

Refuge in The Three Jewels.

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For a better understanding of taking refuge in the three jewels - the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, we need to know something about *samsara*, to begin with. For it is this cyclic existence of total dissatisfaction that we wish ourselves to be sheltered from [*samsara* is sanskrit for cyclic existence of various forms of life, death and rebirth, that everybody undergoes due to interdependent co-origination, sanskrit: *pratitya samutpada*].

Broadly speaking, there are two aspects to *samsara*. There is the actual *samsaric* experience of misery and there are the sentient beings, who suffer blindly in this intolerable state, since beginningless times. These ignorant sentient beings are just ordinary beings, whose ordinary minds are in delusion [*sanskrit: avidya, not knowing the true nature of samsara and Nirvana*]. Being deluded in mind, their flawed thinking causes disturbing emotions to arise. And driven by negative disturbing emotions, they act unwisely, thus creating karma; and their maturing karma results involuntarily in rebirth in the six realms, again and again. Under these unfortunate conditions, *samsara* comes into existence. An uninterrupted cycle of rebirth is what *samsara* means. Here, continuity constitutes a problem.

The Buddha

When we take the refuge, it is in the hope of finding a way out of this cyclic state of total confusion and delusion. It is, therefore, of vital importance that the refuge that we are to entrust ourselves in, be very well qualified indeed. Obvious questions come to mind. Who has such power to be able to liberate us from *samsara*? Who has such qualities of mind, in undertaking so noble a mission? The answer, unequivocally is: it is the Buddha. The Buddha protects. The Buddha saves. He bestows his blessing on one and all indiscriminately. It is we, who need to become worthy vessels, in order that we may better receive it. In a downpour, it is the parch earth that is more thoroughly drenched. So being fervent in faith and in devotion to the Buddha, makes us that much more receptive to his blessing. Not only do we need to know what the Buddha's quality of mind is, in order to benefit from his blessing, but we must also supplicate one-pointedly for this benediction.

In the Buddha, there are two main distinguishing qualities: he is uncompromisingly self-accomplishing and at the same time, he is also unconditionally self-giving. These two qualities of mind far from being mutually exclusive, they are, in fact, logically complementary. When one is single-mindedly self-accomplishing, it is for the reason that one may better serve others. And in the process of serving, one is also self-accomplishing, in the natural accumulation of merits. The accumulation of merits and the accumulation of wisdom ultimately lead us to the perfect state of enlightenment, which is Buddhahood.

From then on, the Buddha's spontaneous activities are as limitless as his merits and his wisdom. In the accomplishing stages, merit and wisdom, however, must never be neglected, one at the expense of the other. For both are of equal importance in the attaining of Buddhahood.

For a follower in the Buddha-Dharma, there are essentially four different stages of development in accumulation and in accomplishment. The beginners are at the earlier stages; the noble Sangha are at the more advanced stages; the Bodhisattvas are on to the supra-mundane stages; while the Mahabodhisattvas are on the final stages, where both accumulations of merit and wisdom are being perfected, before Buddhahood is finally attained.

There are three distinctive aspects to a Buddha, which is generally referred to as the three *kayas*, the three bodies of the Buddha. They are the Dharmakaya, the Sambhogakaya and the Nirmanakaya. In Dharmakaya, we identify the Buddha as the full realization of uncontrived primordial wisdom. In the Sambhogakaya, we identify him as a pure body of bliss, free from all sufferings and all attachments. And in the Nirmanakaya, the Buddha appears in a communicative form, whereby, we, as yet unenlightened, may better relate to him, tangibly. With the pure motivation of benefiting all sentient beings, the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom are mutually nurturing; the accumulation of the one, naturally enhances the accumulation of the other. When both are fully accomplished, Buddhahood is said to be attained.

Dharmakaya, the wisdom aspect in the Buddha, is where he is identified as *immutable simplicity*. While Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya are the kayas of the dynamic Buddha, where he is in natural manifestation of uncontrived activities, for the well-being of all sentient beings, indiscriminately. The Buddha's spontaneous manifestations being limitless, equally limitless are his merits and his accomplishments. There could no longer be any doubts in our minds that the Buddha truly has the power and the ability to liberate us from samsara. We should, with full confidence in him, commit ourselves to follow him. We should pray to him for guidance and for help, especially in times of need. May our thoughts never stray from the Buddha; and may we all attain to his level of spiritual perfection.

Let me say this: in aspiring to attain to the Buddha's level, does not mean, [that] we are in competition with the Buddha; neither does it mean that we are thinking of taking his place. There is no need for that. For we ourselves are rightfully natural Buddhas.

The Dharma

First and foremost, our refuge is in the Buddha. The Dharma and the Sangha are, as it were, supportive refuges instrumental to Buddhahood, the ultimate enlightenment. They may be compared to a sea-worthy vessel, in an ocean crossing. For this reason, it is important to know of what quality and substance, Dharma is. What is Dharma? It is the method and the means, through which we are to reach ultimate enlightenment. It is the way to Buddhahood. The two aspects of Dharma are the path [sanskrit: *marga*] and the cessation [sanskrit: *nirodha*]. The path is concerned with the technique in applying the Buddhist principles to our daily life - how one can best accomplish the [two] accumulations.

The way to Dharmakaya is in the accomplishing of wisdom accumulation. The way to Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya is in the accomplishing of merit accumulation.

Briefly, cessation is the fruition of the path. In the development stages, there are the different levels of realization. There are the Arhats, the Sravakas, the Pratyeka-Buddhas; and in Mahayana, there we have the different levels of Bodhisattvas [the 10 bhumis], whose ultimate realization is Buddhahood.

The cessation aspect of Dharma, however, is not to be our main concern today. So what is Dharma? Very simply, Dharma is all the teachings of the Buddha, with nothing excluded. Cessation, here means the cessation of all samsaric impurities, when the mind is finally purged of all suffering causing notions [samskaras]. Ultimately this is none other than the blissful state of Buddhahood. As one travels along the right path, is it surprising that one ultimately arrives at the right destination?

The Sangha

The Sangha itself practices the Dharma. The Sangha also instructs. Being experienced in Dharma practice, it has acquired the skills to lead and to guide others relatively less advanced along the path.

The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, the three jewels in refuge, are closely inter-related. We should rely on them all in our quest for ultimate enlightenment. The Buddha, the accomplished and the enlightened is our inspiration. The Dharma is the method and the means to be utilised towards

ultimate enlightenment. The Sangha, dedicated in Dharma, should for the moment be representing the Buddha.

(Rinpoche presiding over the refuge ceremony is [representing] Sangha. This is Sangha in the ideal state - the noble quintessential Sangha. It differs somewhat from the individual members of the Sangha community, on the mundane level. Also, for the present, the Buddha image before us, on the shrine, is [representing] Nirmanakaya Buddha.)

Following the refuge ceremony, there is the haircutting ceremony. Snipping off a strand of hair from the crown of the head, symbolises the cutting off of all samsaric ties. It marks the commencement of the liberating process.

Having taken the refuge vow, it is of the utmost importance to hold steadfastly to the commitment, striving relentlessly for ultimate enlightenment. Only then, are we able to benefit from the vow [and] benefit from its true worth, in retaining the Buddha's blessing. Secure in commitment, everything else falls naturally into place. Being guided by the Sangha, one may then pursue vigorously in the Dharma. Strictly speaking, there are few hard and fast constraining rules and regulations, and there are no binding traditions. It is more a matter of *self-discipline*. just think: Without the Dharma, what else is there? Without the Buddha, who else is there?

We may have to remember from time to time, however, that we are living in an impure realm of samsara. Much as we would like to act positively, negative results are not always avoidable. We can only ask ourselves to act conscientiously and let our intentions be always impeccable.

I was once being asked: as in the case of one suffering from life threatening amoebae, how is it possible to avoid killing? The medication is meant to exterminate all the germs, and if the germs were not drastically eliminated, the patient would normally die. In such a dilemma, the choice is not really there. For one must regain one's health, in order to be productive in life.

Another question once put to me was: hunting and fishing give me a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction. Since physical well-being enhances mental health, one is therefore benefited both mentally and physically, in the pursuit. How can it be wrong? This is obviously an extreme example, where the line of reasoning is totally erroneous.

Now that you have the refuge, remember, it is the very foundation on which all Buddhist teachings and practices are based ; and it is also the support and the basis for all subsequent vows.