

# Buddham Sharanam Gachhami

by Veena Gokhale

*Buddham Sharanam Gachhami* or I take refuge in the Buddha - when was it that I first heard those words, in Sanskrit? It's hard to say, but growing up in India, I encountered the image of the Buddha, and his teachings, at an early age. Not that I was born Buddhist – but Buddhism was in the air!

Yet it was not in the land of its birth, but on a sunny fall day in Ottawa, that I had my most personal encounter with Buddhism. September 12-14, 2003, was the Refuge Weekend at the Shambhala Centre, presided over by the cheerful and radiant Acharya Richard John. But presided is the wrong word – Acharya John's style is far too relaxed and informal for that!

Let's just say that the Acharya lit the way for us – guiding us towards making a formal commitment to the three jewels – the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha – if we so wished.

The weekend kicked off on Friday evening with the inspiring, riches to rags story of Prince Sidhartha Gautama, who cast off all worldly things to seek something deeper, more meaningful and lasting. But interestingly, it was when Gautama gave up on extreme ascetism, and relaxed a bit, by eating a sweet dish presented to him by a village woman and sat on soft *kusha* grass, given to him by a farmer, that he reached enlightenment.

What does taking refuge in this great teacher, who walked on Earth 2500 years ago, mean? In the bright red, jewel-like book we got on the last day of the weekend, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche writes – « The Buddha is my inspiration, he traveled this same path and overcame many difficulties.... I will be like the Buddha: I will overcome my obstacles and hardships, free myself from samsara and attain complete, perfect enlightenment. »

On Day 2 the Acharya spoke of the dharma – or the teachings of the Buddha and other teachers who followed in this tradition. In the interest of time, he focused only on the core teachings. Taking refuge in the dharma involves having a basic trust in these teachings, he said, but not blind faith. The Buddha insisted that everyone must experience the teachings for themselves and thus realise their own truth. There are no shortcuts in Buddhism.

That afternoon those of us who were taking refuge had a brief one on one session with the Acharya where we actually uttered the refuge vows – I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the dharma. I take refuge in the sangha. I was happy to say these words in both English, my acquired tongue and Sanskrit – the language of my ancestors.

Day 3 brought us back to Earth – to the concept of the sangha or the community of Buddhists to which we would belong after we took our refuge vows. Here too, we were told, there was no room for idealisation. The sangha would provide a community of practice, yes – but it would not provide

perfect conditions. We would have both rights and responsibilities in the sangha - a community which we would again create for ourselves.

That afternoon, twelve of us took our refuge vows publicly, before family, friends and members of the Ottawa sangha. It was a simple but moving ceremony where we were also given our much-awaited refuge names! I must confess that I had some trepidation about landing up with a « weird » Tibetan name. I guess I really have to work on my attachment to my own name ! In any case my fears were laid to rest as soon as I heard my beautiful and far too flattering name ! The refuge name is supposed to be both a reflection of what the teacher had glimpsed in us and what we could aspire to furthering in our practice.

The refuge ceremony was followed by a lovely party with lots of fulfilling food, drink and conversation. We were congratulated on taking refuge and made to feel genuinely welcome. I would say that my sense of community has certainly deepened since taking refuge. I have also started putting the word of taking refuge out to friends who have been very accepting and at times even joyous.

The weekend consisted of sitting and walking meditation, shamatha yoga, discourse and celebration. This weekend's teaching, like earlier experiences I have had at the Centre, was free of theoretical conjecture and complex concepts. Instead the emphasis was on clarity, simplicity and practice. Having spent a lot of time in academia and among opinionated intellectuals, I am always left a little disoriented but also refreshed, by the sensible approach taken at the Shambhala Centre!

You might get mixed up about the three schools of Buddhism – Hinayana or Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, and the Buddha's teaching known as the Third Turning of the Wheel may make your head spin – but you can come as you are to the Shambhala Centre – and it is not the theory, but the practice of loving kindness, and much else besides, that will take you further along the path.

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