pastures, monks, keep to the resort of your own fathers.⁵⁹ If you do so, then Māra will not find a chance, he will not find an opportunity (for an attack). This is the reason, monks, for the undertaking of the wholesome states: it builds up merit.⁶⁰

(D 26,1/3:58 = 16,2.26/2:101)

3.3.0.2 The existence of two ancient Buddhist languages, Pali and Sanskrit, provides a dynamic stereoscopic panorama of Buddhism. It helps us to clear up a problem in the interpretation of this passage from **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16):

*Tasmā-t-ih'Ānanda attā,dīpā viharatha attā,saraṇā anañña,saraṇā, dhamma,dīpā dhamma,-saraṇā anañña,saraṇā.*⁶¹

Therefore, Ānanda, live as an island unto yourself, with self as refuge, with no other refuge, the Dhamma as an island, the Dhamma as a refuge, with no other refuge.

(D 16,2.26/2:100 f = 26,1/3:58, 26,27/77; S 3:42, 5:154, 163, 164)

⁵⁶ See eg Harvey 1995:54-63.

⁵⁷ “Observing the body in the body,” “observing feeling in the feelings,” “observing mind in the mind, and “observing mind-object in the mind-objects.” These are the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). In each case, they are not to be seen as “This is mine” (*etam mama*) (which arises through craving, *taṇhā*), or as “This I am” (*eso’ham asmī*) (due to conceit, *māna*), or as “This is my self” (*eso me attā*) (due to wrong view, *diṭṭhi*) (**Anattā,lakkhaṇa S**, S 3:68 = SD 1.2). These three are also known as “latent tendencies to ‘I’-making, ‘mine’-making and conceit” (*ahaṃ,-kāra; mamañ,kāra; mānānusaya*) (M 22,15, 72,15, 112,11 20, S 2:75, 3:236, 4:41, A 1:132, 133). They are called the 3 obsessions (*gāha*) and are the main factors behind conception (M 1) and mental proliferation (M 18). In short, such experiences are not “beliefs” but direct experiences of reality. See Bodhi 1980:8-11; Harvey 1995:32 f.

⁵⁸ This sentence is as at **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22,1/2:290) & **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10.3/1:56). “Fully aware and mindful” *sampajāno satimā*: Vism 163 = 4.172 explains that full awareness (*sampajañña=paññā*) has the characteristic of non-confusion; its function is to investigate and manifested as scrutiny. Mindfulness (*sati*) has the characteristic of remembering. Its function is not to forget and is manifested as guarding. *Sampajāno* is also tr as “fully understanding,” “clearly comprehending” (see Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi 2001 n147; also Prayudh 2001: 265).

⁵⁹ “The resort of your own fathers,” *sake pettike visaye* (D 3:58; S 5:146; J 2:59, 6:193). alt trs “the way of your ancestors,” “your own home-ground” (PED), “in your own native beat” (Harvey 1995:54). **Sakuṇagghi S** (S 47.6/-5:147 f) explains this expression: “Not one’s own pasture ... the domain of others” refers to the five strands of sense-pleasures (*pañca kāma,guṇa*), namely, the sense-objects, that is, one should not be distracted by pleasurable sense-objects. “Your own pastures ... the resort of your own fathers” refers to the Focuses of Mindfulness (as defined in the sutta passage here).

⁶⁰ “Merit” *puñña*, “goodness-power” (Harvey 1995:54).

⁶¹ Cf *yo kho Vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati*, etc. S 3:120.

3.3.0.3 Some scholars have rendered the term *dīpa* here as “light”—Rhys Davids (D:R 2:110); Fausböll (Sn:F 501)⁶²—or as “lamp” (Adikaram; Childers), possibly because they are influenced by the Western saying “No man is an island” and its negative connotation. **Buddhaghosa** comments on the term *atta, dīpa*, “with self as an island”: “What is meant by ‘self’? The mundane and supramundane Dhamma.” Therefore he says next, “with the Dhamma as an island,” etc. **Bhikkhu Bodhi** notes here that “This comment overlooks the obvious point that the Buddha is inculcating self-reliance.” (S:B 1:1055 n53).

3.3.1 Sanskrit

The Sanskrit words *dīpa* (light, lamp) and *dvīpa* (island, continent) are both rendered as *dīpa* in Pali. The Sanskritized passage of the Buddha’s last words (D 2:100) are found in the Mahāvastu, giving *dvīpa*:

ātma, dvīpa bhikṣavo viharatha ananya, dvīpāḥ ātmaśaraṇāḥ ananya, śaraṇāḥ
(Senart, *Le Mahavastu* 1: 334)

The same Sanskrit word is found in the Turfan version of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (Waldschmidt 1950-51:200).

The **Gāndhārī Dharmapada** also renders the term *dīpa* as “island” (Brough 209 f.). **The Tibetan translation** also uses “island” (*glin*), and not “a light of lamp” (*mar me*).

3.3.2 Chinese mistranslation

Zhi Fanian (Former Chin 351-394): “a light” (T 1.15b). Saṅghadeva (Later Chin 384-417) rendered it as “a lamp-light” in the Mādhyāgama: “Make yourself a lamp-light” (T 1.645c). The Chinese Dharmapada (25, 238) also uses “light” (pointed out by P V Bapat).

However, **Guṇabhadra** (Liu Sung dynasty 420-479) rendered *dīpa* as “island” in his translation of the same passage in the Saṃyukt’āgama (T 2.8a).⁶³

3.4 THE ONLY WAY

3.4.1 In declaring that after his passing, **only the Dharma should be one’s refuge**,⁶⁴ the Buddha effectively and radically shifts the focus from the 3 refuges to **the one refuge**—the Dharma—that is, our practice of the 4 focuses of mindfulness (*sati’paṭṭhāna*) that he often discourses on.⁶⁵ In this sense, it becomes clear why, in the Maha Satī’paṭṭhāna Sutta (D 22), for example, the Buddha declares it to be “the only way” (*ekāyana, magga*) “for the purification of beings.”⁶⁶

3.4.2 It is important here to understand that the Buddha is referring to mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*). For mental cultivation to progress, one needs to be strongly grounded in moral virtue (*sīla*), so that such a mental cultivation would lead to wisdom (*paññā*) and spiritual liberation (*vimutti*) (M 1:195-197). As

⁶² G Obeyesekere, similarly shows a sad lack of deeper understanding of the Suttas and the Dharma (esp the nature of *satipaṭṭhāna*), being influenced by Western categories, in saying that “‘Islands unto themselves’ ‘suggest a kind of spiritual isolation from others rather than pity for the world’” (“The death of the Buddha,” in Blackburn & Samuels (edd), *Approaching the Dharma*, 2003:23 f, esp n20).

⁶³ G H Sasaki, *Linguistic Approach to Buddhist Thought*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986: 58-63.

⁶⁴ Skt *dharmā, śaraṇa*, P *dhamma, saraṇa*.

⁶⁵ See Piya Tan “**Was the Buddha poisoned?**” (Lecture 10 of “The Buddha and His Disciples”), 2002 §§7b, 10b; also SD 9.13a.

⁶⁶ D 2:290 = 315 = M 1:55 = 63 = S 5:141 = 167 f = 185 f. = Kvu 158 = Vism 3.

such, the “only way” here does not refer to a particular “method” of meditation, whether it is called “Vipassanā” or “Satipaṭṭhāna.” The “only way” here refers to the noble eightfold path, which is clear from the Dhammapada:

Maggān’atṭhaṅgiko seṭṭho
saccānaṃ caturo padā
virāgo seṭṭho dhammānaṃ
dīpadānañ ca cakkhumā.

The best of paths is the eightfold path.
The best of truths are the four sayings [the Noble Truths].
Non-attachment is the best of states.
The best of the two-legged is the Seeing One.

Eso’va maggo natth’añño
dassanassa visuddhiyā
etaṃhi tumhe paṭipajjatha
Mārass’etaṃ pamohanam

This indeed is the only way,
There is none other for the purity of vision:
Follow then this path:
This is the bewilderment of Māra [the Evil One].
(Dh 273 f) [Tan 2002:19b]⁶⁷

3.4.3 It does not refer to “Vipassanā” meditation (if there were such a meditation) or one school of Buddhism to the exclusion of others. This *ekāyana* statement should be understood in the context of the Buddha’s final instruction here—and the Buddha’s prophecies of what is popularly known as **the “Dharma-ending age”** [Tan 2002, 6:21]. After the Buddha’s passing, he is no more the practitioner’s refuge as it were (not in person, anyway). As for the Saṅgha, its gradual laicization and degradation increases as the number of those who transgress the Vinaya increases and the number of arhats and Saints decrease. (Piya Tan 2002: 19b)⁶⁸

3.5 THE ONE REFUGE. Before we close, let us remind ourselves with take the “one refuge”—the Dharma as one’s practice. This is the so-called “one and only way” or the “one-going way” (*ekāyana*)⁶⁹ to self-awakening, that is, the noble eightfold path [3.4], which is a statement of the 4 focuses of mindfulness in terms of total practice: on the interpersonal and social level (virtue), the personal level (mind or concentration), and the spiritual level (wisdom and liberation). [1.4.3.1]

The “3 refuges” of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are here conflated into the barest minimum: **oneself and Dharma**; in other words, the truth is not out there, but **deep within oneself**. Matthew Dillon, in his remarkable comparative study of the last days of Socrates and the Buddha in “Dialogues with Death,” remarks: “However much support may be offered by teacher and community, it all comes down to you and the Truth” (2000:547). The Buddha is dead, long live the Dharma!”⁷⁰

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Bibliography

[See end of SD 3]

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⁶⁷ See SD 13.1 (3.2.4).

⁶⁸ See also **Money and monastics**, SD 4.19-23.

⁶⁹ See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10,2), SD 13.3 + SD 13.1 (3.2).

⁷⁰ On the levels of refuge-going, see SD 43.4 (5).