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# The Quick Path to Enlightenment

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## The benefits of meditation

Before we begin with a short breathing meditation, we need to understand that the most important factor determining how well we do in any activity and how much effort we put into is our level of interest.

We must have an enough interest or an aspiration to engage in that activity; if we don't have enough interest, we should develop it. We can develop interest and aspiration by recognising the benefits of undertaking the activity and the disadvantages of not doing it. This point is important because, if we don't have enough interest in or are not passionate about what we do, we won't put enough effort and focus into it. Consequently, we cannot achieve our aims.

Let's talk a bit about the benefit of meditation practice. Lama Tsongkhapa said mental stability is like a king ruling over the mind. This analogy indicates that meditation practice has the benefit of enabling us to gaining control over our mind, like a king who has control over his subjects.

Now the question is, why do we need to have control over the mind? It is because if we lack control over our mind, it will be easily distracted and influenced by various thoughts of external objects. These distractions bring unnecessary stress, tension and worry, causing us to become oversensitive and reactive to things and people. We become short-tempered, paranoid and even insane. The result is more suffering, and even depression. But, through controlling and subduing our mind, we can reduce our distracting thoughts and ease or get rid of this suffering.

Meditation practice is all about subduing our mind. To see some positive effect from our meditation practice, we need to practise regularly and familiarise ourselves with it. After a prolonged period of practice, we will eventually notice our mind being less influenced by external distractions and thoughts. As the distracting thoughts lessen, we will notice more peace, happiness and joy arising within us.

Therefore, meditation practice will benefit us now, as well as in our future life.

There are different types of meditation practice, so we might well ask, which one should I do? It is said that breathing meditation is the most effective to immediately overcome disturbing thoughts and emotions – it's like a quick fix for a mental problem. It is also a recommended meditation for beginners because it a simple technique and easy to learn and practise.

Bearing this in mind, we will now do a short breathing meditation together. Ensure that whatever sitting posture you assume is the most convenient for you; it is, however, important to make sure your body is completely at rest. If there is any pain, stress or ache in any part of the body, try to imagine they are gone and feel the whole body to be completely at rest.

Next, direct your attention to the mind, letting go of all outwardly directed thoughts and bringing the mind within. Then, before the mind turns outwards again, direct it to the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, keeping it completely on the breath and not losing any part of the mind to any other object. To help you keep the mind on the breath in this meditation, you can mentally count the breath, counting one inhalation and exhalation as one round, and keep counting throughout the breathing meditation.

*(Pause for meditation)*

## Taking refuge in the Three Jewels

We are talking about taking refuge in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

The meaning of taking refuge is to wholeheartedly place our faith and trust in the Three Jewels as the protection and guidance that will save us from falling into lower rebirth, and enable us to achieve liberation from cyclic existence and complete enlightenment. We cultivate this firm faith and trust through reasoning, based on our knowledge of the Three Jewels' excellent qualities, which demonstrate their capacity to protect and guide us.

Before we take refuge, we must have reasons or causes for taking refuge. The two main causes are fear and faith. Here, fear refers to the fear of experiencing the suffering of cyclic existence, particularly the lower realms. But feeling fear or a sense of insecurity is not sufficient cause to take refuge; you also must have faith in the excellent qualities and power of the Three Jewels to protect us from the lower realms. When we generate these two causes, we can then go for refuge to the Three Jewels wholeheartedly and sincerely.

Take the example of a patient. To recover from illness, the patient needs to seek help from a doctor, take the prescribed medicine and use the support of a nurse. However, before seeking help, the patient must know why they need to see a doctor. They need to acknowledge their illness and that if they don't seek help, the illness could get worse and they may even die from it. So, the patient looks for the doctor and treatment because they are concerned about their illness. To have faith in the doctor, medicine and nurse, the patient must have knowledge of and confidence in their qualifications, experience and capabilities. In a similar way, you can understand the meaning of taking refuge in the Three Jewels.

## Taking refuge: the three types of person

Regarding the ways of taking refuge in the Three Jewels, in the scriptures, we find three different types of person – the person of small scope or mental capacity; the person of middling scope or mental capacity; and the one of great

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scope or mental capacity. The differences between these three are:

1. The person of **small scope** takes refuge in the Three Jewels in order to free themselves from the sufferings of lower rebirth.
2. The person of **middling scope** or mental capacity takes refuge, not just from fear of the sufferings of lower rebirth, but also from fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence or samsara. They take refuge out of a motivation or aspiration to achieve liberation from samsara.
3. The person of **great scope** or mental capacity takes refuge not just because of concern for their own self, but also concern for all suffering sentient beings; they are motivated by the great compassion that wishes to free all other sentient beings from suffering.

As part of practice of taking refuge in the Three Jewels, we say the refuge prayer, which we did at the start of the session. Physically, as part of taking refuge, we show homage by prostration.

Now, to learn more about how we integrate taking refuge with our practice, we should refer to this lamrim text – *The Quick Path* – that we are studying. The text instructs us that first, we should visualise the object of refuge – one’s guru or spiritual guide in the aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha – upon the crown of our head.

Then, if possible, think of this crown Buddha as being surrounded by an infinite number of buddhas, bodhisattvas, dakinis, dharma protectors, and so on. Otherwise, you can simply visualise one’s guru in the aspect of, but inseparable from, Shakyamuni Buddha, and think that this represents all the objects of refuge. We then reflect on the qualities of the Guru Buddha; through this, faith in the guru will arise.

Next, we should reflect on our current situation and that of all other sentient beings – how we and all sentient beings are subject to our suffering nature. By reflecting on suffering, we cultivate compassion, or a sense of empathy, for all suffering sentient beings, followed by a strong and sincere wish or motivation to liberate them.

However, we need to understand that we are unable to liberate all suffering beings at the moment. Therefore, we must seek refuge in the Three Jewels, because they are fully qualified with all the excellences and power to guide and protect all sentient beings. For example, we recognise that Shakyamuni Buddha is endowed with all the qualities to liberate all suffering sentient beings, and in this way, we generate faith in the Buddha.

Here, we take refuge of the person of great scope: in order to free all other beings from suffering and place them in the state of liberation and buddhahood, we will rely on the Three Jewels with an unwavering faith based on our recognition of the qualities of the Guru Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

### **Benefits of taking refuge**

You become a qualified Buddhist. Whether a person is a Buddhist or not depends on whether they take refuge in the Three Jewels.

You now have a basis to receive all other vows, such as laypersons’ vows, or novice and ordination vows. Without taking refuge in the Three Jewels, you are not qualified to take these vows.

It purifies a vast amount of negativity, such as the bad karma we have accumulated in our past lives or in this current life. Once purified, negativities or accrued bad karma will no longer be able to produce their result. Purification can also mean minimising the length of time or the degree and intensity of the suffering that one must otherwise bear as a result of negative karma.

### **The law of karma**

Regarding the law of karma or causality, we should understand that we can purify negative karma we have created in the past through certain practices we can do now. Sometimes, when people go through a situation, they say, ‘Oh, this is my bad karma.’ Such statements are based on the wrong notion that everything is predetermined and can’t be changed. This idea of karma is similar to the notion of an Almighty God as being the creator of everything.

It may help us to think that when things don’t go well, we can blame our past karma. That way of thinking has some merit. However, at the same time, it is important to understand that karma is *not* something that cannot be changed or altered; rather, we should think that karma can be changed, it can be increased or decreased. We should think that by engaging in Dharma practice, we can minimise negative karma and increase positive karma and merit.

### **How to take refuge in practice**

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels doesn’t mean we don’t have to do anything; that if we take refuge, we are automatically protected by the Three Jewels, in terms of solving our problems and getting what we want.

Rather, after taking refuge, we must follow up by practising the refuge precepts, just as a patient must follow the doctor’s advice, take the prescribed medicines, and co-operate with the nurse to recover from illness.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, our hope is to be free from suffering and to obtain happiness. But the Buddha said he cannot remove the suffering of sentient beings with his hands, nor can he transfer his realisations and happiness to them. He can only liberate other beings through teaching the Dharma.

Therefore, when we take refuge, we must put the Buddha’s teachings into practice, for it is our practice that serves as the actual refuge and protection for us. We must recognise that the Buddha’s teachings are the perfect guide. They reflect the Buddha’s experience, the path he followed, and what he found to be beneficial for himself. So we must have an absolute faith in the Buddha’s teachings and qualities, supported by our own reasoning and assessment.

### **Q&A**

*Question: The question refers to the lamrim text, Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, where it discusses the techniques for generating the altruistic mind of enlightenment. The text*

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*presents two techniques – the sevenfold cause and effect method; and the method of exchanging self with others. However, the text also explains how you can combine both methods to develop a more profound method of cultivating bodhicitta. There is mention about the special ways of recollecting the kindness of others. So the question is: what are the special ways? And how do these relate to the meditation on giving and taking? In relation to the meditation on giving, the text talks about two types of love; what are those two types?*

Answer: So, the first question relates to the special way of remembering the kindness of all other mother sentient beings. Here, you reflect on the kindness of other beings, not just in terms of having given birth to you or having served you as a mother, but thinking that all your happiness, joy and goodness come from other sentient beings. This is remembering the special kindness.

In this technique, we focus on the benefit of cherishing other sentient beings, on the one hand, and on other hand, the shortcomings of the self-cherishing mind. We see how all the happiness we have comes from cherishing other sentient beings, whereas all the problems and suffering we find in our life are derived from the self-cherishing mind, which we hold within ourselves.

The next question you asked was, what are the two types of love? Cultivating loving-kindness is one of the causes of generating bodhicitta or the altruistic mind of enlightenment. Generally speaking, love is the mind that wishes others to have happiness. That is one form of love. The other form of love is simply an intimate, close feeling, a sense of endearment you feel towards others – like some a pleasant attraction towards other sentient beings. This attraction to others is also a kind of love.

In the practice of generating bodhicitta, where we have to generate compassion, it is said that before we can generate compassion, we have to generate the type of love that we call a sense of endearment or pleasant attraction. That is a prerequisite; it must be generated before we can generate impartial or genuine compassion for all. One must first generate that love or attraction towards others, a sense of endearment.

However, when the text refers to love as the wish for all others to have happiness, that is not necessary to cultivate before compassion. In fact, there is no order or sequence, in terms of whether we cultivate that love or compassion first. These two are not a cause and effect.

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