

Taking Refuge

By Lama Thubten Yeshe

Taking refuge is the first step on the Buddhist path to inner freedom, but it is not something new. We have been taking refuge all our lives, though mainly in external things, hoping to find security and happiness. Some of us take refuge in money, some in drugs. Some take refuge in food, in mountain climbing or in sunny beaches. Most of us seek security and satisfaction in a relationship with a man or a woman. Throughout our lives we have drifted from one situation to the next, always in the expectation of final satisfaction. Our successive involvements may sometimes offer temporary relief but, in sober truth, seeking refuge in physical possessions and transient pleasures merely deepens our confusion rather than ending it.

We should try to determine for ourselves whether or not our experiences have been beneficial. When we take refuge only in agreeable sensations or emotions, the problem of attachment is merely aggravated and we are sadly disenchanted because we expect lasting satisfaction from what turns out to be mere flickers of ephemeral pleasure. We take refuge in darkness and sink into even deeper darkness.

Buddhist refuge is a process of turning inward that begins with our discovery of our own unlimited potential as human beings. This discovery generates tremendous zeal for the development of our inborn wisdom energy. Complete, perfect wisdom is Buddhahood. Perhaps the word "Buddha" conjures up a remote and rather oriental image. But "Buddha" is just a word and it means a totally opened mind, an "opened lotus" When we finally realise our human potential and arrive at this total openness of mind, we become Buddhas.

However, at the outset we feel hopeless, helpless and incapable of self-improvement. Buddha seems to be somewhere in the sky, completely out of reach and we are nothing. But this is not true: we should not underestimate ourselves. Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, was once even more confused than we are, but by discovering his own latent wisdom-energy, he attained enlightenment. There are countless Buddhas and all living beings have the innate capacity to unify their minds with the unsurpassable clarity of enlightenment.

During Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime, many people attained profound insight and experienced miraculous bliss as a result of merely seeing him. In spite of his bodily disappearance -so long ago, we still benefit from the power of his wisdom and compassion. By cultivating our own latent powers and continuously developing our wisdom, we too can immensely benefit others. However much the world around us changes and our fortunes fluctuate, our inner world can remain stable and balanced when fortified by this profound understanding. Wisdom brings unfailing happiness, unlike those temporal objects of refuge which bring only tantalisingly brief and inconclusive moments of

pleasure.

The three objects of refuge are **Buddha**, **Dharma** and **Sangha**. Taking refuge in Buddha involves accepting the guidance of enlightened beings as the only remedy for the confusion and dissatisfaction of our present life. This is the only way we can realise our dormant capacity for attaining inner freedom. There are two aspects of refuge: the outer and the inner. Outer refuge means seeking guidance from living Buddhas, since we are unable to achieve liberation without a teacher. Buddhas also provide inspiration and are sublime models for us to emulate. When we contemplate the enlightened state, its reflection within our own minds fills us with joyful, radiant energy. This demonstrates that though at present we are not fully enlightened, the seed of Buddhahood is contained within each of us. Inner refuge is directed towards this seed of enlightenment, this inner Buddha-nature. We recognise that, ultimately, we are our own refuge.

If we are convinced that we are beyond hope and incapable of change, or if we think we are already perfect, then of course, there is obviously no reason to take refuge. But if we honestly examine our minds, our way of life, and the pattern of our relationships we can clearly recognise our own spiritual sickness. The enlightened being we turn to at this point is in effect the doctor who diagnoses our ailments and restores us to perfect health.

The medicine prescribed by a Buddha is the Dharma. Dharma is wisdom: the wisdom that understands our own true nature and reveals our own latent power of self-liberation. Taking refuge in Dharma means using that wisdom now. This will restore our hitherto obscured sense of human dignity and make us feel that we can, after all, do something positive about ourselves. Those who take deep refuge never feel lost or desperate. Refuge frees us from such abject mental states. As our self-respect and confidence increase, our relationships with others improve. Having discovered our own inner strength, we also recognise and respect the Buddha-nature in others.

Dharma means understanding reality. Meditation and prayer are not Dharma; they are merely tools for reaching this inner wisdom. Even if we meditate all day, but totally lacked Dharma understanding, we would achieve precious little. Nor are religious texts Dharma; they are merely books about Dharma, means for communicating information about Dharma. True Dharma or religion is a personal experience that each of us must elicit from within ourselves alone.

The third object of refuge is the Sangha. Sangha consists of those who are endowed with wisdom. They are like the nurses and friends who help us recuperate from an illness. Sangha are not only those who wear red or yellow robes, but also those friends who influence us beneficially. These spiritual friends energise and inspire us and are therefore to be clearly distinguished from ordinary friends who hold us back.

True spiritual friends support one another in their practice and promote each other's growth in

knowledge and awareness.

I can clearly see the importance of spiritual friendship when I visit my students around the world. When they are among friends in the supportive environment of a meditation course, they are happy and enthusiastic. But after they leave and try to practise on their own, their energy slowly subsides, and by the time I see them again they are back in the doldrums. This shows our need for strengthening influences that keep our energy flowing in the right channels. Whatever persons provide this influence, be they eastern or western, white or black, male or female - are of the true sangha.

It should be clear by now that the impulse to take refuge arises from seeing the necessity of developing our mind and cultivating our wisdom. Being buddhist is an inner experience, and not one that can necessarily be measured by our outward behaviour. I often meet people who hold no particular religious or philosophical views but who, in a quiet and simple way, take refuge in wisdom. They are sensitive to their own and others' needs and try to give their lives meaning by developing themselves and helping others. In my opinion, such people are buddhists, although they may never have heard of Shakyamuni Buddha or his dharma.

Taking refuge is not difficult, but it would be a mistake to think that we can passively sit back and let Buddha, Dharma and Sangha do the work for us. Buddha said, "You are responsible for your own confusion, and you are responsible for your own liberation." What saves us from confusion is our wisdom. If we take refuge while fully understanding the meaning of the three objects of refuge, our wisdom will flow and will of itself fill us with energetic determination to follow the path to liberation.

Once we have formally taken refuge, we assume a certain responsibility for our behaviour. We should watch our mind and examine the inner processes of action and reaction. "What is my mind doing now? What impulse is arising? When I act like this, what is the result?" For example, we should observe how others react when we utter empty, unnecessary words or when we talk without understanding what we are saying. Words are very powerful. Bodily communication also has a strong effect on others; our posture, our movements and our facial expression make a deep impression on other people's minds. Since most of our problems involve other people, it is important to be aware of our behaviour and to avoid harming anyone.

This process of action and reaction is called karma. Karma may seem like a technical philosophical term, but it is nothing other than our own experience. It tells us what results to expect from our actions, and this plays a vital role in spiritual practice. We want to meditate and develop wisdom, but if we make no attempt to control our behaviour and our distraught, scattered mind, we shall not get very far. For this reason we say, "Watch your karma." We must act with discriminating wisdom in order to create the best internal conditions for achieving our aims.

To recapitulate: Buddha is the totally opened mind, the state beyond confusion; Dharma is the path of wisdom leading to that state; and Sangha consists of those who are endowed with wisdom and can help us along the way. It is our own lifelong dissatisfaction that impels us to take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We realise that clinging to daydreams and physical possessions has never given us lasting joy. Therefore, in order to rid ourselves of this dissatisfaction and gain an understanding of reality, we take refuge in wisdom: the path to inner freedom.

But you should be careful neither to exaggerate your own problems, nor to be concerned exclusively with taking refuge for yourself alone. Remember that all beings alike are confused and unhappy. Therefore, whenever you take refuge, visualise your mother and father at your side, your friends and relatives behind you, those who agitate you sitting before you, and all other beings surrounding you. With sympathy and loving-kindness think, 'All living beings in the universe, including myself, have been in confusion since time without beginning, taking refuge in fictions and constantly encountering obstacles. Now I have the opportunity to develop my human potential and become unified with the omniscience of totally opened consciousness. Instead of listening to my confused, clinging mind, I shall listen to wisdom; this is the only way to liberate myself and all beings. For this reason I now take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.'

Then visualise Shakyamuni Buddha before you: white light radiating from the crown of his head, red from his throat and blue from his heart. You can visualise your own spiritual teacher as this main object of refuge or, if it comes more naturally, Jesus Christ or another spiritual guide whom you revere as one who has transcended all delusion. Your object of refuge should be visualised in a gentle and loving aspect, and radiating the three coloured lights. These rays of light flow into you and all the surrounding beings, and purify all negative energy, especially despair and self-degradation.

At this point a question may arise. "If taking refuge is a matter of relying on our own inner wisdom, why do we have a formal refuge ceremony? Why is this ritual necessary?" The answer is that it reminds us how critical the moment of taking refuge is: it marks our arrival at a crucial insight into our own nature. So many times in the past we have sought security in trivialities, but now we have discovered our innate capacity to fulfil the most exalted destiny of all: complete emancipation from suffering. We are determined that, from this moment on, rather than taking refuge in ephemeral fictions, we will take refuge in our own pure, clear wisdom-energy and set out on the path to liberation. The ceremonious action of taking refuge strengthens this determination.

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