

INITIATION INTO BUDDHISM

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A unique feature in Buddhism is the omission of any ceremony akin to baptism. There is only one way to become a Buddhist and that is to follow the footsteps of the Buddha and attempt to put his teaching into practice in one's life. Buddhist philosophy recognizes certain so-called "fetters" which hamper an individual's growth towards liberation. One of these fetters is the 'belief in rites and rituals' the mistaken assumption that by going through special ceremony or by following some "religious" practices, one can be saved. Little wonder that there is no baptismal service in Buddhism. "Work out your own liberation" and never mind joining any groups or societies.

What then marks one's entry into Buddhism? The required quality is *Saddha* often translated as "faith" but meaning rather "confidence based on knowledge". As the Buddha said "Confidence is the companion to the person, and wisdom issues commands to him". Another interesting translation of *saddha* is "the confidence that there is a goal to be reached". Before one can begin seriously to follow the Buddhist path, there must arise within one – however falteringly- the confidence that there is a path to be trod and a goal to be reached. This initial confidence may then be strengthened gradually, as experience teaches that it was well founded. Yet always, throughout one's long journey, this response of the heart, this awakening of confidence, will precede, enabling one to take each new step in the dark.

It is no doubt in recognition of this repeated pattern – initial confidence leading to a willingness to experiment, which in turn bring confirmation of the original confidence and provides the basis from which a further step can be envisaged – that the Buddhist practice of Tisarana was instituted and developed.

Tisarana, "the taking of the three refuges" involves the threefold repetition of the following formula:

To the Buddha I go for refuge.

To the Dhamma (teaching) I go for refuge.

To the Sangha (order of monks) I go for refuge.

To the sceptical Westerner, such an incantation no doubt smacks of idolatry, superstition and "oriental passiveness". Yet taking refuge in the Buddha implies no personal guarantee that he himself will effect the arrival at the goal of any of his followers. On the contrary he said: "Surely by oneself is evil done, by

oneself one becomes impure, by oneself is evil avoided, by oneself one becomes pure. Purity and impurity are (of the) individual. No one purifies another.”

Indeed the Tisarana would probably be more acceptable to the Western mind if, instead of the time honoured “refuge the word “guide” were used. The first “refuge” might then be translated as “I intend to use the Buddha to guide me, in my search.”

The second guide is the Dhamma, the teaching. The example of the Buddha’s own life is a great help to those wishing to attain a similar goal, just as the life of Jesus Christ affords a pattern to inspire and guide the sincere Christian; the Buddhist has a second guide in the detailed teaching handed down through the ages, just as the Christian has a similar guide in the sermons and parables of Christ recorded in the Gospels. The Buddhist is, however, yet more fortunate in that the Buddha lived for so many years after his enlightenment and had the time to develop and perfect a detailed philosophy, a code of life, a careful step by step analysis of the path to be taken and the various states to be achieved and transcended. In the course of his teaching life the Buddha encountered many thousands of people, with differing educational, social, moral, and religious backgrounds. He adapted and refined his message to the needs and capabilities of kings and beggars, prostitutes and ascetics. The modern day Buddhist can, therefore, turn confidently to the Dhamma for support, knowing that his teaching has been developed to incorporate all sorts and conditions of men. As he begins to put the teaching into practice, however, the follower of the Buddha comes to have a much surer and more ultimate reason for relying on the Dhamma: he comes to realize that though he knows little – and practises less – he is beginning to be helped and “succoured” by the teaching. He goes to the Dhamma for support because he begins to find that its message is in accord with his own slowly, and probably painfully, acquired experience.

The third refuge is the Sangha, the community of monks, past, present and the future. The realization that millions of men have followed the Buddha’s teaching, have decided to devote their whole energy and attention to it, and have found it a valid and satisfying way of life – this is the third refuge for the Buddhist. Sangha can be interpreted as the community or order of monks, but it can also be interpreted as the fellowship of those who have walked in the footsteps of the Buddha and reaped the fruit of their labours