
Through the virtuous merit from giving and other
perfections,
May I achieve enlightenment for the sake of all
beings.

The first two lines remind us that the path we have chosen is the correct path, as opposed to the wrong one. The third and fourth lines remind us that the path we are following is the supreme one, as opposed to the lesser path.

I am here in the role of giving a teaching, while you are here to listen to the teaching. We all need to think about the meaning of this prayer. If we do this right at the beginning, then our actions – whether listening to or giving the teaching – will bring tremendous benefits.

As indicated earlier, the first two lines of the refuge prayer distinguish the path that we follow, from a wrong or perverted path. A wrong path is the one that rejects the concept of the law of cause and effect, or karma. Or it might accept some sort of concept of karma but reject the fact of a life before and after this one, or it might assert a view of an all-mighty god, the creator of everything. The main indication of the first two lines is that the path that we follow is the right one.

The Three Jewels

The Buddha

The first of the Three Jewels of refuge is the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Buddha means to follow the path wholeheartedly with faith and trust in the Buddha as the perfect guide. The Buddha himself said, 'I have shown you the path to liberation, so understand that liberation is dependent on you'. In light of this statement by the Buddha, we have to clearly understand that the Buddha can only show us the path to liberation. That's all Buddha can do. As the Buddha said, '... liberation is dependent on you'. This means that if we follow the path by practising the Dharma as guided by the Buddha, we will achieve the state of liberation.

Furthermore, the Lord Buddha also said, 'You are your own protector; For no-one else can be your protector.' This means that achieving liberation is up to ourselves. The Buddha cannot take any of us to liberation by holding our hand. We achieve liberation by putting the Buddha's teaching into practise and realising our self-potential, and for this we must rely on the Buddha or a fully qualified spiritual teacher as a guide. But in the end, it comes down to striving hard in our practice. Simply cultivating faith in the Buddha, praying to him, and prostrating to him is not enough to achieve liberation.

The Buddha is likened to the qualified doctor. The patient must rely on a qualified doctor but that alone is not enough. To recover from their illness they must precisely follow the advice of the doctor, such as on medical prescriptions and following dietary advice and so on. Likewise, if we are to achieve liberation, we must implement the Buddha's teachings, and walk on the path as shown by him.

The Dharma

We take refuge in Dharma by recognising it as the true or actual refuge. Dharma is likened to the medicine we must take to cure our illness. Just as that medicine is the real and

direct cause of the cure, the Dharma is our real protection. When we actualise the quality of Dharma through our practice, we receive protection from the Dharma refuge object. Hence, the Dharma is said to be our true refuge and protector.

For instance, if, after hearing the Buddha's teachings on the view of selflessness we contemplate and meditate on that, we will gain insight and knowledge about selflessness. This insight and knowledge realising selflessness serves as a remedy to self-grasping, which is a form of ignorance that grasps at an inherently existing self, and the root cause of all the afflictions which bring about suffering. Therefore, we can see that through putting Buddha's teachings into practise we can gain realisations, such as the realisation of selflessness. Along with this realisation, we can gain the Dharma quality called the truth of cessation, and in this way, we are able to achieve the state of liberation.

The Sangha

Thirdly, we take refuge in the Sangha by recognising them as our trustworthy spiritual friends. Just like the nurse who assists the patient to get better, the Sangha are those you can turn to if you need support in your practice. For example, if you don't understand the meaning of certain points of Dharma or some area of practice, you can go and discuss this with a member of the Sangha, who is a reliable spiritual friend. Just as a patient needs a nurse, we need to have the Sangha to help us, and be a good role model to inspire us along the path.

In short, the meaning of taking refuge in the Three Jewels is placing wholehearted trust in the three objects of refuge. It is also said that taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the mark of a Buddhist. You don't automatically become a Buddhist just because your parents are Buddhist.

If we follow the path of the greater vehicle, the Mahayana, then we have to take refuge in the Three Jewels out of the motivation of benefiting all sentient beings. We can develop this altruistic thought by recognising that all sentient beings are just like us – they want happiness and do not want suffering. So, in order to benefit all sentient beings we want to achieve complete enlightenment. Hence, the main motivation in the Mahayana path is called bodhicitta, which is a genuine and passionate desire to achieve complete enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. It is with this motivation that you take refuge.

So, infusing this motivation of bodhicitta, not just with our spiritual activities, but with any activity, even if we are just going to bed or sleeping, transforms our actions into a Mahayana practice.

In general, the practise of Dharma is all about training our mind and eliminating mental afflictions such as anger, self-grasping misconceptions and so forth. Whatever Dharma practice that we do should counteract or serve as a remedy to any afflictions.

For example, when we meditate on and cultivate this view of selflessness or emptiness then, just like hot and cold water oppose each other, this view of selflessness opposes the wrong view of an inherent self. So, a benefit of our

Dharma practice is that we will be able to rid ourselves of mental afflictions such as self-grasping, anger and so forth.

However, we must also always bear in mind that when we follow the path of Dharma, we cannot expect that everything will go smoothly. Rather, we should expect to face challenges and obstacles. We also have to understand that following Dharma practice requires hard work and forsaking a lot of time spent on other things. Therefore, it is necessary to have sufficient determination and courage to engage in Dharma practice.

Following the practice of Dharma means purifying all our negativities and mental obscurations. That's a huge goal, so we have to understand that we need a great deal of courage, a readiness to face any obstacles and that we need to work hard over a long period of time.

The life story of the Lord Buddha shows us how hard he worked in order to achieve complete enlightenment. It is wrong to think, 'Well, I understand the story of the Lord Buddha and the hard work he engaged in', and then expect our own path to be very easy, and that we will achieve enlightenment easily and quickly, without having to work hard. That is not the right attitude.

Some people are inspired by reading biographies of early great masters and yogis like Milarepa, who accomplished mystical powers like flying in the sky and so forth. They fantasise about following these masters without considering that if they want to achieve such spiritual feats, they must be ready to sacrifice their own happiness and really work hard on the path.

I said earlier that for a practice to become a Dharma practice the most basic motivation is to find a good rebirth, the mediocre motivation is to achieve self-liberation and the highest one is the Mahayana motivation of bodhicitta. Having said that, I don't mean that the Dharma has no value for us in this current life. What we can understand here is that if we practise pure Dharma aimed at achieving happiness in our long-term future, we don't need to mention the automatic benefit to this life.

Dharma practice is a means of remedying or eliminating mental afflictions such as the three poisonous states of mind which are anger, desire and ignorance. These three are the main source of the problems we find in this current life. So, there is no question that if we sincerely follow pure Dharma practice, we will gain happiness in the future and also have a happier and more peaceful current life.

Today we have covered an introduction to the Dharma and practice. Next week we will return to the teaching on *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*. Last year we stopped at Verse 10, so we will continue from that point next week. In the meantime, if anyone has a question, you can email it to the Tara Institute office or send via Tara Institute's Facebook page.

Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version
© Tara Institute