A Note on Refuge in Vedic and Pāli Texts

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Abstract

In this exploratory note I consider a few examples of refuge motifs in vedic and Pāli texts, including examples of the vedic motif of triple refuge. Concerned more with questions and suggestions than with definitive answers, the following is an attempt to think through some of the implications of "refuge" and "going for refuge" as these ideas appear in a selection of ancient and more recent texts.

I. "The Triple Gem," according to Nyanaponika Thera, "has objective existence as an impersonal idea or ideal as long as it is known and cherished. Even in that mode it is doubtlessly a persisting and active source of benefit for the world."[1] It was in the late 1940s that these remarks were first uttered,[2] and they were immediately followed by this elaboration on the Triple Gem, also known as the Triple Refuge:

> But it is transformed from an impersonal idea to a personal refuge only to the extent that it is realized in one's own mind and manifested in one's own life. Therefore, the existence of the Triple Gem in its characteristic nature as a refuge cannot be proved to others. Each must find this refuge in himself by his own efforts.[3]

[1] From *The Threefold Refuge* by Nyanaponika Thera (2008, 8).

[2] When the paper that was eventually published as *The Threefold Refuge* was read in Colombo on March 20, 1948 (ibid., 1).

[3] Ibid., 8.

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It would be an engrossing pastime to speculate about the above words and whether they could have been uttered without there having been a Protestant Reformation or the Christianity that preceded that mighty upheaval. For although the individual who became Nyanaponika Thera was born to a Jewish family,[4] he came of age in a Germany steeped in centuries of Christian and Protestant thought, a land, moreover, in which a formidable array of mystics, Romantic thinkers, and theologians had discovered with irrevocable certainty the highest truths of religion amid the shifting currents of personal feeling and inner experience.[5] Religion for such thinkers was not about dry theory, nor empty ceremonial, and, for Nyanaponika, neither was the act of "going for refuge." Nyanaponika explained that going for refuge "should be a conscious act, not the mere profession of a theoretical belief or a habitual rite of traditional piety."[6] Those who go for refuge finally do so in the fullest sense "by actually attaining to the refuge through their own inner realization."[7]

Nyanaponika's musings on what it means to go for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha might furnish the student of religion with any number of points for further consideration. But in this note I shall follow a line of thought suggested by Nyanaponika's insistence that going for refuge ideally amounts to a kind of "inner realization" congruent with developments in other aspects of the refugee's life.[8] I furthermore would like to suggest that something of what Nyanaponika calls for is illustrated in the following

[4] See *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Buswell and Lopez 2014), s.v. "Ñāṇaponika Mahāthera," also known as Nyanaponika Mahathera, etc., born Siegmund Feniger (1901-1994).

[5] For introductory discussions of thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Rudolph Otto (1869-1937), see Kessler (2012, 12-16, 79-84) and McCutcheon (2014, 168-171). Michael Ferber provides an accessible introduction to Romanticism vis-à-vis religion and philosophy (2010, 63-91); also helpful are the historically astute remarks of Taylor (2012, 58-63), the retrospective elements in Thomas (2006), and the more substantial treatment of Reardon (1999). Richard Tarnas (1991, 366-394) provides a contextualizing discussion of Romanticism with references to the *Confessions* of both Augustine and Rousseau.

[6] Nyanaponika Thera (2008, 7).

[7] Ibid., 8.

[8] Nyanaponika approvingly refers to "ancient devotees" who perceived the act of going for refuge "as a most momentous step decisive for life, entailing sacred responsibilities" (2008, 11). Nyanaponika also expounds four graduated methods or modes of going for refuge, "each entailing a different degree of commitment" (10) and each entailing physical, verbal, or mental activities, changes in attitude, etc. (11-14). On the idea of refuge in Theravāda Buddhism see also Carter (2006).

narrative about the female elder Sumanā from Dhammapāla's medieval commentary on *Therīgāthā* verse 16:

> Hearing the Master preach the doctrine to the King Pasenadi . . . she believed, and was established in the Refuges and the Precepts. Fain to leave the world, she put off doing so that she might take care of her grandmother as long as she lived. After the grandmother's death, Sumanā went, accompanied by the King, to the Vihāra, taking much treasure in carpets and shawls, and presenting them to the Order. And hearing the Master teach, she attained the fruit of the Path of No-return, and asked for ordination.[9]

What makes this account interesting for the student of religion is that in it one finds the story of a great discontinuity, at the heart of which is the certainty felt by one who becomes "established" (*patiṭṭhāya*) in the refuges (*saraṇesu*) of Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. Concomitant with this development there is moral improvement, registered in the account by mention of "the Precepts" (*sīlesu*).[10] In the wording of the account we are made to appreciate a sequence of events,[11] and how Sumanā's transformative experience manifests in other aspects of her life: she wishes to "leave the world," but above all the great discontinuity in Sumanā's life is symbolized by her transference of precious objects to the monastic establishment, and by her subsequent decision to seek ordination. Following in the wake of Romantic era thinkers and before them Augustine – whom so many of us follow without knowing it – we might think it fitting to speak of Sumanā's "change of heart."[12] In what follows I shall attempt

[9] Rhys Davids (1909, 19-20). See Müller (1893, 22).

[10] The Pāli word *sīlesu* evokes a range of ideas: "in moral practices," "in the rules of behavior," etc. On the Buddhist meaning of *sīla* see Norman (2012, 198).

[11] In the translation as in the Pāli text, part of which reads: *desitaṃ dhammaṃ sutvā laddhapasādā saraṇesu sīlesu ca patiṭṭhāya pabbajitukāmā* (Müller 1893, 22). To recapitulate: after hearing the teaching that was preached, she had faith, and after becoming established in the [three] refuges and in moral behaviors, she wished to go forth, i.e. leave the worldly lifestyle.

[12] According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (Ammer 2013), the phrase "change of heart" (s.v.) dates to the early 1800s. In the 1828 edition of Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1, one definition of the word "conversion" (s.v.) begins: "In a *theological* or *moral sense*, a change of heart" (original italics). After noting that "the Romantic movement identified the heart of religion with feeling rather than with the conclusions of intellectual arguments," Henry Chadwick states: "Augustine was not in the least anti-intellectual, but he did not think that intellect had the last word and he pioneered a highly

to place the story of Sumanā and her change of heart in a somewhat wider perspective. I also would like to suggest that we cannot fully understand certain events depicted in Pāli texts unless we understand the vedic antecedents of going for refuge.

II. Some people in ancient India used the word *saraṇa*, as we read in Pāli texts, while others used the word *śaraṇa*, as we read in vedic texts.[13] But these refer to the same thing or to the same set of related ideas: refuge, shelter, protection, and that which provides the same. With this understanding in mind a Buddhist composer of a *sutta* could imagine *saraṇa* in the form of a true friend: "he is a refuge for the frightened" (*bhītassa saraṇaṃ hoti*).[14] The composer of *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* 3.27, on the other hand, could imagine *śaraṇa* in connection with the intricacies of vedic recitation: "I resort to the meter which, Prajāpati, is your refuge" (*yat te prajāpate śaraṇaṃ*

positive evaluation of human feelings. We owe to him our use of the word 'heart' in this sense" (Chadwick 2001, 3-4). For other reasons too, "Augustine could well be called the first Romantic" (Brown 1973, 39). Augustine described the climactic events of his conversion (see *Confessions* viii 11.25-12.29) with repeated references to his "heart" (Latin: *cor*), drawing in part, according to Chadwick, on the language of Psalm 18:15 in Augustine's Latin Bible (*Confessions* viii 12.28, tr. Chadwick 2008, 152 – see also xxvi); cf. the Loeb edition of Augustine's *Confessions* (tr. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond 2014, esp. 406-407). At this pivotal moment and at other significant points in Augustine's career, the achievements and letters of the Apostle Paul were much on Augustine's mind (Brown 2000, 99-102, 106, 144, 201, 508-509; Fredriksen 1986, 20-28). And it is of course Paul's "conversion" experience (as told primarily in Acts) that remains for many the example *par excellence* of a change of heart. References to Paul's religious transformation in the undisputed letters of the Apostle are notoriously few and allusive; in those same letters Paul sometimes uses the word μετάνοια, "repentance, change of heart, turning from one's sins, changing one's ways" (*A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, Newman 2014, s.v. *μετά|νοια*). In 2 Corinthians 7:10, for example, Paul writes of a "repentance that leads to salvation" (NRSV); see Douglas, Brown, and Comfort (1993, 637). A searching treatment of the evidence for Paul's conversion, as well as Augustine's reaction(s) to that evidence, can be found in Fredriksen (1986); cf. the response of Asiedu (2001).

[13] Or with accent: *śaraṇá*. Not all vedic texts are accented and in this note I use accented forms only in direct quotations. Also in this note I take a relatively broad view (basically following Witzel 2005) of the rubric "vedic texts," under which the early *Upaniṣad*s and *Śrautasūtra*s are included.

[14] See Carpenter (1911, 187) = DN iii 187. Carpenter lists the variant *paṭisaraṇaṃ* (187 n. 2). The phrase *bhītassa saraṇaṃ hoti* appears with other wording from DN iii 187 in commentaries on other texts. See, for example, Smith (1989, 73).

chandas tat prapadye).[15] The composer does not explain to our satisfaction the relationship between Prajāpati and *śaraṇa*,[16] but the association between *śaraṇa* and divine power was in any event an old one. Indeed, when composers of classic vedic texts thought of *śaraṇa* they often thought of the gods. The poet of *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* 1.158.3, for example, could pray to the Aśvins, the twin gods: "may I gain your shelter and protection" (*úpa vām ávaḥ śaraṇáṃ gameyaṃ*).[17] Or, reading *śaraṇa* in this same passage adjectivally: "I would come to your sheltering help."[18] Either way, divine forms of refuge, shelter, and protection flourished in the minds of Ṛgvedic poets.[19] The poet of *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* 6.49.7 could imagine Sarasvatī acting with other goddesses or divine ladies to hold up *śaraṇa* and spread it out like some kind of perfect canopy: "together with goddesses she will extend unbroken protection" (*gnā́bhir áchidraṃ śaraṇáṃ sajóṣā . . . yaṃsat*). The poet of *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* 7.95.5 could imagine being in Sarasvatī's "dearest" protection or shelter (*śárman priyátame*), and build on that idea to evoke the image of an arboreal refuge: "may we stand nearby it like a sheltering tree" (*úpa stheyāma śaraṇáṃ ná vṛkṣám*).[20] The idea that Sarasvatī's protection is like a tree that provides shelter or refuge can be found in other vedic texts.[21] A different view of human beings going for refuge (*saraṇa*) to trees and other objects can be found in the *Dhammapada*:

> Men who are terrified by danger go to many a refuge,
> to mountains, and woods, to parks, trees and shrines.[22]

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[15] Translation based on Kashikar (2003, vol. 1, 175), with modifications. Sanskrit text from Kashikar (ibid., 174).

[16] Cf. *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 1.327 *prajāpatir asi . . . brahmaṇaś śaraṇa tan mā pāhi iti* (Vira and Chandra 1986, 137), "You are Prajāpati . . . the protection of brahman, protect me" (tr. Bodewitz 1990, 186). On the interpretation of this part of JB 1.327 see Bodewitz (312 n. 25).

[17] From the translation by Griffith (1889, 271). All transliterated Sanskrit passages from the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* in this note are based on Aufrecht (1877).

[18] From the translation by Jamison and Brereton (2014, vol. 1, 336). In other passages too Jamison and Brereton, and other translators, sometimes translate *śaraṇa* adjectivally.

[19] As did terms for such ideas. See, for example, RV 1.114.5 *śárma várma chardír*, "shelter, covering, and protection" (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014, vol. 1, 266).

[20] From the translation by Jamison and Brereton (2014, vol. 2, 1003).

[21] See, for example, *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.4.6.1 (Sastry 1921, 191).

[22] *Dhammapada* verse 188 translated by Norman (2000, 29). See Sūriyagoḍa Sumaṅgala Thera (1914, 28); Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2011, 122).

In the following verse of the *Dhammapada* we are told that such things are not a "secure refuge" (*saraṇaṃ khemaṃ*), are not the "best refuge" (*saraṇam uttamaṃ*).[23] The Buddha would be a better refuge, as elsewhere in Pāli texts we are made to understand:

> Whoever have gone to the Buddha as a refuge –
> they will not go to the realm of perdition.
> Having abandoned the human body,
> they will fill out the company of the gods.[24]

Composers of Pāli texts delighted in representing not only human beings but also divine figures going to the Buddha for refuge. Thus the moon god pays homage to the Blessed One, and then says: "Be for me a refuge!" (*tassa me saraṇaṃ bhavā ti*).[25] The sun god says the same.[26] But in time the Buddhist tradition would come to agree that the best refuge for most people is the triple refuge (*tisaraṇa*) consisting of Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. Furthermore, as we have seen above, some Buddhists eventually would claim that going for refuge, if it were a going worthy of the name, ought to involve a kind of inner experience that manifests in one's life. The question for the student of religion is the following: is there support in the primary texts of the *suttapiṭaka* for such a position? To help stake out the conceptual territory of our inquiries we might consider the following verse, again from the *Dhammapada*:

> But whoever goes to the Buddha, the Doctrine and the Order as a refuge, he perceives with proper knowledge the four noble truths.[27]

Notable in this verse is the assertion that going to the triple refuge involves a kind of inner realization. Even so, the verse with its frankly gnostic sensibility may not speak adequately to the kind of inner experience that many would call a change of heart. For a stronger sense of the latter we must look elsewhere in Pāli texts. Before we do so, however, we must return to the corpus of vedic

[23] Quotations from Norman (2000, 29). See Sūriyagoḍa Sumaṅgala Thera (1914, 28); Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2011, 122).

[24] See Feer (1884, 27) = SN i 27.

[25] See Feer (1884, 50) = SN i 50.

[26] See Feer (1884, 51) = SN i 51.

[27] *Dhammapada* verse 190. Translation based on Norman (2000, 29), with modifications. See Sūriyagoḍa Sumaṅgala Thera (1914, 28); Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2011, 123).

texts. For as even brief forays into the vedic corpus make clear, Buddhists had no monopoly on the idea of refuge, nor on the idea of a triple refuge. Indeed, if standard accounts and chronologies are correct,[28] composers of vedic texts arrived at the idea of a triple refuge long before the Buddhists.

III. An enigmatic instance of the triple refuge motif occurs in a hymn to Parjanya, a vedic god of thunder and rain, at *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* 7.101.2. In the nineteenth century Ralph T. H. Griffith translated the key part of the verse as follows: "Vouchsafe us triple shelter for our refuge."[29] W. Norman Brown understood the text more or less in the same way, but reversed the terms: "provide a triple refuge as our shelter."[30] Wendy Doniger peered into the text and also saw "triple refuge." Her translation is shown here along with the verse in full:

> *yó várdhana óṣadhīnāṃ yó apā́ṃ yó víśvasya jágato devá ī́śe | sá tridhā́tu śaraṇáṃ śárma yaṃsat trivártu jyótiḥ svabhiṣṭy àsmé ||*
>
> The god who causes the plants to increase, and the waters, who rules over the entire world, may he grant us triple refuge and comfort, the triple light that is of good help to us.[31]

As one might expect, other translators have understood and translated the verse somewhat differently. Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton translate the verse as follows:

> The one who is the increaser of plants, who of the waters, who, as god, holds sway over the whole moving world, he will extend triply layered sheltering shelter, triply turned very superior light to us.[32]

In their introduction to the hymn Jamison and Brereton observe: "this hymn celebrates the fructifying rain in sometimes cryptic and riddling terms, which probably involve simultaneous natural and ritual reference."[33] The translators also point out that the number three is a "recurrent theme" in the hymn.[34] All in

[28] See, for example: Witzel (1995); Witzel (1997); Olivelle (1998, 4-21); Witzel (2009).
[29] Griffith (1897, 95).
[30] Brown (1978, 12).
[31] Doniger (n.d., 174-175).
[32] Jamison and Brereton (2014, vol. 2, 1011).
[33] Ibid., 1010.
[34] Ibid.

all, it is by no means clear why the "triply layered sheltering shelter" (*tridhātu śaraṇaṃ śarma*) or in some translations the "triple refuge" (*tridhātu śaraṇaṃ*) is in fact *tridhātu*, consisting of three (*tri*) parts or elements (*dhātu*) and thus "triply layered" or "triple."[35] An interesting sidelight on the issue is cast, perhaps, by the way *tridhātu* was sometimes used to refer to the threefold nature of heaven and earth.[36] But however that may be, the meaning or evocative potential of a triple *śaraṇa* certainly was grasped by the composers of other texts.

Let us take *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* 6.46.9 as an example. This verse occurs in a hymn that "concentrates on Indra as the helper of his praisers in contests and in battles."[37] The hymn is arranged in a series of two-verse *pragātha* strophic units.[38] Calling directly on the god, the poet addresses Indra thus:

> *índra tridhā́tu śaraṇáṃ trivárūthaṃ svastimát | chardír yacha maghávadbhyaś ca máhyaṃ ca yāváyā didyúm ebhyaḥ ||*
>
> O Indra, threefold refuge, triple-secure, providing well-being – extend [such] protection to the benefactors and to me. Keep the arrow away from those [39]

The verse ends, as it were, in mid-sentence; suffice it to say here that the latter part of the verse runs into the next verse and forms a prayer for keeping

[35] Cf. RV 8.47.10 *śárma śaraṇáṃ . . . tridhā́tu yád varūthyàṃ*, "sheltering shelter . . . providing threefold defense" (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014, vol. 2, 1127).

[36] See, for example, RV 1.34.7; 4.42.4; 7.5.4; 1.154.4. In the latter Jamison and Brereton translate *tridhā́tu pṛthivī́m utá dyā́m* as "heaven and earth in their three parts" (2014, vol. 1, 331); see Macdonell (2006, 34) on ways of construing *tridhātu* in the verse. Additional references to Indian tripartite cosmology can be found in Kirfel (1920, 3-5). Richard Gombrich has observed that in vedic cosmology the universe is held to be "bipartite" or "tripartite," with additional complications: "sometimes the two, sky and earth, sometimes the three, earth, atmosphere and sky, are said each to consist of three strata" (1975, 112). Could *tridhātu śaraṇaṃ* thus be understood as something like "(providing) refuge on all three cosmic levels"? The question stems from an exchange with Richard Gombrich (personal communication, August 2016), who also reminded me that Pāli Buddhism too divides the universe into three layers: *kāmadhātu* ("sphere of desire"), *rūpadhātu* ("sphere of form"), and *arūpadhātu* ("sphere of non-form"). On the latter scheme see Gombrich (1975, 133-134). See also *A Dictionary of Pāli* (Cone 2010), s.vv. *tedhātu*, *tedhātuka*.

[37] Jamison and Brereton (2014, vol. 2, 831).

[38] Ibid.

[39] Translation of RV 6.46.9 based on Jamison and Brereton (2014, vol. 2, 833), but I have incorporated elements of other translations or comments (in part to harmonize the translation with the translation of *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 5.1.21 – see below).

the right sort of people (the brave people, our people) safe from the arrow.[40] Reflecting on the above verse, Royal W. Weiler noted: "Indra was implored to grant a happy home, a triple protection (*śaraṇa*), triply strong."[41] W. Norman Brown noted more simply: "Indra provides triple refuge."[42] In fact there is good reason to regard RV 6.46.9 as the *locus classicus* of the triple *śaraṇa* motif. This is because: (a) the verse is quoted in several other vedic texts; and (b) those quotations indicate that the verse or the *pragātha* (verses 9-10) provided important content for actual performances of rituals.[43]

This can be seen in *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 5.1.21. This passage is part of a larger textual unit dedicated to explaining elements of the ritual program, including chants (*sāman*), carried out on the third day of the *pṛṣṭhya ṣaḍaha* rite:

> *indra tridhātu śaraṇam iti sāmapragāthas trivāṃs tṛtīye 'hani tṛtīyasyāhno rūpaṃ*
>
> "O Indra, threefold refuge" is the *pragātha* of the *sāman*. Containing [the word] "three" on the third day, it is a symbol of the third day.[44]

The composer of the passage finds the wording of RV 6.46.9 to have a measure of symbolic meaning. But what more such symbolism meant to the composer, if it meant anything more at all, is something about which we can only wonder. Perhaps the idea of "three" (*tri-*) on the third day of the ritual seemed amazing to the composer, as if that liturgical detail were a precious window through which one might glimpse the eternally valid but deeply mysterious nature of reality. Or maybe not. The composer of this part of the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* did not linger on the topic or record for posterity additional thoughts on the matter, but like a hurried traveler with much ground to cover, the composer quickly moved on with more terse "discussions" of the scores of words and yet more words that flow here like a torrent from the Ṛgvedic hymns into this, the composer's area of responsibility. The performance extending across book five of the *Aitareya*

[40] See Jamison and Brereton (2014, vol. 2, 833).

[41] Weiler (1962, 241).

[42] Brown (1978, 12), commenting on RV 7.101.2 with a reference to RV 6.46.9.

[43] See examples including but not limited to: *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 5.1.21; 5.20.21 (Aufrecht 1879, 123, 144); *Śānkhāyana Śrautasūtra* 6.13.3 (= 6.13.4 in Hillebrandt 1888, 70); *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.391 (Vira and Chandra 1986, 330); *Āśvalāyana Śrautasūtra* 7.3.19 (Vidyāratna 1874, 559); *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* 22.4 (Lindner 1887, 98).

[44] AB 5.1.21. See Aufrecht (1879, 123). Translation based on Keith (1920, 224), with modifications.

Brāhmaṇa is surely impressive in its own way. But still we might wonder what it all finally meant to those long chains of transmitters and receivers in old India, the Brahmins, of whom it can be said truly: they did their duty.

IV. To the extent that the vedic passages mentioned above (and others) were recited and taught to succeeding generations, and to the extent that rites such as the *pṛṣṭhya ṣaḍaha* (and others) continued to be performed according to sanctioned patterns, it would seem that notions of tripartite protection, threefold shelter, triple refuge – all the connotations of *tridhātu śaraṇaṃ trivarūtham* – lived on in the minds of at least some Brahmins. And possibly in the minds of others in ancient India.[45] Weiler has claimed that the "triple averment," or verbally going for refuge to Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, is "strongly reminiscent of Indra's triple refuge."[46] But there are other intriguing motifs of refuge and triple-refuge in vedic texts, and it might be that over time the older vedic ideas of refuge and triple refuge influenced or took on new forms, forms that might help us better understand evolving ideas of refuge in ancient India.[47] These may have emerged in what Michael Witzel calls the "Late Vedic" period, when the great early *Upaniṣad*s and other texts were created by composers who – it is widely acknowledged – drew with considerable expertise on earlier vedic

[45] It is certain that some vedic motifs found their way into non-vedic texts. But exactly how and why did this happen? More to the point, were vedic references to "refuge" known, at least to some degree, by non-priests? By bards or patrons? By cultured despisers? By those who purveyed or sought remedies in spells or mantras? Weiler suggests that because the formula "O Indra, threefold refuge . . . " is the *pragātha* of the *sāman* in AB 5.1.21, it "operates as a kind of spell" (1962, 241 n. 20) – but he does not elaborate on the use of such mantric "spells" in any significant way. For a discussion of the use of Ṛgvedic mantras in different contexts see Patton (2005).

[46] Weiler (1962, 242), referring to RV 6.46.9. Monier Monier-Williams thought that the Buddhist "three-refuge formula" was noteworthy for another reason: "Very remarkably, this, the only prayer of true Buddhism, resembled the Gāyatrī or sacred prayer of the Veda . . . in consisting of three times eight syllables" (1889, 78). Monier-Williams also noted how the "prayer-formula of the Jains" differs from the "three-refuge" formula of the Buddhists (536) – one difference being that the former does not refer to refuge.

[47] "The act of taking refuge, in traditional Indian culture, was a formal act of allegiance, submitting to the preeminence and claiming the protection of a powerful patron, whether human or divine. The formula of taking refuge was uttered three times to make it a solemn and formal commitment" (Robinson and Johnson 1997, 43). Unfortunately, Robinson and Johnson do not cite any texts for this explanation, nor do they explain what is meant by "traditional Indian culture." Weiler's comment on the matter is even less anchored to any particular time or place: "The transition from the literal shelter of a home to a greater and truer shelter or protection of a god or gods is natural and easy for the religiously orientated mind" (1962, 241 n. 20).

material.[48] Such composers would have realized that they could draw on a selection of usages to express ideas of refuge and triple refuge, including the word *śaraṇa*.[49] Or take the verb *pra√pad*, forms of which were used in some vedic texts in the sense of "resort to" or "take refuge in."[50] In the great *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* forms of *pra√pad* are used in this sense to articulate a complex set of refuges: turning to *bhūr* for protection means turning to the earth for protection, to the intermediate region for protection, and to the sky for protection; turning to *bhuvas* for protection means turning to the fire for protection, to the wind for protection, and to the sun for protection; turning to *svar* for protection means turning to the *Ṛgveda* for protection, to the *Yajurveda* for protection, and to the *Sāmaveda* for protection.[51] This being so, *bhūr*, *bhuvas*, and *svar* each can be thought of as a kind of triple refuge.[52]

We have already seen, above, a form of *pra√pad* used in connection with the word *śaraṇa* in the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra*, another late vedic text.[53] In *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 2.22.3-4 a form of *pra√pad* is collocated with the word *śaraṇa* in a construction having the following pattern: x *śaraṇaṃ prapanno*. With x in the accusative this formula basically means: "I have gone forward to x as a refuge," or "I have resorted to x as a refuge," or as some translators render it, "I have taken refuge in x." What is more, the construction is used to speak explicitly of going to three refuges:

[48] Witzel posits that the early *Upaniṣad*s, including the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, date to before c. 400 BCE (see now Witzel 2009, 287, 290, 292, 308).

[49] Another available term, as we have seen above, was *śarman*. Some examples of *śarman* that is triple or threefold (*tridhātu*) include RV 1.34.6; 8.40.12; some examples of *śarman* that provides triple or threefold defense (*trivarūtha*) include RV 8.42.2; 9.97.47; 10.66.5; 10.66.7; 10.142.1; *Atharvaveda Saṃhitā* (Śaunaka) 9.2.16 (Roth and Whitney 1855, 197); *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 4.3.12.1 (Weber 1871, 361). It is difficult to estimate the extent to which such ideas of *śarman* might have influenced ideas of triple or threefold *śaraṇa* or *saraṇa*.

[50] Or a similar expression. See *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 6.5.6.3 (Weber 1872, 216; tr. Keith 1914, vol. 2, 542); *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 4.42 (text and tr. Gonda 1989, 41).

[51] CU 3.15.5-7 (text and tr. Olivelle 1998, 210-211). I have greatly condensed Olivelle's translation.

[52] The terms recall vedic cosmology as explained in relation to another ritual context: "If we turn now to the tri-partition [of the universe] . . . earth, atmosphere and heaven are called *bhūr*, *bhuvaḥ* and *svar* respectively . . . . These three words, in the nominative as just cited, are from very early times known as the three *vyāhṛti*, the three utterances . . . . In this [ritual context under discussion] the meaning of the syllables has long been disregarded; but *bhū* and *svar* are good classical Sanskrit words for earth and sky, and the middle term, *bhuvaḥ*, is but the plural of *bhū*. This curious detail may suffice to show that it is the basic tri-partition which really pervades Indian cosmology" (Gombrich 1975, 113).

[53] On such late vedic texts see Witzel (1995, 2-3); Witzel (2005, 77, 86-87).

> All the vowels are corporeal forms (*ātman*) of Indra. All the spirants are corporeal forms of Prajāpati. And all the stops are corporeal forms of Death. So, if someone criticizes him for the way he pronounces his vowels, he should tell that man: "I have taken refuge in Indra, and he will rebut you." And if someone criticizes him for the way he pronounces his spirants, he should tell that man: "I have taken refuge in Prajāpati, and he will crush you." And if someone criticizes him for the way he pronounces his stops, he should tell that man: "I have taken refuge in Death, and he will burn you up."[54]

One feels sure that the trinity in this passage is triune – if I may put it in such a way – because there are only three topics that the Sāmavedic composer wishes to address in the passage: the correct pronunciation of vowels, the correct pronunciation of spirants, and the correct pronunciation of stops. But it may well be that what makes this passage interesting for composer and audience alike, so I would like to suggest, is the application of the old *śaraṇa* and triple *śaraṇa* motifs – reinforced with a recognized sense of *pra√pad* – to a new situation. For here another kind of triple refuge has been established by going to Indra, Prajāpati, and Death. These entities are willing to act now, apparently, as protectors of the particular ways of pronunciation favored by the composer of the text.[55] In a note such as this one we cannot pursue the question of what was at stake for the composer of the above passage, and direct influence from an earlier triple *śaraṇa* motif must remain conjectural. Here I will simply reiterate that composers of *Upaniṣad*s and other vedic and post-vedic texts were masters at recycling earlier vedic terms and motifs, this being one way that new ideas could be advanced in a milieu that prized tradition.[56] And as scholars including K. R. Norman and Richard Gombrich have shown in a variety of publications, it was a game that Buddhists too could play rather well.[57]

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[54] Olivelle (1998, 197). For the Sanskrit text see ibid., 196.

[55] On which pronunciation see CU 2.22.5; also Olivelle (1998, 540 n. 22.5). Weiler, seemingly writing in terms of the particular and the general, asserted that CU 2.22.3-5 "illustrated" the "thin line between the persuasion of religion and the coercion of magic, with regard to the search for a true refuge" (1962, 241 n. 20).

[56] As the recent dissertation of Finnian McKean Moore Gerety (2015) reminds us with striking force.

[57] However, *śaraṇa / saraṇa* is not among the "Brahmanical Terms in a Buddhist Guise" discussed by Norman (2012).

V. Nyanaponika's musings on refuge appear to have been motivated, at least in part, by a desire to prevent "the process of taking refuge from degenerating into a routine habit."[58] The great Thera, so it seems, wished to forestall the "degradation" of going for refuge "by way of thoughtless recital of the formula."[59] Ironically, Nyanaponika's remarks serve to underscore just how routine and formulaic the accounts of going for refuge actually are in a great many Pāli texts. Indeed, in many cases such accounts seem nothing more than an acceptable way to conclude an edifying story. But there are exceptions, and some of these – even if they too are stylized – are what we find interesting and worthy of further consideration in what follows. As for what we find in vedic texts, one is tempted to suppose that for practitioners of vedic religion the meaning of *śaraṇa* was largely a matter of what Nyanaponika would have called the "habitual rites of traditional piety." This is because, looking from a certain angle, one is struck by what one does not see in the vedic texts discussed above. What one does not see in them – unlike in certain Pāli texts – is any suggestion that *śaraṇa* is something to which one goes in connection with a change of heart.[60] For the vedic thinkers represented in this note, talk of *śaraṇa* comes not with talk of contrition or conversion or the like, nor with any talk of the transformative healing of a broken heart such as we find in the words attributed to Ubbirī in these verses of the *Therīgāthā*:

> He pulled out the arrow . . .
> that was stuck in my heart,
> he expelled the grief for a daughter,
> the grief that had overwhelmed me.
>
> Today the arrow is pulled out,
> I am . . . completely free.
> I go to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha for refuge,
> I go to the Sage for refuge.[61]

[58] Nyanaponika Thera (2008, 11).

[59] Ibid., 10.

[60] I do not mean to suggest that practitioners of vedic religion were insincere or could not feel religious emotion (on which latter possibility see Solomon 1970). And I recognize that passages such as RV 8.18.12 raise interesting questions. For if *enas* means "sin" and *śarman* means "shelter," then in this text we have something that superficially – save for the gods – is almost Augustinian: "O Ādityas, extend to us the shelter that will free even the sinful from his sin . . . ." (tr. Jamison and Brereton 2014, vol. 2, 1062). But in this note I am more concerned with *śaraṇa* and specifically the use of the triple *śaraṇa / saraṇa* motif.

[61] *Therīgāthā* verses 52-53. Translation based on Hallisey (2015, 39), with modifications. For

There was no Augustine who could write a *Confessions* among the early Buddhists, but here and there in their surviving compositions we do get something like a brief glimpse into the inner life of a Buddhist convert, intimations of what it means subjectively for an individual to go for refuge in the Buddhist fashion. Whether such accounts are true, merely pseudonymous, or entirely fictional is beside the point,[62] and the standard against which we should judge them is not Augustine but the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, not Rousseau but the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā*. Scholars of late have poured buckets of cold water on the idea of religious experience,[63] but it is doubtful that very many people know or care about the reservations of the learned in these matters. I take it as given that many people hunger for a special kind of personal experience, call it a religious experience, the peace that passes understanding,[64] *nibbāna*, or what you will.[65] Supposing this was also true or became true at some point in ancient India,[66] the points

Pāli text see ibid., 38; cf. Norman (1995, 8); cf. *Therīgāthā* verses 131-132.

[62] Similarly Kumkum Roy on *Therīgāthā* stories: "The question of the literal truth or accuracy of such stories is obviously not the point. What is clear is that, whether narrated in prose or verse (or both), they had the basic elements of a good narrative. They achieved and maintained the delicate balance between the plausible and the unusual, and would have attracted audiences" (1998, 21).

[63] See, for example, David Kyle Johnson, *Why Religious Experience Can't Justify Religious Belief* (forthcoming), and Nick Zangwill, *The Myth of Religious Experience* (2004). See also the preface and some essays in Martin and McCutcheon (2012); see also Fitzgerald (2009), Sharf (1995), and Sharf (1998). The latter is reprinted with an introduction in Martin and McCutcheon (2012, 131-150), and as "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion" in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 11-12 (2000): 267-287.

[64] See Philippians 4:7.

[65] Whether such expressions refer to the same thing, to different things, or to nothing at all makes no difference to my point, which is simply that many people want what they think such expressions represent. The desire for such states or experiences is a prominent theme in much of the recent literature on "spirituality" and the like. See, for example, Biersdorf (1975), Fuller (2001), Thomas (2006), Sheldrake (2012), and Huss (2014), among other studies.

[66] This is not the place to delve into a chronology of ancient Indian texts, but it is worth noting that in the *Bhagavad Gītā* Arjuna desires to see Kṛṣṇa in a new way (11.3-4); the experience produces in Arjuna a new *mata* or "conviction" (11.18); thus fortified and after being told to "go for refuge" (*śaraṇaṃ gaccha*) to the Lord alone (18.61-62; cf. 18.66), Arjuna will soon begin killing his kinsmen (text and tr. Feuerstein 2011, 220-221, 224-225, 316-317, 318). Also worth noting are the final six stanzas of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, in which the poet speaks of the "deepest love for God" (*deve parā bhaktir*) and in which the poet can declare: "in that God do I . . . seek refuge" (*taṃ ha devam . . . śaraṇam ahaṃ prapadye*) – the text suggests that Śvetāśvatara was able to proclaim his message ultimately because of "the power of his austerities and by the grace of God" (text and tr. Olivelle 1998, 432-433). In these probably post-Buddha texts we may have evidence of a desire, on the part of some,

raised in this note might help us better understand just what the message of the early Buddhists was.

By way of further illustration, let us take as a final case the conversion of the murderous brigand Aṅgulimāla as reflected in his own words according to the text of the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*.[67] The composer of the text has the reformed Aṅgulimāla, whose *nom de guerre* meant "Finger-garland" after the gruesome trophies he had collected, reflect on his new life and identity with verses including the following:

> "Harmless" is the name I bear,
> Though I was dangerous in the past.
> The name I bear today is true:
> I hurt no living being at all.
>
> And though I once lived as a bandit
> Known to all as "Finger-garland,"
> One whom the great flood swept along,
> I went for refuge to the Buddha.[68]

The conversion of sinful Aṅgulimāla was brought about by a miracle performed by the Buddha. To register the impact of what Aṅgulimāla experienced, the text tells of how the latter threw down his weapons and worshipped the Blessed One's feet, and of how Aṅgulimāla uttered the following curious verse:

> *cirassaṃ vata me mahito mahesi*
> *mahāvanaṃ samaṇo 'yaṃ paccavādi*
> *so 'haṃ cirassā pahāssaṃ pāpaṃ*
> *sutvāna gāthaṃ tava dhammayuttaṃ* [69]

for a transformative personal experience. I cite these examples in particular because they also involve the idea of *śaraṇa*. A fuller treatment of the topic would ask and try to answer the following question (patterned on a question about the syllable *OM* posed by Moore Gerety 2015, 427): *What happens to the idea of śaraṇa when the sacrificial paradigm gives way to, or comes into contact with, new paradigms based on salvific knowledge, contemplation, renunciation, or theistic devotion?* One thing that happens, I would like to suggest, can be seen in Pāli texts.

[67] Chalmers (1898, 97-105) = MN ii 97-105.

[68] Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (2005, 716). See Chalmers (1898, 105) = MN ii 105.

[69] See Chalmers (1898, 100) = MN ii 100. On why the verse is curious, and indeed problematic, see Gombrich (2007, 144-154).

> Oh, at long last this recluse, a venerated sage,
> Has come to this great forest for my sake.
> Having heard your stanza teaching me the Dhamma,
> I will indeed renounce evil forever.[70]

This emotive translation, furnished as it is with suggestions of longing, repentance, and almost Christian redemption, might be deeply satisfying to some readers. But there are alternative approaches to interpreting and translating the verse based on different readings of the relevant Pāli texts. One of these approaches has been put forward by Richard Gombrich, to whom we are indebted for bringing the story of Aṅgulimāla to a new level of interest and plausibility.[71] Professor Gombrich proposes certain emendations to the text and this translation of the same verse:

> *ciraṃ vatā me mahito maheso*
> *mahāvanaṃ pāpuṇi saccavādī*
> *so 'haṃ cajissāmi sahassapāpaṃ*
> *sutvāna gāthaṃ tava dhammayuttaṃ*
>
> For a long time to fulfil a vow I have been honouring Śiva. You have arrived in the forest, speaking truth. So I shall give up my thousand crimes, for I have heard your verse, which teaches what is right.[72]

In this translation the emotional temperature has been turned down several degrees, though, for scholars, the possibility that a character in an early Buddhist text was based on a worshipper of Śiva holds exciting potentialities.[73] But be that as it may, what is important in the story for our purposes is the fantastic discontinuity in Aṅgulimāla's life. It resembles discontinuities highlighted elsewhere in this note, in the life of Ubbirī the grieving mother, and in the life of Sumanā, giver of "treasure in carpets and shawls." I submit that echoes of all these stories can be heard in the ideas

[70] Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (2005, 711).

[71] See Gombrich (2007, 135-164).

[72] Text and tr. ibid., 154.

[73] Anālayo (2011, 493-494 n. 258) notes that Gombrich was not the first to suggest a connection between the character Aṅgulimāla and the worship of Śiva. Based on his study of Chinese parallels, Anālayo concludes: "Thus, none of the Chinese versions supports the assumption that Aṅgulimāla's stanza could have referred to Śiva."

of Nyanaponika with which our inquiries began. And the deeper note in the message of these stories, I would like to suggest, is just this: the possibility of experiencing something genuinely amazing. I am thus prepared to look upon Nyanaponika and Dhammapāla, at least provisionally, as more recent spokesmen for a view of refuge that emerged in antiquity, possibly among Buddhists: a view that sees refuge in connection with a personal transformation of surpassing significance. Could the ancient promoters of vedic texts and sacrificial religion offer the same possibility? The fact is: composers of vedic texts seem to have used the motifs of refuge and triple refuge before the Buddhists. The question is: what did Buddhists achieve by using versions of the same motifs? The answer is to be found, perhaps, in the contemplation and transposition of these words from a magisterial historian of Late Antiquity:

> Dramatic changes in health, dramatic changes in the weather, dramatic shifts in the locus of wealth – as gold, precious objects, robes, land, even small children passed from the "world" to the monastic establishments associated with holy persons – all these highly visible changes were held to have registered the most amazing of all discontinuities: the stirring to contrition of the sinful human heart.[74]

Abbreviations

AB	Aitareya Brāhmaṇa
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
JB	Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
RV	Ṛgveda Saṃhitā
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya

[74] Peter Brown, *Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (1993, 186).

Acknowledgments

In quotations from Sanskrit and Pāli texts in this note I have converted some of the orthographic usages found in the editions cited to usages that are more standard in our day. I have also resolved sandhi or added spaces in some of the Sanskrit and Pāli texts cited above.

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