

## Threefold Refuge (*Tisaraṅgamana*)

Ei Phyu Pyar Kyaw

### Abstract

Human beings will not be able to proceed along their life long journey without the guidance of religious belief. They tend to practise a certain religion or revere the holy one and follow the principles formulated by Him. Their reverence results four main causes: fear, greed, tradition and belief. Of all types' religious belief and practice, only the fourth one is the true religious belief. Buddhists revere the three precious Gems (the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Samgha*). Threefold Refuge that is described in *pāli*, *aṭṭhakathā* and other texts will be selected and presented in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Saraṅgamana*, *Tiratana* and *Tisaraṅga*.

### Introduction

It is true that people cannot live without seeking reliance and refuge from the one who they believe to be holy. They may even worship inanimate things such as trees, mountains or rivers thinking that they will protect them from being harmed. It is not sure whether the one they believe to be holy may be holy or not. A person, who happens to take refuge either in the immoral one, may also become an immoral one or the one with a wrong belief with evil thought, words and deeds. If he takes refuge in a noble person with the right view, his action will be noble and pure physically, verbally and mentally. For this reason, the noble and sacred act of taking highest refuge in the holy one to be worshipped after having a clear understanding of Him and making a justification about the truth of his doctrines is the true veneration with true belief.

All Buddhists take refuge in the three *Saraṅga*. The three *Saraṅga* are the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Samgha*. A person will become a true follower of Buddhism with mere recitation of the word expressing '*Saraṅgamana*'. A novice to be or postulant will not become an eligible novice if he can't pronounce the words expressing his willingness to become a true follower of the *Buddha* with correct stress and intonation. In the early period of the *Buddha*'s time, those who wanted to enter the Order of *Samgha* had to recite 'three *Saraṅgamana*' before they became monks. The threefold refuge is the foundation of Buddhism. So, how to take refuge in the three Gems, and things to be done and those to be abstained to sustain the highest state in the moral life with *Tiratana*, will be presented in this paper.

### Aims

By studying this paper, to gain useful knowledge about the *Tisaraṅga* and to know about the taking refuge in the *Tiratana* can give us many advantages such as becoming true followers of Buddhism, an easy life, wealth, safety and security from danger and disaster, and finally the attainment of *Nibbāna*.

### The main causes of taking refuge in the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Samgha*

Buddhists have some main causes of reliance or taking refuge in *Tiratana*. There are four main causes of taking refuge in *Tiratana*. They are as follows.

1. Fear for potential dangers,

2. Expectation of gifts or wealth,
3. Acceptance of the traditional belief with no knowledge about the holy attributes of *Tiratana* and
4. Clear understanding of the noble virtues of the Buddha after rationalizations to verify his status of '*Dakkhiṇeya*'.

Of all four causes, the fourth one is the best one. In fact, we should pay our highest homage to the Buddha willingly regarding Him as the noblest teacher and guide who gives us words of advice (*ovāda*) to know the truth (*Dhamma*).

### **Meaning of *Saraṇagamana***

The *Pāli* word '*Saraṇagamana*' is a combination of two *Pāli* words '*Saraṇa*' and '*gamana*'. '*Saraṇa*' means refuge or shelter. In other words, the Three Precious Gems (the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Samgha*) can reduce, eliminate and eradicate the danger and troubles that a refuge seeker might have.

'*Gamana*' means knowing. Therefore '*Saraṇagamana*' (*Saraṇagon*)<sup>1</sup> means acknowledging the *Tiratana* as the greatest refuges for Buddhists.

### **Two Types of *Saraṇagamana***

Basically, there are two types of *Saraṇagamana*: the *lokiya* (mundane) *Saraṇagamana* and the *lokuttarā* (supramundane) *Saraṇagamana*.

#### ***Lokiya Saraṇagamana***

*Lokiya Saraṇagamana* means development or deep faith (conviction) to take refuge in *Tiratana* in the mind of a *puthujjana* (lay people).

#### ***Lokuttarā Saraṇagamana***

This type of *Saraṇagamana* develops in the mind of *Ariyas*. No sooner have they realized the four noble Truths, than *Sotapattimagga ñāṇa* arises.

At this instant they have already eradicated defilements of mind such as *vicikicchā* (doubt) and wrong view. Accordingly, they attain the first state of *Sotapattimagga ñāṇa*. They do not need to take *Saraṇagamana* in the same way that the *puthujjana* do. They have their own deep conviction in the *Tiratana* since they have reached the first stage of *Sotapannas*. *Lokuttarā Saraṇagamana* they have is a permanent type of taking refuge.

### **How to take refuge in the *Tiratana***

There are slight differences between the way one made the declaration of his taking highest refuge in the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Samgha* in the time of King *Ajātasattu* and *Kosala* and the way one made his taking refuge in the *Buddha* and *Dhamma* (two refuges) in the early time when there was no holy order of *Samgha* as in the time of *Taphussa* and *Bhallika*. One can take refuge in *Tiratana* by reciting the declaration in *pāli* in correct accent clearly and devotedly.

If one wants to take refuge in *Tiratana* by recitation of the declaration of his faith in them, he can do so in two different ways: reciting the declaration in *pāli* in front of a Buddha image either at home or at a temple or at a pagoda. Another way is to recite the declaration in *pāli* in the presence of a Buddhist monk. In doing so, one must not only recite the declaration

<sup>1</sup> '*Saraṇagon*' = The *Pāli* technical term '*Saraṇagamana*' is based on the word '*gamana*' which changes into '*gon*' in Myanmar. In Myanmar languages it is called '*Saraṇagon*'.

with complete trust in Three Gems showing deep respect but also know the meaning of the *pāḷi* words clearly.

One can do so without mentioning any specific time limit. In doing so, he must repeat the recitation for three times to show his determination and strong faith.

### **The one who has stable *Saraṇagamana* or without stable *Saraṇagamana***

The one who has stable *Saraṇagamana* or without stable *Saraṇagamana* has two types of refuge: those who declare the true faith in the Three Gems and those who do not. Those who have true faith in the holy attributes of the Three Gems take refuge in them.

### **The decline of *Saraṇagamana***

Of two types of *Saraṇagamana* mentioned above, the *Lokuttarā Saraṇagamana* is always pure and it never declines. Only *Lokiya Saraṇagamana* can decline for four main causes. These causes are as follow:

1. Lack of knowledge about the *Tiratana*,
2. Mistaken views about the holy attributes of the *Tiratana*,
3. Doubt and skepticism about the *Tiratana* and
4. Lack of respect for the *Tiratana*

### **The decay of *Saraṇagamana***

The decay of *Saraṇagamana* is caused by two factors-

1. Conversion from *Buddhabhāsā* to other faiths
2. Death

Of these two cases, the decay of *saraṇagamana* caused by conversion to other faiths has many disadvantages because numerous mind defiling factors such as wrong view, craving and conceit etc. are bound to increase with the absence of *saraṇagamana* in one's mind. But the decay of *saraṇagamana* caused by one's death has no disadvantage or no bad outcome.

On the other hand, the *saraṇagamana* developed in an *Ariyā* (noble one) mind gets never decayed. *Lokuttarā Saraṇagamana* is a permanent one that exists in the mind and heart of *Ariyā* despite their death and rebirth.

The act of taking refuge in the *Tisaraṇa* at a funeral-

*Saraṇagamana* means the wholesome consciousness (*kusal citta*) in paying homage to the worthy one i.e., the *Tiratana*. A dead body has no mind when one dies. Although the dead body is left, the mind cannot be traced as it also stops working. Therefore, the act of taking refuge can bring no effect on the corpse. His family members and relatives offer the Buddhist monks alms and robes etc. with the deceased placed near them. The bereaved family and relatives take refuge in the Three Gems before observing the five precepts administered by the monk. After that, they share the merit to all the beings. This traditional practice is commonly called taking refuge in the Three Gems (*Tharagon tin chin*).

In reality, this practice is followed not to make the corpse express his faith in the *Tiratana* but to declare the faith of the bereaved ones in the *Tiratana* so that sharing the meritorious deeds they have done will be more effective and more advantageous. By doing so, the merit shared can be rejoiced by the beings. However, if the deceased happens to be reborn as a ghost or demon, he or she can not only rejoice the merit shared but also declare his faith in the *Tiratana*.

Ghosts and demons can enjoy the benefits of rejoicing the merit shared by their relatives with reference to *Nandakapeta Vatthu*.

*Nandakapeta* was the chief warrior of king *Pingala*'s army before his death. In his human life, he did no meritorious deed. He observed no moral precepts, scolded the virtuous ones like the ascetics and monks, and prohibited alms giving and doing meritorious deeds. He was not only stingy but also immoral. However, *Uttarā*, his daughter, got married with a male devotee. Accordingly, she controlled her mind very well to avoid doing evils. She not only gave alms to the needy but also supported the *Buddhasāsanā*. So, she was a female devotee of the *Buddha*. One day, *Nandaka* died and he became a *vemānikapeta* at a banyan tree. But he would have to be reborn at *niraya* within six months after becoming a *vemānikapeta*. *Uttarā* offered an *Arahant* snacks and alms food so that her father would gain some merit. Then she shared the merit with a special attention. Immediately after she had shared the merit, her late father *Nandakapeta* managed to rejoice the merit shared. After that, he was able to enjoy the celestial wealth and pleasures like *Vesavaṇṇa*, the king of *devas*.

Therefore, the act of taking refuge by the mourners at funeral is a good practice that can be the last help to the deceased for his final journey of his life. This will probably be conducive for the deceased to be free from becoming a *peta* (ghost) or a demon.

### **Advantages of *Saraṇagamana***

Having declared one's true faith in the Three Gems, he becomes a true follower of Buddhism. Both his mind and physical appearance become gentle and noble as he follows the good conduct and noble practice as instructed and guided by the *Buddha*. Both human beings and celestial beings admire his noble and pure mind. On the other hand, he is well protected from being harmed by ogres and ghosts. A person with pure and strong *saraṇagamana* cannot only remove the dangers and threats of the present life but also defend himself from being reborn at the lower world (*apāya loka*) after death. He can enjoy eight advantages in whatever rebirth. These eight advantages are:

1. Being honoured and venerated by many people,
2. Being endowed with great wisdom,
3. Having influences on others to conform one's wish,
4. Having great wealth,
5. Having good physical appearance,
6. Being loved and respected by many people,
7. Having good and loyal friends and
8. Having great fame

In addition, a virtuous one with strong faith in the *Tisaraṇa* can be reborn at the celestial abodes (the abode of *devas*). A *deva* reborn at a celestial abode for this merit in the previous existence can enjoy ten more advantages over the other common *devas*. These ten more advantages are:

1. Longevity,
2. Beauty,
3. Richness,
4. Attendants,

5. Influence,
6. Visible objects,
7. Pleasant sounds,
8. Sweet odors,
9. Good taste and
10. Pleasant contact.

In short, it can be learnt that taking refuge in the Three Gems can give us many advantages.

### **Some stories highlighting the benefits of *Saraṇagamana* mentioned in *Pāḷi* literature**

There are many stories in *Pāḷi* literature that highlight the benefits of *saraṇagamana*. It is learnt that those who take refuge in the Three Gems and who pay the highest homage to the Three Gems are reborn at the celestial abodes filled with different kinds of celestial enjoyment after their death. It was described in *Pāḷi* scriptures that there were many celestial beings, male and female (devas and devīs), who were reborn in the celestial abodes for their noble act of taking refuge in the Three Gems after death, for example, the young lad *chattā*, *Bhikkhu Tisaraṇamaniya*, *Maṭṭhakuṇḍalī*, the well-bred man, the elephant and monkey dwelling in *Pālileyyaka* wood, frog, five hundred bats, fisherman *Damiḷha* and *Candālī* (destitute), etc. Among them, this paper will present the fisherman *Damiḷha* because he gained great benefits after taking refuge in the Three Gems.

#### **Fisherman *Damiḷha***

A fisherman *Damiḷha* lived at *Madhuaṅgaṇa* village in Ceylon. He had no other livelihood than fishing from the time he came of age and got married to the last minute of his life. He made a living by fishing alone throughout his life. He had not done meritorious deeds but his wife had. But he did not gain any merit from her. When he was on his death bed, he shouted helplessly as he saw the *gatinimitta* (signs of destiny). Such as the flames of the hell and those who were suffering at the hell etc. It is natural that the dying people can see the destination they have to go. Being a fisherman, *Damiḷha* had killed a large number of fish throughout his life. So, he had to cry out frightfully at the sight of the flames and helpless victims of the hell.

Meanwhile a Buddhist monk called *Cūḷapiṇḍapadika Tissa* was on his daily alms round. Hearing the fisherman's frightful shouts, he immediately knew that the dying man was going to be reborn at *niraya*.

As the monk stood at the fisherman's house, he got an idea to help the dying man. He thought that he should try his best to prevent the man from being reborn at *niraya* because the fisherman was also a lay devotee for he had offered him some alms food before. He continued to think that it was not good for him to neglect the miserable shout of his donor. A donor of alms food to the monk was on the brink of *niraya* in the presence of the recipient. So, he took a seat near the dying man. With the purpose of helping the fisherman to reach a good destination after his death, the monk administered the five precepts with Three Gems and his *cuticitta* (death consciousness) arose and he died. He no longer could continue use to recite anything more for observing the five precepts. But, owing to the great benefits of *saraṇagamana*, he was reborn as a deva (celestial being at *Catumahārāja* celestial abode) immediately after his death with no gap of time. The life expectancy of celestial beings in this abode was nine million years in terms of human scale.

By studying the above mentioned story that provides us a message about the benefit of *saraṇagamana*, it is learnt that even the last minute *saraṇagamana* can give a great benefit to be reborn at a celestial abode.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, one can become a true Buddhist if he takes refuge in the *Tiratana*. In fact, '*saraṇagamana*' means paying one's highest homage to the *Tiratana* with strong faith and clear view. So, we can know that the *Tiratana* are *Sadeyyavatthu*, which can increase one's faith and confidence in Buddhism. Having realized the holy attributes of the most valuable *Tiratana*, paying homage to them with strong faith and clear view will remove *kilesā* or mind defiling factors of a devotee immediately and peace of mind and clear view are the immediate effects of *saraṇagamana*.

As we come to know how *saraṇagamana* declines or decays, we should avoid these factors so that the *saraṇagamana* we declare will be pure and long lasting throughout our life span.

It is learnt that those who have a golden opportunity to meet and take refuge in *Tiratana* will certainly become the virtuous ones both in this present life and in the next rebirths along the journey of *saṃsāra*. It is also known that Buddhists always recite the declaration of *saraṇagamana* whenever they do meritorious deeds. They believe that doing meritorious deeds after paying homage to the *Tisarāṇa* can be more effective and conducive to strengthen the merit gained.

To sum up, when one knows precisely about the *Tiratana* that is the only true and reliable refuge both for present life and for next existences in the *saṃsāra*, he will become a true follower of Buddhism. In addition, just as the *saraṇagamana* that one declares saves him from all kinds of dangers in this life, this noble act can prevent one from falling to the lower world. Having known a comprehensive meaning of *saraṇagamana*, we must strive hard to become true followers of the Buddha.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound thanks to Dr Nilar Myint, and Dr. Mar Lar, Pro-Rectors of Hinthada University, for their kind permission and encouragement to carry out this work. It is my pleasure to express my sincere thanks to Professor Dr Soe Mya Hla Thuzar, Head of Department of Oriental Studies and Professor Dr Myint Myint Than, for their kind permission to carry out this work and her keen interest and help given during this research work.

### References

#### *Pāli* texts

1. *Apadāna Pāli* Vol.I, (1960).
2. *Petavatthu Pāli*, (1960).
3. *Samyuttanikāya Pāli* Vol.II, (1957).
4. *Vimānavatthu Pāli*, (2000).

#### Commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*)

1. *Dhammapāla, Bhaddanta*, (1958). *Petavatthu Aṭṭhakathā*, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.
2. *Dhammapāla, Bhaddanta*, (1958). *Vimānavatthu Aṭṭhakathā*, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.

- 3. *Buddhaghosa, Mahāthera, (1958). Aṅguttara Aṭṭhakathā Vol.II, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*
- 4. *Buddhaghosa, Mahāthera, (1958). Khuddakapāṭha Aṭṭhakathā, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*
- 5. *Buddhaghosa, Mahāthera, (1959). Dīghanikāya Aṭṭhakathā Vol.I, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*
- 6. *Buddhaghosa, Mahāthera, (1992). Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā Vol.I, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*
- 7. *Buddhaghosa, Mahāthera, (1993). Majjhimanikāya Aṭṭhakathā Vol.I, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*

**Sub Commentaries (Ṭīkā)**

- 1. *Sāriputta, Bhaddanta, (1990). Sāratthadīpanī Ṭīkā Vol.I, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*
- 2. *Coliyakassapa, Bhaddanta, (1960). Vimativinodanī Ṭīkā Vol.I, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*
- 3. *Coliyakassapa, Bhaddanta, (1960). Vimativinodanī Ṭīkā Vol.I, Yangon; Department of religious affairs.*

**Other Texts**

- ၁။ ဉာတိခမ်း။ (၂၀၁၆)။ သောတာပန်ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ကဲ့သို့အပါယ်မကျသောပုထုဇဉ်လူသား(ရ)ယောက်။
- ၂။ မင်းတင်မွန်၊ ဒေါက်တာ။ (၂၀၀၃)။ မြတ်သရဏဂုံ။ မြမွန်ရတနာစာပေ။ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။
- ၃။ (၁၉၉၄)။ ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာတရားတော်အထက်တန်းဆင့်။ သာသနာရေးဦးစီးဌာနပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။
- ၄။ (၂၀၀၇)။ ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာကောင်းတစ်ယောက်။ သာသနာရေးဦးစီးဌာနပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။