

Taking Refuge

A Guide to the Three Jewels
for Everyday Awakening

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Rooted in Mindfulness

*For the Sangha—
all those who practice together,
support one another,
and co-create refuge
in a world that needs it.*

Which are greater—
the leaves in the forest
or the leaves I'm holding in my hand?

The leaves in the forest are greater.
But these leaves in my hand
are a means to reflect the whole forest.

— *The Buddha, Simsapa Sutta (paraphrased)*

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Introduction

Here You Are

Here you are.

In this body, this heart, this mind, and this life.

Take a moment to really let that land. You exist. You are participating in this unfolding moment, in contact with all that is arising within you and around you. Your five senses are already receiving the world—the sounds, the light, the temperature, the textures. And your sixth sense, your heart-mind, is already receiving the inner world—thoughts arising, feelings moving, memories surfacing, intentions forming.

You're already here. So of course you're present.

And yet, so often our minds are paying attention in ways that don't allow us to truly be aware of what this present moment actually is. We're thinking about what happened yesterday, planning for tomorrow, caught in loops of worry or desire, replaying conversations, rehearsing future ones. We're here, but we're not quite here.

This is the human situation. And this is why we practice.



There's a teaching from the Zen tradition that I find helpful. When we first encounter the Dharma, it's like looking at a mountain. When we begin to study it, it's as if we magnify the mountain, making it seem bigger and more complex than it really is. And when we realize the Dharma, it's just a mountain again.

There's a little riddle in that.

This book is about something very simple—so simple that we often miss it. It's about finding refuge. Not refuge as escape, but refuge as arriving. Refuge as

coming home to what is already here: your own wakeful nature, the laws of life that hold everything, and the community of beings who walk this path together.

These are the Three Refuges, the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

But please don't get too caught on the words. "Buddha Nature"—you can call it whatever you want. The name surely doesn't matter. What matters is whether you can touch the reality the words point to. Can you feel your own capacity for wakefulness, for freedom, for wisdom and compassion? Can you sense how life operates according to its own nature, how everything arises through causes and conditions? Can you recognize the profound gift of practicing together, of being supported and supporting others?



At our sangha, Rooted in Mindfulness, we practice what might be called "universal dharma." As Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, there's no one school or one teaching that contains the whole truth. The Dharma is like a seed, and wherever that seed is planted, it will grow into a flower unique to that soil—but of the essence of that seed.

So we draw from three main streams of Buddhist wisdom: The Theravada tradition, which offers such elegant, practical frameworks for understanding the mind. The Mahayana, which reminds us that our practice is never separate from anyone else's—that this great compassion and care, this Bodhisattva aspiration, is at the heart of our waking up. And the Tibetan tradition, which emphasizes the luminosity of mind—not as some distant destination, but as part of the path itself.

But the Dharma doesn't end with the word "Dharma." It's everywhere—in the perennial wisdoms of all cultures, in the insights that arise when you're with a loved one who's passing, in the birth of a child, in a walk in the woods. It arises whenever we see for ourselves, even without framework, the truth of how things are.



This book is organized around the Three Refuges, but it doesn't separate them artificially. In truth, each refuge contains the others. When you truly take refuge in your Buddha Nature, you are already taking refuge in the Dharma that reveals it and the Sangha that supports it. When you take refuge in the Sangha, you are taking refuge in the Buddha Nature present in each being and the Dharma that guides your life together.

Please know that each bell, each refuge, isn't a refuge alone—it exists in relationship to the greater whole.

So let's begin where we must always begin: with presence. With showing up to this life, this moment, this body and heart and mind that are already here, waiting to be known.

Part One

Choosing Presence

The Skill of Showing Up

Being present is knowing, being with, being open to this present moment unfolding—this arising, this meeting life as it's happening.

It sounds so simple. And it is simple. But simple doesn't mean easy.

When we're choosing presence, many of us discover that this is actually a skill. There are so many patterns within us—cognitive, physical, mental, emotional—all operating through different systems with different roles and functions. Sometimes these systems become imbalanced, or we get caught in a particular mode of being. Sometimes they're competing with one another, pulling us in different directions, preventing us from realizing what seems so obvious: that we are here and we can pay attention.

Even when we intentionally choose presence, it takes a little time for these different systems to align into the present moment. That's okay. That's part of the practice.



So what does it mean to choose presence?

First, there's an intention to show up. You're reading these words right now, which means something in you has already made that choice. Something is inclining toward awareness, toward waking up.

Then there's the skill of recognizing what's getting in the way. Not judging it, not fighting it—just seeing it. Oh, here's distraction. Here's worry. Here's planning mind. Here's that familiar loop.

And then there's the actual showing up: letting all of your senses be more open to what is happening within you and around you. Not grasping at experience, not pushing it away, but receiving it. Witnessing this dance of coming together—time, space, and elements arising within the same present moment.

◇ *What aspects of yourself are you showing up to right now? Is it your body? What's in contact with your senses in this environment? Is it your heart, your mind? What parts, what activities?*



Here's something interesting about presence. We often think of it as the goal of practice—as if being mindful of how we are, being extra sensitive at all our senses, is the endpoint.

It's not the goal.

It's the beginning.

Presence is a doorway. When we show up with mindful presence, we're doing something fundamental: we're freeing ourselves, even temporarily, from the enchantment of our conditioned patterns. We're stepping out of automatic pilot. And in that stepping out, we create space for something else to arise.

There's a Western saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again expecting different results. But here we are, often entangled in exactly that—a repetitive conditioned way of being and seeing, wondering why things don't change.

When we choose presence, we have to let go enough to be open to what is. That all by itself is huge.

Presence as Doorway

Presence is an open door that invites us to leave the internal dwelling of being caught in our own fixed views, ideas, habits, and conditioning. It opens out into a greater world.

When we're not present, we're typically entangled with, enchanted by, identified with the habits of our conditioning—the typical things we get distracted by, attached to, or aversive toward. Ways of thinking and feeling that might seem conscious on the surface, but are often semi-conscious or unconscious orientations. Why are we in this mood? Why do we believe what we believe?

So when we choose presence, even that simple activity requires us to let go enough to be genuinely open. And just that activity is liberating us into a different way of seeing, of being, of knowing, of understanding.



But presence alone isn't enough. It's the doorway, the foundation. When we choose presence, the habitual way of seeing and acting is still quite loud. It's designed to overpower this kind of open attention. If we're feeling things a particular way, cognitively we want to reinforce that. So we listen, we follow these conditioned thoughts and views, and it becomes harder for us to hear a deeper kind of wisdom, to feel a deeper kind of compassion.

This is why presence must open into something more.

When we choose presence, we're not only opening up to what is here—we're also creating space for our wakeful nature. A higher wisdom, a higher compassion, a freedom that isn't bound by automatic pilot and desperate reactivity.

In our presence, we're not only showing up to what's in our environment and what's on our mind. We're showing up open to something greater. We might remember that we want something more meaningful. We might connect more to our inner authenticity and our higher aspirations. We might see the way we get entangled and choose what's more aligned with what truly matters.

◇ *Don't let presence just be your goal, but recognize how fundamentally important it is.*

Contact and Knowing

One way to describe true presence is this: the experience of being in contact, knowing the contact at each of your senses—your five senses and your sixth sense, the heart-mind.

So knowing contact is knowing, in the present moment, what is arriving and what you're conscious of at each of your senses. But there's more to it than that.

At this moment of contact, there's also a certain experience of what's often called emptiness, or potential, or openness—a non-identification with a specific form of being. At this point of contact, there's a receptivity. A certain amount of non-adornment with our labels and expectations and concepts.

And at the same time, there's a fullness. Things are being known. Things are arising. Experience is happening.



It is also traditional to say that true presence includes a kind of discernment. Not judgment—discernment. A knowing, a clarity.

This object, this experience is happening, and there's a witnessing of it. There's a knowing of it. And there's also a discernment: is this healthy or unhealthy? Beneficial or unbeneficial? Helpful or harmful?

In a simple way, this might look like: I am here being present, and I notice a mind that is easily distracted. The knowing recognizes that this is happening. It can discern a distracted mind from a non-distracted mind. It can understand whether this is helpful or not.

But it doesn't judge, saying, "Look how terrible I am." It doesn't say, "I need to be somewhere else." Instead, the discernment simply recognizes: this is happening. Here I am, choosing presence, with a mind that is like this.

And in that discernment, the mind can further incline itself toward presence. It sees, it discerns, but it's not clinging, not getting caught in reactivity. It also knows how to reestablish, how to let go, how to open back up at all the senses.

◇ *Being present looks like this: hearing this sound as it's happening, knowing this thought as it's happening, knowing this emotion as it's happening. So ordinary—and so extraordinary.*

Part Two

The First Refuge

Buddha Nature

What Is Already Here

The first refuge is an invitation to take refuge in Buddha Nature.

What is Buddha Nature? It's this potential that we all have—right here, not somewhere else—to be awake, to be free, to realize great wisdom and great compassion. It's a nature that is freed from our conditioned and fixed views that prevent us from seeing clearly.

Buddha also traditionally refers to the historical Buddha—this human being who discovered liberation, one among many, and taught from that perspective how to realize it. We honor that lineage. But the deeper refuge is in what the Buddha pointed to: this capacity for wakefulness that exists in every being.

This capacity is available right here, within each and every one of us.



When we take refuge in Buddha Nature, we're taking refuge in the wakefulness that is already here. Not just the potential for it, not just the aspiration toward it, but the reality of it in this moment.

This is subtle and important.

We have a tendency—and the Dharma says this is part of the problem—not to see or appreciate the wakefulness that is already here. If we don't see it and appreciate it, how do we bring it into our life? Our practice isn't just about reaching toward some idealized version of ourselves on a mountaintop

somewhere. That version is right here. We are the mountaintop when we realize, in this moment, that we can live with our great wisdom and our great compassion and our great presence.

Too often we compare ourselves to others or to some ideal. That creates a gap: when will we reach that ideal? The answer, if we're honest, is never—not if we keep placing it somewhere else.

So that would mean that even if we put our whole life into sincere, diligent effort to be better, if all that effort is only applied toward some future self, we live in a constant state of insufficiency. We call this dukkha—suffering, unsatisfactoriness.

◇ *What if you are not on your way to becoming awake? What if wakefulness is already part of who you are?*

The Paradox of Wakefulness

Here is the beautiful paradox of this practice: in order to live something, we have to know it to some degree. In order to cultivate something, we have to already have a certain amount established.

Luckily, this tradition recognizes that it is already here.

Buddha Nature is not something we create. It's something we uncover, reveal, remember. The practices don't manufacture wakefulness—they clear away what obscures it.

So when we take refuge, we're actually taking refuge in what is already well. We're saying: I am going to choose that part of me over the part that isn't so healthy. I'm going to dwell there, abide there.



How many of us recognize our wisdom and our compassion, but choose to act otherwise?

I know I do. We put our feet up when we could be practicing. We indulge the habit when we know what's healthier. That's not taking refuge in our wakeful nature—that's stepping outside of refuge.

But here's the thing: when we look into those moments, when we see that we've stepped away from our deeper knowing, from care for ourselves and others—we're seeing from our wakefulness. The seeing itself is Buddha Nature at work.

And then we have a choice. We can abandon the reactive pattern. We can come back. What just happened? We saw it from wakefulness, and we chose wakefulness.

That's how refuge works. It's not a place we arrive at once and stay forever. It's a coming back, again and again, to what is already here.



There is a part of you that is choosing, that is free enough from the chemicals and the form, the embedded memories, views, and associations. There's something in you that can witness and say, "I can see this."

It's not just the form. It's not just the patterns. There is an emergence.

And somehow, within that emergence—a knowing and a care.

This is Buddha Nature. And we can take refuge in that.

Freedom, Wisdom, Compassion

Buddha Nature contains several aspects that are worth naming, even though naming always falls short.

There is wakefulness—the capacity to be aware, to know what is happening in this present moment. Not half-asleep, not on automatic pilot, but genuinely conscious of our experience.

There is freedom—freedom from those things that hinder our ability to realize our own nature. Freedom from being bound by what gets in the way. This doesn't mean freedom from difficulty or from the conditions of life. It means freedom within them—not being tossed around by every reaction, not being imprisoned by our habits.

There is wisdom—the ability to see clearly how things are. Not wisdom as accumulated knowledge, but wisdom as direct seeing. Understanding the nature of things, the causes of suffering, the path to freedom.

And there is compassion—the natural response of a heart that sees clearly. When we're not caught in our own reactivity, when we see the suffering of beings (including ourselves), something in us moves toward care. This isn't manufactured sentiment. It's what naturally arises when the obstructions are cleared away.



The Buddha said that out of all aspects of practice, there's almost nothing as potent and representative of our wakefulness and freedom as loving-kindness. Think about that. Not concentration, not insight, not renunciation—but loving-kindness.

This tells us something important about the nature of awakening. It's not cold. It's not detached. It's warm. It cares. It wants beings to be well.

I remember hearing from a Zen teacher that loving-kindness can be seen like a dragon. Dragons in East Asia are magical, beautiful creatures. But a dragon

needs space and openness. When the mind is contracted—identified with views and thoughts and attachments—it's like trying to put a dragon in a small cage.

So in your mind and your heart, be open. One who embodies loving-kindness in the moment is one who is open and knows both oneself and others at the same time.

◇ *What a refuge it is to bring what is well to the moments that make up our life, instead of dominantly bringing what isn't well.*

Taking Refuge in Your Nature

Buddha Nature is not a thing. It's a way of being.

This is an important distinction. We're not taking refuge in a concept, an idea, a belief. We're taking refuge in a mode of being that is available to us in any moment.

When you take refuge in Buddha Nature, you are being present with your own wakeful nature—which, by the way, isn't only yours. When you look at your mind, you're looking at your mother and father, your friends and family, your schooling, your sorrows and joys, the sun and moon, wherever you've been and even where you haven't been. Everything is interconnected.



Taking refuge in Buddha Nature means:

Recognizing that wakefulness is already here, not only as potential but as present reality.

Choosing to dwell in that wakefulness rather than in reactive patterns.

Seeing when we've stepped away, and coming back.

Trusting that this nature can meet any situation with wisdom and compassion.

Understanding that the seeing itself is the refuge—the witnessing, the knowing, the discerning.



It becomes a refuge when it is known—when it's more present in our views and the way we see and engage. Simply believing in Buddha Nature doesn't make it a refuge. We have to touch it, live in it, return to it.

And here's what's beautiful: every moment is an opportunity. Every moment we can recognize our wakefulness and choose it. Every moment we can ask: What would wisdom do here? What would compassion do?

In the love that we want to offer other people—this compassion and kindness and care—in order to offer it, we need to experience it. We need to feel it. We can put on behaviors and a persona that looks and sounds like love. But if we want it to really come from the core, we need to know it in ourselves first.

Taking refuge in Buddha Nature is learning to know it in yourself. Again and again. Moment by moment.

◇ *With this bell, you're invited to take refuge in your wakeful nature, your free nature, your wise and compassionate nature.*

Part Three

The Second Refuge

Dharma

The Laws of Life

The Dharma, in its essence, is just the laws of life. The laws of suchness. Cause and effect. Interdependence. Karma. The way things actually are.

There's a part of us that knows there is a Dharma here. We can be free enough from being identified solely with our patterns and processes to see that things arise due to causes and conditions. All things are changing. All things are interdependent. Everything is empty of a fixed, solid, permanent self.

This isn't a belief system. It's an observation about reality. Look at anything closely enough and you'll see it: this arises because that arose. This changes because conditions change. Nothing stands alone.



The suchness of things—the reality that we can see and have faith in. All things arise within this greater web of cause and effect, interdependence. It's so full—so full—that every single thing is empty of isolated existence. It's full of everything else. All mutually engendering, supporting, transforming.

And we're part of this. Through our karmic relationships, we contribute to the greater whole, and the greater whole contributes to us. That's ultimately the Dharma.

This Dharma practice works with and helps us become more free in relationship to the law of karma. Not the new-agey view of karma as cosmic reward and punishment, but karma as the fact that we are a product of the greater web of

conditionality, and through our actions, we contribute back into it—which affects ourselves and affects the existence we're part of.



The Dharma also includes the Four Noble Truths: that sometimes things come together or break apart in ways that cause suffering; that because everything is mutually engendered and co-created, there's a cause for that suffering; that if the causes and conditions change, there can be healing; and that there's a way of being and knowing that can co-create the conditions for wellness—namely, the Eightfold Path.

We can take refuge in these laws. Not as dogma, but as reliable truths we can work with. The world operates this way. Understanding that is itself a refuge.

◇ *A refuge to witness and care and take refuge in the Dharma.*

Learning and Practice

Secondary to these fundamental laws are the Buddhist teachings—not the Buddha himself, not the suchness of things, but how the Buddha navigated this suchness and taught the path he took. And other awakened ones helped refine this path through their own seeing.

So we have the Dharma as teachings and practices that bring us into alignment with the way things are, to help us live in ways that benefit ourselves and others and realize our Buddha Nature.

When we take refuge in the Dharma, we're taking refuge in our learning and our practice. If we take refuge in our intentions and the activity that leads to wakefulness, freedom, and wellbeing for ourselves and others, that means we're living with care. We're living in a way that inclines the mind in a healthy direction.

And if we don't take refuge in this sort of thing, we take refuge in something else—usually our habits, our personal and collective reactivities.



Every moment of this life that we're participating in, that we're gifted with, is an opportunity to show up in a meaningful way—a way that is in alignment with our greater wisdom, understanding, and care. Every moment is an opportunity to maintain and cultivate this precious wakefulness.

To transform harmful patterns of mind that cloud or inhibit or hurt ourselves or others.

To see and appreciate and acknowledge those beautiful factors that lead to clarity, that heal and benefit and support ourselves and others.

What an opportunity we have in this very moment.



The Dharma recognizes and tries to meet the complexities of life as skillfully as we can. When we take refuge in the Dharma, we're taking refuge in understanding and in skillful means. We start to notice: if I say this harsh word, if I give that silent treatment, if I consume this media or make that choice—what are the results?

It's not "whatever." We can choose what is healthier for ourselves and others. We can choose what aligns with what's important.

This doesn't mean we become fanatics. Please don't be a fanatic—it's so annoying. But we can be committed to what we're committed to, from our own authenticity and integrity. And we can have fun doing it. This practice isn't about being deadly serious. It's about enjoying this short, precious life that won't repeat.

◇ This is it. This is it for this particular version. It won't happen again. Those we care about—same. So we meet it with authenticity.

Dharma Is Everywhere

The Dharma doesn't end with the word we put on it, the stamp of "Dharma."

The Dharma is everywhere.

It's within the perennial wisdoms and realizations that come from all cultures, all systems, all people. It's from the wisdom that arises when we as individuals see for ourselves, even without any framework. It's in the truths and discoveries that come up when being with a loved one who's passing, when witnessing the birth of a child, when taking a walk in the woods.

At our sangha, we draw from three main Buddhist schools, but we recognize that each school is like a flower growing from the same seed, unique to its soil but of the same essence. The Theravada offers elegant, practical frameworks. The Mahayana reminds us our practice is never separate from others—not a separate self in every sense of the word. The Tibetan tradition emphasizes the luminosity of mind as part of the path, not just the destination.

If we took one system as the absolute truth, we would be separating ourselves from the experiential realization of others who speak from truth.



In taking refuge in the Dharma, we're not taking refuge in a concept that's momentarily stable and reassuring. Nothing can be clung to as some eternal truth contained only within thinking. That's not ultimately satisfactory, and it's not the thing that leads to liberation.

Rather, we're taking refuge in the fact that this world operates according to the laws of its own nature. And it's not a refuge if we're not investigating it, looking into it, testing it against our experience.

Because Dharma is the laws of nature. Our delusion is dharma. Our wakefulness is dharma. But it is investigation, curiosity, that allows us to learn and to practice, and to see for ourselves the truth of the laws of nature as they relate to our wakefulness and liberation and wellbeing.

Great wisdom requires investigation. Great compassion requires investigation.
Taking refuge in the Dharma means taking refuge in this element of
investigating the Dharma.

◇ *Taking refuge in the fullness and the emptiness of Dharma.*

Creating the Conditions

The Dharma is creating the conditions that are conducive to wakefulness. It's also letting go of conditions that hinder wakefulness.

This is very practical. The Eightfold Path lays out the core framework, divided into three parts:

The wisdom section—right view and right intention—is about understanding reality and pointing ourselves in the right direction.

The ethical section—right speech, right action, right livelihood—relates to creating wellness and harmony within ourselves and the world.

The cultivation section—right effort, right concentration, right mindfulness—is where we consciously create the conditions to know our mind, to cultivate our hearts, and to live in ways that transcend what leads to harm and what obscures our capacity to be awake.



When we choose presence, when we show up to what is right now as a formal conscious practice, this is a manifestation of the Eightfold Path. We're exercising the skills of cultivation—mindfulness, effort, concentration.

Concentration is connection to what is in this present moment unfolding. The traditional instructions say: go to an empty hut, or the base of a tree, stepping out of the village, inviting yourself to be free from the worries and doings. Allow yourself to really just show up.

Mindfulness is remembering to be awake to what is occurring. It's knowing what we're actually aware of in this present moment.

Right effort is creating and maintaining the conditions for healthy practice. It recognizes when we're distracted or bringing unhealthy ways of relating, and it transforms them. It also protects against the future arising of unhealthy states.



The great action at its essence is applied Dharma practice—understanding and care and activity. The actions that engender wellness, that protect it, that transform the conditions that lead to ill-being and prevent ill-being from arising.

This is what it means to take refuge in the Dharma: to commit ourselves to learning, practicing, and living in ways that align with reality for the benefit of ourselves and all beings.

◇ *What a beautiful refuge.*

Part Four

The Third Refuge

Sangha

The Precious Container

The third refuge is Sangha—community. Good friendship. Being with others who are trying their best to realize their wakefulness for the benefit of themselves and others. Learning and practicing together. Inspiring one another, supporting one another. Being unwell with, and being well with.

What is admittedly acknowledged as being one of the harder yet most precious refuges is the refuge of Sangha.

Sangha is precious because we're social beings. We become like the people we spend time with. If we're in company that really has different intentions—division, hatred, selfishness, unskillfulness—we know that's what we become. We become one another in so many ways.

So a refuge of good company, understanding, care, and helpfulness—what a refuge.



Sangha is also difficult. If you look at the teachings, at where rules are applied, so many are applied to Sangha. Often just because it's difficult to maintain that container. But it's so precious, so important.

The paradox of Sangha is that we bring our imperfections with the intention for it to be good enough to support what we really care for together. A place where we bring our best, where we challenge the opposite of our best, where we recognize the wakefulness in ourselves and the wakefulness in others.

It's a container where we try to bring our Buddha Nature and see when it's not here, and practice cultivating the conditions that give rise to wellness and awakening within ourselves and others.



Sangha is a place to look honestly. A place to offer wise speech when someone needs the care of wise speech. A way to be with each other and with those we care for in our lives. A place where we can be confused together about practice and mindful living—and where we can share realization together.

And we're supporting one another in this process. We share, more or less, the same intentions for awakening, for freedom, for wellbeing, for wisdom, for compassion—for the benefit of the world.

◇ *What a beautiful refuge.*

Co-Creating Refuge

Sangha doesn't just happen.

Sangha is co-created from those interested in investigating, in knowing Buddha Nature, in living and investigating the Dharma. It's investigating the relationality—what we bring to Sangha and what Sangha brings to us. Learning from oneself in Sangha and learning from others.

There's a container that we're all co-creating together. And to make it Sangha—truly Sangha—that part of us that puts Buddha Nature and Dharma in the front.



Community requires the presence of us and others. It requires interaction—a specific kind of interaction. It's a container that creates the conditions for our learning, our practice, and our wakefulness. It creates the conditions to hold what isn't well and to collectively transform what gets in the way.

Sangha doesn't mean anything until we look at what it's made of. One of those elements is us.

To come together with shared intentions—and letting these intentions become ways of being that often actually oppose our individual, immediate longings or aversions and views—yet at the same time noticing how easy it is because we do care. To see our care transcend the patterns of greed, hate, and ignorance.

What a profound refuge this is. This living practice—never perfect.



Many of us come to practice because we need refuge. Some turn toward the Dharma and the Sangha because they're experiencing profound difficulty in life. For some of us, this is one of the only safe places in their life.

Some of us come to deepen practice and understanding. Some come to purify or strengthen what is healthy, to transform what isn't so healthy. Some have a deep concern for the wellbeing of the world. Some come for meaningful friendship, or because we're trying to live a meaningful and connected life. Some come out of curiosity about the profundity and intellectual beauty of this tradition.

From the spiritual to the mundane, from the pains and joys of life, we gather in our diversity. But there is one set of principles that unifies us all—these three refuges.

◇ *Taking refuge in Sangha on one another with curiosity and investigation.*

When Sangha Is Lost

Has anyone opened their window, turned on the news, had a family gathering—and seen the amount of division and lack of care and lack of refuge?

There's so much beauty out there too. But there's also a profound amount of unsafety. Lack of care. Where is that happening? Interpersonally, in companies, in friendships, in associations.

Sangha means contributing socially in a way that is kind, that is wise, that is compassionate, non-divisive. That reminds one another of one another's goodness and potential and the importance of health.



There's a saying common in all Dharma traditions: when Sangha is lost, so clouded do our Buddha Natures become. And so hard it is for us to embody and to know what is healthy from what is unhealthy.

If we think about a sangha that becomes disrupted—or global sangha, our global community, our global friendship—if it becomes so immersed in things that are not wholesome, and that becomes the global consciousness, it starts to override and cover up all of our potential, all of our wakefulness, all of our wisdom, all of our compassion.

When we don't know what is wholesome from what is unwholesome, that becomes really hard.

And so they say: when Sangha is lost, the Dharma becomes lost. And they say it can be lost for ten thousand years.



This isn't meant to frighten us. It's meant to help us understand why Sangha matters—why this seemingly simple act of gathering together with good intentions is actually profound.

Sangha is not optional. It's not extra credit. It's essential to the path.

Thầy (Thich Nhat Hanh) likes to remind us how rare and special Sangha is—fellow people who are lucky enough to be under these circumstances, to be able to practice together, to support one another.

◇ *And the birds are also Sangha.*

Good Company

And then there is this protector, this guardian, this caregiver: Sangha—as community, as friends—simply practicing the first two refuges together for the benefit of ourselves and each other.

Sangha includes those who are intentionally being present as best as they can, taking refuge in Buddha Nature and the Dharma. But it also includes those who might not even realize they're practicing this way—those who care about integrity and living well, about this earth and its creatures, all those who live in harmony in accordance with the laws of nature. These too are Sangha.



We're here supporting one another—not just in practice, but in life. We gather, we learn together, we practice together. We try to bring our wakefulness, or the practice that helps reveal our wakefulness, for ourselves and for others.

This is what we're co-creating—this living experiment, this process. It's really created through all of our participation in every way. It's where we're doing these first two refuges and holding them together, learning from one another, supporting one another, providing safety as best as we're able.

Learning how to be humble together. Standing up for what's healthy together.



You can take refuge in one another right now.

And all of us can take refuge in you.

That's Sangha. That's the third refuge. That's the completion of the three jewels—and also their beginning, because the refuges are not linear. They arise together, support each other, and contain each other.

◇ *The refuge of Sangha: community, friendship.*

Part Five

Living the Refuges

The Refuges as Relationship

Now, bringing presence to the Three Refuges. Bringing investigation to them. They're not things. They're relationships.

You can take refuge in your own Buddha Nature—being present with your own wakeful nature, which isn't only yours but is interconnected with everything.

Taking refuge in the Dharma—being present with life, with the teachings, with the practices applied to the wholeness of your life, both internally and externally.

And that beautiful container where the other two refuges are held and practiced—in relationship with friends, with fellow travelers on the path. Sangha.



Here's something to understand: each refuge isn't a refuge alone. It exists in relationship to the greater whole.

When you truly take refuge in Buddha Nature, you're also taking refuge in the Dharma that reveals it and the Sangha that supports it. When you take refuge in the Dharma, you're taking refuge in the Buddha Nature that allows you to understand it and the Sangha that practices it with you. When you take refuge in Sangha, you're taking refuge in the Buddha Nature present in each being and the Dharma that guides your life together.

They're like three legs of a stool—remove one and the others can't stand. Or like three strands of a braid—each strengthens the others.



Taking refuge is not a one-time event. It's a moment-by-moment practice. A coming back, again and again.

When you ring the bells, when you sit down to meditate, when you gather with your sangha, when you face a difficult moment in your day—these are all opportunities to take refuge anew.

"I take refuge in Buddha." This doesn't just mean the historical Buddha. It means: I take refuge in my own capacity for awakening, and in the awakened nature of all beings.

"I take refuge in Dharma." This means: I take refuge in the way things are, in the teachings that illuminate this, and in my own learning and practice.

"I take refuge in Sangha." This means: I take refuge in community, in good friendship, in all those who walk this path and all beings who live in harmony with the Dharma.

◇ May we be present enough to take refuge in our wakeful nature, in the laws of existence, in one another's wakeful nature.

Investigation and Joy

Interestingly, the practice of taking refuge is actually a practice of living investigation.

When we take refuge in Buddha Nature, we're looking at it. We're curious about it in a way that eventually inspires joy. We're investigating the wakefulness that is already present.

And when we take refuge in Buddha Nature, we're also investigating what might be here that is in the way of fully realizing this wakefulness. Both movements happen together.

The same is true for Dharma. We're not taking refuge in a concept, but in a living reality that we keep exploring, testing, experiencing. We investigate the laws of nature through direct observation. We investigate the teachings through applying them. We investigate our practice through practicing.

And Sangha—Sangha is co-created from those interested in investigating, in knowing Buddha Nature, in living the Dharma. We investigate what we bring to Sangha and what Sangha brings to us. We learn from ourselves in community and from others in community.



This investigation is not dry or academic. Done with the right spirit, it leads to joy.

There's a quality of delight that arises when we see clearly. When we understand something about how the mind works. When we touch our own wakefulness. When we connect genuinely with another person on the path.

This joy is not the goal, but it's a natural fruit of the practice. It tells us we're on the right track. It sustains us through the difficult parts.



As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, paying attention on purpose. That's investigation.

What is changing? What is being known? What is remembered?

These are the questions of a mind that is awake and curious. And curiosity, it turns out, is one of the greatest allies of practice.

◇ *Great wisdom requires investigation. Great compassion requires investigation.*

This Rare and Precious Life

Some traditions, to help inspire a healthy sense of urgency, invite us to contemplate how rare and precious this life is. That we were even born. That we exist.

Think about that.

You exist.

They say it's as rare as a world that is all ocean, and a turtle just happens to swim to the surface and its head pokes through a little ring just the size of its head. I don't know—it's a weird measurement, but it's one they offer—to describe how rare it is to even be here.

How rare, how precious, how privileged. We had a bed to sleep in. We're relatively nourished. We might even be over-nourished—in my case.

Even with all the things we might not find as well as we'd like, there is so much here that is supporting us.



And I'd say it's even more rare to recognize that we have the capacity, the ability, the freedom to turn toward Dharma practice. To know our mind, to cultivate ourselves, to work on this.

Even just understanding that this might be beneficial to yourself and others is rare. And it becomes even more rare and precious to remember our practice when we're feeling overwhelmed—to actually apply it in our life.

It's one thing to know about it—that's special. But it's another thing to carry it through, even in moments of difficulty.

The Buddha says how rare it is to see our own liberated and wakeful nature—even more rare and precious.



This reflection includes recognizing that others might not be as privileged as we are. That's not meant to create guilt, but to deepen appreciation and responsibility.

We are learning a practice that unfolds here not only to benefit ourselves. May it benefit all beings.

This is the Bodhisattva aspiration—that our wakefulness is never just for us alone. It ripples out. It contributes to the whole.

◇ *Here we are, for now.*

Closing

The Spiral Path

This practice is often described as a spiral, not a ladder.

We don't climb ever upward in a straight line, leaving our difficulties behind. Instead, we circle back—but at a different level. We encounter the same challenges, the same patterns, the same ordinary mind. But we meet them with greater understanding, deeper practice, more developed capacity.

Even with great wisdom and great compassion, we come back to the beginning. That ordinary reactive mind gets active again. But at this point, we meet our practice in the same way we did at the start.

And this is a breakthrough point. Like a kind of spiritual maturity. Being birthed into a new relationship with our practice, our life, ourselves.

We have to become familiar with where we are. Each and every one of us has this wakeful nature. It's not a fixed thing—it's in relationship to the whole of life.

There is no endpoint. It's all practice. It's all learning.



And may we put ourselves in the company—and be the company—for others who are walking this path that the tradition says is rare.

The Three Refuges are not abstract concepts. They are invitations to a way of living.

Every morning when you wake up, you can take refuge. Every time you sit down to meditate. Every time you notice you've been lost in thought and you come back to the present moment. Every time you meet with your sangha. Every time you face a difficult decision and ask what wisdom and compassion would suggest.

Refuge isn't something we find once and possess forever. It's something we practice, something we return to, something we co-create.



So here you are, at the end of this book—which is really just a beginning.

In this body, this heart, this mind, and this life.

The bells ring three times.

May you take refuge in your wakeful nature—your freedom, your wisdom, your compassion.

May you take refuge in the Dharma—the laws of life, the teachings, the practice that leads to liberation.

May you take refuge in Sangha—the community that holds you, that you hold, that you co-create together.

These three refuges are not separate. They are one practice, three faces of the same jewel.

And they are here, available, in every moment.



Here you are.

You exist.

How rare, how precious, how privileged.

May you live in refuge.

May all beings live in refuge.

Practices

Taking Refuge

This practice can be done in formal meditation, or at any moment during the day when you want to remember and return to what matters.

Settle into presence. Feel your body, your breath, this moment.

Then, either silently or aloud, recite:

I take refuge in Buddha—my own wakeful nature and the awakened nature of all beings.

I take refuge in Dharma—the way things are, the teachings, and my own learning and practice.

I take refuge in Sangha—community, good friendship, and all beings who live in harmony with the Dharma.

You can repeat this three times, or as many times as feels right. Let each line land in your body and heart, not just your mind.



The Three Bells

If you use bells in your practice, let each of the three bells represent one refuge.

First bell: Buddha Nature—your wakefulness, freedom, wisdom, and compassion.

Second bell: Dharma—the laws of life, the teachings, your learning and practice.

Third bell: Sangha—community, friendship, those who practice together.

With each bell, let yourself settle more deeply into that refuge.



Contemplation Questions

For Buddha Nature:

What would it mean to trust that wakefulness is already here—not just as potential, but as present reality?

When you act from your deepest wisdom and care, what does that feel like in your body?

For Dharma:

What teachings or practices have most helped you understand how things work?

What conditions support your wakefulness? What conditions hinder it?

For Sangha:

Who are the people in your life who support your practice, even if they wouldn't use that word?

How do you contribute to creating refuge for others?



Daily Life Practice

Throughout your day, when you notice you've been lost in thought or caught in reactivity:

Pause. Feel your feet on the ground, your breath in your body.

Say silently: "I return to refuge."

Take one conscious breath, reconnecting with your wakeful nature.

Then continue with your day, carrying that quality of refuge with you.

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And gratitude to you, reader—for your practice, your questions, your willingness to keep showing up to this life.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be peaceful.

May all beings be free from suffering.

May all beings know the refuge that is already here.