

Taking Refuge

What does it mean to take refuge? Are we just using different words to mean the same thing as "believe" without crossing into mystical territory? The words are different because the meaning is different. Faith asks us to locate something outside ourselves and trust it. Refuge does that too, but it asks us to keep choosing to do so, and to do the work of verifying it from the inside. That verification doesn't happen all at once. It happens through listening, through studying, through practice, through showing up. It is a volitional act, not a belief state. We can stop taking refuge at any moment, and that is precisely what gives it meaning. It is a commitment we undertake each day, with whatever capacity we have that day.

The actual means of taking refuge will be different for everyone, and will surely change over time. Sometimes it will be listening to others, or studying texts, or going to a meeting. Other times it will be applying or investigating what we have learned in our formal practice. The dharma recognizes that the action must be ours.

In Buddhism it is often stated that we take refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Though Buddhism is actually making a broader statement about the entirety of our lives, it can be helpful to ask a smaller question: what can it mean specifically for recovery from our addictions?

Taking refuge in the Buddha is moving with the understanding that recovery is possible, that other people have recovered, that others have found a way to suffer less. The Buddha stands as a specific example of it being done by just another human being. He had to navigate all the conditions of human existence even after finding a way to end suffering. And he didn't keep it to himself; he tried to share how he did it. Addiction is often treated as a special category of human failing, something shameful and apart. Buddhism sees it differently. Addiction is just a particular flavor of suffering, and suffering is something the Buddha understood very well.

Taking refuge in the Dharma, in the context of recovery, is similar. It says: recovery is possible, and here is a way that others have had success with.

What do you think? Investigating and practicing the Dharma is specifically not blind faith. It is a path that can be understood, contemplated, investigated and meditated upon. We can kick the tires, see if there is merit to what it says. It is probably a different way of looking at and doing things than we are used to, and it is wonderful to have a road map that has been successful for other people.

Finally there is the Sangha. Taking refuge in the Sangha is the recognition that we don't have to do it alone. There are other people who are trying to walk this same path. We meet them in the various recovery traditions, very often at meetings. Sangha offers a community of people pointing in a similar direction, where we can compare notes and find support.

But in Buddhism, Sangha is not limited to just the connections we make in recovery meetings. It is bigger than that. The Buddha wasn't specifically talking about the suffering of addiction. There are Buddhist communities that exist that know exactly what we are going through, because they too experience the suffering of dukkha. To experience dukkha is to be human. Even through the suffering of addiction, we are not a separate category of person, no special label that sets us apart from the rest of human suffering. We are not alone in this.

The Buddha once told his attendant Ananda that good friendship was not merely half of the holy life; it was the whole of it. That is the Sangha. Not a support group for a specific problem, but the recognition that none of us navigates the conditions of human existence well in isolation. For those of us in recovery, that recognition is not just a philosophical point. It is often what keeps us on the path.

So refuge isn't belief. It is a choice we make, each day, to trust that recovery is possible for us, to try to understand how we might do that, and to reach toward the connections that help us get there.