
The Quick Path to Enlightenment

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First, we will begin with the usual breathing meditation.

[Meditation]

Causes for taking refuge

Lama Tsongkhapa said in *The Concise Meaning of the Stages of the Path*:

There is no guarantee that after death, I won't be born in a lower rebirth. The only thing that protects or saves us from falling into a lower rebirth is to take refuge in the Three Jewels. Therefore, we should engage in the practice of taking refuge steadily and firmly, as well as follow all the instructions relating to the practice of taking refuge.

This quotation raises the question of how much confidence we have in knowing that, after death, we won't be born into any of the three lower rebirths, such as the animal, hungry ghost or hell realm. At the same time, we should try to understand, based on our own reasoning and knowledge, that the objects of refuge are qualified to give us protection and save us from falling into lower rebirths. So, based on this knowledge, we try to understand the Three Jewels or objects of refuge.

The last lines describe how we receive protection from the Three Jewels or the objects of refuge. First, we develop an unwavering faith in the three objects of refuge. But simply having faith in the three objects of refuge won't help us. We also need to practise all the precepts by taking refuge in the Three Jewels.

It is said in the scriptures that, if we have developed faith in the Three Jewels and are strong and steady in our refuge practice, then that alone can give us some sort of protection. But such protection is only a temporary measure that may prevent us from falling into lower rebirths once or twice. Therefore, to completely protect ourselves from falling into a lower rebirth, we must practise all the instructions or precepts relating to our practice of taking refuge. If we follow all the spiritual practices relating to taking refuge, then we can find lasting protection.

We must practise all the precepts relating to taking refuge continuously so that we will never fall into a lower rebirth. For example, a person might get freed from prison with the help of someone in authority but, if after leaving prison they commit the same crime again, then of course they will return to prison. So, they must make sure not to commit any further crimes.

Commitments after taking refuge

Here, we continue the teaching on taking refuge in the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

The discussion now relates to the sort of practice we must do when taking refuge. In this regard, there are two outlines relating to the practices. There are the specific commitments relating to each one of the three objects of refuge and then there are the common commitments or instructions of the Three Jewels.

If we begin with the specific commitment of taking refuge in each of the Three Jewels, it is explained in two ways. The first indicates the negative commitments or precepts which instruct us on what to reject and what not to do. Next, there are the positive commitments that instruct us on what to accept and what to practice.

Specific commitments

Negative commitments of taking refuge in the Buddha

We begin with the specific negative commitments in association with taking refuge in the Buddha. The negative commitment here is to avoid taking refuge in any mundane gods. Taking refuge in the Buddha means that we recognise the Buddha as a fully qualified object of refuge – as an ultimate object of refuge. So, we place our trust and faith in the Buddha; placing our hopes and direction in life in the hands of the Buddha. Since we make this commitment of taking refuge in the Buddha, we must avoid taking refuge in mundane or worldly gods.

When it says we should not take refuge in other gods, this is in the context of the object from which we seek ultimate refuge, not just to fulfil our temporary or immediate needs. Therefore, we are not contradicting ourselves if we also seek help from other gods for achieving some temporary benefit. It's a bit like paying someone to do a certain task. Likewise, for the sake of achieving a temporary goal, it is okay to offer a ritual cake to a mundane god. But we should not see them as our ultimate refuge.

Negative commitments of taking refuge in the Dharma

Regarding the negative commitments relating to taking refuge in the Dharma, the main commitment is not harming other sentient beings. As part of this commitment, we should always be aware that just as we don't want any harm from others, likewise we should never harm other sentient beings.

Negative commitments of taking refuge in the Sangha

The main negative commitment of taking refuge in the Jewel Sangha is not to befriend those who hold wrong views, such as those who say there is no law of karma, no Three Jewels, no existence before and after death etc. This commitment is in the sense of not being influenced by the wrong views and habits of others. As a beginner, if we are not careful, it is very easy to be influenced by other people. Therefore, by taking refuge in the Sangha as part of our practice, we try to keep a distance from and not be influenced by those with wrong views and unpleasant habits.

Positive commitments of taking refuge in the Buddha

The positive commitment of taking refuge in the Jewel Buddha is to recognise and respect even an image of the Buddha in the form of a sculpture or painting as being the same as the actual Buddha. Furthermore, as far as our

respect and faith in the image goes, we should not consider the material the image is made of, such as mud or gold, or the skills of the artists. Due respect should be made to all images of the Buddha, treating the image as the actual Buddha.

Positive commitments of taking refuge in the Dharma

True Dharma such as the teachings of the Buddha shows us how to achieve liberation from cyclic existence and how to achieve a fully awakened state of buddhahood. Whatever language the Dharma is in, Tibetan, English or any other language, we should venerate and have faith in it. In this matter, we should respect and treat even a single word or letter of a Dharma text as being the true Dharma. As a sign of our respect for the Dharma, we make sure not to step over or place a Dharma text on the ground. It is said that showing respect for the Dharma is a cause to develop clarity in our minds and gain Dharma knowledge quickly in the future.

Positive commitments of taking refuge in the Sangha

Sangha refers to someone like a celibate monk or nun, or even a lay person who is intent on living a virtuous life. As part of taking refuge in the Sangha, the positive commitment is to show deep and sincere respect to any member of the Sangha, whether they are a celibate or a lay person, male or female.

Common commitments of taking refuge

There are also the common or general commitments of taking refuge. This includes remembering the qualities of the Three Jewels and taking refuge in and venerating the Three Jewels from the depths of our hearts as often as possible. Also, we make offerings of food or drink to the Three Jewels before we eat or drink anything.

The actual refuge is the Dharma

We engage in the refuge to receive refuge or protection from the Three Jewels. The direct protection or refuge we receive is the Dharma, which refers to practising or teaching the law of karma, of adopting good actions and abandoning bad actions. If we have a faith in the Dharma, we have faith in the law of karma. We will then make an effort to create virtuous actions, even if they are small ones, and abandon non-virtuous actions, including minor ones. So, this motivation and practice of engaging in right actions and avoiding wrong actions comes from faith in the law of karma and faith in the Dharma.

The law of karma

Speaking in simple terms, if we engage in good actions, it will bring a good result and good things will follow. Whereas bad actions will result in bad things. This is what karma is about.

If we investigate where actions come from, they initially come from our thoughts. We can talk about actions in terms of verbal, bodily or mental actions. Of the three, mental actions are the primary ones. Technically speaking, karma refers to the mental actions in the form of some intention or impulse to engage in an action, as well as the kind of thought we have at the time of undertaking the actual action. So, it is said that there are two types of karma

– the intending karma that is the intention or impulse to engage in an action, and the intending karma that refers to the thought we have at the time of engaging in actions of speech or body.

So, we are continuously accumulating the karma of body, speech and mind. For example, when we say something to another person, we are accumulating karma. We first have a thought or an intention to say something. Through this, we accumulate mental karma. Then, when we say it, we accumulate the karma of speech and, with our facial or hand gestures, we accumulate bodily karma. So, here we accumulate the karma of body, speech, and mind.

The main factor determining whether our actions are virtuous or non-virtuous is our motivation. If our motivation is positive, such as a sense of regard, consideration, and admiration for the other person, we will accumulate positive karma. Whereas, if our motivation is infused with ill-thought, pride or contempt, then we will accumulate negative or non-virtuous karma.

Any questions?

Student: How does karma move from one lifetime to the next?

Karma can go from one life to another life, or it remains intact until it produces its result. The accumulated karma remains within our minds in the form of a seed or tendency. The accumulated karma is like a seed that we plant in the ground. A seed has the potential to produce its result, but it will remain a seed until it meets the necessary conditions, like water, heat etc. When it meets those conditions, the seedling will arise.

In the same way, we continually accumulate good and bad karma which remain within us like seeds or, as we say, karmic imprints. We have negative and positive karmic imprints in our mindstream. The imprint is like a potential or tendency to produce its result. In the scriptures, an imprint or tendency of past karma is explained with an example of the smell of garlic. For example, if you store squashed garlic in a bottle, the bottle will smell even after you take all the garlic out. Likewise, the residue or imprint of the past karma we have created will remain. These imprints will remain there until they meet the right conditions. For good karma to ripen, we must gather these right conditions. Whereas, when we meet with bad conditions, bad imprints will yield a negative result.

At the moment we have past karma in the form of an imprint or tendency or a seed within us. We are also continuously accumulating new karma and conditioning the past karma to ripen its result.

We will come back to this teaching on karma later and also to the topic of the Twelve Links which will give us a good idea about how karma works within our own life cycle.

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Edited Version*

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