

Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom

Buddhism For Beginners Series

Why Take Refuge in the Three Jewels?

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法鼓山

Dharma Drum Mountain

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Foreword

Buddhism values our intelligence and our own choices in life. It encourages us to cultivate wisdom and compassion to the fullest extent and to be responsible for all our actions. This attitude not only applies to how we approach Buddhism and the world, but to our own relationship to its traditions, practices, and rituals. If you wish to be formally recognized as a Buddhist, you are encouraged to first learn and try to understand the teachings. If they truly resonate with you, then the next step is to become a Buddhist and begin the path of cultivation. This booklet is for those who have already read about Buddhism, practiced some of the teachings, found them useful, and now wish to proceed further on the path.

Participating in the ceremony of taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the first, important step for anyone who wants to become a Buddhist. Why? Because the heart of Buddhism is the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Still, many people have erroneous ideas about the significance of the refuge

ceremony. Let us first examine some of these misconceptions before we discuss the profundity of the Three Jewels.

In the West, many people are increasingly attracted to Buddhism, even though they have not participated in the formal ceremony of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. They fear taking refuge will bind them to the institution of Buddhism, so they maintain a window-shopping attitude. Or perhaps they view taking refuge as analogous to rushing into marriage without sufficient knowledge of the future spouse and worry that personalities may clash, interests differ, and divorce ensue.

But taking refuge in the Three Jewels is completely different from marriage! It is about committing one's life towards a path to awakening, which is, in fact, freeing not binding. It is a relationship that includes all sentient beings, not just two people. If we realize that the Buddhist teaching is beneficial or meaningful in our lives, then the next step is to take refuge in the Three Jewels. When we become

Buddhists, we commit ourselves to bringing genuine liberation to ourselves and to everyone around us. This is the Buddhist path.

Trying to learn Buddhism without taking refuge is to be a bystander and not a participant. If we feel constrained by taking refuge, then Buddhism is no path to liberation. It may happen that you ultimately embrace a set of principles or develop a line of reasoning that leads you away from the teachings. After taking refuge, it is still possible to follow other religions or even decide not to believe in any religion. Taking refuge is not a contract written in blood and stone. The preciousness of the Dharma is that after leaving Buddhism, the door is always open, ready to welcome any who decide to return.

Those who believe that having a pure, sincere heart is enough to qualify them as Buddhist practitioners and who see no need to go through the formal refuge ceremony, are not really Buddhists. If you want to get an education, you must first register and then proceed through elementary, middle, and high

school until you reach college—perhaps reaching as far as a Ph.D. It is impossible to progress in one’s education without taking these successive steps.

Similarly, self-proclaimed Buddhists are not real Buddhists. They are like people who are fond of another country, emigrate there, pretend to be citizens, but never apply for citizenship. Those who refrain from taking refuge, but insist upon calling themselves Buddhists, may glean some benefit from the teachings, but the essence of Buddhism will always elude them. Taking refuge is a required process, not an option. The sutras or Buddhist scriptures tell us that even people who perform good deeds will not be able to eradicate bad karma unless they take refuge in the Three Jewels.

Some people believe that their comprehension of the Buddhist sutras, which they take to be one and the same as the Dharma, is sufficient to enable them to advance directly to full enlightenment. They see no need to practice meditation or receive the Three Refuges. While this may have its appeal, it is a serious mistake.

The Buddhist sutras were taught by the Buddha and his disciples, and later collected and written down by members of the Sangha. Concentrating on these texts only yields a limited understanding of the Dharma Jewel. This would lead us to disregard the Buddha, who gave these teachings, and the Sangha, who spread the Dharma. Buddhism stresses the Dharma—the path which leads to the ending of suffering—only in conjunction with the Buddha and the Sangha. The three are inseparable. It is true that taking refuge requires investigation of the Buddha’s teachings, but it also necessitates participation in the refuge ceremony, which must be conducted by a precept master, who is usually a member of the Sangha. This confers the formal recognition that you are a Buddhist.

Precept masters also began their practice by taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Each consecutive precept master represents the continuity of the transmission of the Dharma. No one can take refuge without a master; you cannot do it by yourself. In this sense, the ceremony is a testimony to the unity of the Three

Jewels. In taking refuge in the Three Jewels, we recognize the Buddha for discovering the Dharma and our own Buddha within—our potential to liberation. We also recognize the transmitters of Dharma, the Sangha members throughout the ages. Through them we realize the Dharma.

Therefore, I would urge everyone to take refuge in the Three Jewels in a formal ceremony. Whether you already consider yourself a Buddhist, are planning to become Buddhist, are exploring Buddhism, or following another religion. There is no harm in putting aside your preconceived ideas so that you may take refuge. You will gain genuine benefit with no loss of freedom. If you take refuge wholeheartedly, it is highly unlikely that you will abandon the Three Jewels.

What is Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels?

Taking refuge means returning, taking shelter, relying on, trusting. Any action that involves returning, depending, taking shelter, and trusting is considered taking refuge. This word is not exclusive to Buddhism.

Children take refuge in their mothers' embrace; they rely on and trust their mothers, and, as a result, gain a sense of security. This sense of security arises from the power of taking refuge. Any such action that involves trust and a sense of security can be considered taking refuge, whether it is a secular relationship or a religious belief.

However, objects that are temporary, unstable, and unreliable cannot be true objects of refuge. People may climb a tree or a rooftop for safety in a huge flood, but rising water and strong winds may destroy their sanctuary. A mountain would be a far better haven.

Who wouldn't choose this option over a house or a tree? Refuge in the Three Jewels is stronger than any of these. When you see that nothing is permanent and that everything is contingent and interdependent, you come to realize that there is little security in parents, teachers, plans, bosses, fate, strength, wealth—in all the things we take for granted. As objects of refuge they are highly unreliable. Parents pass away, teachings become outdated, plans are thwarted, bosses come and go, and fate is unpredictable. Strength, schemes, and wealth are even more illusive and ephemeral. Today's king is tomorrow's prisoner; today's millionaire tomorrow's pauper.

In other religions faith is said to lead to heaven, but it is not always assured. According to some Christian beliefs, some people not favored by God will never be destined for heaven, no matter how sincere their faith. From the perspective of Buddhism, heaven—the highest aspiration in many faiths—is still in the realm of birth and death. Heavenly beings live many times longer than humans, but there is still an eventual death. When death arrives, they will be reborn. Only

by taking refuge in the Three Jewels can people gradually walk the path of liberation and break free from the suffering of continual life and death.

A path that leads you home is a genuine refuge. Places where you can put up your feet and relax are not worthy refuges. A practice like this would be no different from using a clay ox to cross a river. You may have a sense of security when you first enter the river, but the clay will crumble and you will sink.

Why are the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha called Jewels? It is because they generate an inexhaustible amount of merit and wisdom that they are considered genuine "jewels." Gold, silver, and precious gems are rare and valuable. That is why they are called "treasures"; the merit and wisdom of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha can bring us benefits in the world and beyond it. They are more precious than ordinary jewels because they bring peace to the world and help us thoroughly transcend our negative emotions, sufferings, and achieve awakening. The Three Jewels are the best of all jewels.

We are originally buddhas, and we are intrinsically connected with the Three Jewels. Because we misunderstand our original nature, we wander the cycle of birth and death without finding the way home. Taking refuge is to start the journey homeward.

Different Levels of the Three Jewels

The Three Jewels may be understood on different levels and in many ways. We will first divide them into two groups, that of the Phenomenal and the Fundamental. These two groupings can be understood in the context of the teachings of "two truths" in Buddhism. These refer to the "absolute" truth and the "conventional" truth. The absolute or fundamental truth is the view of reality as experienced by the enlightened. Since it transcends dualistic logic, it cannot exactly be expressed in words and conceptual constructs. The relative truth is reality on a phenomenal level; it is what ordinary people experience, and is expressed readily in dualistic concepts and words. For a deeply enlightened person who has realized the absolute truth, the two truths are inseparable. But for a person who only understands the conventional truth, absolute truth remains an abstract concept.

These two truths provide a framework to understanding the different levels of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. We start by taking refuge in the Phenomenal Three Jewels; that is, a true refuge in this world that provides insight and guidance toward awakening and liberation. The Phenomenal Three Jewels are tangible, so they are easily understood by ordinary people. Once nirvana is realized—that is, you are fully awakened to the inseparability of the two truths—you embody the Fundamental Three Jewels. At this point, to speak of a refuge outside of you becomes irrelevant; the Fundamental Three Jewels are inseparable from you. This is abstract to most people, but quite clear to someone who has already actualized the true suchness of self-nature. We will return to this issue below. For now, it is important to know that all sentient beings have buddha-nature, the potentiality for buddhahood. It is only because of the vexations and confusion of karma that we cannot perceive this truth. The reason we take refuge in the Phenomenal Three Jewels is to find and manifest our buddha-nature in the Fundamental Three Jewels.

The Phenomenal Three Jewels can be divided into The Abiding Three Jewels and The Manifested Three Jewels.

The Fundamental Three Jewels can be divided into The Three Jewels of One Essence and The Three Jewels of Principle.

The Phenomenal

The Abiding Three Jewels

The Abiding Three Jewels describe aspects of the Three Jewels that are directly perceivable in the ordinary, phenomenal world: 1) Statues of the Buddha made of jade, stone, gold, bronze, clay, and wood or images of the Buddha in oil paint, ink, silk embroidery, and drawings. 2) The three collections of scriptures which include the sutras (recorded words of the Buddha), the shastras (treatises and teachings by eminent practitioners), and the vinaya (the body of texts containing the precepts, which serve as a guide for the behavior of Buddhist practitioners). 3) Buddhist monastics who shave their heads and wear the proscribed robes. Their work is to perpetuate Buddhism in the world.

The Manifested Three Jewels

The Manifested Three Jewels refer to what brought Buddhism into the world: the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, who attained enlightenment and entered nirvana. The Dharma constitutes the teachings he gave during that time, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Six Perfections, the Eightfold Path, and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. These are important teachings that all Buddhists should know. Many Buddhist books discuss them. For those of you who wish to learn more about them, please refer to my book, *There is No Suffering: A Commentary of the Heart Sutra*, for a full explanation of these teachings. Finally, the Sangha are those who followed him during that time. Thus, the Buddha appeared in the world, gave teachings, and formed a community of monastic practitioners.

The Fundamental

The Three Jewels of One Essence

Each of the Three Jewels contains the virtue and merit of all of the Three Jewels. First, the Buddha illuminates and enlightens, so he is the Buddha Jewel.

He gives Dharma teachings, is free from the bounds of all phenomenal reality, and has the ability to preserve and maintain the purity of the teachings. Hence he is also the Dharma Jewel. The Buddha is free from transgression and contention, so he is also the embodiment of harmony, which represents the Sangha Jewel. Second, the Dharma awakens beings to Buddhahood, so it is the Buddha Jewel. It has the function of preserving itself, so it is the Dharma Jewel. Because all Dharmas are equal and mutually non-obstructive, it is equanimous and harmonious. Therefore, the Dharma is also the Sangha Jewel. Third, the Sangha Jewel includes those who are wise and luminous, so it includes the Buddha Jewel. Because its purpose is to preserve the Dharma, it is also the Dharma Jewel. Moreover, it is harmonious, so it is the Sangha Jewel as well.

The Three Jewels of Principle

The Three Jewels of Principle refer to ultimate reality or the absolute truth in the two truths paradigm. It is the world as experienced by someone who is enlightened. For this reason, it is the ultimate place of refuge.

Venerable Master Yinshun (1906~2005) explains the Three Jewels of Principle from two perspectives: that of Hinayana, personal liberation, and of Mahayana, universal liberation. The Hinayana and Mahayana are two main paths of Buddhism. The former focuses on the awakening of oneself; the latter on the awakening of all beings. Both paths identify the Three Jewels in terms of its intrinsic virtue. This virtue has many names, as seen above, but the essence is the same—the state of liberation and full awakening itself. Master Yinshun states:

"The real object of refuge lies in the actual virtues of the Three Jewels. These virtues have been discussed in many ways; two points of view will be introduced here. The first sees the Buddha Jewel as identical with the Buddha's faultless virtues. According to the teachings of individual liberation, the Buddha's faultless virtues are the five attributes of the Dharmakaya (or "true body of reality"), although in the Mahayana teachings they are embraced by perfect enlightenment (the fourfold wisdom). The Dharma Jewel is the true Dharma—that is, nirvana itself. The

Sangha Jewel is identical with the faultless virtues of those who are still learners and those who are not. According to the individual liberation path, the faultless virtues are those of the four stages and four grades of sainthood; but according to the Mahayana path of universal liberation, they are the faultless virtues of the bodhisattvas (this includes those who gained individual liberation upon hearing the Buddha's teachings and those who gained liberation without a teacher by contemplating dependent origination).

"The second view of the real virtue of the Three Jewels draws from the Mahayana teachings of universal liberation, according to which the Buddha treasure is identical to the pure realm of ultimate reality—revealed ultimately, completely, and perfectly (in essence, form, action, and function). The Sangha treasure is the pure realm of ultimate reality that is partially revealed. That is, it refers to those who have reached profound states of realization of the teachings. The Dharma Jewel is the universal realm of ultimate reality—without increase or decrease, neither dualistic nor discriminating (and called suchness, reality, and so

on). The other standard terms for the Three Jewels—the Three Jewels in One Essence, the Three Jewels of Principle, and the Abiding Three Jewels—all refer to the same Three Jewels discussed above, but they are explained in different ways."(*The Way to Buddhahood*, pp. 23~24; translation slightly modified)

The five attributes of the Dharmakaya refer to the virtues of a fully awakened being. They are: moral perfection, cessation of deluded ideas, the wisdom of omniscience, attainment of nirvana, and the perfect knowledge of the state of liberation. Nirvana here means the cessation of greed, aversion, and ignorance and the perfection of awakening. This relates to perfect enlightenment, the content of which is known as the four wisdoms. Each of these four wisdoms describes a function of a buddha's insight. They are: the "great mirror wisdom," which reflects all forms exactly as they are; the "wisdom of equality," which is the result of being free from self-grasping; the "wisdom of wondrous observation," which is the ability to discern with precision the various workings of the phenomenal world; and lastly the "wisdom of unrestricted

activity," which is the ability to save sentient beings according to their spiritual capacities. We all have these perfect virtues within us—all of the qualities of the buddhas are ours if only we can free ourselves from the bondage of karma, vexations, and self-referential clinging. It is in this way that the virtues function: when we take refuge in them, we take refuge in what is most intrinsic in ourselves, our potential to be awakened and perfect that awakening.

Just as conventional truth is inseparable from absolute truth, we must realize that without the Abiding Three Jewels, the Three Jewels of Principle will not manifest. Without the Three Jewels of Principle, the Abiding Three Jewels could not exist. The Abiding Three Jewels are the great function of the Principle Three Jewels of Principle. The Three Jewels of Principle are the whole of the Abiding Three Jewels. Faith in Buddhism should begin with believing in the Three Jewels. The reason for believing in the Abiding Three Jewels is to facilitate understanding of the Three Jewels of Principle.

There are some Buddhist devotees who, without having any real understanding of the true meaning of the Three Jewels of Principle, claim that they only believe in the Three Jewels of Principle. In other words, they disregard the significance of the Abiding Three Jewels. This is not only an upside down view, but a position that is completely contrary to the Buddhist path.

Ordinary people can only perceive the phenomenal Three Jewels, and of these, the Manifested Three Jewels only existed when Sakyamuni Buddha lived. After the passing of the historical Buddha, only the Abiding Three Jewels are left. Within the Three Jewels, the Buddha is most precious, the Dharma is most rare, and the Sangha is most holy. After the passing of the Buddha, it is the Sangha that safeguards Buddhist monasteries, preserves collections of Dharma teachings, and maintains Buddhist culture. The Sangha also transmits Buddhist culture and teaches Dharma to the laity.

When the Buddha was in the world, he was the center. After his passing, the Sangha became the

center, so we must take the Sangha as our refuge, and we must take the Sangha Jewel as the object of our veneration. But we must remember that within the Sangha Jewel, there is a mixture of "dragons and snakes," a Chinese term meaning virtuous and non-virtuous people. We should choose teachers who are virtuous, but we should respect all Sangha members. It is said in the sutras that even though a monk has transgressed the precepts, he is still the teacher of men and gods. In our hearts, we should not entertain ideas of the virtuous and the non-virtuous, and criticize others, let alone criticize the Sangha Jewel.

Once we take the Three Refuges, we have a strong platform of faith on which to begin our practice. There are five stages to building one's practice:

1. The Three refuges of turning away from heterodoxy—the initial entering of the door of Buddhism.
2. The Three refuges of five precepts—when one receives the five precepts after having developed confidence in the Three Jewels.
3. The Three refuges of eight precepts—the

traditional ritual days where one maintains eight precepts for the duration of twenty-four hours.

4. The Three refuges of ten precepts—the precepts one receives when one enters the monastery as a novice.

5. The Three refuges of complete precepts—the full precepts of monks and nuns.

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is always a part of all ceremonies involving the receiving of precepts. This is also true for the higher precept ordinations of monks and nuns, when the precept essence is conferred. Taking refuge is also necessary after repentance and making vows during the ceremony of receiving the bodhisattva precepts. The ceremonies of taking refuge and receiving precepts are mutually supportive.

Taking refuge is the basis of daily practice for all Buddhists. It is included in the daily liturgy in monasteries as well as at the conclusion of every Buddhist event. South Asian Buddhists consider this ceremony to be of highest importance and they chant the refuge as a blessing to the laity.

How to Take Refuge in the Three Jewels?

Many modern people are turned off by religious rituals and ceremonies. In Buddhism, emphasis is placed on the practice of methods that leads to the actualization of wisdom and compassion. However, engaging in ritual can be a useful part of the practice because it gives form to our commitment to the path and serves as a guideline to deepen our understanding. When I came to the United States, I incorporated a minimal amount of ritual in my teachings. However, after practicing for a while, people here naturally developed great respect, faith, and gratitude to the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and lineage masters. The normal way to express such feelings is through ritual.

At the time of the Buddha, practitioners were of keen spiritual capacity, so that there was no need for a formal ritual of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. One of Shakyamuni Buddha's earliest lay disciple, Yasha's father, only had to proclaim before the Buddha: "I now

take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. May you consider me your follower." These simple words confirmed his commitment as a Buddhist.

Technically speaking, there was no Sangha Jewel prior to the establishment of a monastic community. But there is the legend that when the Buddha first accepted two merchants and a dragon king as followers, he had them take refuge in the Sangha Jewel of the future. So the Sangha Jewel was ever present and cannot be divided from the Buddha and the Dharma Jewels.

After the formation of the Sangha, the community of monks and nuns, the Buddha required devotees to take refuge in the whole of the Three Jewels. This tradition has continued to the present. To maximize the ritual experience of taking refuges in the Three Jewels, it is best to memorize the verses of refuge in case the preceptor's pronunciation is unclear or the recipient is too nervous. Otherwise the recipient will be ignorant of the contents of the refuge verses, and the taking of

refuge will not be successful.

There are two sets of verses:

I (the recipient states his or her name) to the end of my life, take refuge in the Buddha, take refuge in the Dharma, take refuge in the Sangha. (Repeated three times.)

I have taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. (Repeated three times.)

Three repetitions confirm the reception of the Three Jewels. The confirming verses that follow merely conclude the ceremony. The crucial phase of the ceremony is the repetition of the first set of refuge verses. This is the time we receive the uncreated "precept essence" of the Three Jewels. It is best to visualize this precept essence during one's proclamation. The first time we repeat the verse we imagine our minds filled with merit and virtue, which shakes the earth in the ten directions. From the ten directions clouds of merit emerge from the ground. The second time we repeat the verse, the clouds of merit hover over our heads in the form of a flower

canopy. The third time we repeat the verse this flower canopy transforms into the shape of a funnel, slowly enters our crown, pervades our body, and then transmits from our pores and extends throughout the ten directions to all worlds. We have then received the precept essence and our bodies and minds have become identical to the merits of the precept essence, filling all world systems. The refuge ceremony is not only solemn but sacred.

If we cannot perform the visualization, at the very least we should use clear diction when we repeat the refuge verses. It cannot be done haphazardly. The eminent monk, Hongyi (1880~1942), stated:

"Whether monastic or lay, when we receive the Three Jewels, two things are most important to keep in mind: first, to know the meaning of taking refuge; second, the preceptor must speak with clear diction and must speak words that can be clearly understood. If the recipient cannot understand the words of the preceptor, the refuge is unsuccessful. The refuge is also unsuccessful if the preceptor is too far away and recipients cannot hear the words. Furthermore, if there

is doubt in the minds of recipients, the refuge is unsuccessful. In the ceremony, the words, "take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha" are most important. We should keep this in mind. The words, "I have already taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha" are only concluding remarks. They are secondary to the first verse. I encourage all those who intend to receive the Three Jewels to understand the meaning of the Three Jewels. At the time of the ceremony, be attentive during the recitation of the words; "take refuge in the Buddha," and so on. Only then will we receive the Three Jewels." (Hongyi, *Essentials of Vinaya*.)

Even though the ceremony is simple, successful reception of the Three Jewels is not easy. So I believe that there are many Buddhists who have not really received the Three Jewels properly. If you know that you have not received the Three Jewels successfully, you can ask your preceptor to transmit them to you again, or you may receive them again from another preceptor. In large refuge ceremonies where hundreds or even thousands of people are in attendance, the

chances of failure to properly receive the Three Jewels are the highest. If this is the case, then you may only be establishing positive karmic affinity with the Three Jewels, not really receiving them.

The more solemn the ceremony, the easier it is to generate sincerity. The stricter the requirements for refuge taking, the more precious the ceremony will seem to the recipients. The ceremony originally required one preceptor, but subsequent modifications have added solemnity to the refuge taking. Precept Master Jianyue (1601~1679), edited a book called, *Prototype for the Three Refuge and Precept Conferral Ceremony*, which was modeled on the litany of bodhisattva and monastic precepts and it still serves as the blueprint for most refuge procedures today.

The Prototype includes eight procedures for successfully taking refuge in the Three Jewels:

1. Preparation of the ritual and invitation of the preceptor—the procedure for preparing the ritual space, such as adorning the hall with flowers and candles and the protocols for inviting the preceptor.

2. Explanation of the meaning of taking refuge.
3. Inviting the holy assembly—the protocol of inviting the Three Jewels of the ten directions to witness the conferral of the refuge. It also details the invitation of Dharma protectors to guard the ritual space and protect the recipients.
4. Repentance—the preparation of the recipients through the purification of body, speech, and mind so that the reception of the undefiled Three Jewels can be successful.
5. Receiving the Three Jewels—the refuge verses and protocols of the refuge proper.
6. Making vows—the importance of generating the bodhisattva vows to save all sentient beings.
7. Encouragement—the merit of the Three Jewels and encouragement to the recipients to practice the Dharma properly.
8. Transference—the ritual practice of transfer of merit derived from receiving the Three Jewels to all sentient beings, so that they may be alleviated from suffering and be reborn in the Buddha Lands.

However, the language in this manual is classical

Chinese and difficult to understand. Master Hongyi wrote this criticism:

"The manual edited by the master at Mt. Baohua, Jieyue, was written in classical form. If the audience of the ceremony does not understand the words, the words will only be empty. It is best if the preceptor can use colloquial Chinese to confer the precepts."(Hongyi, *Essentials of Vinaya*.)

However, the eight sections of the *Prototype for the Three Refuges and Precept Conferral Ceremony* include indispensable procedures for taking refuge. For example, it is quite important to provide a conducive environment for the precept monk or nun to explain the meaning of the Three Jewels to the lay recipients. Hence, the importance of preparing the ritual space for refuge ceremony. Since the preceptor represents the Three Jewels, in order to conduct the ceremony, it is only proper to invite him or her into the space with reverence. Receiving the refuge is a commitment to renew your life, so it only logical to repent your past negative karma. Repeating the refuge verses is the heart of the ceremony, so explaining the refuge verses

and proper protocols of refuge is important. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels can be divided into three categories: those who wish to receive the refuge for the sake of benefiting self and others belong to the superior category; those who wish to receive the refuge for individual liberation belong to the middle category; those who wish to receive the refuge in order to avoid being reborn in lower realms of existence or for the purpose of being reborn in heaven, belong to the lowest category. Therefore it is important to encourage recipients to generate the altruistic heart of a bodhisattva, to practice Dharma diligently, and to transfer merit to all others. This last imperative diminishes self-centeredness and nourishes compassion.

I would like to point out that we do not discriminate between Hinayana and Mahayana, literally translated as "Small Vehicle" and "Great Vehicle." However, early teachings of Buddhism emphasize personal liberation. The protocol of refuge ceremonies at that time was simple, including only the refuge verses. When Buddhism was transmitted to

China, the later teachings of Mahayana predominated, and the focus shifted to universal liberation. The ritual protocols became more elaborate. These changes were beneficial. Any not wishing to engage in the altruistic practice of the Mahayana, however, may omit the practice of making vows and transferring merits.

If space and time are limited, a simplified version of the refuge ceremony is permissible. Below is a distilled version of the ceremony I conduct:

After the preceptor has paid reverence to an image of the Buddha and assumed the proper position, the recipient kneels down and join his or her palms. The preceptor briefly explains the meaning of the Three Jewels and the refuge. The recipient repeats these lines of repentance after the preceptor:

"All bad karma of greed, aversion, and delusion, created in the past through body, speech, and mind, I repent in front of the Buddha."

After repeating these lines three times, the recipient prostrates once. Then the recipient repeats the

following three times:

"I (state your name), till the end of my life, take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha." The recipient repeats this three times and prostrates after each time, then say:

I (state your name) have already taken refuge in the Buddha. I would rather relinquish my life than to take refuge in celestial and demonic beings.

I (state your name) have already taken refuge in the Dharma. I would rather relinquish my life than to take refuge in heterodox teachings.

I (state your name) have already taken refuge in the Sangha. I would rather relinquish my life than to take refuge in heretical communities.

The recipient repeats this three times and prostrates after each time, then generates the four great vows:

I (state your name) vow to deliver all sentient beings.

I (state your name) vow to cut off all vexations.

I (state your name) vow to master limitless approaches to Dharma.

I (state your name) vow to attain supreme Buddhahood.

The recipient repeats this three times and prostrates after each repetition. Then the preceptor can briefly talk about the merits of receiving the Three Jewels and encourage the recipient to practice the Dharma. Afterwards, a verse of merit transfer can be repeated:

The merit of refuge is supreme. I transfer it to all beings.

May all those who suffer be instantaneously reborn to the Pure Lands of the Buddhas.

Homage to the Buddhas of the ten directions, to the bodhisattva-mahasattvas, and to the great transcendent wisdom. (three times)

This completes the refuge ceremony. Afterwards, recipients can pay reverence to the preceptor. Ordinarily this is expressed with three prostrations, but the preceptor may ask the recipient to just make one prostration.

This ceremony does not involve chanting, but the words spoken must be clear in order to ensure the proper reception of the Three Jewels.

Now I will talk about the vow of "not taking refuge in celestial and demonic beings," "not taking refuge in heterodox teachings," and "not taking refuge in heretical communities." With these three lines the refuge begins to take on the function of precepts. These are not words of slander to other religious traditions, but according to our tradition the Buddha's wisdom is unsurpassable. After taking refuge in the Buddha there is no need to take refuge in celestial beings. The Dharma is a repository of all the wisdom in the world. When we practice the Dharma, we will be able to alleviate suffering and know peace. Therefore, there is no need to depend on other teachings. The Sangha represents purity and is the teacher of men and gods. Therefore, there is no need to rely on other practitioners. The purpose of these vows is to ensure that once we have entered the correct path, there is no need to turn to other paths.

After we have taken refuge in the Three Jewels, it might happen that we perform or engage in rituals of other religious traditions for the sake of our family, nation, or for other reasons. As long as we do not harbor the intention of taking refuge in these other traditions, we will not lose our commitment to the Three Jewels.

After taking refuge in the Three Jewels, we should be mindful of certain precepts. For example, we should try to uphold the five precepts of not killing sentient beings, not taking what does not belong to us, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not deceiving others, and not using alcohol and addictive drug. The last precept is precautionary; it helps us to maintain a clear mind. Upholding this precept protects us from breaking the previous four precepts. If you cannot give up alcohol because of social obligations, at least try to moderate your intake. These precepts help to cultivate wisdom and compassion. After we have taken refuge, we should try to uphold them in our lives. When we feel ready, we can formally receive these five precepts from our precept master.

For the sake of compassion, it is best to become a vegetarian. But if this is not possible, you should avoid eating five kinds of animal meat: meat that comes from a animal slaughtered for your sole consumption; meat that comes from an animal that you witnessed being slaughtered; meat that comes from an animal that you heard being slaughtered, meat that comes from an animal that died of its own accord; meat that comes from an animal partially eaten by other animals. There are also occupations you should avoid, such as a butcher, seller of alcohol, prostitution, gambler, and so on. Moreover there are ritual fast days every month that proscribe eating after midday. In the West, this practice is not widely known, but in Asia many lay Buddhists engage in this practice. These dates are the 8, 14, 15, 23, and the last two days of each month according to the lunar calendar. According to the scriptures, if you observe these fast days, you will be reborn in the assembly of the next Buddha, Maitreya, and reach full liberation.

We should also keep in mind that we are taking refuge in the Three Jewels of the ten directions and

three time periods (past, present, and future). We recite, "Homage to the Buddhas of the ten directions and three times, and to the bodhisattva-mahasattvas, and to the great transcendent wisdom." The first part refers to the Buddha Jewel; the second to the Sangha Jewel; the third, to the Dharma Jewel. These three parts cover the Fundamental and Phenomenal Three Jewels. We take the Phenomenal Three Jewels as our initial refuge. Therefore, we should revere all images of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, all Buddhist scriptures, and all Sangha members.

Our first and foremost teacher is Shakyamuni Buddha. Our refuge teacher is our preceptor. In order to express our gratitude for receiving the Three Jewels, it is only natural that we emphasize Shakyamuni Buddha and our preceptor. But if we only acknowledge Shakyamuni as a Buddha and deny the existence of other Buddhas in other world systems that are mentioned in the scriptures, then this is not in accordance with proper Buddhist teaching. Similarly, it is incorrect to only show respect to our own preceptor and not toward other Sangha members. This would

show favor to only one kind of virtuous behavior and deny the goodness of countless other virtuous acts. This would be like planting seeds on one acre and ignoring the rest of the farm—a foolish thing to do.

The Benefits to Taking Refuge

There are numerous benefits from taking refuge in the Three Jewels which can be reaped in present and future lives and can ultimately lead to the happiness of full liberation. These benefits can be divided into eight categories:

1. Becoming a follower of the Buddhas
2. Establishing a firm basis for receiving precepts
3. Diminishing karmic obstacles
4. Potential to accumulate a vast amount of merit
5. Avoiding rebirth in lower forms of existence
6. The quality of not being disturbed by humans and non-humans
7. The ability to accomplish all virtuous deeds
8. Ability to become a buddha

There are also many stories and parables in Buddhist scriptures that detail these benefits. For example, it is said that if you take refuge in the Three Jewels, you will acquire an inexhaustible amount of merit in the future. It is like a great repository of

wealth. Even if everyone in a nation were to make withdrawals for seven consecutive years, there would still be considerable wealth left. The merit derived from taking refuge in the Three Jewels is thousands and millions of times greater than all the wealth in such a repository (*From the Scripture of Lay Bodhisattva Precepts*).

There was once a celestial being in the Indra heaven whose lifespan was approaching its end. His celestial body began to deteriorate and he had only seven days to live. He had a vision that he would be reborn as a boar and he became distressed. Then he asked Indra, the celestial king, to help him, but even Indra could not do anything. Indra asked him to seek out the Buddha for help. The Buddha bestowed the refuges upon him. He was reborn as a human and later met and received teachings from Shariputra (one of Buddha's principle disciples, renowned for his wisdom), and, consequently, reached enlightenment.

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is something precious. The Buddhas have stated that once you take

refuge in the Three Jewels, you will be protected by the four guardian gods who protect the four quarters of the universe. the east Dhrtarashtra; in the south, Virudhaka; in the west, Virupaksha, and in the north Vaishravana. These four guardian gods send thirty-six guardian angels to protect the recipient from harm. Each prevents different kinds of harm. Some prevent sickness, hunger, delusion, aversion, greed, thievery, fear, and so on.

Lastly, I must stress that taking refuge in the Three Jewels is only the first step in becoming a Buddhist. Once we have taken refuge, we must embark on the path of spiritual cultivation, which involves finding a teacher and developing a regular practice. Doing so will decisively set you on the Buddhist path of awakening to wisdom and compassion.

About the Author:

Master Sheng Yen

Venerable Chan Master Sheng Yen was one of the twentieth century's foremost Buddhist teachers, scholars and meditation masters, and was instrumental in the revival of Chinese Buddhism in modern times.

Ven. Sheng Yen was born into a humble farming family near Shanghai in 1930; he became a novice Buddhist monk at the age of 13. During the Communist takeover of China in 1949, he escaped with the Nationalist army to Taiwan. At the age of 28, after 15 years of strenuous scriptural study and struggle in his meditation work, while sojourning at various monasteries in southern Taiwan, he had the deepest spiritual experiences of his life. Soon after, he entered into a solitary six-year 'meditation retreat to deepen his realization.

He later received formal lineage transmission in both the extant lines of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, making him the 57th generation master in the Linji line and the

52nd generation master in the Caodong line of Chan.

In 1969 Ven. Sheng Yen went to Japan to attend graduate school, with the conviction that a strong education would be required to revive Chinese monasticism. In six years he obtained master's and doctor's degrees in Buddhist Literature from Rissho University, becoming the first monk to earn a doctorate in the history of Chinese Buddhism. For the last thirty years of his life, he tirelessly devoted all of his energy to advancing Buddhist education, reviving the tradition of rigorous education for monks and nuns, leading intensive Chan meditation retreats worldwide, engaging in interfaith outreach, and working on behalf of world peace, youth development, and gender equality.

Ven. Sheng Yen passed away peacefully in Taiwan on February 3rd, 2009. He is revered by tens of thousands of disciples and students around the world. His wisdom and compassion is found in his books in Chinese, English, Japanese, and several other languages, and in the teachings of his students and Dharma heirs both in Asia and the West.

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