



A Handbook for  
Training  
in Refuge

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Venerable Jiqun

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# **A Handbook for Training in Refuge**

Venerable Jiqun



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Know that refuge has four actual practices:

1. Devoting yourself to a spiritual guide
2. Hearing the correct Dharma
3. Having proper mental engagement
4. Practising as prescribed by the Dharma

~ Venerable Jiqun

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## FOREWORD

Since the publication of *Rethinking Chinese Buddhism—the 2004 New Year Address* 《汉传佛教的反思—2004新春致辞》, Venerable Jiqun 济群法师 has been actively working on the foundation building in Buddhadharma by subsuming it under the four great bases. Refuge is the basis of the Buddhadharma, generating a pure motivation is the basis of practice, right view is the basis of liberation, and ethical discipline is the basis of the Sangha community. Among these important bases, refuge is the most important. Missing out on this foundation is like having a seed separated from soil; none of the Dharma practices will be able to take root.

It is likely that every Buddhist has some degree of acquaintance with refuge. Now what is regrettable is that most people only have a superficial understanding of refuge, even to the extent of regarding it as merely a Buddhist identity certificate or a protective amulet. Before going for refuge, they do not know that refuge bears great purpose; when going for refuge, they do not know that refuge should be motivated by generating the right intention; after having gone for refuge, they do not know how to strengthen their confidence in the objects of refuge. Therefore, there are many people who have gone for refuge for many years but still feel lost and aimless, not knowing how to go about training in the essential points; and

there are even some whose faith and conviction in the path have gradually faded away.

Have we ever examined our motivation when we are going for refuge in the Three Jewels, to ensure that we are entering the door of Buddhism at the correct starting point? Have we done some comparison, thereby coming to know about the Three Jewels and making the determination to go for refuge on account of that knowledge? Do we understand the true inner attributes of our objects of refuge and take them as an exclusive model for improving the quality of our life? These questions bring up points that every Buddhist must deeply reflect upon and realise.

To address the many problems caused by the long-time lack of attention in the Buddhist circles with respect to refuge and its related training, the Venerable has conducted large-scale events propagating the Dharma practice of refuge close to ten times within this year at various places. On these occasions he spoke in depth about the important purpose of refuge with respect to the training in Buddhadharma, guided the devotees to strengthen their understanding of refuge, and reinforced their confidence in the Three Jewels.

This book contains the Dharma teachings given by the Venerable at Suzhou Dinghui Temple 苏州定慧寺 during the May Day period. They were recorded by Yan Ru 演如 and Yang Li Qun 杨利群, and arranged by An Yin 安隐. The text *From the Three Jewels for Upholding to the Three Jewels of Innate Nature* 《从住持三宝到自性三宝》 is also appended; these were teachings given by the Venerable to the camp participants at the

Wutaishan Qingliangzhilv Summer Camp 五台山清凉之旅夏令营. Since the theme of the summer camp was “*Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 and Buddhadharma in Life”, the Venerable gave an exposition that revolved around *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, which he combined with the Dharma practice of refuge that he was strongly propagating. Explaining profound concepts in simple terms, he provided an analysis of the processes beginning from going for refuge in the Three Jewels for Upholding up till achieving the Three Jewels of Innate Nature. This is another masterpiece he produced since he started to propagate the Dharma practice of refuge. It was recorded by Li Ren 立仁 and arranged by An Yin 安隱.

In order to guide the devotees to include the practice of refuge as part of their daily practice, the Venerable also composed *A Rite for Weekday Group Practice in Refuge* 《周日皈依共修仪轨》 and personally led devotees to perform group practice in refuge at various places. I believe that the dissemination and propagation of the Dharma practice of refuge will serve as a great impetus to the consolidating of foundation building in Buddhadharma and the strengthening of the students’ faith and conviction in the path.



October 2005

# INTRODUCTION

As far as Buddhists are concerned, going for refuge in the Three Jewels seems like something that is all too familiar. Precisely because of this, many people feel apathetic towards this practice and do not value it sufficiently. In reality, the practice of going for refuge is not just a procedure, and it is especially not something that can be accomplished through a single ceremony; it is an important form of practice in itself. We can even go so far as to say that the practice of refuge pervades our entire practice for attaining Buddhahood. If we are unable to truly recognise the inner attributes and great significance of the Three Jewels, then even if we were to take part in a refuge ceremony, it is inevitable that we will find ourselves in a problematic situation.

We come to enter the door of Buddhism due to different causes and conditions. Some of us seek refuge out of fear for cyclic existence and the three lower realms; some of us seek an object to rely upon because we feel insecure in life; some seek refuge for the sake of attaining liberation from cyclic existence; some seek a safeguard in order to be assured of safety and wellness in life; some truly understand the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels and generate the mind to go for refuge; yet some others harbour a kind of superficial trust, opting to believe than to disbelieve. Thus, we have diverse reasons for going for refuge, not just a single one. These different reasons for refuge will directly influence the attitude and depth of our engagement

with Buddhism thereafter. Now, that being the case, what is a proper reason for us to go for refuge?

Although some people have gone for refuge in the Three Jewels, they still have not really generated a sense of reliance and belonging with respect to the Three Jewels. Concerning the practice of Buddhadharma, to constantly have a sense of reliance and belonging with respect to the Three Jewels is of utmost importance; it will affect whether or not we will be able to set a higher goal in life, improve our outlook on life, and make our mind stable after having gone for refuge. If we are not able to give rise to a sense of reliance and a sense of belonging with respect to the Three Jewels, then there is no way to talk about all these achievements mentioned above. This is precisely why many people still feel lost and helpless even though they have been engaging with Buddhism for years. Given this situation, how can we develop a sense of reliance and belonging with respect to the Three Jewels, and make it effective and long-lasting?

Some people believe that going for refuge in the Three Jewels is something relevant only at the start of their engagement with Buddhism. They think that although it is a necessary procedure for entering the door of Buddhism, it is not really related to practice. As a result of that, after having gone for refuge, they totally neglect to practise or strengthen their refuge practice. Consequently, their faith in the Three Jewels gradually fades away, as it is said, “Having engaged with Buddhism for a year, the Buddha abides before your eyes. Having engaged with Buddhism for two years, the Buddha abides in the temple hall. Having engaged with Buddhism for three years, the Buddha

abides in the Western Paradise.” Refuge is about having the most sincere trust in the Three Jewels, and is complete reliance on the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha with all of one’s body and mind. This is something that we have to practise constantly throughout our engagement with Buddhism. It is only through continuously reinforcing our refuge that we can truly elicit a strong sense of identification with the Three Jewels, and this is what will prevent us from losing our way on our path of engaging with Buddhism. The process of recollecting the Three Jewels is a process of learning how to generate the thoughts and practise the conduct of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and is also one of immersing ourselves in the boundless excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. By way of recollecting and emulating the thoughts and deeds of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, eventually we ourselves will achieve the Three Jewels of Innate Nature, which are qualities that sentient beings possess fundamentally. So, how should we go about practising refuge, and uninterruptedly strengthen and deepen our refuge?

There are also people who do not know how to go on to engage in training after they have gone for refuge. It is as if they believe that, along with the completion of the refuge ceremony, their engagement with Buddhism has become fully consummated. This being the situation, which Sutras and treatises should we study after having gone for refuge? What kind of stages of training should we follow? How do we choose a spiritual guide and devote ourselves to our spiritual guide?

I will explain in this piece of writing each of these issues revolving around the topic of refuge.

# 1

## **The role of going for refuge in the Three Jewels in our training in Buddhism**

Going for refuge in the Three Jewels is the  
basis of all immeasurable virtues,  
including even unsurpassable perfect complete enlightenment.

Although the Buddhadharma can be categorised into the Three Scriptural Baskets (Tripitaka), the twelve divisions of the canon, and the 84,000 Dharma teachings, these categories share the same essential points; moreover, they all contain the basic rules associated with training. Regardless of what school we choose and which Dharma practice we train in, we cannot circumvent these essential points and rules. If we neglect these bases, we will have to suffer grave consequences.

In my many years of training, I have come to deeply realise the importance of refuge, generating a pure motivation, right view, and ethical discipline. Refuge is the basis of the Buddhadharma, generating a pure motivation is the basis of practice, right view is the basis of liberation, and ethical discipline is the basis of the Sangha community. Everyone's practice should be built upon these basic constructs. Among these important practices, refuge is especially important; all students of Buddhism need to pay great attention to it.

### **1. Going for refuge in the Three Jewels is the start of our engagement with Buddhism**

The most basic criterion for becoming a Buddhist is refuge. Just as taking an oath is necessary for one to join a certain party, and registration is necessary for one to enrol in school, we need to pass through a corresponding ceremony for us to obtain formal Buddhist status. Going for refuge is an essential entrance procedure for a person to become a Buddhist. It is also the starting point of the path for distancing ourselves from



the sufferings of the three lower realms and for progressing to enlightenment.

This question arises frequently: If I do not go for refuge, can I practise the Dharma properly? Even without going for refuge, if we adjust our body and mind as prescribed by the Buddhadharma, and practise and actualise the relevant Dharma teaching, then we will certainly experience benefit to some extent, but what we can achieve will be severely limited. If we have yet to give rise to an earnest attitude of refuge, this is a clear sign that our confidence in the Three Jewels is not complete. Even if we are engaging in learning and practice, we are mostly making choices based on our own whims and fancies, instead of entrusting ourselves to the Three Jewels with all our body and mind in such a way that the Three Jewels serve as our only goal in life. In the absence of firm unshakeable confidence and also the determination to transform our lives serving as impetus, how are we to emerge from our current state, one that has existed for aeons without beginning, and gain a completely different kind of existence?

Hence, at the start of engaging with Buddhism, we need to go for refuge in the Three Jewels, and we need to go for refuge in a sincere and heartfelt manner with all our body and mind. There is neither room for bargaining nor indecision regarding personal gain and loss. Only this kind of refuge will set us at the starting line of the track on the great path to enlightenment. Otherwise, we will simply be loitering outside of it. Even if we were to receive a refuge certificate in our name, we would merely have come into the possession of an entrance ticket; we

would still need to walk over to the track ourselves in order for it to be effective. And the means to cover this distance depends precisely on our confidence in the Three Jewels.

## **2. Accomplishing refuge is the goal of engagement with Buddhism**

The final aim of going for refuge in the Three Jewels is not about waiting for the protection of the Three Jewels; nor is it to wait for the Three Jewels to arrange everything in our life for us. Rather, it is to enable us to eventually become the Three Jewels. Upon hearing this explanation, perhaps the lay people among you will become worried, wondering, “Does this mean that all of us need to be ordained as monks or nuns?” It is not so. What we need to achieve is not simply the Three Jewels in terms of outer image, but the inner qualities possessed by the Three Jewels. This is where the crux of our practice lies.

In that case, what are these qualities possessed by the Three Jewels?

Buddha is enlightenment, complete in limitless loving-kindness, compassion and wisdom. Dharma is emptiness and also the Middle Way that enters into emptiness. Sangha is the qualities of the noble Sangha, namely uncontaminated wisdom and the excellent qualities of liberation. Therefore, one does not need to be ordained in order to become the Three Jewels. What is more important is that we fully achieve the excellent qualities possessed by the Three Jewels. Only in this way can we become the Three Jewels in the true sense.

The ordained ones shave their heads and dye their



robes to become Sangha members who are successors and disseminators of the Buddhadharma. From the point of view of outer image, they are already the Sangha Jewel that is one of the Three Jewels for upholding; together with Buddha images and the scriptures, they symbolise the spread of Buddhadharma in the world. However, are their inner qualities consistent with their outer appearances? This is a matter that calls for continual self-examination. If they have appearances that exist in mere name but lack substance in reality, then ultimately they have nothing to do with liberation. Generating a pure motivation and receiving ordination is only the beginning of embarking on the road of liberation and truth. Before reaching the destination, sangha members need to strive uninterruptedly in practice; only then will they eventually become the actual Three Jewels.

All of the practices of Buddhadharma are to help us achieve the inner qualities like those of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The purpose of reciting the sacred name of Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara) is to recollect the great loving-kindness and great compassion of Bodhisattva Guanyin and to follow her example, so that we are constantly inspired to also fully achieve the same qualities of loving-kindness and compassion. Reciting the name of Amitabha is for the sake of recollecting Buddha Amitabha's forty-eight great vows; by using these vows as models in our practice, we continuously encourage ourselves to achieve the same kind of magnificent vows.

Thus, the recitation of the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is not just for us to obtain protection from them, and especially not for the sake of requesting them to

fulfil our selfish desires, including the fulfilment of our own mundane mind; such motives are contradictory to the practice of the Buddhadharmā. The basic purpose of recollecting the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is to admire their wisdom and virtuous conduct. In that way, we become motivated to emulate them, engage continuously in virtue, incline towards them uninterruptedly, and eventually achieve in ourselves the same qualities that they possess. It is only in this way that we will be able to meet the standards of Buddhist conduct and completely accomplish refuge.

### **3. It is due to refuge that the various Dharma teachings are bestowed**

The Buddhadharmā contains 84,000 types of Dharma teachings. In fact, all of them are inseparable from the scope of going for refuge in the Three Jewels. It can be said that, separated from the Three Jewels, there is no Buddhadharmā. When Atisha went to Tibet, due to seeing that there was room for improvement in the people's attitude of refuge, he taught refuge widely and came to be known as the "refuge lama". In the beginning, many people developed misgivings about his teaching of refuge, wondering, "Who doesn't know about refuge?" I believe many of you present here had the same doubt when you saw the notification regarding this talk. "Refuge? What's there to talk about? How can it be that people like us who have gone for refuge for many years still do not know about refuge?" Regarding this question, Atisha's reply then was "I am unaware of any Buddhadharmā that is higher than the practice of going for refuge."



Atisha attached much importance to the practice of refuge and walked the talk, with which I concur. My practice over many years has made me deeply realise that there is no Dharma practice that can be separated from the basis of going for refuge in the Three Jewels. The Three Jewels represent the entire corpus of the Buddhadharmā, and each of the Jewels is indispensable. The entire practice of the Buddhadharmā is a process of going for refuge that proceeds from outside to inside, from the surface to the depths. So, in this sense, the attainment of Buddhahood is precisely the complete accomplishment of going for refuge.

Having chosen the Three Jewels as the objects of our refuge, we should frequently recollect them, just as we recollect our loved ones whom we are most concerned about. By causing their images to constantly appear in our minds, we should not be parted from them for even an instant. The early *Agamasūtras* 《阿含经》 especially emphasise the practice of recollecting the Three Jewels. Regardless of whether one performs the three recollections, the six recollections or the ten recollections, the basic content of these recollections is the recollections of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The six recollections are, in addition to the recollection of the Three Jewels, the recollection of ethics, the recollection of giving and the recollection of the gods. The ten recollections include the four additional items: the recollection of tranquillity, the recollection of breathing, the recollection of the body and the recollection of death. Regardless of how the content of the recollections is enumerated, the recollection of the Buddha, the recollection of Dharma and the recollection of Sangha are

of primary importance from beginning to end, and serve as indispensable bases.

In regions where Chinese Buddhism is practised, many devotees practise the Dharma of recollecting Buddha as found in the Pure Land tradition. The practice of recollecting Buddha can be of varying depths, and all three levels of the faculties of disciples are covered, no matter how sharp or dull. It encompasses the recollection of Buddha by reciting the name, the recollection of Buddha by visualisation, the recollection of Buddha by viewing the image, the recollection of Buddha by reality, “The self-nature is Amitabha; mind only is the pure land”, and including even “Just the mind is Buddha” in the *Chan* (or *Zen*) tradition. All these different levels of content for practice have at their core the recollection of Buddha and refuge.

Furthermore, many of the Dharma teachings and practices found in Mahayana Buddhism are built upon the foundation of recollecting the excellent qualities of the Buddha. The familiar *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct, Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行愿品》 is the highest, deepest, most complete, and most direct means of recollecting Buddha. Its central thought may be summed up in two phrases: “Peerless observation and practice of the mind of enlightenment; the method of emulating the Buddha’s qualities.” One of the purposes of recollecting Buddha is to remember the Buddha’s excellent qualities, but more importantly, the recollection of Buddha is for us to emulate the Buddha’s qualities, to translate this recollection into practice. Therefore, the practice of *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct, Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行



愿品》 serves as a profound recollection of Buddha, one that is both direct and practical.

The kind of results we receive from the recollection of Buddha depends on our understanding of the Buddha's excellent qualities. Many see the practice of recollecting Buddha as being only too simple, believing that all it takes is merely the ability to recite the name "Buddha Amitabha". In that case I need to inform you that, if you lack understanding of the inner qualities of "Buddha Amitabha" and do not really know the profound Dharma meaning contained within it, it will be difficult for your recitation of this Buddha name to be powerful, and it will be even more difficult for this name to have any effect on your life. You need to be aware that "Buddha Amitabha" is a glorious name of millions of virtues, one possessing limitless inconceivable excellent qualities. The profundity of your recitation of this Buddha's name commensurates with your understanding of this Buddha's name. Hence, the recollection of Buddha should be accompanied by the hearing and contemplation of the scriptures as well as proper reflection. Especially for those of you who have yet to give rise to full confidence in this practice, it is only through deepening your understanding of the Buddha's excellent qualities that you are able to cause your recitation of the Buddha's name to be powerful.

The recollection of Dharma is the recollection of the teachings of the Buddha and the Dharma practices He bestowed. These Dharma teachings and practices guide us to our destination on the other shore, like a lighthouse illuminating before us the directions where we need to proceed in. We train

in the Buddhadharma in order to eliminate our afflictions, penetrate emptiness, be liberated from the cycle of birth and death, and accomplish the peerless qualities of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. How can we attain these achievements? Since the Buddha had already entered *parinirvana*, we can only “rely upon a spiritual guide, and attain liberation by depending on the Dharma”, as the saying in Chinese goes. For over 2,000 years, the past lineage masters have attained their achievements in this manner.

The recollection of Sangha mainly refers to recollecting the noble Sangha, including the noble hearers (*shravakas*) and the great Bodhisattvas who have yet to attain Buddhahood. We recollect their virtuous deeds and the Dharmas of their practice. The *Agamasutras* 《阿舍经》 contains detailed records of the words, deeds and realisations of the great Arhats such as Shariputra, Mahakashyapa, Maudgalyayana, Purna, Upali and so forth. Many Mahayana scriptures also reveal the great vows of the great Bodhisattvas. The *Universal Door Of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva Chapter of the Lotus Sutra* 《法华经·观世音菩萨普门品》 documents the spirit of great compassion of Guanyin 观音 (literally meaning “One who observes sounds”, Avalokiteshvara), who seeks out sounds in order to rescue those who are suffering and fulfils every single one of the multitudes of requests that are made; *The Sutra of The Great Vows of Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva* 《地藏菩萨本愿经》 describes the inspiring power of the vows of Kshitigarbha, who vowed to attain enlightenment only after all sentient beings have been liberated; *Mahayana Yoga Vajra Nature Ocean Manjushri Thousand Arm Thousand Alms Bowl Great*



*King of Teachings Sutra* 《大乘瑜伽金刚性海曼殊室利千臂千钵大教王经》 relates the true vow of Bodhisattva Manjushri, who pledged to benefit all sentient beings with equanimity and to cause them to attain the Buddhas' noble results; the *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct of the Flower Adornment Sutra*, *Bhadracharyapranidhana* of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* 《华严经·普贤行愿品》 proclaims Bodhisattva Samantabhadra's vast vows of conduct, which extend as far as the limits of the realm of space. Besides these, treatises such as *The Record Pointing to the Moon* 《指月录》, *Biographies of Eminent Sangha* 《高僧传》, and so forth also record incidents in the lives of past eminent masters who undertook austerities and sacrificed themselves for the Dharma. The power of their vows, the Dharmas of their practice, and their final accomplishments are what all Buddhists should constantly recollect and relentlessly pursue in the process of their training.

If we regard the Buddhas, the Bodhisattvas, and the past eminent Sangha as signposts on our path to achieving Buddhahood, then the constant recollection of their excellent qualities will help us to aim accurately for the target and strengthen our aspiration for the goal, so that we become closer to our destination with every stride. Otherwise, the mundane mind will always be looking for an opportunity to intrude, so that we will become confused by ignorance, wander aimlessly without making any progress, and even lose our bearings.

So we can see that the practice of any Dharma is inseparable from refuge in the Three Jewels. In other words, the numerous Dharma practices are but different interpretations of refuge in the Three Jewels.

## 4. Going for refuge in the Three Jewels is the basis of the Buddhadharma

Refuge is the demarcation that differentiates between Buddhists and non-Buddhists. It is the basis of Buddhadharma and of all ethical discipline. It is also what safeguards every practice and actualisation.

The practice of every single Dharma is based upon our trust in the Three Jewels. As it is said, “Faith enables us to enter the great ocean of the Buddhadharma.” This kind of faith is the fountainhead of what will enable us to arrive at the state of liberation on the other shore. If we do not possess it, then our practice will definitely lack drive and be more difficult to sustain over time. Why are we not afraid of karma and its results? Why do we remain indifferent in the face of impermanence? To a huge extent, these tendencies occur because our confidence in the Three Jewels is not firm yet. For that reason, when we hear teachings on karma and its results or on impermanence, even though we may feel that they are reasonable, we fail to arrive at a level of deep conviction such that we are completely free from doubt.

Regarding this point, the master Tsongkhapa gives the following vivid analogy in *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 in which he observes that although some people have gone for refuge, they place greater trust in a fortune-teller than in the Three Jewels: “If a fortune-teller tells us that misfortune will befall us if we engage in a certain task this year, we will probably proceed very cautiously and follow his instructions to the letter; but



even though we may have studied the scriptural teachings and taken vows, we do not feel any shame or embarrassment about frequently transgressing them, much less feel vigilant regarding them.” This situation pointed out by the master Tsongkhapa is still a common phenomenon these days. It will do no harm for us to engage in self-examination: “Have I accepted with confidence and practised the teachings of the Buddha that I have learnt? Have I kept with the utmost care all the vows that I have taken? Have I properly actualised the advice of my spiritual guide?” If our answers are negative, then this can only clearly indicate that we have yet to firmly establish the Three Jewels in our hearts.

Whether or not we can put into practice the Buddhadharma we have learnt is directly contingent upon our confidence and unwavering faith in the Three Jewels. When a patient with a terminal disease chooses a doctor, he needs to have complete trust in the doctor before he can willingly entrust his life to that doctor and earnestly undergo the treatment. Similarly, the Buddhadharma serves as a good medicine that will eradicate our serious ailment of birth and death. Whether it is the mindfulness on death and impermanence, the mindfulness on the sufferings of cyclic existence, the deep conviction in karma, or the dependent-arising emptiness nature and the selflessness of all phenomena, all of these antidotes are prescriptions bestowed out of loving-kindness and compassion by the Buddha in order to cure the sicknesses of sentient beings. Only when we have full confidence in the truth and the efficacy of the Dharma will we practise it accordingly. Of course, merely having trust is not sufficient, because the attainment of

liberation depends also on our exploring and actualising of the Dharma. Just as a sick person needs to consume his medicine according to the doctor's instructions in order to fully recover, it will be impossible for his ailment to be eliminated if he simply worships the doctor but does not actively cooperate in the treatment.

Therefore, with deep conviction in the Three Jewels as a prerequisite, we need to continuously study and contemplate the scriptural teachings, constantly recollect the excellent qualities of the Dharma, give rise to pure faith in the Dharma, and respect it from the depths of our heart. Only by thoroughly understanding and trusting the Dharma will we be able to immerse our body and mind in the Dharma and to transform our lives as prescribed by the Dharma.

## **The causes of refuge and the choice of refuge**

Having gone for refuge in the Buddha,  
Gone for refuge in the Dharma, and  
Gone for refuge in the Sangha,  
One should not involve oneself in other paths,  
Should not prostrate to the gods, and  
Should not worship ghosts and spirits.

We need to have proper reasons for going for refuge. This will directly affect our attitude and accomplishment with respect to our engagement with Buddhism. Correct causes for going for refuge mainly include the three aspects explained below.

### **1. Recognising the significance and preciousness of this human rebirth replete with freedoms and endowments**

We have a precious human rebirth replete with freedoms and endowments. It enables us to learn the Buddhadharma and holds great meaning, but its value needs to be actualised by means of refuge in the Three Jewels.

The freedoms and endowments refer to the eight freedoms and ten endowments. The eight freedoms are: (1) freedom from rebirth in the hell realm; (2) freedom from rebirth in the hungry ghost realm; (3) freedom from rebirth in the animal realm; (4) freedom from being blind, deaf or dumb; (5) freedom from false worldly views; (6) freedom from being born at a time when the genuine Dharma has vanished; (7) freedom from being born in the northern Uttarakuru continent; and (8) freedom from being born in the god realm of non-discrimination.

The ten endowments are: (1) the endowment of being “same in type with the masses”, which refers to being born human; (2) the endowment of place, which refers to being born in a location where the four types of disciples are present; (3) the endowment of support and being upright, where the fruition of support refers to being born in a place

where there is Buddhadharmā, and the fruition of being upright refers to having complete sense faculties and being able to hear, accept and retain the Buddhadharmā; (4) the endowment of not having karmic obstacles, which refers to not having committed or caused others to commit the five actions of immediate retribution; (5) the endowment of not having the obstacles of non-faith, which refers to not being obscured by false views such as the denial of karma and its results; (6) the endowment of teacher, which refers to encountering the advent of a Buddha in the world; and (7) the endowment of the bestowal of conventional genuine Dharma, which refers to meeting the peerless Buddhadharmā; (8) the endowment of the transmission of ultimate genuine Dharma, which refers to Buddhist followers attaining results of practice and so forth in accordance with the Dharma; (9) the endowment of the correct conduct still in existence, which refers to the scriptural and realisation Dharma still being transmitted in the world; and (10) the endowment of having favourable necessities, which refers to having the complete necessary collections for practice. Among these ten endowments, the first five are inner and the rest are outer.

These endowments can be summarised into the following main points: the foremost is to possess unimpaired intellect, thereby being endowed with the abilities to study and understand the Buddhadharmā; the next is to be free from disabilities such as being deaf or blind, thereby being able to read the scriptures or hear one's spiritual guide explain the Dharma; the third is being free from the obstacles of misconceptions, such as utterly denying religion due to having

come under the influence of certain trends of thought; the fourth is living in a place where there are opportunities to hear the Dharma.

What exactly is the value of such a human rebirth? In reality, its value cannot be described by words. This is because it is priceless, surpassing all the valuables in the world. Its value lies in its endowing us with the ability to unearth the limitless treasures of our life, to eliminate all our future sufferings and those of all other sentient beings, and to proceed to the state of liberation on the other shore together with all sentient beings. None of these accomplishments can be achieved through any kind of wealth. Of course, if we are unable to use our human rebirth correctly, our human rebirth can also cause us to create negative karma and fall into the lower realms. Or it can cause us to become its slave, so that we spend our whole life toiling and undergoing strife for its sake. What a stark contrast between gain and loss here!

To begin with, a human rebirth is already difficult to obtain. Now, a human rebirth endowed with the freedoms and endowments is even more difficult to obtain. If we do not know how to cherish it and are not skilful in uncovering its potential, then our existence will be squandered in the worst possible way. Regarding this point, I have given the following example in the past. Suppose a person has been sentenced to imprisonment for a hundred years due to a serious crime. During this period he is allowed half a day of free activity. If he uses this opportunity to perform meritorious acts to atone for his crime, he will be able to enjoy total freedom for the next fifty years. If instead, he simply uses it to have fun, then

even though he may experience some degree of happiness right there and then, what follows will still be lengthy imprisonment. And if he is not careful and creates further wrongdoings while enjoying himself, he may be subjected to prolonged and even more intense misery in jail.

The plight of sentient beings in cyclic existence is just like that. We have no idea how many times we have been wandering in cyclic existence life after life, appearing and disappearing on this long pathway of birth and death without end. It is with difficulty that we have obtained this long-awaited chance to be liberated, a status that will enable us to engage in practice. If we do not seize it to transform ourselves with joyous effort and achieve liberation, very quickly we will go on to take rebirth in cyclic existence. At this junction with several options leading to different destinations, we must identify the correct direction to take and make a timely decision as to where we are to go.

Refuge is a path we need to traverse in order to unearth the boundless treasures of our life. Obtaining a human rebirth is equivalent to getting once the precious chance to decide how our life will unfold in the future; if we come to be aware of this fact, can we bear to give it up easily? Will we not take action immediately? If there is a poor man who hears that he is in possession of a priceless treasure but is in no hurry to find it, but instead passionately pursues all kinds of trivial gains at the cost of his life, we will certainly bemoan his foolishness. Now what is unfortunate is that we ourselves have been such a fool life after life. Busying ourselves for our entire life for the sake of external possessions, which we did not bring along at birth and will not

take away at death, we neglect to unearth our own treasures. Or we might have tried for a short while with great enthusiasm, but readily abandoned the endeavour when the search proved to be difficult or long. We behave in such a foolish manner because we do not understand the value of our human rebirth.

## **2. Being mindful of death and impermanence**

Likewise, being mindful of death and impermanence is a strong driving force that can produce a powerful mind of refuge. The Buddha said, “The observation of impermanence is sufficient for one to attain the path.” This quintessential statement regarding the practice of impermanence should be deeply impressed upon the mind of every Buddhist. Perhaps some people will feel puzzled, “I’m living just fine. Be mindful of death? Won’t that just be looking for trouble for myself?” Yet others may develop the misunderstanding that Buddhism inclines people towards becoming passive and escapist in outlook. The truth is, Buddhism emphasises the mindfulness of death and impermanence so that we can fully understand the harsh reality and be constantly prepared to handle any mishaps. Even if death were to suddenly descend upon us, we will be able to face it with ease, control and confidence. In this sense, the mindfulness of death is exactly what urges us to be proactive in using this life to practise the Dharma, and thereby accomplish the turning point in the transformation of our life.

In this world, most people are preoccupied with making a living, pursuing fame and gain, and indulging in pleasure. Notwithstanding the constant struggle and the price they have

to pay physically and mentally, even if they were to become successful in the end, what would they have added to their life? They would have added nothing but some momentary satisfaction and temporal purpose. When death comes to us, will such achievements enable us to depart from this life without regrets and to face death unflinchingly?

If there is birth, there will definitely be death. Like the shadow cast by an object in sunlight that cannot be shaken off, none of us will be lucky enough to escape death. Now what is frightening about death is that the time of death is uncertain. Some people die in an accident soon after being born; some pass away only at a ripe old age of a hundred years old; some die due to illness; while some leave suddenly due to an unexpected calamity. Nobody can guarantee that he or she will definitely be alive tomorrow. Even for us who are alive and well today, our breathing can just stop and we may find ourselves in a future rebirth with our next breath. Death is a phantom whose whereabouts are uncertain; we do not know when we will fall into its clutches.

No one can predict how much more time is left for us in this life. It may be a few decades, one year or even a day, before we are caught off guard and lose this only chance where we can act as the master of our own destiny. We may suddenly die even before we have the time to sigh. Our precious human rebirth replete with its freedoms and endowments, having expired, will go down the drain. What other loss in this world can be more tragic?

When death comes, having a high status will not be able to save us. Riches will not be able to help us and our relatives will

not have the power to prevent us from dying. In this boundless universe consisting of the billion-fold world systems, what can give us strength, allow us to face death fearlessly, and provide us with the power to transcend birth and death? As far as our continuum of life is concerned, only the Buddhadharma has everlasting true meaning. Everything else is just a dream, an illusion, a bubble or a reflection. Actually, it is not necessary to wait until death to recognise our circumstances as such. When elderly people recall the past events of their youth, do they not lament that life is like a dream, worldly matters are like illusions, and no trace whatsoever will be left behind?

For this reason, being mindful of death will enable us to clearly see our perilous situation in cyclic existence, recognise the significance of the Buddhadharma in our life, and naturally give rise to the thought to seek protection, just as someone who falls into water will immediately look forward to a strong person extending a helping hand. This is a very important prerequisite. Just imagine, is it possible for such a person, who is on the verge of drowning, to have wandering emotions and thoughts? If someone in those circumstances were to have the luck to meet a rescuer at that point in time, would he not cling on to the rescuer for dear life without letting go even slightly? In a certain sense, if we fail to contemplate death for a day, it is likely that the day will pass in vain. This is because we will unknowingly revert to our old ways and come under their control. Our habits have enormous force and need to be counteracted by applying the powerful antidote of being mindful of death.

Mindfulness of death and impermanence is like the deafening chimes of a bell issuing alerts to worldly people. Each

chime reminds us to cherish every minute and second that we have now, and to use our time to accomplish the most important task of this life. This kind of attitude is similar to that of a person who is about to die treasuring what little remaining time he has, without allowing himself to be indolent even slightly. Therefore, being mindful of death and impermanence is greatly significant not only for the practice of refuge; it is important for all our practices thereafter.

### **3. Reflecting on the suffering in the three lower realms**

Why is death frightening? Without doubt it has to do with our inability to let go of our attachment to this world, but more importantly, it is because we do not know where we will head to after death. Accomplished practitioners are able to face birth and death with light-heartedness, precisely because they know very clearly what the future holds for them, and are able to make a choice according to the power of their own wish, whether to be reborn in Sukhavati Pure Land and “encounter the Buddha when the flower opens up” as the Chinese saying goes, or to return out of compassion to the world according to their vows. However, mundane beings have no control but to drift about according to the winds of their karma and be mired in the ocean of suffering.

Buddhadharma tells us that sentient beings cycle continuously in the six realms: god (*deva*), human, demi-god (*asura*), animal, hungry ghost and hell realms. From among these realms, the three lower realms are such that the agony

and intensity of the circumstances there are unbearable to hear about, let alone experience. The reason why the Buddha repeatedly described these sufferings of the lower realms was not to terrify us, not to increase the sense of heaviness of our miserable human existence, and especially not, as some have imagined, to create an atmosphere of sensationalism in order to attract disciples. We need to know that the Tathagata speaks what is genuine, true, not false, and not inconsistent. He wanted us to recollect the sufferings of the lower realms due to his infinite compassion; to wake up worldly people from their deluded dream, he cautioned us, who are as if dwelling in a house on fire and yet unaware of the danger we are facing, so that we will wake up from our stupor and quickly escape using whatever means.

We should see clearly that the three lower realms are not far away from us at all. In reality, they may just be a single breath away. When your next breath fails to come, do you have the confidence that you will not be reborn in a lower realm? We should reflect: “Do I have control over my mind right now? If I lack control over it at present, what are the chances that I will emerge victorious at the moment of death? And how am I going to face the trials of my various karmas as well as the adverse conditions?” Upon that precarious and hazardous road of the intermediate state leading to the next rebirth, one deprived of discernment by means of a well-trained mind is like a blind man dwelling at the edge of a cliff. It will only take slight heedlessness for him to plummet into an abyss and experience suffering in the lower realms for long lengthy aeons.

So how can we avoid the sufferings of the lower realms?

How can we save all sentient beings—ourselves and others—from cyclic existence? We can attain these goals only by going for refuge in the Three Jewels, practising properly, and attaining final liberation. Therefore, it is said that frequent recollection of the sufferings of the lower realms is an important cause for generating a powerful mind of refuge.

#### **4. Having conviction that only the Three Jewels can save us**

Going for refuge is for the sake of seeking the final refuge in life. In this world, all of us are employing various means to find security and are constantly thinking about clinging on to something so that we can feel secure. Some rely upon wealth, using money as security; some rely upon status, using status as backing; some rely upon their family, using their relatives as shelter. We go for refuge in whatever we feel is the most reliable object. However, these refuges are still not final, because all external objects abide in a state of impermanence and flux, and are in themselves unstable, so how can they provide us firm protection? Relying upon external objects is like someone clutching at straw to save himself from drowning. At that moment, what he clutches in his hand is nothing but an illusion that is on the brink of obliteration.

“All gatherings end in dispersion; high status definitely ends in degeneration; meeting eventually ends in separation; life inevitably ends in death.” What can we rely upon? It is hard for families to avoid encountering misfortune; it is not possible to be guaranteed of status forever; and wealth can change

owners any time. Especially in today's world, the availability of too many opportunities causes everything to be permeated with instability. This is exactly the reason why the lack of a sense of security is so widespread among modern people. We enjoy far better material conditions than our forefathers, but why do we still feel apprehensive deep in our hearts? Why do we still find within us a sense of restlessness that we cannot get rid of? Very often, the more we possess, the stronger is our fear of loss.

Often people ask me: What is happiness? In my opinion, the happiness according to worldly people is nothing but some kind of unstable feeling. The foundation of happiness lies in the world and our own mind, but what kind of world and mind are they? The external world is in constant flux and the inner mind is clambering in every direction. How can happiness that is based upon an impermanent environment and inner mind be stable and firm? So we can see, nothing in the world can serve as a true object of refuge or provide the final solution to the ultimate problem in life.

Hence, in what way are the Three Jewels ultimate? We can analyse this question from three aspects: truth, virtue and ability.

First of all, let us consider the aspect of truth. The Buddha is not a fairy who comes and goes without leaving any trace, but is an actual person. More than two thousand years ago, Buddha was born in Lumbini (which lies within modern-day Nepal). His father was King Shuddhodana and his mother Queen Maya. After he left the household and attained the path, he travelled to many places and left behind many holy places



where pilgrims journey to pay their respect even to this day. The “Buddha” means the “Enlightened One”, and refers to a state attained through realising the truth of the universe and life. The teachings bestowed by him have the ability to guide all sentient beings to eradicate ignorance and erroneous thinking, and to perfect the wisdom realising reality. Over hundreds and thousands of years, countless highly realised eminent Sangha and excellent beings have progressed to liberation precisely by relying on the Buddhadharma. Hence, the Buddha is said to be a true teacher of humans and gods.

Next is the perfection of virtuous conduct. The Buddha is fully endowed with the virtue of abandonment, the virtue of wisdom, and the virtue of compassion. The virtue of abandonment refers to having abandoned all afflictions, not having any flaw, and never generating the slightest greed or aversion; for otherwise, in what way will the Buddha be different from a mundane being? When we turn the pages of the life story of the Buddha, we never find an account of the Buddha getting angry, let alone becoming furious and unleashing a flood as in the case of God. The virtue of wisdom refers to having achieved all types of wisdom. In general, it is divided into two types. The first is the wisdom realising the reality of the universe and life, called the wisdom of all modes, and the other is the wisdom understanding the distinctions in appearances of dependent-arising, called the wisdom of all varieties. The virtue of compassion refers to the perfection of great loving-kindness and great compassion. Everyone, not just the Buddha, has compassion. However, our compassion is narrow and small, one that is processed by ego and filled with

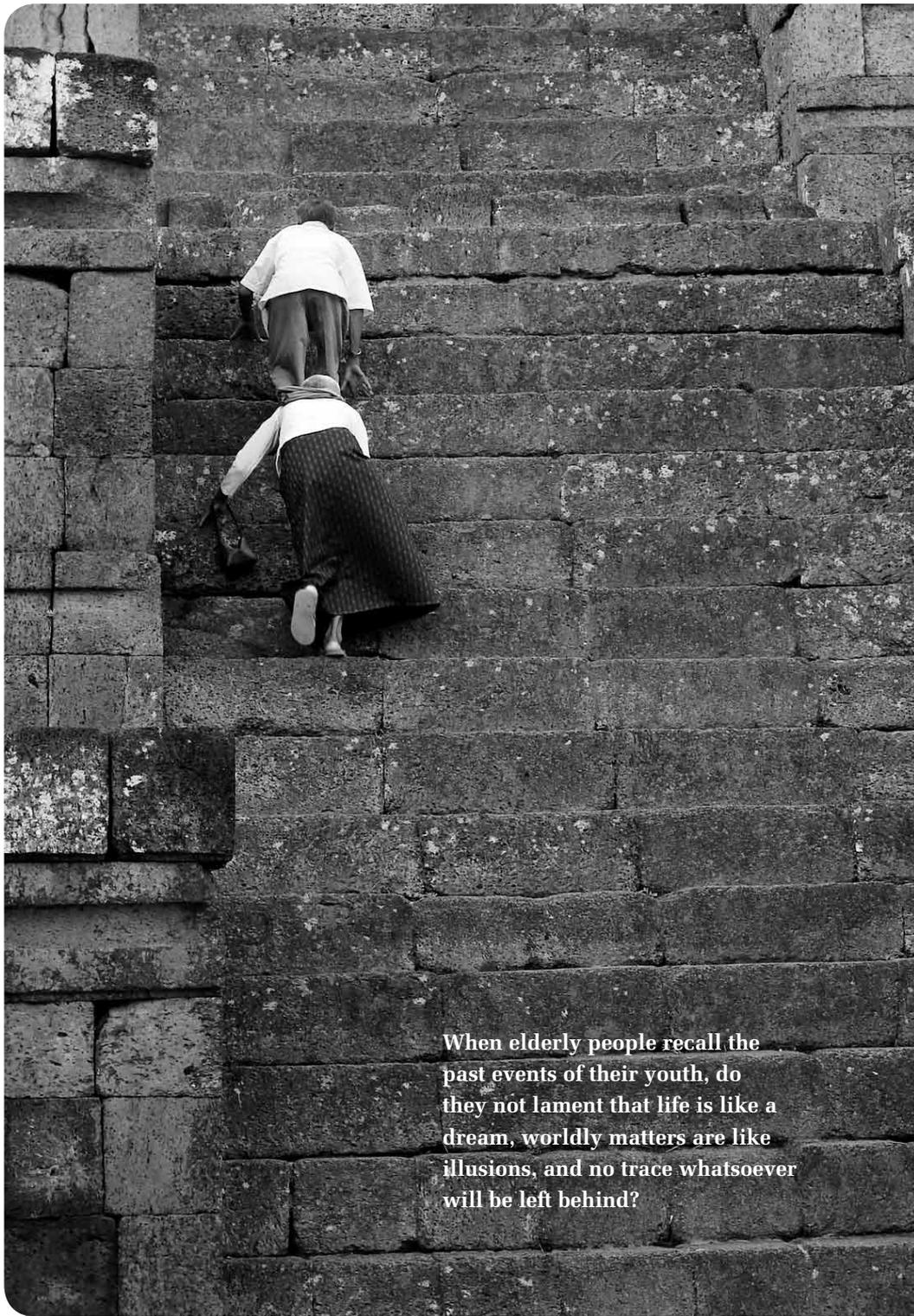
unevenness. The Buddha has transcended the grasping at self, which is why he is able to be completely equal towards all and uncover boundless compassion.

Third, the Buddha has the ability to liberate sentient beings. He is worthy of our trust and can be relied upon by all sentient beings. Such ability stems from the Buddha's perfect virtuous conduct. As he has perfected the virtue of abandonment, he is able to teach sentient beings how to extinguish afflictions and abandon erroneous thinking. As he has perfected the virtue of wisdom, he is able to bestow teachings upon sentient beings in accordance with their individual faculties and guide them appropriately. As he has perfected the virtue of compassion, he is able to be aware that sentient beings are in difficulty and generate the mind to help them, unconditionally and without the slightest prejudice.

Truth, virtue and ability are the criteria for choosing a religion. Just imagine, if one discovers that the object of one's belief has not been true, not mentioning the disappointment in one's heart, how does one recover all the lost time? Furthermore, if the virtuous conduct of the object of one's belief has not yet been perfected, then how is one going to achieve the advancement of one's inner mind and the improvement of one's life based upon one's belief? In addition, the object of one's belief needs to be equipped with the pedagogical ability to guide sentient beings to come to understand the reality of life.

Refuge is not merely external; its deeper significance lies in the improvement of our thoughts and conduct by means of refuge. Only the correct reasons for going for refuge can

induce true refuge; only an urgent mind of refuge can lay a stable foundation for practice. Otherwise, even if we were to take part in a refuge ceremony, it would be difficult for it to have a significant effect on improving our life.



When elderly people recall the past events of their youth, do they not lament that life is like a dream, worldly matters are like illusions, and no trace whatsoever will be left behind?

## Coming to know the Three Jewels

The Three Jewels of single essence are just single-mind.  
The nature of the mind having the self-ability of reflection  
is the Buddha Jewel.  
The mind and body having the fundamental self-nature of being  
devoid of name is the Dharma Jewel.  
The mind and body being non-dual is the Sangha Jewel.

We are fundamentally endowed with all the qualities of the Three Jewels within our life. In other words, on a particular level of our consciousness, we are no different from the Buddhas of the ten directions. The basis of our going for refuge is precisely the uncovering of these treasures by means of training in the Buddhadharma. Therefore, we must understand the inner qualities of the Three Jewels. Only when we have clearly comprehended their various qualities can we uncover these features accurately within ourselves without the slightest error.

## 1. What are the Three Jewels?

First of all, we should understand the names of the Three Jewels. The Sanskrit word “Buddha” means “enlightenment”: being self-enlightened, enlightening others, and being perfect in the conduct of enlightenment. The Sanskrit word “Dharma” refers to all the Dharma that the Buddha has realised and spoken. The Sanskrit word “Sangha” refers to those who dedicate themselves to the actualisation and propagation of the Buddhadharma, including hearers (*shravakas*), solitary realisers (*pratyekabuddhas*), and bodhisattvas. The Three Refuges formula in Sanskrit is “Namo Buddhaya; Namo Dharmaya; Namo Sanghaya”, and translates into English as “I go for refuge in the Buddha; I go for refuge in the Dharma; I go for refuge in the Sangha.”

Next, we need to understand their inner qualities. The “Buddha” is the “Enlightened One”; therefore he has attained Buddhahood and perfectly achieved wisdom. The highest result of Buddhist practice is “*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*”, meaning

“unsurpassable perfect complete enlightenment”, which is the highest unsurpassable thoroughly and fully accomplished enlightenment. One of the Buddha’s epithets is “Correct All-Knower”, indicating the function of omniscience contained within his enlightened nature.

Life fundamentally possesses the power of being self-enlightened. This state of being self-enlightened is defined in contradistinction to non-enlightenment. The non-enlightenment of mundane beings has its origin in beginningless ignorance. Due to it, they have attachment and afflictions, as well as cyclic existence, birth and death. Once we uncover the power of self-enlightenment in our lives, we will be able to transcend the long-drawn-out darkness of ignorance. We must understand that enlightenment and liberation are of one entity. In the very moment of self-enlightenment, the ability to attain liberation is present. For that reason, liberation is not something so distant as to be out of reach, and is especially something that we do not need to wait until death to attain, because it is something that life itself possesses fundamentally. This ability is simply waiting for us to uncover it and to abide in it; right there and then we will be able to break away from bondage and attain great freedom. The Buddha was able to perfectly attain the path to Buddhahood precisely because of having realised this type of ability.

Concerning the virtues of cessation, wisdom and compassion achieved by the Buddha, their core strengths have never been separated from this kind of “enlightenment”. The “Buddha” means the “Enlightened One”. Hence, enlightenment is the core effect of the Buddha’s perfection of character. Among

these virtues mentioned above, the virtue of wisdom is the manifestation of his enlightenment, and has the wonderful utility of penetrating emptiness. He possesses the virtue of cessation also on account of his enlightenment, as enlightenment is able to dissipate the afflictions and habitual tendencies. Likewise, the virtue of compassion is not separated from the effect of enlightenment; in the ultimate sense, compassion and wisdom are not different. The Buddha has achieved infinite loving-kindness and compassion, due to which He manifests himself in the world, teaches the various essentials of Dharma, and liberates all sentient beings, whereby there is Buddhadharma being transmitted in the world.

Buddhas pervade the worlds of the ten directions, but the one who has the strongest connection with our samsaric world is Buddha Shakyamuni, which is why he is called the “Founder Teacher Buddha Shakyamuni”. In the context of the Three Jewels, “Buddha” mainly refers to Buddha Shakyamuni, but you must realise that “Buddha” in general refers to all the Buddhas in the ten directions and three times. “Ten directions” is a spatial concept that includes the east, the west, the south, the north, the southeast, the northeast, the southwest, the northwest, above and below; whereas “three times” is a concept of time, and includes the past, present and future. All Buddhas of the ten directions and three times throughout the dharma realm and space are our objects of refuge.

“Dharma” is the teaching spoken by the Buddha. The word has broad connotations, as all that exist in the world can be called “dharma,” and there is nothing that is not included within its bounds. What is being referred to here is specifically

the teaching concerning enlightenment spoken by the Buddha. We need to learn about the Buddhadharmā by way of a few aspects.

One way to understand the Buddhadharmā is by means of the spoken teachings that are the revealers. These are the statements in the scriptures that reveal the doctrines, which is why they are called “revealers”. They mainly take the form of the Three Scriptural Baskets (*Tripitaka*) and the twelve divisions of the canon. The Three Scriptural Baskets are *Sutrapitaka*, *Vinayapitaka*, and *Abhidharmapitaka*. In “*Sutrapitaka*”, “*pitaka*” has the meaning of containment; it pervades the Buddhadharmā, causing it not to be dispersed and lost. The *Vinayapitaka* extinguishes all kinds of mistakes, puts a stop to negativities, causes the practice of virtue, subdues the senses, and determines the gravity of a misdeed similar to what a statute does; it sets out the code of conduct for Buddhists. The *Abhidharmapitaka* distinguishes the meanings of all Dharmas through the modes in which uncontaminated wisdom realises phenomena such as the Four Noble Truths, and comprises the realisations and interpretations of the Buddhadharmā of the great Bodhisattvas and lineage masters. The twelve divisions of the canon refer to the categorisation of the content of the scriptural teachings: discourses, versified sermons, metrical teachings, narratives of circumstances, biographical narratives, narratives of former lives of the Buddha, narratives of marvels, parables, teachings settling profound doctrines, unsolicited utterances, extensive teachings and prophecies.

The second way to understand the Buddhadharmā is by means of the doctrines that are revealed. This includes

the two big divisions: scriptural Dharma and realisation Dharma. Scriptural Dharma includes all uncontaminated virtuous Dharmas that teach sentient beings to destroy and eliminate ignorance, afflictions and karmic obstacles: the five aggregates, the twelve sources, the eighteen constituents, impermanence, suffering, emptiness, selflessness, the two truths, the three natures, dependent-arising emptiness nature, and so forth. Realisation Dharma is the Dharmas that guide us to proceed to liberation: ethics, concentration, wisdom, the thirty-seven branches of enlightenment, the six perfections, the four means of gathering disciples, and so forth. In other words, the practice of Buddhadharma includes two big parts: theory and practice. The scriptural Dharma emphasises theory, helping us to understand the reality of our existence, whereas realisation Dharma emphasises practice, which is the skills for adjusting our thoughts and conduct, helping us to improve the circumstances of our lives, realise the reality of all phenomena, and achieve positive qualities like those of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In the Buddhist Sutras, our inner qualities that we fundamentally possess are likened to the treasure of a poor woman; she guards the treasure but is unable to uncover it, and can only survive through begging. In reality, our situation is just like that; although we are endowed with the wisdom and virtue of the Tathagatas, we still cycle within birth and death, and are not able to attain freedom. Not only does our training in Buddhadharma involve the examining of our own treasures by means of the scriptural Dharma, it also requires us to learn the specific methods for uncovering the treasures.

“Sangha” means “assembly”, whereby a single person cannot be called “Sangha”; four or more are needed. This is just as a tree cannot be called a forest; trees covering an area are needed in order for there to be a forest. The Sangha community is a group that is a pure assembly. The spread of the Buddhadharmā in the world relies upon this group to shoulder such a responsibility. Hence, the Sangha is the Buddha’s followers, the upholders of the correct Dharma, those who actualise the practice, and the guides of sentient beings. Even though the Buddha had passed into *parinirvana*, because of the presence of the pure Sangha community that is in accord with the Dharma, the Buddhadharmā is able to pass down from generation to generation for more than two thousand years.

The Sangha can be classified into the Sangha of noble beings and the Sangha of mundane beings. The Sangha of noble beings is a vast category—including the Bodhisattvas of the ten grounds (*bhumis*), the four abiders in the results and the four approachers, and so forth—within which are the divisions of hearer Sangha and Bodhisattva Sangha. All the hearers who have attained the noble results and all the Bodhisattvas who have yet to attain Buddhahood belong to the Sangha, such as Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, Bodhisattva Manjushri, Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta, and so forth. The Sangha of mundane beings includes all ordained ones who bear the appearance of the Sangha but have yet to realise results or see the path.

Why are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha known as “Jewels”? The *Sublime Continuum, Uttarantra*

《究竟一乘宝性论》explains this point specifically; there are six levels of meaning for why the Three Jewels are “Jewels”.

The first is rarity. In this world, those who can really uncover such treasures are very few in number. Even though everyone possesses the qualities of the Three Jewels, they are deeply hidden and unexposed; even though one possesses them, it is as if one does not, so that one cannot use them in any way to improve one’s life.

The second is purity. The qualities of the Three Jewels are stainless phenomena that are free from all contaminations. The Three Jewels differ in terms of their external form and substantial entity. The qualities referred to in *Sublime Continuum*, *Uttaratantra* 《究竟一乘宝性论》 are those of the latter kind, that is to say, their qualities of inner realisations, liberation and so forth, which are stainless and uncontaminated.

The third is power. The Three Jewels have the great power to dissipate all afflictions and attachment. When the qualities of the Three Jewels within our life start to take effect, our troubles will dissolve away right there and then, like a snowflake falling into a fire stove and vanishing immediately without any trace.

The fourth is glory. First of all, the Three Jewels can purify our mental afflictions. The impurity or purity in the world is manifested in accordance with the impurity or purity of people’s minds; because our inner minds are filled with afflictions, the world becomes one of a period of the five degenerations. Therefore, in order to purify the world, not only do we have to clean up the environment, we also need to rely upon the power of the Three Jewels to purify our inner minds.

Secondly, the qualities of the Three Jewels contain boundless merit. The purity and glory of the Buddha lands of the ten directions are manifested precisely in accordance with the pure minds of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The fifth is supremacy, which includes two aspects. First, the qualities of the Three Jewels are very sublime, pure and uncontaminated. Second, they have the ability to dissipate all afflictions.

The sixth is immutability. The compounded contaminated world is filled with changes and instability. If we turn to observe our inner mind, what appears is none other than messy scattered thoughts and emotions, whereby our life is simply a composite of chaos, unrest, fluctuation and uncertainty. However, beneath the surface of changeability, the mind retains an unchanging level, which is composed of the inner qualities of the Three Jewels, all-knowing and infinitely compassionate.

On account of possessing these six types of inner qualities, they are known as “Jewels”. Even though the external forms of the Three Jewels—such as Buddha images, Sutra texts, the Sangha community, and so forth, including even the form body of the Tathagatas—are “Jewels”, they are not perfect after all and are not “Jewels” in the ultimate sense.

When going for refuge in the Three Jewels, we must understand what is so special about them. Only then will we be able to generate unwavering faith in them, and this kind of faith is precisely the key to our success. If we are not able to give rise to unwavering faith, then our minds will wander aimlessly in the states of the mundane mind, struggling within all kinds of

thoughts and emotions. In that case, it will naturally be difficult for our engagement with Buddhism to make progress as we have anticipated.

## 2. The types of Three Jewels

The Three Jewels that we usually speak of are the Three Jewels for upholding. What is meant by “uphold” is in the transmitting and spreading of the Buddhadharma, and causing it to be passed down in the world. Among the Three Jewels for upholding, the images of the Buddha are the Buddha Jewel, the Sutra texts the Dharma Jewel, and the present Sangha community the Sangha Jewel. After the Buddha passed into *parinirvana*, the Buddhadharma was able to spread mainly by depending on the Three Jewels for upholding. We must be aware that although the Three Jewels for upholding are not the Three Jewels in the ultimate sense, if it wasn't for their continuation in upholding the genuine Dharma, sentient beings will have no opportunity to hear the Buddhadharma and embark on their journey of practice. Therefore, the Three Jewels for upholding serve as an important medium for the transmission of the Buddhadharma.

Next, we have the Three Jewels with specific manifestation, which refer to the manifestation of the Three Jewels in the world. Among the Three Jewels with specific manifestation, Buddha Shakyamuni who manifested in the world and displayed the eight aspects of enlightenment is the Buddha Jewel; doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Links of Dependent-Arising taught by the Buddha over the period of forty-nine years is the Dharma Jewel; the Sangha

who were guided by the Buddha when he was in the world is the Sangha Jewel. The Three Jewels with specific manifestation embody the forms taken by the Buddha when he was teaching and guiding sentient beings; they represent the appearing of the Three Jewels in the world and signify the origination of the Buddhadharma in samsara. That we are able to learn the Buddhadharma today can be traced to the source that is the Three Jewels with specific manifestation.

The third is the Three Jewels of principle essence, which are the Three Jewels in the ultimate sense. Among the Three Jewels of principle essence, Buddha is enlightenment, whose qualities are infinite compassion and wisdom. Dharma is emptiness; all scriptural teachings and Dharma practices are ultimately for the sake of helping us to realise emptiness. For that reason, the ultimate base of Dharma is emptiness and not the scriptural teachings. Sangha refers to the qualities of the noble Sangha, which are uncontaminated wisdom and liberation. The Three Jewels of principle essence are the actual reasons why the Three Jewels are “Jewels”.

The fourth is the Three Jewels of single essence. In terms of content, although the Three Jewels are three, they are a single essence from the point of view of fundamental nature. The Buddha’s substantial quality is the enlightened nature; the Dharma’s substantial quality is emptiness; and the Sangha’s substantial quality is harmony. In terms of matters, “harmony” here refers to the six points of harmony, and in terms of principle essence, it refers to the great harmony existing fundamentally within life, that is, the non-duality of enlightened nature and emptiness. From the point of view of emphasis, even though

the Three Jewels have distinctions in enlightened nature, compassion, emptiness, liberation and so forth, these essential factors are originally non-dual, as in the non-duality of clarity and emptiness, the non-duality of emptiness and compassion, and the non-duality of the enlightened nature and liberation. In the ultimate sense, there is no emptiness that is separated from the enlightened nature, there is no compassion that is separated from the enlightened nature, and there is especially no liberation that is separated from the enlightened nature. They are explained separately only because these qualities need to be cultivated separately during the process of practice. For example, in order to accomplish loving-kindness and compassion one needs to generate *bodhicitta*. Otherwise, even if one sees the nature, it will be difficult for one to fully realise emptiness and accomplish great compassion, as in the case of hearers who also realise emptiness, but relinquish their bodies, cease their wisdom, and approach tranquil cessation.

The fifth is the Three Jewels of innate nature. From the point of view of fundamental nature, the Three Jewels of innate nature, the Three Jewels of principle essence and the Three Jewels of single essence are not different. However, they can be differentiated from the perspective of mundane beings. Becoming aware that life possesses, on a particular level, qualities like those of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will undoubtedly imbue sentient beings with tremendous confidence in their practice. The content of the Three Jewels of innate nature is as described in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* 《六祖坛经》:

“Buddha” means enlightenment. “Dharma”

means the genuine. “Sangha” means purity. In your own mind, go for refuge in enlightenment, so that the false and deluded are not generated. Have few desires and be content, and be able to transcend wealth and sensual pleasures: this is called the Two-legged Honoured One. In your own mind, go for refuge in the genuine, being without false views in every thought. If you are without false thoughts, then there is no self or persons to become proud, greedy or attached: this is called the Honoured One Who Has Transcended Desire. In your own mind, go for refuge in purity, [realising] your self-nature to be completely unpolluted by all states of life’s concerns and desires: this is called the Honoured One among assemblies. If you cultivate this practice, this is to go for refuge yourself.

As you can see, there is not a single sentient being who is not endowed with the Three Jewels of innate nature; these are simply waiting to be uncovered and revealed.

### **3. Inner Three Jewels and outer Three Jewels**

Although the Three Jewels can be differentiated into the Three Jewels for upholding, the Three Jewels of specific manifestation, the Three Jewels of principle essence, the Three Jewels of single essence, and the Three Jewels of innate nature, we should neither isolate any of them from the others nor emphasise one at the

expense of the others; these classifications are made in order to help us deeply understand the Three Jewels on various levels.

Usually, those who are engaged with Buddhism tend to lean towards the Three Jewels for upholding and become attached to Buddha images, Sutra texts and venerables who are presently abiding in the Sangha community; they forget that going for refuge in the Three Jewels is for the sake of realising the Three Jewels of principle essence and Three Jewels of innate nature. If their refuge simply remains at the level of the Three Jewels for upholding, this kind of refuge will certainly be superficial; it will not be true and efficacious. On the other hand, some so-called Zen practitioners easily gravitate towards the other extreme, thinking, “I am fundamentally a Buddha, so what need is there to listen to the scriptural teachings and go for refuge in the outer Three Jewels?” We must know that even though the Three Jewels of innate nature exist on a certain level within our life, it will take relevant training and practice for us to be able to arrive at an awareness of this level of our existence. They are just like mineral deposit that is buried deep in the ground, which, without detection and digging, will simply remain underground as it has always been, even for billions of years, and cannot be of any use. Therefore, we need to go for refuge in the Three Jewels for upholding, and by means of hearing, contemplating and meditating, uncover the Three Jewels of innate nature within us.

In reality, the Three Jewels within our life and the outer Three Jewels are of one essence; they are differentiated only because the two kinds of grasping—grasping at self and grasping at phenomena—have isolated them from each other.

Regardless of whether we reject the outer Three Jewels or grasp at them, such inclinations will obstruct the uncovering of the inner Three Jewels. As soon as we abandon these two kinds of grasping at self and phenomena, the divide between the inner and the outer will no longer exist.

Our achievement in practice is largely determined by the depth of our understanding in the Three Jewels. Having a partial understanding will yield only a partial achievement in practice; only when we have complete understanding will our achievement become perfect. This is like mining mineral deposits; if we detect only a portion of the deposits, then even if we manage to uncover all of them, our extraction will remain limited. Only when we discover deeply where all the treasures lie will we be able to completely uncover and utilise them without any remainder. More importantly, not only can these treasures of the Three Jewels benefit us, they can benefit millions of sentient beings and bring illumination to the world. Thus, truly knowing the inner qualities of the Three Jewels is an important prerequisite to the practice of refuge.

There is not a single sentient being who is not endowed with the Three Jewels of innate nature; these are simply waiting to be uncovered and revealed.



## How to go for refuge

Regard the Dharma as support  
Regard the Dharma as aid  
Regard the Dharma as refuge  
Regard the Dharma as dwelling  
Guard the Dharma  
Delight in the Dharma  
Seek the Dharma  
Contemplate the Dharma

Most of us here have already gone for refuge, but is our refuge proper? Nowadays, there are many instances of improper refuge in the Buddhist circles, some of which have been simplified to the extent of merely issuing a refuge certificate. Frequently, those who have sought and accepted refuge neither comprehend the significance of refuge nor understand the related points they need to pay attention to, much less know how to engage deeply in training after having gone for refuge.

How do we obtain the refuge essence by means of the relevant ceremony? Which sections in it require special attention? If we are not able to obtain the essence of refuge, our so-called refuge will be nothing but numerous roots of virtue, and will not be very helpful to us in our training.

## **1. Generating the mind of refuge**

Refuge is embodied in totally relying upon the Three Jewels, having conviction in them, and following them. It is only through these causes and conditions that we enter the practice of the Buddhist path. Recognition of this fact, which stems from the understanding of the sufferings of cyclic existence and of the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels, is where the substantial entity of refuge lies.

In recent years, with the successive revival of temples in various places, the number of Buddhists has been increasing day by day. However, how many from among these people have generated the mind seeking liberation and the mind to free sentient beings? They may feel good about Buddhism in some vague way, be looking for emotional solace, be praying for safety

and protection, or even be harbouring an opportunistic outlook, believing that by establishing a relationship with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas they can somehow do whatever they want and not be subjected to punishment, and the like. For most people, the above-mentioned reasons for refuge serve as the causes and conditions for their entering the door of Buddhism. However, if they remain at these levels, the positive effects of their refuge will be greatly diminished. Therefore, based upon these kinds of foundation, they need to go on to deepen their knowledge of the causes of refuge. This is an urgent task in the training of Buddhadharma. Otherwise, even though they may have gone for refuge, their refuge will likely to have been ceremonial.

A huge proportion of the people who have gone for refuge are willing to participate in various kinds of Buddhist activities. They also like the peaceful atmosphere of the temples and identify with the various principles of Buddhadharma. However, these likings and identifications are not strong enough and are not exclusive, for at the same time they still take delight in worldly prosperity and concur with the benchmarks of the world. Therefore, they lead worldly lives that are infused with some spiritual flavour, and they are quite happy with it. Of course, knowing some Buddhist principles and applying them in life will cause one to achieve the corresponding effects of transforming one's mind. Furthermore, the Buddhadharma itself does not reject the ways of the world. However, we do need to consciously distinguish which of the two are more important, and what the exclusive ultimate objects of refuge are.

Before we make a vow to go for refuge in the Three Jewels, we need to prepare ourselves by cultivating great

confidence in the Three Jewels by means of recollecting the sufferings of cyclic existence and the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. If we find that we have yet to regard the Three Jewels as our exclusive protectors, then we need to review the causes of refuge and strengthen them through proper contemplation.

Going for refuge is, with earnest sincerity, making a vow from the depths of our heart: “From now on I go for refuge in the Three Jewels, with the Buddha acting as the refuge master, the Dharma as the actual refuge, and the Sangha as the companions of refuge.” For a trainee of Buddhism, the above three factors are indispensable. This situation is like that of a patient who searches high and low for a renowned doctor to cure his sickness. After having determined a certain doctor as his main physician, he receives treatment based on the doctor’s prescriptions. During this process he needs to be tended by others who guide him to take his medicine as prescribed in order to complement his treatment. The process of refuge is similar, in that the Buddha is the king of physicians who will heal us, the Dharma is the medication that will cure our sickness, and the Sangha is our elders who will guide us in practice.

Only when we have produced a sincere heart of refuge in the Three Jewels can we extricate ourselves from the state of the ego. Life is a composite of many instances of confusion, and at its core lie ignorance and self-grasping. Ignorance is the source of afflicted karma, and self-grasping is the root of afflictions. If we wish to emerge from this kind of existence, we should understand that such a task will be more difficult than freeing ourselves from the gravitational pull of the earth. Only if

we generate unwavering faith in the Three Jewels and transform the focus of our lives from the ego to the Three Jewels can we enter a totally new track in life, like a rocket propelling a space shuttle into space. This is why it is said that the mind of refuge is a strong impetus that will bring about improvement in the quality of our life.

## **2. Transmission of refuge as prescribed by Dharma**

Refuge should be performed through a proper rite, and it mainly includes the following aspects.

The first is confession in which we confess the countless negativities that we have created since beginningless time. Through confession we become pure; through confession we attain peace and happiness. Only a pure untainted mind is able to properly accept refuge. The content of the confession that is to be recited is often stated as follows:

*All the negativities I have committed in the past  
Originated from beginningless greed, hatred and  
delusion.  
Having arisen from my body, speech and mind  
Today I confess all of these negativities.*

Next is the taking of vows. As a trainee in Mahayana Buddhadharma, we should at all times have the four great vows as our goals in life:

*Beings are numberless; I vow to liberate them.*

*Afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.  
Dharmas are boundless; I vow to master them.  
Buddha's Way is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it.*

Regardless of whether one is performing confession or taking vows, what is being stressed here is not the recitation of the four-line verses. Rather, emphasis should be placed on the mind of confession and the vow to benefit sentient beings that are generated from the depths of one's heart. Furthermore, using these as the criteria for one's conduct thereafter, one resolves to not repeat the negativities and to diligently practise virtues. If one simply recites these verses mindlessly, it does not take much to imagine what effects one will accomplish.

Next is the actual refuge, which is the crucial part of the entire ceremony. The crux of refuge is to vow:

*I go for refuge in the Buddha;  
I go for refuge in the Dharma;  
I go for refuge in the Sangha.*

The complete content is:

*During my entire present life, I go for refuge in the Buddhas, the perfectly completely enlightened Lord Tathagatas, whom I honour, never going for refuge in false demonic non-Buddhist paths.*

*During my entire present life, I go for refuge in the Dharma, the Three Scriptural Baskets*

*(Tripitaka) and the twelve divisions of the canon, which I honour, never going for refuge in non-Buddhist canons.*

*During my entire present life, I go for refuge in the Sangha, the pure Sangha community, whom I honour, never going for refuge in non-Buddhist false assemblies.*

“Entire present life” means the whole of this life. Refuge is not about some impulsive words of jest; rather, it is a dignified pledge of a lifetime, and an everlasting vow pervading our future lives. Since “entire present life” applies merely to the refuge of the hearer vehicle, as Mahayana practitioners, we should make the vow to go for refuge in the Three Jewels forever, as in the phrase “I go for refuge until enlightenment.” “Whom (or which) I honour” refers to the objects to whom (or which) we go for refuge. Furthermore, going for refuge also involves the act of not going for refuge, which is the content of “never going for refuge...” Since going for refuge is to choose our ultimate shelter in life, we should not affiliate ourselves with just anybody in a fickle-minded fashion.

The crux of the refuge ceremony lies in these three sentences. If we fail to hear them clearly when we are going for refuge, then we will not obtain the essence of refuge. Not only that, when we go for refuge, we should also clearly state our Dharma name and accurately follow the master to make a vow of the above content. Finally, we recite “Going for refuge in the Buddha is completed; going for refuge in the Dharma is

completed; going for refuge in the Sangha is completed.” Then we conclude with the dedication prayers.

The main body of the refuge rite is divided into these four sections. Among them, the most crucial part is the vow of the “Three Refuges”. There is no harm in checking to see if we heard clearly the content of the Three Refuges explained by the master at the time of receiving refuge. If we attended the refuge ceremony feeling completely muddled and lacking precise understanding of what the Three Refuges are all about, then it is necessary that we go for refuge again.

### **3. Token of faith of enlightenment**

The refuge master is the witness for the disciple’s going for refuge in the Three Jewels, and serves especially as a link in the transmission of the Buddhadharma. Through a dignified proper refuge ceremony, the torch of wisdom that was lit by the Buddhas is passed down from generation to generation. In order for us to remember our new life after having gone for refuge, and for the master to lead the students to undertake in-depth training after having entered the door of Buddhism, at the time of conferring the Dharma name and the refuge certificate upon the disciple, the refuge master should also confer the symbolic Dharma text and the rosary.

The Dharma name signifies a change in status. Since beginningless time, mundane beings, taking self-grasping as the nucleus and afflicted karma as the foundation of their life, have revolved in cyclic existence, perpetuating birth and death. To go for refuge in the Three Jewels is to thoroughly part ways with

the previous state of existence, thereby establishing a totally new journey in life that is centred upon the Three Jewels. In this sense, the life of a Buddhist should be computed from the day of refuge. Only through having undergone this “rebirth” will we start to have a life that is endowed with self-awareness and meaning. Although a Dharma name is simply a code word, it frequently carries a profound symbolic significance representing the actualisation of the various practices of the Buddhadharmā. It continuously spurs the disciple on with the following message: As a practitioner of the path of liberation and the approach of enlightenment, you should diligently practise ethics, concentration and wisdom, as well as extinguish greed, hatred and delusion, and swiftly advance with courage to your destination on the other shore. At the same time, it also serves as a reminder to the students: Events of the past have died just like the previous day; in the new journey of practice, do not be shackled by your previous habituation, allow history to repeat itself, or abandon light for darkness.

The refuge certificate signifies the proof and recognition by the Three Jewels of the ten directions with respect to this newborn Buddhist. It symbolises a person having become a disciple of the Three Jewels, and also serves like a passport granting access to the Buddha pure lands. Printed on the cover of the *Refuge Certificate* 《皈依证》 of the Xi Yuan Jie Chuang Lv Si Temple 西园戒幢律寺 is the emblem, which is composed of a pair of lotus-like folded palms enclosing the pledge, “I go for refuge in the Buddha; I go for refuge in the Dharma; I go for refuge in the Sangha.” This connotes the Buddhist follower’s sincere mind of reliance and devoted conduct of respect with

regard to the Three Jewels. At the bottom of the cover is printed the Mahayana refuge verse:

*Until enlightenment I will always go for refuge in  
the Buddhas, the correct Dharma, and the noble  
Sangha. By the roots of virtue I practise, may I  
become a Buddha to benefit sentient beings.*

Through this verse, followers are encouraged to generate a vast mind, practise the deeds of Bodhisattvas, and benefit sentient beings at all times. On the inside page, besides the usual table of contents, there is a specific note: “From today onwards, I should obey the instructions of the Three Jewels, eradicate negativities, practise virtue, take great vows, enlighten myself and others, never turn back, accept the Three Refuges properly according to the rules, and become a disciple of the Three Jewels. This certificate is specially conferred as proof.” Thus, the significance of refuge and the function of the refuge certificate are indicated. In addition, the certificate also includes the refuge rite, a statement of basic Buddhist conduct such as possessing the five dharmas, constantly implementing the six recollections, and so forth, and also an introduction to several elementary classic recitation texts. After these, there are blank pages for the holders of the certificates to write down their records of participation and learning, which functions as a form of well-wishing for the disciples to leave firm footprints of their progress upon their road of training. Every page contains cautionary sayings from the Sutras and lineage masters to serve as encouragement.

The rosary signifies the lineage of the Buddhadharmā. Going for refuge is for the sake of obtaining the proper essence of refuge that has been passed down in an unbroken manner by the Buddhas; this is exactly the most supreme lineage in Buddhadharmā. Usually people regard the rosary as a counting instrument when they are reciting the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas or mantras. In fact, it holds far greater significance. The centre bead (also known as “guru bead”) symbolises the Buddha; the rosary string symbolises the Dharma; and every small bead symbolises the Sangha. If any of these components is missing, then the rosary will not be complete; therefore the rosary symbolises the indivisibility of the Three Jewels. A rosary that is made of *bodhi*-seeds also connotes training in the *bodhi*-path (path of enlightenment), reminding us to generate *bodhicitta* (mind of enlightenment), practise the Bodhisattva deeds, and achieve perfect unsurpassable *bodhi* (enlightenment).

Therefore, one should always carry with oneself the rosary bestowed by one’s elder in order to signify never being separated from the Three Jewels for even an instant. On one hand, this is an expression of our gratitude to the Three Jewels; but more importantly, it serves as a reminder for us to train with enthusiasm to actualise the inner qualities contained within this lineage and to cause this seed of *bodhi* to grow healthily, produce flowers, and bear fruits.

The Dharma text can help us to have a comprehensive understanding of the significance of refuge and a deep awareness of what we need to train in after we have gone for refuge, so it serves as a guidebook for achieving the wisdom Dharma body.

Although we fundamentally possess the qualities of Buddhas, the current foundation of our thoughts and conduct is still the mundane mind. The tough and stubborn afflictions and habitual predispositions are not something we can remove overnight. Hence, after having gone for refuge, we still need to learn the essential techniques for remedying the mundane mind and mastering the skills for uncovering the treasures within us. These essential techniques and skills are contained in this Dharma text. The related content explained in *A Handbook for Training in Refuge* 《皈依修学手册》 is especially the foundation for all practices of the Buddhadharma and is something that cannot be circumvented; we need to learn it in depth and contemplate upon it properly, and beginners in particular must take it seriously. Unwavering faith in the Three Jewels serves as the most stable foundation for practice. Only when this precondition is fulfilled can we make steady progress in our practice.

#### **4. Points to take note of**

We also need to take note of the fact that the Three Jewels are of one essence. Some may think, “I just want to go for refuge in the Buddha, but not the Dharma nor the Sangha.” Is this permissible? The answer is no. Of course, by developing faith in the Buddha and generating the mind of refuge, we will receive their corresponding results; and when we feel afraid or have perverse erroneous thoughts, recollecting the Buddha will allow us to become free from fear. However, if we wish to be liberated from birth and death, we need to rely upon the

Buddhadharma. Furthermore, it is only after having learnt the scriptural Dharma that we are able to deeply understand the profound and vast inner qualities represented by the Buddha. If we simply go for refuge in the Buddha but fail to practise as prescribed by his teachings, then we will be like a patient who, although believing in the doctor, refuses to take the medicine or undergo treatment, eventually there is nothing the doctor can do to cure the patient.

Yet some people feel, “The principles in the Buddhadharma are good; I only wish to go for refuge in the Dharma and learn the Dharma, but I do not wish to go for refuge in the Buddha or the Sangha.” This is also not feasible. If we have total faith in the Dharma, then we will definitely go for refuge in the Buddha Jewel and the Sangha Jewel. Not going for refuge in the Buddha and the Sangha can only indicate that the level of faith we have in the Dharma is limited, in which case it will be impossible for us to practise wholeheartedly in accordance with the Dharma, and naturally the results of our practice will be trifling.

Some people are willing to go for refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma, but not the Sangha; there are quite a number of “Two Jewels householders” of this type. We need to know that to go for refuge in the Sangha is not about going for refuge in a particular person; rather it means going for refuge in the entire Sangha community, especially the pure uncontaminated qualities possessed by the noble Sangha. These pure uncontaminated qualities are our ultimate objects of refuge and they are what we want to achieve through our refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma. If we are unable to generate a strong

confidence in them, then how can we achieve such qualities within ourselves? Besides that, when we are practising, we need to devote ourselves to a spiritual guide. Although going for refuge in the Sangha is not going for refuge in a particular person, in order to actualise our practice, we still need to devote ourselves to one or several specific spiritual guides. Otherwise, we will not be able to hear the genuine Dharma, undertake proper reflection, and practise as prescribed by the Dharma.

In addition, when we go for refuge we should engage in generating the right motivation and visualisation. Generating the right motivation for refuge consists of three levels: great, middle and small. The great motivation is to go for refuge in order to benefit all sentient beings; the middle motivation is to go for refuge in order to liberate oneself; the small motivation is to go for refuge for the sake of present safety and success. Correspondingly, the essence of refuge can be divided into three levels—great, middle and small—where the great essence of refuge is obtained by means of the great motivation of refuge, and so on.

The essence of refuge is something that has been passed down from the Buddhas of the three times and the lineage masters from generation to generation. When we go for refuge with all our body and mind, it means that we obtain the lineage that has been passed down to this day from the Buddhas. The kind of mind that we generate determines the kind of essence of refuge we will achieve. This is like using a vessel to hold water: the size of the vessel determines the amount of water it will hold. A teacup can only contain a cup of water. A washbasin can contain a basin of water. If we have

a vessel that is as vast as space, then it will be able to contain a limitless amount of water. Therefore, we should open up our hearts and, using bodhicitta as the container, accept the great level of the essence of refuge. More importantly, we also visualise all sentient beings of the six realms going for refuge in the Three Jewels together with us and receiving the blessings of loving-kindness and compassion of the Three Jewels along with us. This type of refuge is the most supreme refuge.

Another point we should pay attention to is that we need to state our own names when going for refuge. Before making the vows, we need to state “the disciple named so-and-so” in accordance with the instructions of the master, only after which do we recite “In my entire present life, I go for refuge in the Buddhas, the perfectly completely enlightened Lord Tathagatas, whom I honour ...” and so forth. This makes clear that “I” am the one making the vow and pledging the stated content.

What I have explained above are points concerning refuge that you should take note of. If you can fulfil all of them, you will have performed a proper refuge. A good start is considered achieving half of the success. As it heralds the start of engaging with Buddhism, refuge plays a crucial role in practice thereafter. For that reason, we should take it seriously.

To go for refuge is to choose the ultimate object of reliance in our life. Once we become a disciple of the Three Jewels, we should not take other religions as objects of our refuge. In the process of choosing a refuge, we have already undertaken a comprehensive investigation by means of truth,

virtue and ability, and have ascertained that only the Three Jewels have the ability to be true objects of reliance. Once we have made such a life choice, we should take the Three Jewels as our only objects of refuge, and never go for refuge in other religions or in ghosts and spirits. Otherwise, we will damage and lose the essence of refuge, and naturally have no hope of achieving success in our practice. In that way, we will have incurred the greatest loss; not only will we have wasted our time in this life, we will also have created the causes to be distant from the Buddhadharma in future lives.

## **The actual practice of refuge**

Know that there are four actual practices of refuge:  
Devoting yourself to a spiritual guide  
Hearing the genuine Dharma  
Having proper mental engagement  
Practising as prescribed by the Dharma

Refuge in the Three Jewels pervades the entire practice for attaining Buddhahood. When we have become a Buddhist through the refuge ceremony, how should we proceed in our training? *Levels of Yogic Practice, Yogacharyabhumi* 《瑜伽师地论》 tells us that, after having gone for refuge, we should perform the four Dharma practices: devoting to a spiritual guide; hearing the genuine Dharma; having proper mental engagement; and practising as prescribed by the Dharma. It is only by engaging in these relevant practices that we can accomplish the ultimate purpose of refuge.

### **1. Devoting yourself to a spiritual guide**

To go for refuge is to entrust ourselves to all of the Buddha Jewel, Dharma Jewel, and Sangha Jewel in the ten directions and the three times, but in actual practice we still need to actualise refuge with respect to a specific spiritual guide. After having gone for refuge, we need to settle on a proper lifestyle, be endowed with the conduct of a Buddhist, and understand the prohibitions and exceptions with respect to the ethical codes, as well as the points concerning the keeping and transgression of the vows; we also need to possess the right view, have deep conviction in karma and its results, come to penetrate emptiness, remove the delusions in our inner mind, and uncover the treasures of life. All these achievements will come about in dependence on dedicated guidance from our teachers and elders.

The Buddha stipulated that newly ordained disciples must “learn the ethical codes for five years and not be parted from the object of reliance”. Therefore, we can see that the spiritual

guide is the powerful guarantee for ensuring the development of the character of the Sangha. Just as an infant needs to be cared for and nurtured by his parents, Buddhist followers who are newly ordained or who have just gone for refuge need to receive the dedicated guidance of the spiritual guide so that they can develop fully and grow healthily. Lay Buddhists, even though they may lack the conditions to always stay by the side of the spiritual guide, also certainly need a capable elder whom they can rely upon and receive benefit from.

In order to become fully endowed with the view and to eventually penetrate emptiness, we especially need the personal exhortations of the spiritual guide. As the doctrines in the Buddhadharma are vast and profound, especially in the calm abiding (*shamatha*) and special insight (*vipashyana*) sections where the practices are very subtle, if we do not have a clear-sighted person to guide us, we will not be able to break away from the labyrinth of our complex thoughts and conduct, and can end up miles away from our goal due to having made a tiny mistake. The minds of sentient beings are inundated with innumerable unstable thoughts. Wandering aimlessly among them everyday, we are dominated by various emotions and fail to find peace. How can we cause our unruly mind to take a break from its rampage? How can we activate the enormous power lying dormant within our life? We need to rely upon the practice of calm abiding and special insight to achieve these. If calm abiding and special insight are likened to a skill for uncovering the treasures within our life, then we can say that the essential technique for this skill rests in the hand of the spiritual guide. Perhaps someone may ask, “Can’t I find the answer in the

Sutras of the Buddha?” We must understand that the knowledge of mundane beings is limited and full of misperceptions that obstruct their comprehension of the Buddhadharmā. Furthermore, the Buddhadharmā has its lineage, and the levels of practice and realisations especially cannot be fully expressed in the scriptural teachings. The missing components that cannot be communicated through speech can only be received from the skilful guidance of the spiritual guide in accordance with the individual circumstances; only then can we come to realise the scriptural Dharma in our thoughts and conduct.

Therefore, how does a person become qualified as a spiritual guide whom sentient beings can rely upon? This is a question that concerns many Buddhist trainees, as a spiritual guide will neither wear a sign announcing “I am a spiritual guide” nor claim to be one. So we ourselves have to discover, distinguish and choose a spiritual guide.

The Sutras and treatises provide many criteria for selecting a spiritual guide. The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras*, *Mahayanasutralamkara* 《大乘庄严经论》 list ten types: the spiritual guide (1) possesses ethics; (2) possesses meditative concentration; (3) possesses wisdom; (4) has fully accomplished virtuous conduct; (5) has joyous effort; (6) has realised the doctrines (is “rich in scriptures”); (7) has realised the truth; (8) is skilled in teaching Dharma; (9) is compassionate; and (10) has abandoned weariness.

If we try to select a spiritual guide strictly according to these ten criteria, we may experience considerable difficulty. It is neither easy to hear the Buddhadharmā nor meet a spiritual guide; without the sufficient causes and conditions of merit and

excellent qualities, it will be very difficult for us to encounter a fully qualified spiritual guide. So what should we do then? Here I shall offer a simple set of criteria consisting of three basic qualities a spiritual guide must possess. In other words, they are the minimum requirements for someone to be a spiritual guide. If these requirements are not met, it will be difficult for us to receive benefit when we train under that person; we may even receive negative influence. Hence, we must remember well the three criteria explained below.

One criterion is to possess ethical conduct. The practice of Buddhadharma involves the generation of meditative concentration from ethics, and the generation of wisdom from meditative concentration. Therefore, ethics is the foundation of practice. Only one who possesses ethical conduct is capable of serving as the teacher of humans and gods and as the protector of sentient beings. Before the Buddha passed into *parinirvana*, he advised his disciples to take ethics as their teacher, fully illustrating the importance of ethics in the practice of Buddhadharma.

The second criterion is to possess right view. This is the most essential quality from among the various criteria of a spiritual guide, carrying even more weight than ethics. If a person has faults in his view, then there is no way he can guide us to liberation. The basic difference between Buddhism and other religions is embodied in the views they embrace. Ethics, meditative concentration and wisdom are essential paths in the practice of the Buddhadharma. However, it will be difficult for us to determine the suitability of a system simply based on the features of the keeping of ethics or the training in

meditative concentration. With respect to ethics, many non-Buddhist religions, and even false cults, have a very strict code of ethics; with respect to meditative concentration, the four *dhyanas* (*jhanas*) and eight meditative concentrations are not achievements of practice that are unique to Buddhism. However, it is precisely the deviant or mistaken view in a system that prevents the attainment of liberation and even causes its believers to proceed on a path of no return. In this sense, having a corrupt view is even more serious than having corrupt ethics. Therefore, the right view in Buddhadharma is one that is not found in other religions, and holding a corrupt view will lead to the severance of one's roots of virtue.

The third criterion is to be endowed with compassion. Only someone who has compassion and wishes to gather sentient beings under his care will be able to provide his disciples with meticulous guidance. Otherwise, he will engage in solitary practice behind closed doors, and when he goes to the mountains he may have misgivings that he has not gone far enough to isolate himself from others. So even if he possesses the two former qualities, it will be hard for students to devote themselves to him and to stay by his side to hear the Dharma and receive benefit from him.

When we encounter a spiritual guide, how do we devote ourselves to him and receive teachings from him? If we are not skilful in relying upon the spiritual guide, then even if we get to meet one, we may end up squandering the opportunity. Conversely, if we are able to forge an auspicious Dharma connection with the spiritual guide, then we will come under his care life after life. Regarding devoting to a spiritual

guide, *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 mentions the following requirements.

The first requirement is to have clear faith as the basis. We must have full confidence in the spiritual guide to whom we devote ourselves. Observing his excellent qualities and ignoring his shortcomings, we should avoid flippantly criticising him based upon our own emotional responses and viewpoints. The mundane mind is filled with subjectivity; when we observe the world with this kind of mind, naturally it will be difficult for what we see to appear pure and perfect. If we are not skilful in discovering the excellent qualities of the spiritual guide, then we will very likely go along with the habitual tendencies of mundane beings and look for his shortcomings. If that is the case, then we will not be able to generate clear faith and respect in relation to the spiritual guide upon whom we rely. Consequently, the teachings given by the spiritual guide will not be able to yield the effects that they are supposed to yield. For that reason, *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 specially emphasises “viewing the teacher as being like the Buddha”, since we will not generate the attitude seeking faults in the Buddha. The emphasis in “viewing the teacher as being like the Buddha” does not lie in the teacher having excellent qualities equal to those of the Buddha; however, this kind of clear faith will be of tremendous help to our training in the Buddhadharma.

The second is to cultivate respect by recollecting the kindness of the teacher. In our endless births and deaths, we have been able to hear the Buddhadharma and create roots of virtue owing to the kindness of the guidance from spiritual

guides, not just the ones of this life, but also those of past lives. If not for the help rendered by them, we could still be mired in the three lower realms. Thus, we should frequently recollect the spiritual guides' excellent quality of kindness.

The third is offering service, which refers to making offerings to the spiritual guide with our body, speech and mind. Among the various offerings, the best is the offering of our practice according to the instructions, as it is said, "From among the various types of offerings, the offering of the Dharma is the best." This is because the basic purpose of devoting ourselves to the spiritual guide is to practise in accordance with the correct methods until we attain liberation.

Sentient beings belonging to the time period when the Dharma is ending have little merit and huge obstacles; they do not have the conditions to perceive the appearance of Buddhas and directly hear them teach. The scriptures are as vast as a sea of smoke, still they are unable to encompass all of Buddhadharma, as the Chinese saying goes, "The books cannot exhaustively convey the speech; the speech cannot exhaustively convey the meaning." In the absence of the guidance of a spiritual guide, how do we find our bearings in the ocean of the Buddhadharma with its endless horizon? This is precisely why many people train for years, but to no avail. In the end, the Buddhadharma is the Buddhadharma, oneself is oneself, and problems remain problems. Besides, it is unavoidable that the Sangha community is comprised of members of diverse calibre. Even though the object to whom we go for refuge is the entire Sangha Jewel, it is impossible for us to rely upon all Sangha members, especially those who lack the right view and virtuous conduct. In this

state of affairs, relying upon a spiritual guide seems all the more important. If we are able to meet a true spiritual guide, have full confidence in him, and rely on him properly, then we will indeed have come upon a fast track for our practice.

## 2. Hearing the genuine Dharma

Hearing and contemplating the scriptural teachings is an important component in the practice of Buddhadharma. It is as said in *Verses about Hearing, Srutivarga* 《听闻集》, “Through much hearing, one can understand the Dharma. Through much hearing, one can become far from wrongdoing. Through much hearing, one discards the meaningless. Through much hearing, one attains Nirvana.”

“Through much hearing, one can understand the Dharma.” Why is this so? Much hearing involves two levels. One is vast learning, referring to reading and reciting widely the Mahayana and Hinayana scriptures. The other is to hear about and reflect upon the same content repeatedly and continuously. For example, we need to hear about the principle of karma and its results and the principle of selflessness again and again without feeling weary, and cause the meaning of Dharma to adhere to our mind and be impressed upon our hearts without any omission, so that it becomes part of our contemplation. Much hearing is a process of accumulation. When a critical mass has been accumulated, it will transform into a force that can destroy our misconceptions, as it is said in the Chinese expression, “When one’s effort is sufficient, the result will issue forth naturally.” The mundane mind is tough and hard to

subdue. If we lack accumulation in terms of quantity, then the meaning of Dharma will probably have just a fleeting impact on us, arising vaguely and then vanishing instantly. Only through continuous reinforcement via much hearing can we cause the Buddhadharmā to be deeply imprinted upon our mind, to the extent that every movement of our mind becomes aligned with the Dharma.

In addition, much hearing can also help us to distance ourselves from wrongdoing, as it is said that “Through much hearing, one can become far from wrongdoing.” The state of our life is largely determined by our outlook on life. If our outlook is mistaken, then it will create problems continuously, resulting in an unhealthy mindset developing within us. Once we adjust our outlook, our thoughts and conduct will follow suit and become adjusted. And the shortcut for establishing a correct outlook is to hear about and reflect upon the scriptural teachings, correct our understanding through observation, and thereby distance ourselves from non-virtuous conduct and emotions. In that way, the course of our life will turn around.

“Through much hearing, one discards the meaningless.” This is the third point. “The meaningless” refers to a meaningless life. In this world, most people are simply drifting along with the tides of life, frittering away their days in a lack of awareness and being preoccupied with work, career, family, children, and the like. Taking these matters as the focus of life, some struggle under their heavy burden, while some find joy in them. However, if we scrutinise such a situation with the wisdom of the Buddhadharmā, we will see that all of these matters carry only temporal meaning, like water bubbles that are on the verge

of disappearing. As far as career and wealth are concerned, the distinctions between success and failure, as well as gain and loss, amount to nothing but whether the water bubbles are big or small; apart from that, there is no other meaning. Through much hearing, we will be endowed with the wisdom penetrating reality and clearly perceive the true nature of the world. Otherwise, we will be like worldly people, taking things as real and pursuing them, whereby our entire life will pass in vain. And of course, the crucial point regarding much hearing is to hear the Buddhadharmā, rather than the diverse types of worldly knowledge and information. Only the hearing of genuine Dharma can help us see clearly the reality of life.

Finally, we have “Through much hearing, one attains Nirvana.” Nirvana is the exhaustive cessation of afflictions and the penetration of the reality of life. Such a state also requires much hearing before it can be attained. This is because much hearing can lead us to attain the right view of Buddhadharmā and progress to the penetration of emptiness. In that way, we will be able to steer ourselves towards Nirvana and attain what the Buddha has attained.

Having understood the purpose of hearing the Dharma, we should go on to correct our attitude for listening to the Dharma. If we liken our mind to be a vessel for the Dharma, then in order to ensure that the milk of Dharma we pour into it is of maximum quantity and that its original quality is preserved, first certain conditions need to be fulfilled. *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 sums up these appropriate conditions by discussing the three kinds of faults we need to be free from and the six kinds of contemplation

we should be equipped with when hearing the Dharma.

Regarding the three kinds of faults, Tsongkhapa uses the analogies of the upside-down vessel, the dirty vessel and the leaky vessel.

The first is the upside-down vessel, referring to distractedness while hearing the Dharma; the mind is distracted with thoughts scattering everywhere, and the meaning of the Dharma cannot enter the mind. Such a mind, which frequently dwells in states of torpor and scattering, is like an upside-down vessel, into which it is impossible to pour anything. Therefore, we should gather our mind inwards, sit up straight, listen attentively, and avoid torpor and excitement.

The second fault is that of the dirty vessel, referring to having many preconceptions rather than a pure mind when hearing the Dharma; one is not able to accept the meaning of Dharma that one has heard as it really is, and causes it to be processed and polluted by one's viewpoints, so that it is no longer the pure Buddhadharma. It is like pouring water into a vessel that is filled with condiments such as chilli, soy sauce, and vinegar; even if the water we pour in is of the purest quality, it will become mixed with chilli, soy sauce, and so forth, and be completely altered. Hence, we should listen to the Dharma with a pure mind, to maintain the purity of the meaning of Dharma that we hear.

The third is the leaky vessel. Even though we may not pollute the meaning of Dharma that we have heard, if we fail to reflect upon it and restudy it afterwards, then we will be like a leaking vessel; even though the entire amount of water has been poured into the vessel, it leaks out and leaves behind not even

a drop. Over the past few days all of you have come to hear the teachings on refuge, and you might have been very attentive when listening, but if you do not think about them after you leave, soon you will forget them, so naturally it will be difficult for them to have any effect on your practice.

What I have described above are the three kinds of faults we need to be free from when we are hearing the Dharma. Furthermore, we should be equipped with the six kinds of contemplation: think of yourself as a sick person; think of the Dharma instructor as a doctor; think of the Dharma teachings as medicine; think of practice as treatment for the sickness; think of the Tathagatas as excellent beings; and think that the genuine Dharma will endure for a long time.

Learning the Dharma is like treating a sickness. Normally, if we were to become slightly unwell on some occasion, we would feel anxious and troubled, but seldom do we have the awareness that we are seriously ill with greed, hatred and delusion. As we are afflicted by delusion, we remain oblivious to the perils of cyclic existence, even though we are as if approaching a deep chasm on a dark night. We must understand that while it is true that the health of our physical body is important, what carries greater weight is a healthy mind, that referring to being calm and peaceful, being free from worries, fears, perversity and attachment, and always abiding in compassion and wisdom, like the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When we take a look at ourselves, do we not see that we are incessantly dominated by afflictions and emotions? We need to face our sickness squarely. It is only by becoming aware of this situation that we will actively try to remedy it and also

generate respect for the Dharma and the Dharma master. All of us have come here to hear the Dharma; do we realise that the Dharma master is the doctor who will save us, and that the Buddhadharma is the medicine for treating our disease? Only if we perform the above contemplation can we give rise to an uncommon confidence in the Dharma, whereby we will hear the Dharma with devotion and practise in accordance with the Dharma.

So, what constitutes genuine Dharma? And in what order should we undertake the practices? Here I shall provide a reading list of the foundation texts.

First of all, we need to strengthen our confidence in the Three Jewels. To establish our basic faith as learners of Buddhism, we can study *Sutra of Recollection of the Three Jewels* 《随念三宝经》, *Three Jewels Chapter of the Ekottarikagama* 《增一阿舍经 • 三宝物》, *Sutra of Kshitigarbha* 《地藏经》, *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct, Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行愿品》, and so forth. *Sutra of Recollection of the Three Jewels* 《随念三宝经》 and the *Three Jewels Chapter of the Ekottarikagama* 《增一阿舍经 • 三宝物》 can help us to understand the profound excellent qualities of the Three Jewels and strengthen our mind of refuge by means of understanding and recollecting the Three Jewels. *Sutra of Kshitigarbha, Kshitigarbhasutra* 《地藏经》 and *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct, Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行愿品》 explain the great power of vows and vast practices undertaken by Bodhisattva Kshitigarbha and Bodhisattva Samantabhadra on the causal grounds, in which Mahayana practitioners should actively develop conviction.

Next are the texts explaining the basic right view and conduct that Buddhist trainees must have. Sutras and treatises containing instructions on how we should properly lead our lives, keep our vows, cease misdeeds, and perform virtue include the *Trainings Chapter of the Abhidharma Dharma Aggregate Treatise, Abhidharmadharmaskandapada* 《阿毗达磨法蕴足论·学处品》, *Sigalovada Sutta* 《佛说善生经》, *Mangalam Sutta* 《佛说吉祥经》, *Sutra of the Ten Virtuous Paths of Action, Dasabhadrakarmamarga Sutra* 《十善业道经》, and so forth. *Trainings Chapter of Abhidharma Dharma Aggregate Treatise, Abhidharmadharmaskandhapada* 《阿毗达磨法蕴足论·学处品》 introduces the trainings that a lay Buddhist should know and abide by, and explains the five precepts in detail. *Sigalovada Sutta* 《佛说善生经》 and *Mangalam Sutta* 《佛说吉祥经》 describe how a lay Buddhist should treat others, handle matters, and lead a proper life. *Sutra of the Ten Virtuous Paths of Action, Dasabhadrakarmamarga Sutra* 《十善业道经》 reveals dependent-arising cause and effect and also the purpose of ceasing misdeeds and performing virtues; it teaches us how to differentiate between Buddhism and other religions in terms of view and builds the foundation of our training.

In addition, we should build the appropriate doctrinal foundation and clarify the basic path and stages for engagement with Buddhism. The recommended books are *A Survey of Buddhadharma* 《佛法概论》 and *The Way to Buddhahood* 《成佛之道》 by Venerable Yinshun 印顺导师, and *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 by Tsongkhapa. *A Survey of Buddhadharma* 《佛法概论》

describes the basic inner qualities of Buddhadharmā; *The Way to Buddhahood* 《成佛之道》 elucidates the basic structure of practice for attaining Buddhahood; and *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 provides the complete outlines starting from engaging with Buddhism up till attaining Buddhahood, which can help us master the essentials of the Buddhadharmā in a short time and make firm strides on the path to enlightenment.

The final aim of engagement with Buddhism is to become a Buddha, and to achieve this goal we need to give rise to conduct and vows like those of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The related scriptures that we should read are Bodhisattva Maitreya's *Bodhisattvabhūmi* of the *Yogacharyabhūmi* 《瑜伽师地论·菩萨地》 and Bodhisattva Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, Bodhisattvacharyavatara* 《入菩萨行论》, the focal points of which are introductions to the actualisation of *bodhicitta* and the Bodhisattva deeds. In particular, *Bodhisattvabhūmi* of the *Yogacharyabhūmi* 《瑜伽师地论·菩萨地》 describes comprehensively the training content of the Bodhisattva path, by means of explaining the Bodhisattva's generation of *bodhicitta*, deeds and results. In China and Tibet, the *Ethics Chapter* 《戒品》 in *Bodhisattvabhūmi* 《菩萨地》 specifically has been translated and widely circulated, constituting an important set of criteria for actualising the Bodhisattva path. A Chinese translation of *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, Bodhisattvacharyavatara* 《入菩萨行论》 already existed in the Tang and Song dynasties, but regrettably it was not accorded great importance. However, after it was translated in Tibet, all the major schools held it in

high esteem. This treatise begins with the exposition of the great meaning of the precious human rebirth and explains in detail the preliminaries for practising *bodhicitta*, the way to uphold it, and the process of perfecting *bodhicitta* by relying upon the six perfections. It presents very thoroughly the theory and methods of practice for actualising *bodhicitta* and the Bodhisattva deeds, and is readily applicable in everyday life.

After being endowed with conduct and vows, one needs to go on to remove the afflictions and enter into the view of a Buddha. *Differentiation of the Middle and the Extremes* (*Madhyantavibhanga*) 《辩中边论》, *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》 and *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* 《六祖坛经》 can provide guidance in these areas. *Differentiation of the Middle and the Extremes* is an important scripture in the Mind-Only (*Cittamatra*) School, establishing the view of Mind-Only Middle Way by relying on the three natures, and elucidating the fundamental issues of what the Middle Way is and what the extreme views are, and therefore it has enormous instructional value in establishing the correct view of Buddhadharma. *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》 is an important scripture in the literature belonging to the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajaparamita*) series, and is one of the Buddhist Sutras that the Chinese are most familiar with; it mainly elucidates the concepts of emptiness, no-form and no-attainment, and points out the correct view of the Middle Way that practitioners of Bodhisattva deeds should hold in the process of generating *bodhicitta* and practising Bodhisattva deeds. *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* 《六祖坛经》 is the basic scripture of the Zen

tradition; it directly points out the advanced views of the mind and of attaining Buddhahood by seeing the nature, and reveals a fast track for the practice of attaining Buddhahood.

If ordinary lay Buddhists can engage more and more deeply in systematic practice through such a sequence and make progress step by step, they will establish a firmer foundation for their practice.

### **3. Having proper mental engagement**

As Buddhists, what kinds of basic notions should we have? In Tibetan Buddhism, reflection on the rarity of the human rebirth, mindfulness of death and impermanence, contemplation on the fact that samsara is suffering, and conviction in karma and its results are the common notions that trainees need to have. These are referred to as the “four common notions”. Frequently recollecting and reflecting upon these points can help us to gradually become free from our mundane mind and deepen our practice. In this section on “The causes of refuge and the choice of refuge”, I have already introduced the content of the first three points. At this juncture, I will specially explain the topic “Conviction in karma and its results”.

Karma is an important force impelling the continuation of life. In a certain sense, karma creates everything, and karma is everything. Since the very existence of life is the existence of karma, the continuation of life is the continuation of karma. Karma refers to the imprints left behind by the actions of our body, speech and mind. Buddhism’s viewpoint on life differs from that of other religions. Other religions usually believe

that there is a controller soul or self, whereas Buddhism asserts that life is simply the false appearances of the causes and conditions for the composite of the five aggregates, and it includes innumerable thoughts and emotions. Among them, some are strong while others are weak. These imprints or forces have their sources in the past accumulation of lives. Some people accumulate only a particular type of force, while some accumulate only another type of force. For example, people who continuously exercise attachment will strengthen the force of attachment in their life, moulding a character where attachment is predominant. Those who continuously exercise hatred will strengthen the force of hatred in their mind, casting the mind into a disposition where hatred is predominant, and so on. Every type of force represents the accumulation of karma, and directly affects our life thereafter.

How do we gauge a person? According to profession or title? According to the role in the family or the role in society? These outer forms are impermanent, changeable and unreliable. The factor deciding what we are is precisely our karma. This is to say, you are what you do. Our past actions determined the present, and our present actions determine the future. In this process there is no specific controller soul or self. Therefore, life is very malleable; it will become whatever inner quality we endow it with.

In the flow of life, no thought or conduct will go to waste. Regardless of whether our thoughts and conduct are positive or negative, they will leave their imprints, the only difference between them is the strength of the imprints. When we give rise to compassion, we are reinforcing compassion in our life. When

we give rise to attachment, we are reinforcing attachment in our life. Different thoughts and conduct strengthen different kinds of forces and create different directions in life.

Karma and its results are true and infallible. The results include not only the outer effects, but also the inner consequences. Many people are concerned with the outer results, wondering, “If I do this, will I fall into the hell realm? If I do that, will I rise to the god realm?” I feel that, from the viewpoint of the principle of cause and result, the outer result is not important; rather, what we need to be concerned about is the force that is produced by our every thought and conduct in life. This is because the objective result will just be a dream, an illusion, a bubble or a reflection; it will become the past after all. However, if the inner force is not eliminated through confession and repentance, it will affect us forever. Hence, this kind of force has long-term ramifications and is more frightening.

At the same time, we need to have conviction in the principle of the certainty of karma, namely the fact that every kind of karma will bring about its results: virtuous karma will bring about the result of happiness, and non-virtuous karma will bring about the result of suffering. Not only will karma bring about future results, it will also manifest in some form of change right in the present. A virtuous karma represents a mental factor of virtue and is a type of harmonious force. When we give rise to compassion and loving-kindness, our mind feels warm and pleasant, we experience happiness right here and now, and this happiness can be spread to those around us. In contrast, when we give rise to hatred and jealousy, our mind will definitely be in a state of confrontation and conflict,

we will experience pain right here and now, and we may go on to cause harm to those around us. Therefore, the results of happiness and suffering brought about by virtuous karma and non-virtuous karma respectively, are completely determined by our individual mental characteristics.

The principle of the certainty of karma also tells us that happiness or suffering, no matter how slight, does not occur by chance; it is induced by virtuous karma or non-virtuous karma. It is said in *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 that the hell beings who are undergoing boundless suffering experience occasionally a cool breeze between their bouts of suffering; even the happiness that is brought about by that cool breeze has to do with their past virtuous karma, whereas the pain of sickness and hardship manifested by noble hearers arise from the non-virtuous karma they created previously.

Another characteristic of karma is that one will not obtain the result of a karma one has not created but once one has created it, it will not go to waste. Karma does not arise out of the void. If we have not created a certain karma, no one will be able to falsely accuse us of committing it and attribute blame to us by force. However, once we have created it, it will certainly not vanish and we will not be so lucky as to be spared from the principle of karma. So in this sense, the principle of karma is more just and precise than worldly law.

Besides that, karma can also increase. Likewise, it can also decrease and disappear. What happens to it depends on the causes and conditions that we set up. If we provide virtuous causes and conditions through continuous confession and

practice, then our negative karma will no longer have the opportunity to grow; instead it will gradually be eliminated. Conversely, if we increase our afflictions uninterruptedly, then this supplies the fertile land on which our negative karma can thrive, rapidly multiplying even up to billions of times. This is like a seed growing into a gigantic tree reaching to the sky and producing thousands and thousands of seeds.

It has been said, “Karma that has been created will not disappear even after hundreds and thousands of aeons. Once the causes and conditions come together, one will experience the results.” Regarding the principle of karma, we need to have the conviction that karma is true and infallible. At the same time, we should also recognise that the view of karma in Buddhism is one of selflessness, whereby karma itself is also free of inherent existence and can be altered through confession and repentance. If karma cannot be altered, then the karma we have created since beginningless time will impel us to undergo suffering for long lengthy aeons, such that the day when we will become free from it will never arrive. The purification of karmic obstacles serves as the preliminary of all practices. And karmic obstacles are counteracted mainly through the power of remorse (feeling intense regret due to one’s belief in karma and its results), the power of reliance (practising refuge and generating *bodhicitta*), the power of remedy (reading and reciting Mahayana scriptures, cultivating the view of emptiness, and so forth), and the power of resoluteness (not repeating one’s misdeeds). In conjunction with purification, we should extensively practise virtuous conduct and improve ourselves continuously so that we can improve our situation life after life.

#### 4. Practising as prescribed by the Dharma

Practice is a life-changing project, and so it calls for continuous repeated training. In particular, we should always bear in mind the content of certain types of foundational practices without forgetting them. Here I shall introduce with emphasis the practice of refuge, generating a pure motivation, the five precepts, and the four immeasurables.

After having gone for refuge, first we need to use an appropriate practice to increase our faith in the Three Jewels and cause it to become unshakeable, such that we will not give up our refuge even at the cost of our lives. The various schools in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition have designated several quantified preliminaries that serve as the foundation of practice, such as the recitation of the Four Refuges formula, full-length prostrations, recitation of the Vajrasattva mantra, offering of the mandala, and so forth, for the sake of strengthening refuge, accumulating merit, and purifying obstacles. I feel that this kind of training is really necessary for beginners. There are many worldly skills that require one to start by training in the basics. In this sense, one of the basics that learners of Buddhism need to be equipped with is the ability to cause the Three Jewels to be so deeply impressed in their hearts that the Three Jewels are never forgotten, and this is something that must be accomplished through practising refuge.

The main point of practising refuge is for us to strengthen our confidence in the Three Jewels. It requires accumulation in quantity, which is why we need to accomplish it through daily practice. A specific way to practise refuge is to perform it

according to *A Rite for Refuge Practice* 《皈依修习仪规》. The recitation of the Three Refuges formula in its “Calm abiding cultivation” section should be performed a thousand times or more. If there are individual circumstances that make the above difficult to fulfil, such as being very occupied due to study or work, or having to travel because of work and so forth, then one should at least sincerely recite the Three Refuges formula 108 times daily without break for even a day. We should avoid the lazy habit of practising intermittently, as depicted in the Chinese saying, “Fish for three days and sun the fishnet for two days.” Practice entails sustained determination and perseverance. Beginners should spend two to three years practising refuge, reciting the Three Refuges formula up to a million times. What you need to pay attention to here is that the recitation of the Three Refuges formula should be fulfilled not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of quality. Every practice must be conjoined with the correct generation of motivation and analytical cultivation, so as to inspire an earnest attitude of longing for the Three Jewels. By arousing a devoted mind seeking refuge, we will be able to achieve a practice in which our mind and speech are consistent with each other.

Refuge practice should also be combined with making prostrations to the Buddhas. Not only is the offering of prostrations an expression of our respect and gratitude to all the Buddhas of the ten directions and three times, it is also the best way to confess our karmic obstacles and remove hindrances to our practice. In the process, we can also subdue our pride and develop the Buddhist conduct of humility and gentleness. When making prostrations with devotion, we should combine

them with visualisation, thinking that we are leading all the sentient beings of the six realms—including our friends and relatives, strangers, and especially those who have been our enemies before, as well as all kinds of animals—to entrust ourselves to the care of the Three Jewels. We make prostrations together with them, recite the Three Refuges formula together with them, and experience special blessings together with them.

In order to ensure the results of practice, refuge practice should mainly be performed in formal practice sessions. In accordance with their individual circumstances, practitioners can set up a shrine, acquire Buddha images and Sutra texts for the sake of spiritual purposes, and make offerings. The Buddha images should mainly be those of the Founder Teacher Buddha Shakyamuni. As for the Sutra texts, you can choose from Mahayana Dharma Jewels such as the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, *Prajnaparamita Sutra* 《般若经》, *Flower Adornment Sutra*, *Avatamsaka Sutra* 《华严经》, and *Lotus Sutra*, *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* 《法华经》. The prayer room should have a dignified spiritual atmosphere and should be cleaned on a daily basis. Also, make offerings of incense, flowers, light and fruits everyday. When the conditions are not complete for you to make those offerings, you can simply offer a cup of clean water. In that way, simultaneous with the strengthening of your mind of refuge, you accumulate the collection of merit too.

Next is the practice of generating a pure motivation. Begin from the special virtuous mind belonging to the path of the small scope, progress to the practice of the mind of renunciation belonging to the path of the medium scope, and then generate the mind of *bodhicitta* belonging to the path of the great scope.

Renunciation is about renouncing not just this life, but also samsara. By training in the three uncontaminated trainings and the thirty-seven branches of enlightenment supported on the mind of renunciation, we accomplish the path of liberation. *Bodhicitta*, the mind of enlightenment and altruism, needs to be endowed with the qualities of limitlessness, equanimity, no-form, and no-attainment. Understanding the many qualities of *bodhicitta*, we generate wishing *bodhicitta* through cultivating it during formal practice sessions. The specific methods for generating it are exchanging self and others, the sevenfold cause and effect instruction, and the ten kinds of causes and conditions. The technique of exchanging self and others was taught by Bodhisattva Shantideva. The sevenfold cause and effect instruction has its source in *Seven-Point Mind Training* 《修心七要》, and comprises the followings steps: (1) recognising sentient beings as having been one's mothers, (2) recollecting their kindness, (3) repaying their kindness, (4) love, (5) compassion, (6) exceptional resolve, and (7) the generation of *bodhicitta*. Having its source in *Urging the Generation of Bodhicitta* 《劝发菩提心文》 by Master Shen'an 省庵大师, the ten kinds of causes and conditions are: (1) recollecting the great kindness of the Buddhas, (2) recollecting the kindness of parents, (3) recollecting the kindness of masters, (4) recollecting the kindness of the benefactors, (5) recollecting the kindness of sentient beings, (6) recollecting the suffering of birth and death, (7) respecting the deceased, (8) confessing karmic obstacles, (9) aspiring to be reborn in the pure land, and (10) thinking that the genuine Dharma will remain for a long time. After one has generated wishing

*bodhicitta*, one still needs to generate engaging *bodhicitta* outside of the formal practice sessions, practising deeds to benefit others according to one's ability. For information related to generating *bodhicitta*, you can refer to the book *Understanding Bodhicitta* 《认识菩提心》, which contains more detailed explanations.

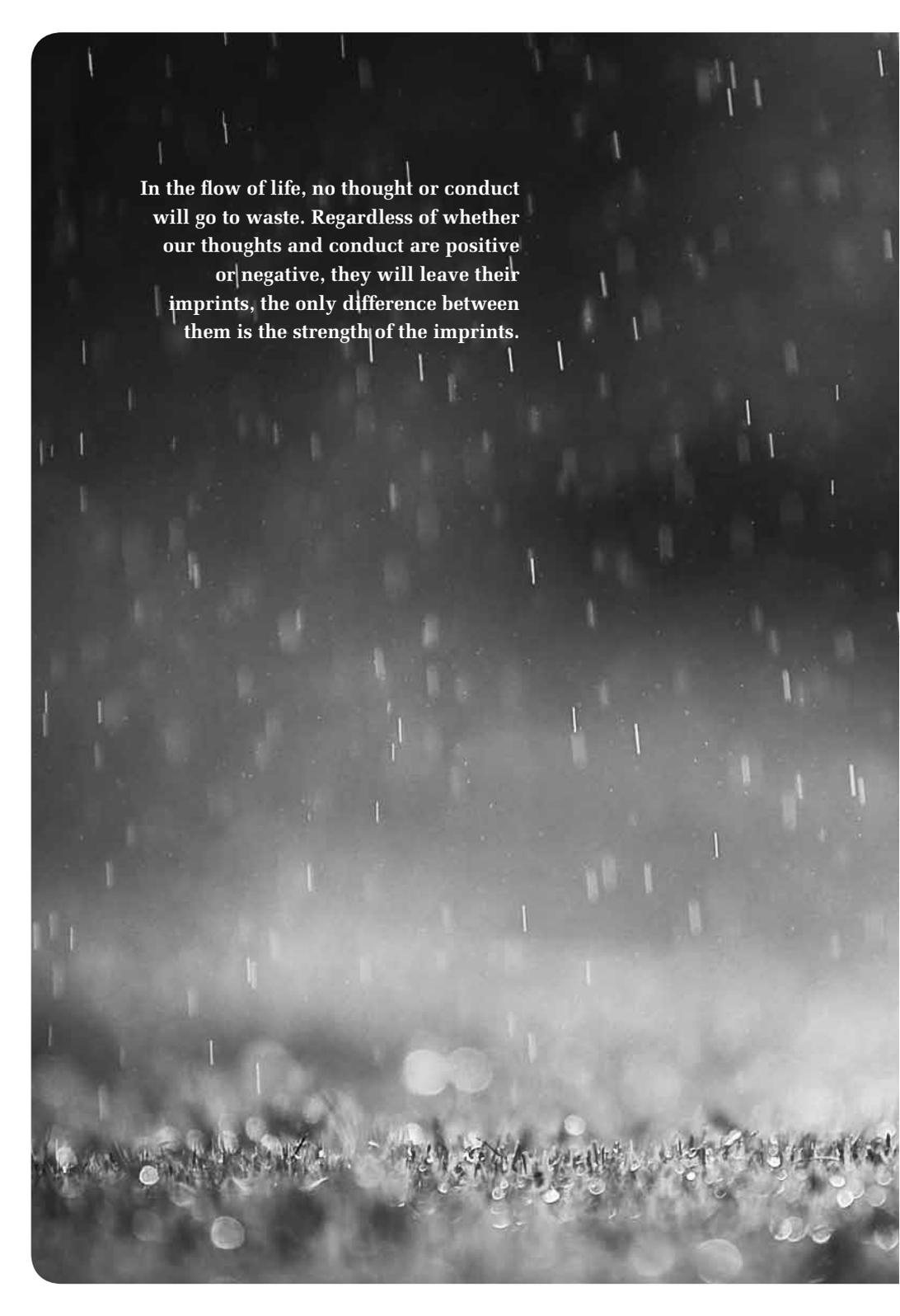
The third foundational practice is observing the five precepts and the ten virtues. The five precepts are not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not consuming alcohol; the ten virtues are, in addition to the first four of the five precepts, not engaging in divisive speech, not gossiping, not using harsh speech, non-greed, non-hatred, and not holding false view. The five precepts and the ten virtues set down the criteria for the basic conduct of a Buddhist. Although these are practices belonging to the vehicle of humans and gods, if we generate *bodhicitta* and practise them, they become the collections for the path to buddhahood. In order to take the five precepts, we should have gone through the study of the related texts on discipline and understood the prohibitions and exceptions, as well as the points concerning the keeping and transgression of the precepts. Ethics is one of the three uncontaminated trainings. Only if we practise in accordance with ethics can we achieve the collections of meditative concentration and wisdom. At the same time, we will be able to cease the mundane mind and the unwholesome habituations in our life. It will also enable us to attain the precious human rebirth replete with freedoms and endowments, and to distance ourselves from the misery of falling into the lower realms.

Furthermore, we should practise the four immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. Loving-kindness is the mind wishing to give sentient beings happiness. Compassion is the mind wishing to extricate sentient beings from suffering. Joy is rejoicing at all the virtuous deeds of sentient beings. Equanimity is treating sentient beings as equal. “Immeasurable” denotes the Bodhisattvas’ vast selfless mind seeking to benefit others. On one hand, it refers to the objects observed, sentient beings, being immeasurable. On the other hand, it points to the mind of the observer being immeasurable. This kind of boundless thought and conduct is indeed fundamentally different from the mundane mind. In the initial stages of our practice, we can start with our loved ones who are close to us, extend our visualisation to strangers, and conclude with those who have been our enemies before. Progressively, we open up our hearts to encompass all sentient beings and to equalise them in one taste.

The above four points are the common foundation for practising Buddhadharma. If it is said that refuge causes us to enter the door of Buddhism, then generating a pure motivation is what allows us to get a handle on the bearings of our practice, and the five precepts and the ten virtues are the criteria for conduct that protect us from the harm of afflictions. The purpose of the four immeasurables is to expand our mental capacity so that we can swiftly accumulate the collections of the path to Buddhahood.

The practices of these four types of Dharma conduct are intricately related: due to devoting to the spiritual guide one can hear the genuine Dharma; due to the guidance of the

genuine Dharma one can undertake proper contemplation; and only after being equipped with the correct notions and experience can one practise properly. In this way, through the processes starting from coming to know the outer Three Jewels up till uncovering the inner Three Jewels, we will eventually actualise the qualities of the Three Jewels that our life possesses fundamentally.

A black and white photograph of rain falling on grass. The rain is captured as numerous vertical streaks of varying lengths, creating a sense of motion. The grass at the bottom is out of focus, appearing as a soft, textured band with some circular bokeh highlights. The background is a dark, gradient-like sky, transitioning from a lighter grey near the horizon to a deep black at the top. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

**In the flow of life, no thought or conduct  
will go to waste. Regardless of whether  
our thoughts and conduct are positive  
or negative, they will leave their  
imprints, the only difference between  
them is the strength of the imprints.**

## The trainings of refuge

Regard yourself as the island of shelter  
Regard yourself as the object of reliance  
Do not regard others as the object of reliance  
Regard Dharma as the island of shelter  
Regard Dharma as the object of reliance  
Do not regard others as the object of reliance

Practice is like a single man battling with 10,000 people; it takes just slight carelessness for him to be exposed to attack, and end up besieged and defeated by his opponents. On the path of practice, the mundane mind is like thousands of opponents who are lying in ambush, waiting for every opportunity to invade. Therefore, after we have obtained the essence of refuge, we must protect it with utmost effort and be alert to any unfavourable condition that can cause us to damage and lose our refuge. This calls for our strict adherence to the relevant trainings without the slightest transgression.

## **1. Proscribed trainings**

Proscriptions stipulate what we should not do after we have gone for refuge in the Three Jewels. In the Three Refuges vow, we make the pledge:

... I go for refuge in the Buddha, ... never going for refuge in false demonic non-Buddhist paths.

... I go for refuge in the Dharma, ... never going for refuge in non-Buddhist canons.

... I go for refuge in the Sangha, ... never going for refuge in non-Buddhist false assemblies.

These are the guidelines stipulating the actions we need to refrain from after we have obtained the essence of refuge.

First of all, the proscribed trainings require us to go for refuge in the Buddha, never going for refuge in other religions or any kind of folk belief. Also, we should understand that, having gone for refuge in the Buddha, we should not take worldly relationships, wealth or status as our ultimate shelter.

Perhaps someone will ask, “Surely it does not mean that if we engage with Buddhism we have to reject everything in life?” It does not mean that. Refuge is certainly not about escaping from reality, and it also does not prohibit people from working to make a living or setting up a family. It simply intends that we understand that all of such objects have only temporary meaning in life and are not true objects of refuge. If we lack the awareness of this reality, then short-term benefits, like leaves blocking our eyes, will likely hinder our sight and prevent us from seeing the reality and the wider world. Going for refuge in the Buddha is going for refuge in the enlightenment of all the Buddhas of the ten directions and three times, which is the most ultimate and perfect wisdom in the world and beyond. If, after having gone for refuge, our minds are still fettered to other objects of refuge, then not only will we damage our essence of refuge, we will also have difficulty creating the causes and conditions to meet the Buddhadharmas in lives to come.

Having gone for refuge in the Dharma, we should practise according to the teachings, adhering to the various rules prescribed by our vows and refraining from all improper conduct. For lay Buddhists, emphasis should be placed on abiding by the five precepts and the ten virtues. Every one of these items involves two aspects: protecting oneself and not harming others. From the viewpoint of Buddhadharmas, the five precepts are five types of generosity: the generosity of fearlessness. When we abide by the five precepts, we eliminate the causes and conditions for harming sentient beings. Since others’ fears are dispelled in this manner, the five precepts are known as the generosity of fearlessness. If we do not kill, then

others do not need to worry about being hurt by us; if we do not steal, others do not need to worry about us appropriating their possessions; if we do not engage in sexual misconduct, others do not need to worry about their family members being subject to danger in our company; if we do not lie, others do not need to worry about being deceived by us; if we do not consume alcohol, others do not need to worry about us losing our rational faculty. With respect to the ten virtues, we need to especially pay attention to protecting our karma of speech, taking special care to avoid divisive speech, harsh speech, gossip, and the like. The karma of unwholesome speech not only causes problems and affects harmony within the community, it also causes our minds to become more and more deeply entrenched in interpersonal conflicts. In addition, the ten virtues also include non-greed, non-hatred, and not holding false view. Greed, hatred and false view are root afflictions, from which all kinds of non-virtuous karma arise. Once we are able to have a handle on them, then our remaining problems will be easily resolved.

Having gone for refuge in the Sangha, we should not go for refuge in non-Buddhists or believers of other religions. The main purpose of this proscription is the avoidance of taking them as our objects of refuge; it does not reject making contact with them and cooperating with them in the course of our work.

The proscriptive trainings involve mainly these three aspects. After we have gone for refuge, we certainly cannot concur with any kind of action of non-faith, including slander, that is targeted at the Three Jewels. Even at the cost of our life, we should not give up our refuge. We must understand that if we concur in any way with the actions defaming the Three

Jewels, we will immediately lose our essence of refuge.

## 2. Prescriptive trainings

The prescriptive trainings are to respect the Buddha, respect the Dharma, and respect the Sangha.

The first is to respect the Buddha, including all clay or wooden Buddha images. We have to regard all of them with respect as we do with the Buddha Jewel and never judge them in a presumptuous manner. Mundane people tend to want to speak their minds whenever they see anything, and even a Buddha image is not exempted from their judgement. This problem may seem trivial, but it is not. We need to understand that when we judge the Buddha images, the image of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we carry in our heart will be affected to some degree, be it serious or slight; and doing so can even result in us losing the pure minds with which we have regarded the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and cause us to enter the polluted states of the mundane mind. This will directly affect our acceptance of the Buddhadharma.

Atisha handles this matter with great skill. We find in *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》 an account of how someone had shown him a Manjushri statue and requested him to examine it, asking, “According to you, is this a good statue?” Atisha immediately raised the statue to the top of his head in veneration and replied, “There is no such thing as a bad Manjushri statue. However, the workmanship is lacking.” From this response we can fully sense his respect for Buddha images.

Since all the Buddha images are good, does that mean we do not need to be selective with the images that we want to acquire for the sake of spiritual purposes? What should we do with images that are old and damaged, or those that are of poor workmanship or quality? This is a question that Buddhist believers often ask. The purpose of acquiring a Buddha image for the sake of spiritual purposes is to help us generate a mind of respect. Proper dignified Buddha images can be very effective in helping us give rise to a mind of respect and they serve as favourable conditions on our path of practice. Therefore, when we acquire a Buddha statue for the sake of spiritual purposes so that we can perform prostrations and make offerings daily, we should try our best to select a proper dignified Buddha image of good quality. If a Buddha image is old and damaged, we should respectfully carry out the appropriate procedures, by cremating it at a high place and then leaving the ashes on clean ground. If we carry out the above procedures with devotion, then we are not being irreverent to Buddha images. Mundane beings are very attached to appearances, and non-believers especially can view the Buddha images in a worldly way. So in order to prevent the image of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that we carry in our heart from being affected, and to prevent others from creating negative karma through speech, we can respectfully carry out the relevant procedures to damaged or soiled images.

At the same time, we should never treat Dharma images as ornaments or artwork and casually arrange them just anywhere. This is a mistake that modern people can commit very easily. Not only do Buddha images serve as the symbols of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for believers to make offerings

to, they are often in themselves exquisite pieces of Buddhist art. However, quite a number of people only see them as art and neglect the most important inner qualities and functions of Buddha images. With the advancement of modern craft, the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have become important subjects for craftwork, and so their quantities have increased enormously. Obtaining Buddha images is no longer a difficult task, and many people use them as decorations in their homes. Not only do such acts not constitute the acquisition of Buddha images for the sake of spiritual purposes, they create many problems. Frequently the images are not arranged in proper places, and what is worse, once people become habituated to seeing Buddha images as pieces of craftwork, they will find it hard to generate true respect and a pure mind with regard to them.

Another point we need to take note of is that we cannot buy or sell Buddha images for monetary profit. Perhaps many people will feel baffled: “Nowadays many temples also engage in the ‘circulation’ of Buddha statues; is this proper?” Regarding this issue, we need to use the motivation as criterion. What is meant by buying and selling here is to behave like a businessman treating Buddha statues and Buddhist Sutras as goods and engaging in commerce in order to earn a profit; this is absolutely incorrect. If the underlying motivation is to spread Buddhism more effectively, rather than monetary gain, then there is no fundamental contradiction between “circulating” the images and the injunction against buying and selling them. Concerning this matter, on one hand we need to assess the motivation, and on the other hand we need to examine the

outcome. The mundane mind is very subtle; often it does not cherish what is easily obtained, but maintains a deferential attitude towards what has been acquired with money. I feel that the crux of this matter is not whether one presents it as a gift or one “circulates” it; rather it lies in one’s own motivation and especially in the outcome in practical application. If one’s motivation is correct and one does not have monetary profit as one’s goal, then even “circulation” is not a problem. However, if one’s motivation is incorrect, then even if one were to present it as a gift, it would still be improper.

We respect the Buddhas not because the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas need our respect, as the Buddhas have thoroughly eliminated the concept of self and are immovable like Mount Meru in the face of blame and praise. If that is the case, then why do we still show respect to the Buddhas, to the extent of respecting Buddha images as we do with the Buddha himself? In the eyes of some, this is nothing but a case of deceiving oneself and others, because these images are obviously nothing but earthen or wooden sculptures; so why do we see them as the actual Buddha body and make prostrations to them with devotion? We must understand that to respect the Buddha is to fulfil a need of our own practice and that we achieve the effect of purifying our mind by means of developing respect. When we are abiding in a state of tremendous respect, our minds will definitely be pure and unpolluted, and be aligned with the Dharma. This type of respect is an excellent practice in itself.

Next, we should respect the Dharma, respecting all kinds of Dharma Jewel such as the Buddhist Sutras. We

need to view the scriptures as the Buddha's Dharma body (*Dharmakaya*), in the way we respect the Buddha. We should avoid casually leaving Buddhist Sutras just anywhere, as we do with ordinary books, especially in unclean places. We should also not place other objects (including Buddha images, rosaries, and other Dharma paraphernalia) upon Sutra texts. Many Buddhists behave very deferentially towards Buddha images, but do not know how to value the Dharma Jewel. We must understand that all the Buddhas attain liberation because of the Dharma, so in that sense, the supreme among the Three Jewels is the Dharma; this is something we need to pay special attention to. The Tibetan tradition of Buddhism takes this aspect very seriously; when receiving a Buddhist Sutra, believers raise it to the top of their head in veneration in order to receive blessings. This is certainly not simply some kind of dispensable formality. In reality, respecting the Buddhist Sutras can strengthen our confidence in the Dharma, thereby enabling us to practise as prescribed by the teachings. Since confidence also needs to be nourished by causes and conditions, we need some external gesture to awaken and reinforce it.

The benefit we obtain from the Buddhadharma commensurates with our respect for it. This is the case with our engagement with Buddhism, and in fact any kind of worldly learning too. If we do not respect the teacher transmitting the trade and we do not attach importance to the knowledge that we are acquiring, then it will be impossible for us to be successful in our learning. Therefore, from the view point of practice, respecting the Buddhist Sutras is of great purpose. Not only will doing this affect our acceptance and upholding

of the Dharma in this life, it will also influence our connection with the Dharma in the future. If we fail to respect the Dharma and the Dharma master, we will create the causes for corrupt wisdom, which will cause us to be deprived of the conditions to become close to the Buddhadharma and will result even in our taking of rebirth in a border region where the Buddhadharma is unheard of.

The basis of respect for the Dharma is to practise as prescribed by the teachings. *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct, Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行愿品》 tells us, “From among the various types of offering, the offering of the Dharma is the best. That refers to the offering of practice, the offering of benefiting sentient beings, the offering of gathering sentient beings under one’s care, the offering of oneself undergoing suffering in the place of sentient beings, the offering of diligently cultivating roots of virtue, the offering of not giving up the bodhisattva deeds, and the offering of not separating from *bodhicitta*.” All the deeds starting from benefiting sentient beings up till not separating from *bodhicitta* are deeds emulating those of the Buddhas and actualising the instructions of the Buddha; they are also the best ways to repay the kindness of the Three Jewels. *Diamond Sutra, Diamond Cutter Sutra, Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》 tells us, “Subhuti, if there is someone who makes offerings of the seven precious objects filling the limitless uncountable worlds, and if there is a virtuous man or woman who generates *bodhicitta*, accepts, retains, reads, recites, or explains to others this Sutra, or even a four-line verse and so forth, the merit of the latter exceeds the former.” Although this citation compares the merit of various activities,

it also fully illustrates the fact that practising as prescribed by the teachings excels all worldly virtuous deeds.

The purpose of respecting the Dharma is so that we can learn the Buddhadharma and actualise it better. To seek the path of Buddhahood and to liberate sentient beings are the true deeds of Buddhists.

The third prescriptive training is respecting the Sangha Jewel. The Buddhadharma is able to spread in the world precisely because of the Sangha Jewel, which serves as an important link. The Sangha Jewel actualises the Buddhadharma and also upholds the correct Dharma. We should always recollect the kindness of the Sangha Jewel. Owing to their upholding and propagation of the Buddhadharma, we have the opportunity to become close to the Sangha community, hear the genuine Dharma, and progress towards liberation. At the same time, lay Buddhists have the responsibility to support the development of the Sangha community, by means of contributing donations to build temples, making offerings of the four necessities—food, clothing, bed and medicine—or physically participating in the various kinds of activities for propagating the Dharma.

We need to pay special attention to the fact that going for refuge in the Sangha is going for refuge in the entire Sangha Jewel of the ten directions and three times. For that reason, we have to treat all the Sangha members with equal respect and avoid judging them with a mundane mind. Criticising the Sangha creates grave negativities. Even though the Sangha community in real life is composed of people of diverse calibre who may not necessarily match up to our expectations, but as Buddhists, especially lay ones, with the exception of needing



to undertake detailed investigation when we are choosing and relying upon a spiritual guide, we should not criticise other Sangha members in a presumptuous manner.

Another purpose of respecting the Sangha Jewel is that it helps us to create the causes for leaving the household and attaining liberation, so that we can become the true Sangha Jewel in the near future. We will become like the Buddha, leaving the household, attaining enlightenment, achieving freedom and liberating sentient beings.

It is necessary for every Buddhist to respect the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Not only do we need to respect them from the depths of our heart, we also need to express this respect in our speech and conduct. We should not behave like certain scholars who know some superficial trivia about the Zen tradition and spout the non-attachment to signs whenever they speak; while being out of touch with reality, they think highly of themselves. Being mundane beings, if they do not place the Buddhadharma in their hearts, will it be possible for the Buddhadharma to have any effect on them? Although sentient beings fundamentally possess the qualities and wisdom like those of the Buddha, the foundation of their present thoughts and conduct is still the mundane mind. If we wish to transform our current state of life, we must begin by respecting the outer Three Jewels, and then gradually work to accomplish the inner Three Jewels.

### **3. The common trainings**

The common trainings are the types of standard basic conduct

that we need to actualise with respect to the Three Jewels. There are five points concerning these trainings.

The first is to recollect the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels and to go for refuge again and again. We should often recollect the boundless excellent qualities of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and give rise to the mind of devoted refuge. Whenever we see a sentient being, we should think, “I and sentient beings go for refuge in the Three Jewels and generate *bodhicitta*.” By readily generating this kind of wish and being in accord with the Three Jewels in our every thought, we will achieve an inconceivable effect on the improvement of our thoughts and conduct.

The second is to recollect the great kindness of the Three Jewels. We should always recollect their kindness, which is vast and deep like the ocean. On account of the Three Jewels having come into our world, we are able to hear the Buddhadharma and practise virtuous conduct. Therefore, with a heart of gratitude, we should readily practise making offerings to them. If circumstances allow, we can set up an altar at home, and make offerings of at least clean water everyday. If we obtain any food or clothing of excellent quality, we should utilise them only after having offered them. There are two purposes for making offerings. First of all, since the Three Jewels is the supreme field of merit in the world, by making offerings to the Three Jewels, we will obtain infinite merit. The cultivation of merit is of foremost priority on the paths of humans and gods, and there is no achievement that can be separated from the support of merit. The attainment of Buddhahood is the perfection of the collections of merit and wisdom. Thus, we

should make offerings to the Three Jewels to cultivate merit. Worldly people do not comprehend the wonder of such a practice; they take joy in trivial gains, but neglect this vast field of merit, which is highly regrettable. The second purpose of making offerings is to consolidate the position that the Three Jewels occupy in our heart; through the continuous practice of making offerings, our heart will become constantly aligned with the Three Jewels, whereby they will firmly take root in our heart.

The third is to recollect great compassion. We recite the names of the Buddhas and go for refuge in the Three Jewels because the Three Jewels possess the sublime qualities of unconditional loving-kindness and all-encompassing compassion. Hence, reciting the names of the Buddhas is not just to request for protection; it is rather for the sake of emulating the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, so that eventually we can achieve loving-kindness, compassion and wisdom like theirs. We recite the name of Bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara) in order to remember the great compassion of Bodhisattva Guanyin. We recite the name of Buddha Amitabha in order to remember the great wisdom of Buddha Amitabha. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have trained in great compassion by generating *bodhicitta* and benefiting sentient beings. After we have received benefit from the Buddhadharma, we should also guide all sentient beings to entrust themselves to the Three Jewels. Propagating the Buddhadharma benefits both self and others.

Many people feel that propagating the Dharma is the responsibility of only those who are ordained. This is a mistaken

idea. We should say that the propagation of the Dharma is the responsibility not only of those who are ordained, but of every Buddhist. Some harbour misgivings about their own ability, wondering, “Without having liberated myself, how can I liberate others?” Actually every Buddhist can propagate the Dharma and benefit sentient beings within the limits of their ability. For example, whenever we undertake any task or perform any practice, we can start by generating a motivation of intending to do it in order to benefit all sentient beings. Especially when practising refuge, we can visualise that we are leading all sentient beings to entrust themselves to the Three Jewels. Once we have such a wish, then we will naturally be able to utilise various causes and conditions in our daily lives to guide sentient beings so that they can draw close to the Three Jewels. If we have the ability to teach, it will do no harm for us to explain the Dharma to others by using our own experiences as examples; and if we lack the ability, we can introduce others to the practice of devoting to a spiritual guide, or sponsor the printing and circulation of the Dharma Jewel. All these activities belong to the practice of propagating the Dharma.

The Sutras teach that the giving of material wealth is surpassed by the giving of Dharma, and the offering of material wealth is surpassed by the offering of Dharma. We find in *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》 seven comparisons of merit. Even if we were to give outer offering of material wealth equalling the number of grains of sand of the River Ganges or even inner offering of our life, the merit of such giving would not compare with that of explaining to others a four-line verse. Why? This is because although outer



offering of material wealth can bring affluence to others, it cannot exhaustively cut off their inner afflictions. Only through guiding others to engage with Buddhism can we help them solve their problems in life in an ultimate manner. So, we can see how meaningful it is to propagate the Buddhadharma and guide others to engage with Buddhism.

The fourth common training is to inform the Three Jewels of all our activities. Before engaging in any task, first we should respectfully put our palms together and disclose to the Three Jewels, “With the Three Jewels of the ten directions witnessing this, the disciple named so-and-so plans to do this activity today and requests the Three Jewels of the ten directions for blessings.” When encountering a difficulty, we can likewise request the Three Jewels for help by respectfully folding our palms and requesting, “The disciple named so-and-so has encountered a difficulty and requests the Three Jewels of the ten directions for blessings so that the unfavourable conditions may be eliminated and the favourable conditions achieved.” In case our wishes are not fulfilled, we must avoid complaining that the Three Jewels have not been compassionate to us. Understanding that the consequence we encounter is due to our karmic obstacles, we should generate a strong mind of shame, extensively practise virtuous deeds, and confess our karmic obstacles, until our thoughts and conduct become aligned with the Three Jewels; then naturally we will receive their blessings. By constantly disclosing our activities to the Three Jewels, not only will we be able to receive the blessings of the Three Jewels, we will also be cultivating the important practice of developing our mind of refuge. Whenever people find themselves in

trouble, the first thing that dawns to their mind is definitely the most powerful figure in their heart. As Buddhists, the Three Jewels are our most powerful backing support. How fortunate and safe we are to be able to always abide in the blessings of the Three Jewels!

The fifth is to guard refuge and never give it up. After having gone for refuge, we should firmly guard our essence of refuge and never give up our refuge even at the cost of our life. The essence of refuge is even more important than our lives. Losing our life is nothing frightening, because we can continue to exist in our next life. In the infinite torrent of endless births and deaths, we have been born and have died billions and billions of times, but these have always been passed in vain. If we give up our refuge, we will end up sinking in deep mire for long lengthy aeons without a chance for exit. In that case, what is the use of being born again? Furthermore, we should not place the non-Buddhist systems and the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels in the same ranks. In our society we frequently hear statements of this kind: “Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Taoism are all similar; their fundamental essence is the same...” If we believe that all religions lead to the same destination though their paths are different, then this indicates that we have yet to generate an uncommon confidence and firm faith in the Three Jewels, in which case even the mere exposure to certain ideas can cause us to abandon our refuge.

After having gone for refuge, we must abide by the relevant trainings. Through guarding these trainings, we will ensure that we continue to possess the essence of refuge and that the position the Three Jewels occupy in our hearts becomes



consolidated. Only when we have firm faith and proper conduct from our side can the Three Jewels truly make a difference to our life.

## The benefits of refuge

Like the *agadha* medicine that can treat all poisons,  
The Buddha merit field extinguishes the ailment of our  
afflictions.

Like the rising sun that shines upon the world,  
The Buddha merit field dispels all our darkness.

What benefits can refuge bring us? Perhaps many people will feel puzzled by my question and wonder, “Do trainees of Buddhism also concern themselves with the benefits?” In reality, Buddhism does not reject benefit; it is just that it is not attached to benefit and uses a mind of no-attainment to view these.

However, not being attached to benefits will not affect the benefits we deserve. The fact is engagement with Buddhism brings enormous benefits. On one hand, there are temporal benefits, referring to the results of happiness of humans and gods. On the other hand, there are ultimate benefits, referring to attainment of Buddhahood. Mahayana scriptures such as *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》, *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct*, *Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行愿品》, and *Flower Adornment Sutra*, *Avatamsaka Sutra* 《华严经》 all contain substantial expositions on the benefits of engagement with Buddhism. We find especially in *Flower Adornment Sutra*, *Avatamsaka Sutra* 《华严经》 descriptions of the merit of engagement with Buddhism and of generating a pure motivation that are extensive, spectacular and mind-blowing. Of course, we should not give rise to the slightest attachment towards all of these. Since the mind of attachment is limited, the merit it can accommodate will naturally be very limited.

The benefits of refuge can be subsumed in simple terms under the following eight points.

## 1. We enter the ranks of Buddhists

When we generate a mind that completely relies upon the Three Jewels, trusts them, follows them, and we obtain the lineage of the Buddhadharma through a proper refuge ceremony, then we formally become disciples of the Three Jewels. Thus, refuge is the yardstick that measures whether or not we are Buddhists.

The key point in refuge lies in making the vow of the Three Refuges, in which we commit ourselves to taking the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha—as our ultimate objects of refuge for the duration of our entire life. It is precisely due to making this kind of pledge that we are able to obtain the unbroken transmission of the essence of refuge that has been passed down from the Buddha and the lineage masters, generation after generation, over the span of a few thousand years. Theoretically speaking, going for refuge grants us formal permission to learn the Buddhadharma and we become qualified to learn any Sutra or treatise. What we should take note of is that the Buddhadharma has to be learnt in stages; if we fail to follow the appropriate sequence, it will be very easy for us to go astray. And to be able to accurately apprehend the very profound meaning of the Dharma, we cannot be separated from the transmissions of our elders, for otherwise we may easily develop flawed understanding. Therefore, some schools emphasise that the Sutras and treatises can only be learnt after the teachers have taught them or given permission for their study. From the view point of the results of training, such a policy is indeed rather reasonable.



In addition, the essence of refuge also has the function of preventing conflicts and ceasing negativities, thereby serving as strong backing support as we progress along the long path of practice. To guard the essence of refuge is to guard our qualification as a Buddhist. Once we lose our refuge, then, like a sportsman who has been disqualified from a competition due to having committed a penalty, no matter how hard we may strive, we will not be able to attain anything.

## 2. Refuge is the basis for all vows

Ethics is the basis of individual liberation and also the basis of unsurpassable enlightenment. And the taking up of ethical discipline and the keeping of ethical discipline are all built upon confidence in the Three Jewels. Regardless of whether one is taking the five precepts, the eight precepts, or the novice ordination vows, the process of taking these pledges occurs by means of refuge, in that one receives the vow essence through making a pledge to the Three Jewels. Our faith in the vows is determined by our faith in the Three Jewels. If we do not have confidence in the Three Jewels, then we will not be taking the vows purely with a mind seeking liberation. Even if we were to take the vows due to various other reasons, it will be difficult for us to keep them seriously and guard them without losing them.

In fact, not just ethical discipline, but the practice of all Dharmas, must be inseparable from confidence in the Three Jewels. There is no exception be it the generating of renunciation or *bodhicitta*, the keeping of vows, the cultivation

of meditative concentration, the conviction in karma and its results, or the understanding of impermanence. We can say that our actualisation of the Buddhadharma commensurates with the confidence we have in the Three Jewels. If we do not firmly believe that practice will lead us to the achievement of liberation, will we be able to practise the teachings meticulously? Especially when our habituations and our practice run into conflict, if we lack complete faith, then what will we depend on to resist the disturbance of the habituations and to fortify the progress of our practice?

Only with full unwavering confidence in the Three Jewels will we follow the Buddha's advice and practise it. Therefore, not only is going for refuge in the Three Jewels the basis of the various vows, it is also the basis of all Dharma ways of practice.

### **3. Refuge extinguishes the various obstacles**

Going for refuge in the Three Jewels can help us eradicate all negative karma. During the endless continuity of our lives we have committed boundless negative actions, and these can only be eliminated through sincere confession. In *The Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* 《菩提道次第论》, the powers of confession are summarised into four types: the power of regret, the power of reliance, the power of remedy, and the power of resolution. Among them, the power of reliance refers to relying upon the strength of the Three Jewels to dissipate karmic obstacles and to become free from all difficulties.

*Ekottarikagama* 《增一阿含经》 says, “The five signs of death appeared to the son of the god of the Heaven of Thirty-Three (Trayastrimsa god realm). When he was about to be reborn among the pigs, the king of gods heard his wails of grief and told him, ‘You can go for refuge in the Three Jewels. If you follow the instructions immediately, you will avoid rebirth as a pig.’ Having gone for refuge in the Three Jewels, he took rebirth in the home of an elder. He also left the household and achieved the state of a no-more-learner.”

As you can see, wholehearted refuge in the Three Jewels and reliance upon the blessings of the Three Jewels can eliminate all kinds of obstacles and lead to the attainment of liberation.

#### **4. We will accumulate vast merit**

The Three Jewels are the greatest merit field in the world. The results of happiness come from cultivation. Just as farmers who want a harvest in autumn have to sow the seeds in spring, those who want to obtain the results of happiness should also engage in cultivation with utmost care. Merit fields are of three types: the field of compassion, the field of respect, and the field of kindness. We recognise and repay the kindness of those who have shown us kindness; we try our best to help those who are poor and have difficulties; with devotion we pay respect to the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

The Three Jewels are enormous treasures of life, containing immeasurable merit and wisdom. By going for refuge in the Three Jewels, we will have inexhaustible results of

happiness waiting for us to uncover and extract. *Compendium of the Perfections, Paramitasamasa* 《摄波罗蜜多论》 says, “If the merit of refuge were to take form, even these three realms would be too small to contain it, just as a ladle cannot measure the great ocean, the storehouse of water.” If the results of happiness from going for refuge were to take form, the billion-fold world systems would not be able to contain them. As the merit obtained by going for refuge is infinite, this kind of infiniteness transcends our scope of thought and cannot be accurately expressed by words.

Regarding the excellence of the merit of refuge, *Rare Comparison of Merit Sutra* 《稀有较量功德经》 says, “Suppose the billion-fold world systems are filled with Buddhas, like bamboo, reed, sugar cane, rice plant and fibre crop. If there is a virtuous man or virtuous woman who makes numerous offerings to those perfectly completely enlightened Buddhas for 20,000 years with all objects of recreation, clothes, food and drinks, beds and medicinal soups, and after they have passed into *parinirvana*, gather their relics and build stupas of the seven precious substances, and make offerings of incense, flowers, music, silken canopies, flags, banners, perfume, candles and oil lamps, he or she will accumulate immeasurable, boundless, incalculable, innumerable merit. The Buddha said, ‘Ananda, instead, if he or she with a pure mind, says, “Today I go for refuge in the Buddha; I go for refuge in the Dharma; I go for refuge in the Sangha”, the excellent qualities will exceed the previous merit by thousands and thousands of times, and be incalculable, innumerable, inexpressible by words.”

So we can see, by going for refuge in the Three Jewels

and recollecting the Three Jewels, we create immeasurable boundless merit.

## 5. We will not fall into a lower realm

Buddhadharma believes that life revolves within the six realms without end. Among them, the lower realms entail horrific suffering. Frequently reflecting on the sufferings of the lower realms can induce a strong mind of refuge. If we regard the Three Jewels as our sole shelter in life, we will be blessed by them and not fall into a lower realm.

*The Son of the Gods, Jiewanangfa, Who Accepted the Three Refuges and Was Saved From the Lower Realms Sutra* 《嗟秣曩法天子受三皈依获免恶道经》 says, “That which will be obtained by a person who sincerely goes for refuge in the Buddha is the constant recollection by the mind of the Buddha day and night. That which will be obtained by a person who sincerely goes for refuge in the Dharma is the constant blessings by the power of Dharma day and night. That which will be obtained by a person who sincerely goes for refuge in the Sangha is the constant protection by the might of the Sangha day and night.”

*Verses of the Doctrine with Parables* 《法句譬喻经》 states this account: “Sakra, the king of gods, Indra, had lost the five qualities from his body and knew that after dying he would be born into a potter’s family and be conceived in the womb of a donkey. Worried, he remembered that the Buddha was the only one who could rescue sentient beings from suffering in the three realms. Hurrying to where the Buddha was residing, he bowed

his head to the ground, lay on the ground, and wholeheartedly went for refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha community. Before he could get up, his life suddenly ended and he entered the womb of a female donkey. At that time, the donkey was walking and smashed the pots. The owner struck it and injured the foetus, whereupon the god immediately re-entered his former body, regained the five qualities, and remained the king of gods. The Buddha proclaimed, ‘Excellent! At the time of dying, you went for refuge in the three honoured ones, your negativities were exhausted, and you did not have to suffer.’ The Buddha pronounced the above verse and caused Indra to hear it. Indra accomplished the transformation from negativity to merit, understood the bases for prosperity and for degeneration, abided by the conduct for cessation, and attained the path of a stream-enterer (*shrotapanna, sotapanna*).”

At the time of death, the direction our lives will take is influenced by the karma we have created in the past and especially our virtuous or non-virtuous thoughts at the time of death. If our intention to go for refuge in the Three Jewels is very strong at that moment, then other thoughts will not have the opportunity to influence us. Conversely, if our karma manifests and we struggle physically and mentally in pain at the point of death, then even slight carelessness can result in us falling into a lower realm. Therefore, it is not the case that simply going for refuge once will guarantee that we will not fall into a lower realm. What is crucial is that we have a strong sense of identification with the Three Jewels. This strong intention constitutes a force that propels us far away from the lower realms, into a rebirth in the higher realms, or even into Sukhavati Pure Land.

## 6. Humans and non-humans will be unable to harm us

By going for refuge in the Three Jewels, we abide safely under the light of blessings of loving-kindness of the Three Jewels. This is like obtaining the most effective protection amulet and the sturdiest armour, which will make our life and practice safe and smooth. We will be immune to harm from humans or non-humans, such as ghosts and spirits, in our surroundings. What is meant by harm here includes external difficulties such as accidents, as well as inner fear such as psychological obstacles. After having gone for refuge, by relying upon the power of the Three Jewels, we will become distant from dangers and harms, and our minds will especially become happy and distant from perverse erroneous conceptualisations. As the Three Jewels represent the greatest force in the world and beyond, even if the world is like a sea battered by severe storms and filled with terrifying waves, we will still be able to remain unscathed in the peaceful harbour bay constructed by the Three Jewels, without fear for any disaster.

*Mahavibhasastra* 《大毗婆沙论》 says, “The virtuous gods will certainly protect those who believe in and respect the Three Jewels, causing them not to succumb to untimely death, not to suffer from sicknesses and difficulties, not to fall into the lower realms, and to be born in the realms of gods and humans.”

Furthermore, *Sutra of Empowerment, Three Refuges, Five Precepts, and Wearing a Protective Mantra* 《灌顶三归五戒带佩护身咒经》 states that there are thirty-six virtuous gods who protect those who have accepted the Three Refuges:

“Those who have accepted the Three Refuges are protected day and night by thirty-six refuge-protecting virtuous gods who see that all are auspicious.” These virtuous gods are delegated by the four heavenly kings to specifically protect those who have accepted the Three Refuges. At the same time, there are millions of ghosts and spirits equal to the number of grains of sand of the River Ganges in their retinue who take turns to provide the protection. And of course, only proper disciples of the Three Jewels will be accorded such an honour.

## **7. All our wishes will be fulfilled**

“All our wishes will be fulfilled” does not mean that all of everyone’s wishes will be fulfilled. Rather, all the good kind wishes that benefit both self and others will be fulfilled. If one sincerely requests the Three Jewels for blessings in such wholesome wishes, then all of them will be fulfilled. Similarly, when we encounter difficulties and hindrances in the course of our activities, we can request the Three Jewels for blessing and protection.

Whether or not we can achieve success in the world is determined to a large extent by our own merit. Since the Three Jewels are the unsurpassable merit field, if our minds are constantly aligned with the Three Jewels, then we will be able to accomplish infinite merit and remove innumerable karmic obstacles in our every thought, and so our wishes will naturally be fulfilled with ease. Our merit, complemented by the blessings of the Three Jewels, will enable us to achieve everything we wish for.



## **8. We will attain Buddhahood swiftly**

Having sincere faith in the Three Jewels will cause us to have the conditions to always be close to the Three Jewels life after life, to hear the Dharma, and to practise with joyous effort. The substantial essence of going for refuge in the Three Jewels is to come to know the qualities of the Three Jewels that we possess fundamentally within our lives by means of the outer Three Jewels. Through knowing about the Three Jewels and familiarising with the qualities of the Three Jewels, we will swiftly attain Buddhahood. The Dharma practice of refuge can be shallow or deep, and when it is deep it is unfathomable. Entrusting ourselves to the Three Jewels with all our body and mind enables us to swiftly accumulate the collections and perfect our merit and wisdom under the guidance of the Three Jewels. This is exactly the fast track for swiftly accomplishing the path to Buddhahood.

## The practice of refuge

Recollect Buddha  
Recollect Dharma  
Recollect Sangha  
Recollect ethics  
Recollect giving  
Recollect the gods

The final goal of our refuge is to achieve the qualities of the Three Jewels within ourselves. This process pervades the entire practice of the Buddhadharma. Therefore, after having gone for refuge, we need to repeatedly practise it, constantly reinforce it, and transform our present existence by relying upon the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels.

All practices of the Buddhadharma are built upon confidence in the Three Jewels. Abundant resources elucidating this point can be found in all the Mahayana and Hinayana Sutras and treatises. In the canonical scriptures of the *Agamasutras* 《阿含经》, we find this mainly embodied as the three recollections (the recollection of Buddha, the recollection of Dharma, and the recollection of Sangha), the six recollections (adding the recollection of ethics, the recollection of giving, and the recollection of the gods), and so forth. And in the Mahayana scriptures, we find innumerable references to the Dharma ways of practice concerning the recollection of Buddha, the recollection of Dharma, and the recollection of Sangha. In the regions where the Theravada Buddhist tradition is practised, the devotees recite the Three Refuges formula daily, and on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar calendar they go to the temple to practise refuge. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the practice of reciting the refuge formula 100,000 times or even a million times is performed as a preliminary practice. So we can see, there is an important lineage associated with the practice of refuge in Buddhism. What is regrettable is that in the Chinese regions this practice has not been receiving enough emphasis; many regard refuge as simply an entry procedure and have not been able to practise it in-depth. That being the state of affairs,

it is difficult for the Three Jewels to carry enough weight in their heart, and eventually their faith and conviction in the path will fade away.

## 1. How to practise refuge

The practice of refuge should be carried out according to the rite. To ensure the quality of practice, it should mainly be performed in a formal practice session. In addition, we should also constantly recite the Three Refuges formula outside of formal practice sessions so that our minds will constantly align with the Three Jewels.

### (I) Sing *the Song of the Three Jewels* 三宝歌

(Note: If you are practising alone, you can mentally recite it with devotion.)

### (II) Generating a pure motivation, confession, and making offerings

First practise generating a pure motivation and confession as follows.

*Today I generate the mind not to seek for myself the results of happiness of the humans and gods, hearers, solitary realisers, or even the bodhisattvas of the expedient track. I will only rely upon the highest vehicle and generate bodhicitta. I wish to attain the state of unsurpassable perfect complete enlightenment together with all the sentient beings of the dharma realm.*

*I go for refuge in all the Buddhas in the entire realm of space of the ten directions.*

*I go for refuge in all the honoured Dharma in the entire realm of space of the ten directions.*

*I go for refuge in all the noble Sangha in the entire realm of space of the ten directions.*

*All Buddhas living throughout the worlds of such kinds, all Bhagavans, please give me your loving attention. In this life and previous lives, since beginningless birth and death, I have created negative actions, caused others to create them, and rejoiced at their creation. I have taken the possessions of stupas, the Sangha, and the Sangha of the four directions, caused others to create them, and rejoiced at their creation. I have created the five actions of immediate retribution, caused others to create them, and rejoiced at their creation. I have committed the ten non-virtuous paths, caused others to create them, and rejoiced in their creation. All these negativities and obstacles I have created were either concealed or unconcealed. I have created the causes for rebirth in the hells, as hungry ghosts, as animals, and in other unfortunate rebirths, in lowly border areas, amongst barbarians, and in places of such kinds. Today I am confessing all these negativities and obstacles. All Buddhas, be my witness today and think of me.*

*(Note: Remembering the negative karma you have created since beginningless time, especially the improper actions performed recently, give rise to a sincere mind of confession before all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions, abide in a mind of confession, and stay silent for three minutes.)*

Next, practise the seven-limb offering to accumulate the

collections and purify the obstacles according to the vast vows of Samantabhadra conduct:

*Before the lions amongst men of the three times  
Throughout the worlds of the ten directions,  
With pure body, speech and mind,  
I pay homage without exception.*

*With the magnificent power of the  
Samantabhadra's vows of conduct,  
I manifest bodies as many as atoms in the worlds,  
Before every Tathagata  
And pay homage to Buddhas as many as atoms  
in the worlds.*

*In every atom are Buddhas as many as atoms  
in the worlds,  
Each dwelling amidst a host of Bodhisattvas.  
I have conviction that the endless dharma realm  
Are likewise filled with Buddhas.*

*With oceans of every sound  
I express endless elegant eulogies,  
Throughout all the aeons of the future,  
Praising the deep oceans of the Buddhas' excellent  
qualities.*

*Supreme excellent flowers and garlands,  
Music, perfumes, parasols and canopies,*

*And other supreme ornaments,  
I offer to all Tathagatas.*

*Fine clothing, supreme scents,  
Fragrant powder, incense, lamps and candles,  
Each heaped as high as Mount Meru,  
I offer to all Tathagatas.*

*With a vast mind of belief,  
Having conviction in all the Buddhas of the three times.  
With the power of the vows of Samantabhadra conduct,  
I make offerings to all the Tathagatas.*

*All the negativities I have committed in the past  
Originated from beginningless greed, hatred  
and delusion.  
Today I confess all of these negativities  
That have arisen from my body, speech and mind.*

*I rejoice in the merit  
Of all sentient beings in the ten directions,  
The learners and no-more-learners in the two vehicles,  
And all Tathagatas and Bodhisattvas.*

*To all the lamps of the worlds of the ten directions,  
Those who first accomplished enlightenment,  
I now make the request  
To turn the unsurpassable supreme wheel of Dharma.*

*If there are Buddhas who wish to display Nirvana,  
I earnestly request that they abide in the world  
For as many aeons as there are atoms in the worlds  
To bring benefit and happiness to all sentient beings.*

*The roots of virtue from paying homage,  
making offerings,  
Requesting that the Buddhas remain in the world and  
turn the wheel of Dharma,  
Rejoicing, and confessing,  
I dedicate to sentient beings and the path to Buddhahood.*

*Like the extent of the limits of the worlds and space,  
And the limits of sentient beings, karma and afflictions,  
I now dedicate that my vows be limitless,  
Just as the four phenomena know no bounds.*

Then recite the *Mantra of the Seven Buddhas for Extinguishing Negativities* 七佛灭罪真言 for the purpose of purifying your negativities and karmic obstacles (seven times):

[Chinese pinyin] *Libalibadi guhaguhadi dalanidi  
nigaladi weimalidi mahagadi (jiamu) (lamu) (zhamu) di siwaha*  
离巴离巴帝，估哈估哈帝，达拉尼帝，尼嘎拉帝，微嘛离  
帝，马哈嘎帝，（加母）（拉母）（扎母）帝，司哇哈。

(Note: While reciting it, visualise that with every recitation, the negative karma you have created since beginningless time dissolves into the infinite excellent qualities of the Three Jewels.)

### **(III) Analytical cultivation**

First of all, contemplate that the precious human rebirth carries great meaning, and understand that it is only by going for refuge in the Three Jewels that we are able to fulfil the great purpose of our precious human rebirth. Next, contemplate that death is definite, but the time of death uncertain, and at the time of death, besides the Buddhadharma, nothing will be able to benefit us, thereby generating a fervent mind of refuge in the Three Jewels. The third point is to think of the sufferings of the three lower realms and generate a sense of fear, and then give rise to the mind seeking help. After that, recollect the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels and generate tremendous confidence in the Three Jewels, feeling certain that the Three Jewels are our objects of reliance and our shelter in life.

### **(IV) Calm abiding cultivation**

Repeatedly recite, “*Namo Buddhaya; Namó Dharmaya; Namó Sanghaya.*” (*Note: When reciting the Three Refuges formula, visualise that all the sentient beings of the six realms are reciting it with you, and that with every recitation all of you dissolve into the infinite excellent qualities of the Three Jewels.*)

After that, abide in tranquillity; contemplate the infinite excellent qualities of the Three Jewels of the ten directions, and abide in the infinite excellent qualities of the Three Jewels of the ten directions.

### **(V) Taking of vows**

First of all, take the vow to abide by the five precepts as follows.

**The first precept is not killing:** *Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I promise to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of humans, animals and plants. I make the determination not to kill, not to cause others to kill, not to condone any act of killing in my thinking and in my way of life, and also not to rejoice in anyone's act of killing.*

**The second is not stealing:** *Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, oppression, stealing, social injustice, and the like, I promise to cultivate loving-kindness, and learn ways to diligently work for the well-being of humans, animals and plants. I promise to practise generosity by sharing my time, energy and material resources with those who are in real need. I make the determination not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I shall respect others' ownership rights to their property, but I shall prevent self-serving actions that profit from human suffering or the suffering of people in certain parts of the world.*

**The third is not engaging in sexual misconduct:** *Aware of the suffering caused by inappropriate sexual relationships, I promise to cultivate a sense of responsibility, and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I make the determination not to be involved in sexual relations that lack love and long-term commitment. In order to protect the happiness of myself and others, I make the determination to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I shall do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by inappropriate sexual relationships.*



**The fourth is not lying:** *Aware of the suffering caused by talking while being distracted and by the inability to listen to others, I promise to cultivate loving speech and attentive listening in order to bring happiness and joy to others, thereby reducing their suffering and worries. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I promise to learn to speak truthfully, with words that will inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I make the determination not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticise or condemn things of which I am not sure. I shall refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I shall make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.*

**The fifth is not consuming alcohol:** *Aware of the suffering caused by inappropriate consumption, I promise to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society, by practising mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I promise to ingest only substances that will preserve the physical and mental health, as well as harmony, in me, my family and my society. I make the determination not to consume alcohol, ingest harmful food, and use unhealthy intellectual products, such as certain types of television programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or mind using such “drugs” is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations.*

*Through the practice of these five precepts that are appropriate to be applied to the individual and also to society, I shall work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in*

*my mind and in society. I understand that a set of suitable rules is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.*

Next is the practice of the four immeasurables.

*May all sentient beings have happiness and its causes.  
(Immeasurable loving-kindness)*

*May all sentient beings be free of suffering and its causes.  
(Immeasurable compassion)*

*May all sentient beings have the happiness that is free  
from suffering, and enjoy physical and mental  
well-being. (Immeasurable joy)*

*May all sentient beings abide in equanimity,  
free of greed and hatred. (Immeasurable equanimity)*

## **(VI) Dedication**

*I dedicate the excellent qualities of refuge, the supreme  
conduct, and the boundless supreme merit,  
So that sentient beings who are drowning in suffering  
may swiftly go to the Pureland of Amitabha.  
All the Buddhas and all the Bodhisattvas mahasattvas  
in the ten directions and three times,  
mahaprajnaparamita.*

Regarding the practice of refuge, we should pay attention to the following points.

First, the practice should be carried out according to the complete rite, which includes the following three parts: the preliminaries, the actual rite and dedication. Initially, the

preliminaries of generating a pure motivation, confession, and the seven-limb offering help us to accumulate the collections and purify obstacles. The accumulation of the collections is like preparing the money and food that we will need on a forthcoming journey, and the purification of obstacles eliminates the obstacles to progress, so that our journey will be smooth. Next is the actual rite, which includes analytical cultivation, calm abiding cultivation, and the taking of vows. The crux of the rite is the recitation of the Three Refuges formula. At the end is dedication, in which we direct the merit of our practice to a specific goal; we should especially dedicate with *bodhicitta* and cause the merit to be multiplied millions of times.

The second point is that, before reciting the Three Refuges formula, we should generate a very earnest mind seeking help by continuously recollecting death and impermanence and also the sufferings of the lower realms. If we cannot sense the perils of cyclic existence, then naturally it will be difficult for our mind of refuge to be sincere.

The third is to be certain that the Three Jewels are the ultimate objects of refuge. This awareness is mainly achieved by recollecting the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. The process of choosing a refuge is also a decision-making process. If we sense that wealth and status are insubstantial and transitory, and also feel that other religions are not complete, then we will settle on Buddhism. However, this understanding needs to be continuously reinforced during practice.

The fourth is to contemplate the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. With every recitation, we dissolve ourselves into the Three Jewels, just like a drop of water merging into the

ocean. In reality the Three Jewels have never forsaken us, and so all that we need to do is to dissolve into them totally with our body and mind.

## **2. Explanation of generating a pure motivation in the rite**

All practice in the Buddhadharma is built upon the foundation of generating a pure motivation. Not only do we engage in generating a pure motivation in our practice, we do so in our everyday life too. Be it work or study, if the participation of our mind is missing there, then we will not achieve any success. Therefore, mind is the basis of all actions. The kind of mind with which we do things determines the kind of life we will eventually achieve. Since the foundation for our thoughts and conduct is currently the mundane mind, it affects everything we say and do daily, including our engagement with Buddhism and our practice. If we do not make a special effort to adjust our thoughts and conduct, they will inevitably be influenced by the mundane mind. That being the case, our eventual achievement will definitely be the mundane mind.

How do we adjust our thoughts and conduct? What we hope to generate through engaging with Buddhism is the mind of renunciation and the mind of *bodhicitta*. Generating renunciation, we view the three realms as a burning house and the world as a prison; naturally we will have no longing for them and will only wish to flee quickly. Otherwise, our life will forever be a continuation of the mundane mind and a huge trap where we find ourselves entrenched in greed, hatred, pride

and jealousy. However, the mind of renunciation can only lead to individual liberation. When we see the sufferings of the three realms and become aware that all sentient beings in the six realms are suffering in cyclic existence, how can we bear to emerge from cyclic existence alone? The mind that aspires to help all sentient beings in the six realms to attain liberation is *bodhicitta*. Only through its practice will we be able to achieve the great loving-kindness and great compassion of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The basis of going for refuge in the Three Jewels is to accomplish the qualities of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and this must begin from *bodhicitta*. Just as stated in the rite, we should think, “Today I generate the motivation not to seek for myself the results of happiness of the humans and gods, hearers, solitary realisers, or even the Bodhisattvas of the expedient track. I will only rely upon the highest vehicle and generate *bodhicitta*.” We need to pay attention to the fact that generating a pure motivation is not merely the recitation of words; we have to give rise to the sincere wish from the depths of our hearts. The stronger our wish, the more energy we will invest in our practice, and the greater the hope of success will be. If we can sincerely take *bodhicitta* as the strongest wish in our life, then the taking of vows in formal procedure will no longer be important. However, prior to that, we still need to reinforce it through repeated recitation.

Generating a pure motivation is not something that is embodied only in the text for the taking of vows; it pervades the entire practice of the rite. Especially when engaging in the actual practice of the Three Refuges, we have an excellent opportunity

for eliminating the narrow ego and training in generating a pure motivation. We want to visualise ourselves leading all sentient beings of the six realms in reciting the refuge formula and going for refuge together in the infinite excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. Such a visualisation is precisely an emulation of and training in the thoughts and conduct of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Usually we only have in mind ourself, our family and our friends; even if we were to fit in our people and country, such a mind would still be limited. Generating *bodhicitta* is about accommodating all sentient beings, which is indeed somewhat difficult. By working on this in analytical cultivation during formal practice sessions, gradually opening up our hearts, and persevering in this, one day we will be able to draw close to the thoughts and conduct of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. To complement our efforts during formal practice sessions, outside of practice sessions, we should also try to benefit sentient beings whenever circumstances allow. In this way, generating a pure motivation and our conduct can integrate and come together to nurture the growth of *bodhicitta*.

### **3. Explanation of the confession in the rite**

After generating a pure motivation, we need to practise confession fervently. In our infinite lives, we have accumulated too much negative karma, and these bear lasting consequences for us. It is only through wholehearted confession that we will be able to eliminate our non-virtuous karma.

In confession, we first have to disclose the various kinds of negative karmas that we have created in the past,

face our problems squarely, and generate the motivation of wanting to rectify our mistakes. The rite states, “All Buddhas living throughout the worlds of such kinds...” This is precisely the disclosing of the various kinds of negative karmas. After recitation, we recollect the negative karmas we have created since beginningless time, particularly the recent improper actions, generate a sincere mind of confession before the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten directions, and then abide in that state of mind.

Next, we have the practice of the seven-limb offering. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the seven-limb offering serves as the great confession text and can help us to purify our karmic obstacles in the swiftest manner. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the seven-limb offering also functions as an important means for accumulating the collections and purifying obstacles, thus serving as a preliminary to all Dharmas.

To strengthen the effect of the confession, recite *Mantra of the Seven Buddhas for Extinguishing Negativities* 七佛灭罪真言 seven times, visualising that with every recitation the negative karma created since beginningless time dissolves into the infinite excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. The *Mantra of the Seven Buddhas for Extinguishing Negativities* has its source in the *Mahavaipulyadharani Sutra* 《大方等陀罗尼经》. The expression “Seven Buddhas” bears broad connotation, as innumerable Buddhas transmitted to sentient beings the mantra for extinguishing negativities. When we recite this mantra, by means of the blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we will be able to dissipate our karmic obstacles right there and then. Reciting it with devotion brings inconceivable power of

blessings. The pronunciation of *Mantra of the Seven Buddhas for Extinguishing Negativities* 七佛灭罪真言 stated here is slightly different from that found in the morning and evening daily practice. What we had been reciting in the past is the Tang dynasty translation, “lipolipodi qiuheqiuheddi 离婆离婆帝，求河求河帝...” The pronunciation during the Tang dynasty differs from that of those same words nowadays. The *Mantra of the Seven Buddhas for Extinguishing Negativities* 七佛灭罪真言 included here in the refuge rite has been directly translated from the Sanskrit and is therefore closer to the Sanskrit tones.

Besides that, reciting “Namo Buddhaya; Namo Dharmaya; Namo Sanghaya” with a pure mind also has the effect of confession. Since reciting the Three Refuges formula can cause us to receive the blessings of the outer Three Jewels and also to uncover our inner qualities of the Three Jewels, we are relying upon both the outer and inner forces to dissipate our karmic obstacles.

#### **4. Explanation of the seven-limb offering in the rite**

The seven-limb offering has its origin in the King of Sutras, the *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct of the Flower Adornment Sutra*, *Bhadracharyapranidhana* of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* 《华严经·普贤行愿品》, which occupies an important position in the practice of Buddhadharma. The great vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, also known as the ten great kings of vows, contain very sublime content.

The four verses beginning with “Before the lions amongst men of the three times” are the limb of prostration,

the first of which is prostration with the three doors (of body, speech and mind) combined, and the latter three are the particular prostrations. The three verses beginning with “Supreme excellent flowers and garlands” are the limb of offering, the first two of which are associated with surpassable offerings, and the third verse with unsurpassable offerings. The one verse beginning with “All the negativities I have committed in the past” is the limb of confession. The one verse beginning with “I rejoice in the merit” is the limb of rejoicing. The one verse beginning with “To all the lamps of the worlds of the ten directions” is the limb of requesting the Buddhas to turn the wheel of Dharma. The one verse beginning with “If there are Buddhas who wish to display Nirvana” is the limb of requesting the Buddhas to remain in the world. The one verse beginning with “The roots of virtue from paying homage, making offerings,” is the limb of dedication.

The content of the seven-limb offering may look ordinary, but because it is built upon the foundation of the vows of Samantabhadra conduct, it is incomparably sublime. Once I subsumed the practice of the *Vows of Samantabhadra Conduct*, *Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行愿品》 into two phrases: “Observation and practice of unsurpassable enlightenment; emulation of the Buddhas’ thoughts and conduct.” Practising according to the vows of Samantabhadra conduct is to directly take the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as examples and emulate them; by comparing our thoughts and conduct with theirs, we adjust our own thoughts and conduct.

The vows of Samantabhadra conduct are known as the kings of vows, because every prayer has infinity as its object.

When people like us make offerings to Buddha, we only make offerings to one Buddha. When we make prostrations to Buddha, we only make prostrations to one Buddha. What we are doing is limited, and our offerings are even more limited. According to the visualisation of the vows of Samantabhadra conduct, when recollecting Buddha once or making prostration to Buddha once, the objects of visualisation are the uncountable boundless Buddhas of the ten directions throughout the dharma realm and the realm of space. And this kind of prostrations and offerings is not performed for just a day or two, but forever in an uninterrupted manner. It is as said, “Like the limit of the realm of space, the limit of the realm of sentient beings, the limit of the karma of sentient beings, and the limit of the afflictions of sentient beings, here my prostrations are without limit. I generate the thoughts without interruption, and my actions of body, speech and mind are devoid of weariness.” How enormous is this power of vows! How vast are these thoughts and conduct!

Such an infinite mindset is exactly the mindset of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. By means of the practice of Vows of *Samantabhadra Conduct, Bhadracharyapranidhana* 《普贤行愿品》, we will be able to open up the self. When we visualise all the Buddhas in the ten directions as the objects of our prostrations, right there and then we will be able to penetrate the state of mind of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Making offerings with such an infinite mind enables us to achieve immeasurable merit. This is because any action that is built upon an infinite foundation will become infinite, just as any number multiplied by infinity will become infinity. Therefore, practising

according to the seven-limb offering will help us to fulfil the accumulations for attaining Buddhahood in the least amount of time. Conversely, if we collect merit with finite thoughts and conduct, then our merit will always be finite. It is as said in *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》, “If the Bodhisattva practises generosity with a mind abiding upon phenomena, then this is like a person who has entered darkness and does not see anything.”

## 5. Explanation of the taking of vows in the rite

The purpose of refuge is to accomplish within ourselves the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels. This requires us to start by being an upright person; if we do not satisfy the basic criterion for being an upright person, then how can we practise the Bodhisattva path and even attain Buddhahood?

As a Buddhist, the basic criterion for being an upright person is the observance of the five precepts and the ten virtues. The five precepts are not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying and not consuming alcohol. In themselves they fulfil important purposes in terms of practice.

Abstaining from killing can put a stop to the negativity of killing, and brings about the cessation of the mind of hatred and the cultivation of the mind of compassion. Not stealing is also known as not taking what has not been given, which means that we do not take as our own things that others have not given to us, and it includes refraining from stealing, robbing and cheating. Putting a stop to the conduct of stealing also helps us to cease the mind of attachment and brings about the cultivation

of the mind of generosity, so that we can use our resources, skills and the Buddhadharma we have learnt to help others. Not engaging in sexual misconduct is to abandon all kinds of sexual relationships that lie outside a legal marriage, which helps us to cease the mind of lust and attachment with regard to the opposite sex. From the point of view of Buddhism, sexual desire is the basis for birth and death, and is also a huge obstacle on the path of practice. Abstaining from sexual misconduct, and indeed all forms of sexual conduct, will help us to attain liberation sooner. Not lying means to not engage in false speech, which can be divided into big lies, small lies and convenient lies. Big lies are heavy actions of deception where one claims to have realised what one has not realised and the like, such as telling a lie claiming that one has attained achievement in practice in order to obtain offerings from others or to win their trust. Small lies are lies that are of the kind where one claims to have seen what one has not seen, which are actions of deception in daily life. Lying is a cause of falsity, and serves as an obstacle to attaining true wisdom. Not consuming alcohol includes abstaining from alcohol and also any kind of food, including intellectual sustenance, that affects the growth of wisdom of the mind. Such substances will exacerbate the ugly elements in human nature and hinder the uncovering of wisdom, so we should be resolute in eradicating their consumption.

The purpose of ethics is to prevent misdeeds and put a stop to negativities. Negative actions such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying are deterred by ethics. In China or elsewhere, in modern or ancient ages, times have changed greatly, but human nature has not become much different,

and criminal behaviour still does not transcend the bounds of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying. Ethical discipline in Buddhism is built upon the foundation of human nature, and therefore it will never become outdated. The common nature of sentient beings is greed, hatred and delusion, which lead to the various types of criminal behaviour. The practice of the five precepts is kept precisely for the sake of putting a stop to greed, hatred and delusion, ceasing unwholesome familiarisation, and achieving noble inner qualities.

The principle behind the five precepts is simple, but their meaning is very profound. The content of the five precepts in the refuge rite is compiled by the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh 一行禪師 from the Plum Village Meditation Practice Centre in France. Its content fits the times very well. I hope lay Buddhists will be able to recite it everyday and use it as a basic article of faith in their life. Not only will doing so be meaningful for one's individual practice, it will also promote stability in society and peace among humankind.

The five precepts stress the ceasing of negativities, whereas the four immeasurables emphasise the practice of virtuous conduct. The practice of the four immeasurables is common to the three vehicles. If we train in them with a worldly mind, then the merit we obtain will cause us to be reborn in Brahma realm; for that reason, the four immeasurables are also known as the Brahma abodes (*brahmaviharas*). If they are practised while conjoined with the wisdom of emptiness, transcending “I” and “mine”, and not discriminating between self and others, then they are immeasurables of liberation, which will lead to the achievement of the fruits of noble beings

in the hearer vehicle. If loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity are conjoined with *bodhicitta* and practised within the infinite vows of compassion, then they become a practice of the Bodhisattva path, which will enable the perfect achievement of unsurpassable Buddhahood.

The practice of the four immeasurables is strongly emphasised in both the hearer vehicle and the Bodhisattva vehicle. Lay Buddhists should take the practice of the four immeasurables as the way to cultivate their basic thoughts and conduct: constantly thinking of giving happiness to all sentient beings; eradicating the sufferings of all sentient beings; rejoicing from the heart at the accomplishments and gains achieved by all sentient beings; and wishing all sentient beings to be separated from the minds of greed and hatred and to abide in equanimity, and then progressing to attain unsurpassable Buddhahood by means of *bodhicitta* and the view of emptiness.

**The final goal of our refuge is to achieve the qualities of the Three Jewels within ourselves. This process pervades the entire practice of the Buddhadharmā.**



**Conclusion**

Refuge is the basis of the Buddhadharma, the foundation of practice, and especially the guarantee for attaining Buddhahood. All of us, be it ordained or lay Buddhists, should make refuge the core of our practice. I hope that all beginners in Buddhism will take refuge practice as their primary practice, thereby building a firm foundation for their future practice. At the same time, I also suggest that all Buddhists, regardless of how long they have been engaging with Buddhism and how great their accomplishment in practice is, spend a substantial amount of time practising refuge in their life. Not only will this practice help to nurture their faith and gratitude with respect to the Three Jewels, it will also contribute to the improvement of their personal practice. Therefore, I myself also practise refuge and recite the Three Refuges formula as a daily practice. The practice of refuge can be deep or shallow; if we practise it with the highest view, then refuge will be the highest and swiftest Dharma way of practice.

Nowadays, the fading of faith is a widespread phenomenon in Buddhist circles. Although there are many people who have gone for refuge for many years, they still feel lost and aimless, not knowing how to go about training. Even though we may have things to learn and to practise, most of these things fail to encapsulate the essential points, and our thoughts and conduct have not changed much. These failings are directly related to having neglected the practice of refuge. Therefore, group practice in refuge should be strongly promoted in Buddhist circles. My initial intention in composing this book was to formulate a regular weekly religious routine for the devotees. So, it was only after the completion

and implementation of *A Rite for Group Practice in Refuge* 《皈依共修仪轨》 that this *A Handbook for Training in Refuge* 《皈依修学手册》 came into being to complement the spread of the rite.

I sincerely hope that every Buddhist will take on the responsibility of propagating the practice of refuge, and I also hope that every Dharma centre will be able to organise a weekly group practice in refuge and cause all lay devotees to engage in regular religious practice. Through the sublime causes and conditions of such a group practice, they will continuously strengthen and deepen their confidence in the Three Jewels, be in accord with the Three Jewels in their every thought, and cause refuge to truly become the starting point of their journey of awakening. Beginning from there, they will take steady strides on the path to enlightenment, and finally accomplish the qualities of the Three Jewels that they possess fundamentally.





The basis of going for refuge in the Three Jewels is to accomplish the qualities of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and this must begin from *bodhicitta*.

The mind that aspires to help all sentient beings in the six realms to attain liberation is *bodhicitta*. Only through its practice will we be able to achieve the great loving-kindness and great compassion of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Appendix

**From the Three Jewels for Upholding  
to the Three Jewels of  
*Innate Nature***

The Three Jewels represent everything in the Buddhadharmā. Therefore, our entire training is inseparable from reliance upon the Three Jewels. Our engagement with Buddhism begins with refuge, and this is our pledge and commitment to the Three Jewels. Through the specific ceremony of going for refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, we enter the ranks of Buddhists. So, refuge is also the basic yardstick for measuring whether or not a person is a Buddhist.

If we liken refuge to the starting point of the path to enlightenment, then its destination is the accomplishment of qualities equal to those of the Three Jewels. What is regrettable is that many Buddhists have a rather superficial understanding of refuge, even to the extent of placing all their hopes in just the ceremony. It is as if they believe that, along with the completion of the ceremony, their engagement with Buddhism has been fully consummated and they shall henceforth enjoy the blessings of the Buddhas and the protection of the Three Jewels forever without having to do anything else. We must understand that refuge is not something that can be subsumed within a single ceremony; rather, it pervades the entire practice of attaining Buddhahood.

In other religions, when one takes refuge in God, God is forever the highest lord and the devotee is forever the lowly servant, and this relationship is eternally immutable. In contrast, although Buddhists take the Three Jewels as their objects of refuge, this kind of refuge has as its goal the achievement of the Three Jewels. This is an important distinction between Buddhism and other religions. When the Buddha realised the path under the *bodhi* tree, he discovered that every



sentient being is endowed with the wisdom and virtue of the Tathagatas, as is stated in the expression, “Mind, Buddha, and sentient being: these three are not different.” In other words, even though Buddhas and sentient beings may appear starkly different, there is a particular level of existence on which they are not different.

We are mundane beings because of our attributes in the present life: greed, hatred and delusion, as well as ignorance and self-grasping. However, we do not have to feel discouraged, since under the layers of afflictions lie the infinite treasures of life endowed with perfect compassion and wisdom like those of the Three Jewels, which are the bases of unsurpassable enlightenment. Our practice is precisely for the sake of uncovering these latent qualities within ourselves. When mining mineral deposits, one needs to start by mastering the techniques for detecting them. Likewise, the practice of refuge begins from coming to know about the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels, progresses to the recollection of them and familiarisation with them so that we can be in accord with them, and culminates in the achievement of them.

The practice of recollection of the Three Jewels is of utmost importance. Whatever we recollect in each moment, our mind will align with that. If we recollect wealth everyday, then our mind will align with wealth, whereby we will seek out and realise all opportunities that have the potential to make us rich. If we recollect a certain relationship everyday, then our mind will align with the relationship and it will eventually become an inseparable part of our life. Likewise, recollecting the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels will cause the weight

they carry in our mind to increase gradually, impelling us to continuously uncover the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels that we fundamentally possess.

Engaging with Buddhism is a process which begins from coming to know about the qualities of the Three Jewels up till achieving them. The inner qualities of the Three Jewels are profound. Besides the Three Jewels for upholding, there are also the Three Jewels of emanation, the Three Jewels of principle essence, the Three Jewels of innate nature, and so forth, with these various levels displaying the profound meanings of the Three Jewels. Ordinary devotees who engage with Buddhism are often attached to the Three Jewels for upholding, and neglect the Three Jewels of principle essence and Three Jewels of innate nature, so they never delve more deeply beneath the uppermost surface. If we merely remain at the level of the Three Jewels for upholding, then even if we have great devotion, it will be hard for us to make progress in our engagement with Buddhism.

On the other hand, there are people who fall to the other extreme, thinking that they are already Buddhas and do not need to go for refuge in the outer Three Jewels. In reality, relying upon the Three Jewels for upholding is an indispensable phase in our engagement with Buddhism. If we merely abide on the level of the mundane mind, then the Three Jewels of innate nature will be concealed, as if they are non-existent when they in fact exist. They are like mineral deposits that require special techniques to uncover and refine before they can be of any use. The Three Jewels for upholding are precisely the indispensable skilful means that will help us to come to know the Three Jewels of innate nature and uncover them.

So, how do we maximise the potential of our life by means of our understanding of the Three Jewels and our refuge in them?



**Refuge is the basis of the Buddhadharmā, the foundation of practice, and especially the guarantee for attaining Buddhahood. All of us, be it ordained or lay Buddhists, should make refuge the core of our practice.**

Appendix:

# 1

## **Going for refuge in the Buddha**

Nowhere is there anyone like the Buddha;  
This is so throughout the worlds of the ten directions.  
In all that I have seen in the world  
There is no one who is like the Buddha.

“Buddha” is a Sanskrit word meaning “Enlightened One”. The enlightened state is defined in contradistinction to the non-enlightened state of mundane beings. Not only is the Buddha himself enlightened, he guides sentient beings to enlightenment, is endowed with all excellent qualities, and is perfect in the conduct of enlightenment. The immeasurable excellent qualities he possesses are reflected in his ten great epithets: Tathagata; Arhat; Correct All-Knower; One Perfect in Knowledge and Good Conduct; Sugata; Knower of the World; Unsurpassable One; Supreme Leader of Human Beings To Be Tamed; Teacher of Gods and Humans; and Bhagavan.

In going for refuge in the Buddha, we can certainly request to be blessed by the Buddha’s power, but it is more important that we follow in the Buddha’s footsteps, do what the Buddha does, realise what the Buddha realises, and in this way, achieve the “Buddha of primordial nature”.

## 1. Buddha statues

Buddha images are included in one of the Three Jewels for upholding, and they symbolise the Buddha Jewel. Regarding the origins of Buddha images, according to the records of *Ekottarikagama* 《增一阿含经》, when Buddha Shakyamuni was abiding in the world, he went to the Heaven of Thirty-Three (Trayastrimsa god realm) to teach his mother the Dharma. After the Buddha had been away for three months, the devotees King Udayana and King Prasenajit missed him and used *gosirsa* sandalwood and pure gold to fabricate statues of the Buddha



to honour him. Seeing these images was like abiding in the presence of the Buddha.

After the Buddha entered *parinirvana*, Buddha images became even more sacred symbols, and devotees paid respects, performed prostrations, and made offerings to them. The foremost purpose of fabricating images in Buddhism is to “cause the people in the ten directions to pay respects to the one with a kind expression, so that everyone will be joyful, believe in and receive refuge, create roots of virtue extensively, and eliminate negative thoughts”. This kind of loving method that educates through form caused Buddhism to move out from the religious institution into society, conveying to the people the inner qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity, and also indicating the state of the pure land on the other shore. In all Buddhist temples, whether of the Theravada, Chinese or Tibetan Buddhist traditions, we find images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with dignified features. Although the styles and sizes of these images may be dissimilar, with some being gigantic towering statues and some being fine miniature sculptures, all of them embody the compassionate image of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the minds of the devotees.

So, is a Buddha image equal to the actual body of the Buddha? Regarding this question, the *koan* from the Zen tradition titled “Danxia burns the Buddha” 丹霞烧佛 may trigger some insight in us. Zen master Danxia 丹霞 lived in the Tang dynasty. Once he sought lodging at the Luodong Huilin Temple 洛东慧林寺. As the weather was cold, he burnt the wooden statue in the temple hall to keep warm. The abbot saw that and asked

angrily, “Why did you burn the Buddha?” The master replied, “I burnt it to obtain relics.” Startled, the abbot responded, “How can relics come from a wooden Buddha statue?” The master replied, “Since there are no relics, let me take two more statues and burn them.” After hearing what he said, the abbot was given to contemplation. The Zen master’s action is carried out for the sake of eliminating worldly people’s shortcoming of being attached to outer appearance; they grasp wooden and earthen images as the Buddha, and fail to see the genuine Buddha of one’s own nature. Of course, we should not flippantly imitate the unconventional method that the Zen master had employed to educate the foolish.

Although a Buddha image is not the actual body of the Buddha, respecting a Buddha image is a very sublime method of practice. It can strengthen a learner’s mind of refuge in the Three Jewels, and that in turn serves as a favourable condition for higher practice. If we can see a Buddha image as the actual body of the Buddha and offer prostration to it with devotion, spontaneously a sense of sacredness and reverence will arise in us, and our mind will achieve purification right there and then. Conversely, if we simply regard it as a piece of artwork, then, besides allowing us to admire it or providing us with a sense of beauty, it will not have any impact on our thoughts and conduct; and even when facing a Buddha image, we will still have scattered erroneous thoughts and manifold afflictions. Based on these observations, some people conclude that treating Buddha images as holy objects is a result of devotees’ superstitions, and they condemn such as idol worship. What



they fail to understand is that this is a method of practice for Buddhists to receive inspiration, purify their mind, and activate their primordially enlightened nature, whereby it has far-reaching purpose. This is why making prostrations to the Buddhas is the first practice from among the ten great kings of vows of Samantabhadra. By offering prostrations to them, our mind will gradually come to align with them.

We also need to take note that our practice should not remain at the level of attachment to Buddha images, for otherwise we will be fettered by outer appearances. The stages beginning from respecting Buddha images up till transcending attachment to appearances represent different levels of practice and we should practise them in a graduated manner without emphasising one at the expense of the others.

## **2. The form body of the Buddha**

The Buddha's form body was born over two thousand years ago. The Founder Teacher Shakyamuni who displayed the eight aspects of enlightenment is one of the Three Jewels of specific manifestation. Out of compassion in wanting to rescue sentient beings, the Buddha manifested in the world and taught the Dharma to liberate sentient beings in samsara, due to which Buddhism spread widely in the world.

Does the form body of the Buddha represent the Buddha? As far as mundane beings are concerned, when a certain person's image is seen, it means that the person is seen; when talking about a certain person, what appears in one's mind

is also the person's image. Apart from the form body of the Buddha, is there something else that can be more representative of the Buddha?

The Buddha has thirty-two signs and eighty exemplifying marks. Is seeing these equivalent to seeing the true body of the Buddha? The Bhagavan told us in *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》, "If one were viewed as a Tathagata on account of the thirty-two signs, then even a wheel-turning (*chakravartin*) king would be a Tathagata." Subhuti replied to the Buddha, "Bhagavan, as I understand the meaning of what the Buddha has said, one should not be viewed as a Tathagata on account of the thirty-two signs." Immediately after that, the Bhagavan proclaimed the well-known verse, "Whoever sees me on account of form, whoever seeks me on account of sound, is traversing a false path and cannot see the Tathagata."

The Buddha's form body is a false appearance of the aggregation of causes and conditions. For that reason, seeing the Tathagata's form body is not equivalent to seeing the Tathagata's true body. According to records, when the Buddha returned from the Heaven of Thirty-Three (Trayastrimsa god realm), his disciples eagerly went forth to welcome him. In order to be the first to see the Buddha, the nun Utpalavarna emanated herself as a wheel-turning king and positioned herself at the fore of the group. However, unexpectedly the Buddha said, "Although you see my form body, you do not see my Dharma body. Subhuti is sitting in a stone cell, but he sees my Dharma body." So what had happened was that when the group went to welcome the Buddha, Subhuti, remembering the Bhagavan's teaching



that “Seeing the Dharma is seeing the Buddha”, gave rise to the conditions for the correct view, realised the emptiness of phenomena, and thoroughly saw the Tathagata’s Dharma body. This episode also affirms the Buddha’s statements in *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》 in which he repeatedly emphasised that “one cannot view the Tathagata on account of the form body”, because “anything with appearance is a falsity”.

The Tathagata responds to the world through the form body with the aim to skilfully guide sentient beings. He teaches the Dharma through sound, with the aim to compassionately educate sentient beings. If we are attached to the appearance of the body, the sounds, and even the teachings, then we cannot see the Tathagata’s true body. However, we need to know that, while the form body is certainly not real, we cannot seek a Tathagata that is isolated from it. This is because the Dharma body exists everywhere and is not separate from the form body, and wise ones are able to realise the Dharma body through the form body.

### 3. Qualities of the Buddha

The “Buddha” means the “Enlightened One”. Having realised the path, he is one who is himself enlightened, who enlightens others, and who is perfect in the conduct of enlightenment. Therefore, the enlightened nature is the core quality of the Buddha, and it is also the nature of *bodhi* explained in *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》. At the beginning of *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, the Sixth Patriarch tells the people, “*Bodhi* is



fundamentally pure in its nature. Using this mind, you will attain Buddhahood directly and completely.” He set forth the central doctrine, clarified its meaning, and expressed its thought eloquently. The reason for his stating so is that the various excellent qualities of the Buddha are all built upon the foundation of the enlightened nature. It is precisely through the power of enlightenment that the Buddha is able to achieve the excellent quality of cessation, the excellent quality of wisdom, and the excellent quality of compassion.

The excellent quality of cessation is also called liberation. It refers to the Tathagatas having ceased all afflictions and afflicted karma, and being completely free from them without any remainder. In our endless continuity of lives, we have created all kinds of karma out of ignorance, and so we continuously revolve in the cycle of birth and death, experiencing their results in cyclic existence. As ignorance also produces the numerous afflictions, we constantly have perverse erroneous thoughts and are mired in the sea of suffering. People continuously pursue outer pleasures and attempt to reduce their afflictions. However, in this impermanent fragile world, all compounded phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble and a reflection. Whether wealth or status, whether family or friends and relatives, the functions of these objects are contaminated and limited; at best they can provide us temporary relief from our afflictions, but are unable to resolve our problems at their origin. How do we eradicate the afflictions? The Buddhadharma tells us that we have within our life the ability to dissipate the afflictions, and that ability is our primordially enlightened nature. Once it is applied, our afflictions will automatically be dissipated. The



Buddha, because of perfecting the primordially enlightened nature, achieved the excellent quality of cessation and transcended the bondage of the two types of grasping. Hence, the enlightened nature and liberation are of one essence.

The excellent quality of wisdom is the wisdom of *prajna*. This refers to the Tathagatas perceiving all phenomena with the wisdom of equality, perfectly and without obstructions. The unsurpassable perfect complete enlightenment (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*) achieved by the Buddhas is exactly the highest peerless enlightenment; for this reason the Buddhas are known as the ones with all-knowing wisdom. The all knowing wisdom includes two aspects: the knowledge of all ultimate phenomena and the knowledge of all conventional phenomena. The knowledge of all ultimate phenomena refers to the knowledge knowing the nature of phenomena. The knowledge of all conventional phenomena refers to the knowledge knowing the distinctions of all dependent-arising phenomena in the world. By achieving the knowledge of knowing distinctions, we will have the immeasurable skilful means to liberate sentient beings.

The excellent quality of compassion is perfect great compassion. It refers to the Tathagatas riding on their great power of vows to help sentient beings and never failing to liberate them whenever the conditions are right. The Buddha's loving-kindness and compassion is equal and unbiased, immeasurable and boundless, which is drastically different from the small loving-kindness and compassion of mundane beings. Mencius said, "The mind of sympathy is something everyone possesses." However, the mind of compassion of



a mundane being is very limited because it has the narrow-minded ego as its foundation, is concerned only with himself and his family members, and extends at most to his people and his country. Even if it can accommodate all human beings, it will be difficult for this loving-kindness to pervade all sentient beings. In contrast, the loving-kindness and compassion of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is “unconditional loving-kindness, all-encompassing compassion”, in which sentient beings and oneself are viewed as being of one essence, without strings attached or any distinction in closeness. The ability to reach such a state also has its cause in the enlightened nature. The Buddha has already transcended the two types of grasping to self and to phenomena, and realises the equality of all sentient beings. Therefore, he can benefit sentient beings at all times with a pure compassionate wish without any interruption.

The basic difference between the Buddhas and sentient beings is the former are enlightened while the latter are not. It is just as *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 says, “With a preceding moment of deluded thought, one was an ordinary person, but with a succeeding moment of realised thought, one is a Buddha.” The deluded one is a sentient being (unenlightened), whereas the realised one is a Buddha (enlightened). Delusion and realisation are not two completely opposing modes of life; rather the two of them exist in our present within a single thought. And the difference between affliction and *bodhi* lies simply in whether we are attached to objects or detached from objects, as it is said, “To be attached to objects in a preceding moment of thought is affliction, but to be detached from the objects in a succeeding moment of thought is *bodhi*.” We are



attached to objects because we are unenlightened. When the mind is stuck to objects and produces the two types of grasping to self and to phenomena, afflictions ensue. However, once the realisation of enlightenment manifests and we separate from attachment to objects, we will have *bodhi* present there and then. The Buddha, precisely because of having awakened the primordially enlightened nature within his life, was able to perfect great loving-kindness and compassion as well as great wisdom, thereby attaining great liberation and great freedom.

#### 4. The view of the Zen tradition

The enlightened nature is not something unique to the Buddha. In fact, all sentient beings without exception have it. In Buddhism, this primordially enlightened nature that all sentient beings are endowed with is explained in many Sutras and treatises, especially the scriptures belonging to the system of the *Tathagata* essence (*Tathagatagarbha*). Of course, there are slight variances in the descriptions of the enlightened nature found in the numerous Sutras and treatises. For example, in *Shurangama Sutra* 《楞严经》 it is called the wonderful true mind, in *Nirvana Sutra* 《涅槃经》 it is called the Buddha nature, and so on. In these Sutras and treatises, the Buddha used a variety of explications and analogies to inspire sentient beings to become aware of and uncover the treasures within themselves. It is as *Nirvana Sutra* 《涅槃经》 says, “All sentient beings have the Buddha nature; because of that, sentient beings have within them the ten powers, the thirty-two signs, and the eighty exemplifying marks.” Also, the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*



《大方等如来藏经》 says, “Abiding among the various afflictions of greed, desire, hatred and delusion of all sentient beings, is the *Tathagata* wisdom, *Tathagata* eye, *Tathagata* body, seated in crossed legged position, stable and unmoving.”

There are priceless treasures contained within our life, but we pass our days like a wandering beggar. How pathetic! Based on such considerations, certain practice methods with advanced starting points directly guide the learners to come to recognise the primordially enlightened nature. Systems such as the Zen tradition, as well as the Great Completion (*Dzogchen*) and Great Seal (*Mahamudra*) in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, hold the view of the Tathagata essence. These systems believe that sentient beings possess the qualities of the Buddha fundamentally, and use this feature as the entry point of practice.

Explanations related to this point are abundant in the *koans* of the Zen tradition. When the Zen master Dazhu Huihai 大珠慧海禅师 went to see Mazu 马祖, he was asked, “What are you here for?” He replied, “To seek the Buddhadharma.” Mazu said, “I do not have anything here. What Buddhadharma are you seeking? Why ignore the treasure in your own home and leave home to wander?” He asked, “Which is Huihai’s treasure?” Mazu replied, “The one questioning me now is your treasure. You have everything; why seek it outside?” Hearing this, the master came to recognise his own mind, and thanked Mazu profusely. Afterwards, someone asked the Zen master Huihai, “What is Buddha?” The master replied, “If the person across the pond is not a Buddha, then who is he?” Everyone has Buddha nature. The problem is simply a matter of whether we know it, and whether we dare to take it on. Therefore, practice in the Zen



tradition emphasises very much taking on the Buddha nature squarely.

In *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, when the Sixth Patriarch first met the Fifth Patriarch, he displayed this courageous attitude of readiness in taking it on. The Fifth Patriarch asked, “Where are you from? What do you seek?” Huineng 惠能 replied, “This disciple is a commoner from Lingnan Xinzhou 岭南新州. I have come a long way to pay respect to the teacher. I only seek the achievement of Buddhahood, nothing else.” The Fifth Patriarch asked, “You are from Lingnan, and are also a hunter. How will you be capable of achieving Buddhahood?” Huineng replied, “Although people can be from the south or the north, there is fundamentally no south or north in Buddha nature; even though the body of a hunter and that of a monk are different, what difference is there in Buddha nature?”

From the viewpoint on Buddha nature, all sentient beings are equal, regardless of whether they are Buddhists or Christians, or even mosquitoes or ants; there is no difference in their essence. They appear different only because of variations in their karma and accumulation of lives. Once we uncover our treasures and realise the primordially enlightened nature that is fundamentally pure, fundamentally free from production and cessation, fundamentally complete in itself, fundamentally immovable, and can give rise to all phenomena, then our life will be able to take off and soar high, and thereby become complete in terms of its quality. It is just as said to the Sixth Patriarch by the Fifth Patriarch, “Without knowing the fundamental mind, learning the Dharma will not be beneficial; if one knows the fundamental mind, sees one’s own fundamental nature, then



this person is to be called a hero, a teacher of gods and humans, and a Buddha.”

Besides that, *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 also mentions the three bodies and the four wisdoms, which are also achieved in dependence on the primordially enlightened nature. To have the three bodies refers to having the pure Dharma body as the nature, the complete enjoyment body as the wisdom, and the billions of emanation bodies as the conduct. The four wisdoms refer to the mirror-like wisdom, the wisdom of equality, the wisdom of analysis, and the wisdom of accomplishing activities. This is why we say that the primordially enlightened nature is the foothold of the practice of Buddhadharma and also the basis of the Buddha’s achievement of all excellent qualities. It is just as explained by the Sixth Patriarch in *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, “The innate nature are endowed with the three bodies; generating illumination, the four wisdoms are achieved. Without being separated from the conditions of seeing and hearing, one ascends to the ground of Buddhahood transcendently.”

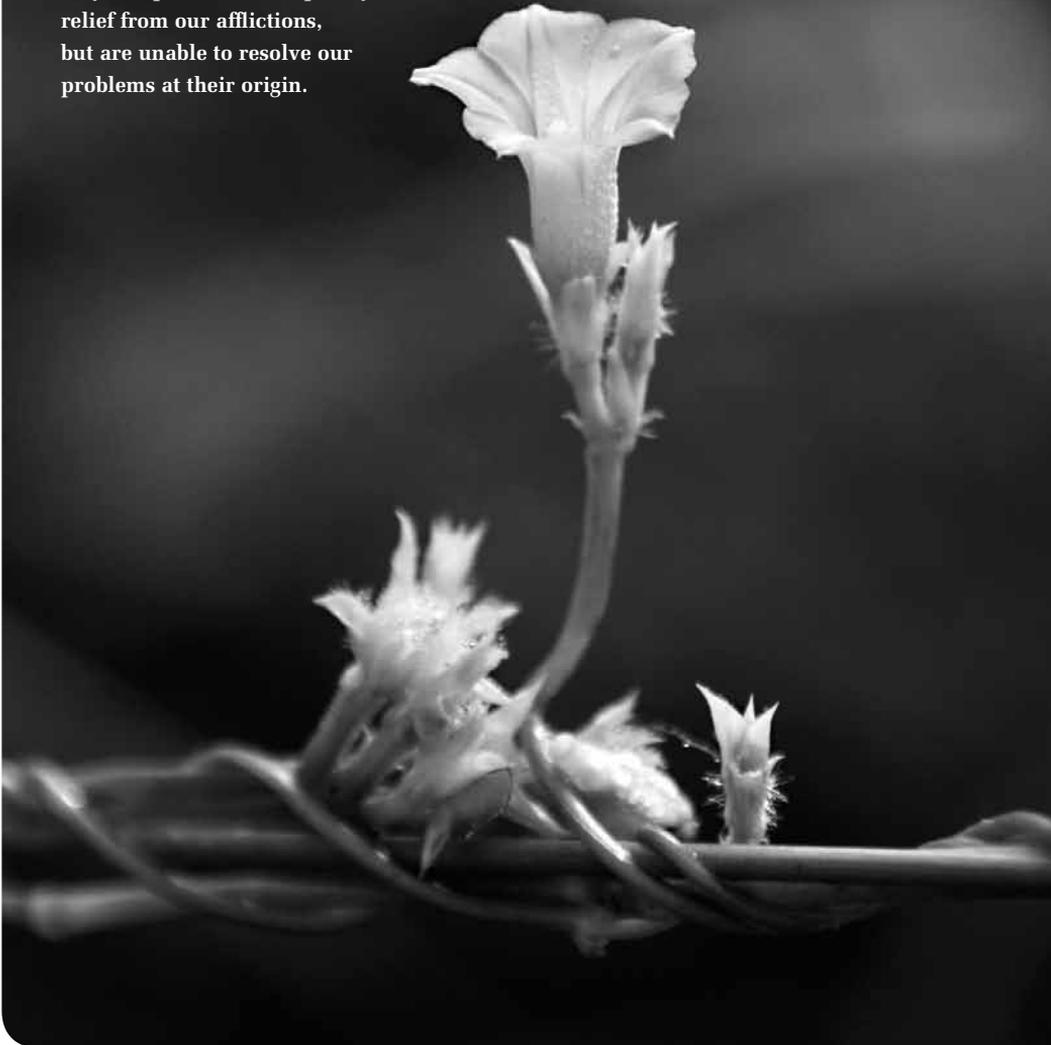
At the same time, the primordially enlightened nature is endowed with the ability to dissipate all afflictions. The method of practice found in the Scriptural Approach uses various means to serve as antidotes to the various afflictions. However, the practice of the Zen tradition, Great Completion (*Dzogchen*), or Great Seal (*Mahamudra*) specifically uses the “upward” technique to overcome the manifold soldiers and horses in the camp of afflictions. In reality, once we awaken the primordially enlightened nature, the fort of the afflictions will automatically dissipate. As the afflictions lack self-nature, when the two types



of grasping to self and to phenomena disintegrate, they will lose their support and will no longer hold up.

Refuge begins with the Three Jewels for upholding. Starting with Buddha images and the form body of Buddha, we progress more deeply until we arrive at the Buddha's qualities, and eventually come to know the primordially enlightened nature that is not different from the Buddha. In *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, the Three Jewels of innate nature are defined as enlightenment, the genuine, and purity. Going for refuge in the Three Jewels is to go for refuge in enlightenment, the genuine, and purity. Therefore, the purpose of going for refuge and training in the Buddhadharma lies in uncovering the primordially enlightened nature that life possesses fundamentally.

People continuously pursue outer pleasures and attempt to reduce their afflictions. However, in this impermanent fragile world, all compounded phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble and a reflection. Whether wealth or status, whether family or friends and relatives, at best they can provide us temporary relief from our afflictions, but are unable to resolve our problems at their origin.



## **Going for refuge in the Dharma**

Not being attached to the world, like a lotus flower;  
Always virtuously entering the quiet conduct of emptiness;  
Directly perceiving the various signs of Dharma without  
obstruction;  
Bowing down, like space without support.

“Dharma” is a Sanskrit word. In ordinary usage, its significance is very broad and includes all the phenomena in the world, such as mountains, rivers and the great earth. However, the Dharma that we are discussing here has a specific connotation, namely the Buddhadharma. It reveals the reality of sentient beings’ lives and provides the method for ceasing delusions and realising the truth. For that reason, it is said that only the Buddhadharma can serve as the ultimate object of refuge in life.

Although the Buddhadharma is vast and profound, and contains innumerable Dharmas, its focal point is placed on the mind of sentient being. If we neglect this focal point, then lapses will definitely occur in our training. Therefore, in our engagement with Buddhism, we must first understand the mind of sentient being (that is, our own mind). Only with such a precondition fulfilled can we truly understand the purpose of training.

## **1. The mind of sentient being**

The continuity of life comes from the continuity of the mind. The Buddhadharma tells us that the minds of sentient beings are of two levels: the enlightened mind and the unenlightened mind. From them, different types of life unfold. Based upon such a simple dichotomy, the world is divided into the mundane and the noble. On account of the enlightened mind, the pure world of the noble beings is established; on account of the unenlightened mind, the defiled world of the mundane beings is established.

Mundane beings are unenlightened because of



ignorance. When the primordially enlightened nature is covered by ignorance, the mind dwells in darkness and obscurations, and is unable to see clearly the dependent-arising phenomena in the world, or its fundamental reality. Due to not understanding reality, the mind creates all kinds of mistaken constructs regarding reality and adheres to them. Among these, self-grasping is one of the starkest mistakes.

Who is “I”? What represents “I”? Perhaps someone may say, “I am the person named so-and-so.” If that is the case, will changing the name result in a change in “I”? Perhaps someone may say, “I am such a body.” If that is the case, then when the body has yet to appear, where did the “I” come from? When the body becomes ashes, where will the “I” go? Perhaps someone will say, “I am just I. I cannot be you, can I?” If that is the case, then why is it that what is not “you” is “I”? Where do the separation and the boundary between “you” and “I” come from?

In fact, all such judgements come from self-grasping. Self-grasping is the false grasping to a truly existent self. On account of the delusion stemming from this single thought, every one of our thoughts becomes a delusion, due to which falsity is taken to be truth, illusion is taken to be reality. In that way, all kinds of negative emotions and afflicted karma are formed. This is why we say that self-grasping is exactly the origin giving rise to the formation of the mundane mind.

## **2. The unfolding of a life of delusion**

Since beginningless time, we have been entangled in the mistaken constructs created by the two types of grasping to

self and to phenomena, causing these two types of grasping to become deeply ingrained habituations and natural instincts within us. Based upon such an unenlightened ignorance, we lead a life of perverse erroneous conceptualisations and have various kinds of deluded confused appearances, upon which we create related constructs. Progressively, we develop firm attachment to these constructs, resulting in our complex mentalities and inducing immeasurable boundless afflictions.

For instance, this teacup is just a dependent-arising false appearance and does not have any specific ownership associated with it. However, after we spend money to buy it, we superimpose ownership upon it and feel that this teacup is “mine”. Furthermore, we affix different kinds of labels upon it, feeling that it is pretty, valuable, rare and so forth, causing our attachment to it to deepen continuously. In reality, no construct whatsoever has added anything to the teacup. None of the various factors that created this dependent-arising phenomenon of the teacup will undergo change on account of any of our constructs.

However, our mind becomes affected as a result of it. Rather than saying that these constructs have been superimposed upon the teacup, we might as well say that some anxiety has been added to our mind. When we damage or lose it, we become troubled and remorseful. When someone else damages or loses it, we become angry and unhappy. If the teacup is only an item on display in a store and we have yet to generate possessiveness with respect to it, will such changes affect us so adversely? Everyday in various parts of the world, there are uncountable losses on account of natural and man-



made disasters, which are easily billions of times worse than our personal loss. Perhaps we have sighed in sadness or even shed a tear of sympathy in response to these disasters, but very soon they are all but forgotten. However, we cannot forget a beloved teacup. Why? The cause is none other than self-grasping.

The deeper our attachment, the greater is its power to disturb us. There was a highly realised practitioner called Zen master Bifeng 碧峰禅师, who had achieved very deep meditative concentration. When he was about to pass away, a little ghost looked for him everywhere but could not find him. Then, discovering that the only love in his entire life was his alms bowl, the little ghost shook it. When the Zen master heard the sound from the alms bowl, his mental attention was disturbed and he immediately emerged from his meditative concentration to investigate its cause. When he discovered that the little ghost was the culprit, he could not help but feel alarmed; not only did a single thought of attachment disrupt his meditative concentration, he was caught red-handed by an impermanent little ghost. Smashing the alms bowl, he re-entered his meditative concentration and left behind the following verse: “No one wishing to take Jin Bifeng 金碧峰 will succeed unless he can lock space with iron chains; if he can lock space, let him come and take me, Jin Bifeng 金碧峰.”

Whether a teacup, a house, a car or even our form body, all of these objects are dependent-arising false appearances, devoid of “I” and “mine”. Having thoroughly understood this point, our mind will become like space, with nothing for it to abide on, whereby attachment will naturally find no ground to take root. In that way, we will no longer be burdened by things

and fettered by emotions. Even though an iron chain can lock all kinds of physical objects, it cannot lock formless space.

Self-grasping also causes us to develop extreme emotional states such as inferiority complex, arrogance and so forth. We have a sense of inferiority because we shut the self off from others, creating a dualistic world in which we are set against the outer world. This kind of narrow-minded mistaken construct in which self and others are in opposition is like an attempt to face off with the entire world through one's own power, resulting in exaggerated feelings of loneliness and despair. Arrogance, on the other hand, comes from the strong attachment to self and magnifies endlessly a certain good quality that we have or a good quality presumed by the ego, to the extent that it inundates the mind, which is already narrow and limited, so that one naturally becomes unable to accommodate others. This is why we say that all afflictions are induced by the perverse constructs created by self-grasping.

Furthermore, there is the attachment to phenomena, namely the view of inherent existence. There are many constructs in the world, and they exist only to help worldly people build up relatively standardised rules and criteria so as to facilitate exchange, but they themselves are devoid of any real substance. Take for example time, a construct involving the year, the month, and the day, which are merely formulated in accordance with the orbiting and revolving of the sun, the moon and the earth. However, once such a convention comes into being and attachment to the signs of time develops, afflictions will then follow. If we are waiting for the bus, one hour of anxious waiting passes so slowly that our nerves are frazzled; and when



we suffer from insomnia, the night of turning and tossing is so long-draw-out that it seems without end. The reason why time has the ability to produce disturbance in us is inextricably tied to our attachment; we are constantly preoccupied with the amount of time remaining, and so we experience anxiety, stress and expectation. In reality, when the mind has no concept of time, time does not exist. When we meet up with a good friend, the same duration of one hour flies by so quickly, leaving us yearning for more. When we wake up from deep sleep, even though a few hours may have passed, they seem like an instant and do not leave any impression upon our mind.

When we use the wisdom of dependent-arising to examine our world, we will see that nothing whatsoever has any inherent characteristics. Let us consider this chair. Apart from the wood, paint and nails, where does the chair exist? The various features of the chair, such as the height, shape, colour and attractiveness, also do not exist objectively in absolute terms. Tallness is relative tallness; shortness is also relative shortness. Therefore, it is said that a chair is a false appearance of causes and conditions that is determined by many factors and is a name that we affix upon the false appearance. This is so for the chair, and everything else in the universe is no exception. Other than the false appearances of causes and conditions and labelling by false names, there is no phenomenon that can exist independently without depending on other factors. This is precisely what is meant by the absence of inherent existence taught in Buddhism.

### 3. The continuity of the life of sentient beings

Mundane beings, because of being unenlightened, grasp to phenomena in the world, which are in fact devoid of inherent existence, as truly existent. On account of this, all kinds of afflictions are created. Therefore, we say that life is the composite of mistaken ways of thinking and confused emotions. This is the state of life of mundane beings and also the force impelling sentient beings to revolve in birth and death.

This kind of unenlightened mind imprisons life in the sturdy cage constructed by the ego. Although people live in a common space, they also live in their own individual worlds, in their own inner minds. The quality of our life is determined by our ways of thinking, mental states and emotions. Many a times we are like a manipulated puppet, lacking autonomy. When hatred arises, of course we can say, “I dislike that person, and it is my freedom to do so.” However, the problem is that, after we give rise to this emotion, we cannot put a stop to it anytime as we wish; we cannot let go of this hatred anytime as we like. If we are autonomous, then we can command any emotion to come and go at our whim and fancy, but this is not the case in reality. Hence, we often hear people lament, “I didn’t want to get angry, but I couldn’t help it.” The manipulator behind the scenes that is depriving us of our autonomy is precisely the unenlightened mind.

So hatred is like that, and attachment is no different. Those who are attached to food know that eating excessively is not beneficial, but still they are impelled by desire to gorge on delicious food. People who smoke know that smoking is bad



for health, but still they are tormented by their addiction and continue smoking. There are government officials who know that accepting bribes is against the law, but still, consumed by greed, they accept bribes and break the law. They are really very pitiful. As their greed has grown too huge, they end up being driven by it. Some of them indulge in it willingly, while some are ignorant; yet others do not have the power to extricate themselves from it. Not only do they lack autonomy over their minds, they also lack autonomy over their bodies. How unfortunate is this kind of life!

Afflictions do not fall from the sky; they originate from our mind. If our mental states are deviant, then even if we shut our doors and stay in, our mind will still generate innumerable afflictions. Nowadays psychotherapy is popular, but this kind of therapy can only provide the patient temporary relief from the problem. If the patient's own notions have not changed, then it is a matter of time before the patient suffers a relapse. Prior to attaining ultimate liberation, none of us has freedom. The external freedom provided by society is very limited. If we have yet to become free from the bondage of afflictions, then our lives cannot be said to have freedom even if we were to live in the most democratic society.

Since beginningless aeons, we have been impelled by the unenlightened mind and the karma created by it. In the past we lacked the power to be autonomous; now we still lack this power and have no choice but to continue our aimless circling in cyclic existence. The root of this current state of affairs is the unenlightened mind, our ignorance. Therefore, the first of the twelve links of dependent-arising is ignorance. Ignorance

conditions compositional karma; compositional karma conditions consciousness; consciousness conditions name and form; name and form condition the six sense bases; the six sense bases condition contact; contact conditions feeling; feeling conditions craving; craving conditions grasping; grasping conditions existence; existence conditions birth; and birth conditions ageing and death. In that way, there is no end to life and our afflictions become inexhaustible.

#### **4. The function of the Dharma**

However, we must understand that even beneath this appearance of chaos, the mind still possesses the aspect of non-dual clarity and emptiness. It is just that it has been covered by ignorance and is thus exhibited in the disfigured manner of the two kinds of grasping to self and to phenomena, resulting in one's presently existing mundane mind. It is through practice that one removes the distorted state of life and returns the mind to its fundamentally enlightened state.

The best guide to actualising this life-transforming project is none other than the Buddhadharma. We first need to establish correct knowledge based on the Dharma, and then use that knowledge to dissipate self-grasping, cease delusions and attain realisation. Of course, views are of varying depths, and included within them are the right views of hearing and contemplation, as well as the right views of thoughts and conduct. The majority of beginners should first embark on the right views of hearing and contemplation, and then make use of the viewpoints of Buddhadharma to newly examine the world



and gradually turn around the notions they presently hold. However, merely understanding the theory is not sufficient; we have to integrate the theory into our thoughts and conduct. Otherwise, even though we may understand that everything is devoid of inherent existence and know that self-grasping is the door to all ruination, as soon as we engage with things in life, we will discover that we remain shackled to our habits and remain powerlessly ignorant. For instance, we may find ourselves still having the sense that the chair over there is truly existent and will forever belong to us. As attachment holds enormous power that has snowballed over many lives and aeons, if we just understand some theory superficially and have yet to experience it through practice, then, ensnared in our old habits, we will end up losing our bearings.

Hence, view has to be combined with conduct. View guides our conduct, and conduct reinforces our view. In the Noble Eightfold Path indicated by the Buddha, besides right view, the path is complemented by right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, so that we can progressively make adjustments to our body and mind. We need to regulate, clean up, tame and dissipate our current chaotic emotions. In that way, we will restore the virtue of the Tathagatas—the pure qualities that our life possesses fundamentally.

## **5. The road of gradual cultivation of the Scriptural Approach**

As a consequence of their varied causes and conditions in



past lives, sentient beings possess dissimilar faculties in this life. Therefore, the Buddha taught sentient beings according to their individual circumstances and provided guidance to them skilfully. The lineage masters and great beings after him constructed various systems of training in accordance with scriptures bearing different emphases. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition alone, there are eight great schools. These can in turn be subsumed under the two great branches: the Scriptural Approach and the Zen Approach, respectively representing the practice styles of gradual progression and sudden realisation.

The practice of the Scriptural Approach starts by working on one's unenlightened deluded mind. In dependence on the three uncontaminated trainings of ethics, meditative concentration and wisdom, one eliminates the deluded continuum gradually, awakens the primordially enlightened nature, and penetrates emptiness.

Ethics is the criterion for the conduct of Buddhists. It includes the five precepts, the eight precepts, the novice ordination vows, the full ordination vows and so forth. Through them, one refrains from misdeeds and puts a stop to negativities, and draws one's body and mind inwards. If we say that worldly law functions in dependence on a governing authority, then what does ethics rely upon in order to produce its effects? It relies upon the power of generating the pure motivation that intends to keep ethics, and also the power of the essence of ethics that has been passed down by the Buddha and the lineage masters from generation to generation.

The Buddha formulated vows for the purpose of helping his disciples put a stop to unwholesome behaviour.



Therefore, every vow is directed at the non-virtuous conduct of mundane beings and formulated accordingly. Even though the basic five lay precepts include only the five items—not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not consuming alcohol—they basically cover all criminal conduct. Ever since the olden times, the crimes committed by humans do not fall outside the categories of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying. To put a stop to these types of negative conduct is to put a stop to the continuity of the three poisons—greed, hatred and delusion. Tracing the sources even further, the three poisons can be attributed to ignorance. Due to an unenlightened thought, we come to have immeasurable afflictions and numerous misdeeds. The infinite waterfall is often used in the Sutras and treatises as a metaphor for life. The life of a mundane being is the continuity of unwholesome states of mind, from which distorted states of life manifest.

Not only do we want to put a stop to the non-virtuous continuity within our life, we also want to cause our life to enter a virtuous healthy continuity. This is similar to the process of curing a patient who has been ill for a prolonged period of time; the treatment of his illness should be complemented by measures to strengthen his body, for it is only by boosting his own immune system that he will be able to resist another bout of attack by the illness. In the bodhisattva vows, besides the ethics of keeping vows, there are also the ethics of gathering virtuous qualities and the ethics of benefiting sentient beings. Having fulfilled the precondition of stopping negativities, one proceeds to practise virtuous conduct and to benefit others. In that way, one activates the positive forces in life and creates a proper

spiritual environment for attaining meditative concentration and generating wisdom.

Meditative concentration is the mind abiding single-pointedly on a virtuous object of observation. Our mind, comprising of innumerable chaotic emotions and mistaken ways of thinking, is unstable and wanders about along with its objects. When seeing something attractive, greed arises; when seeing something unattractive, aversion arises. These minds of greed and aversion, like enemies that appear and disappear mysteriously, often catch us unawares. Those of us who lack the ability to counterattack simply end up coming under their control.

The practice of meditative concentration helps us set our mind on a virtuous object of observation, and is of two types: abidance on something and abidance on nothing. Abidance on something is to set the mind on a certain object during the process of cultivating meditative concentration. Although setting the mind on any one object can cause the mind to abide calmly, since the practice of meditative concentration is the precursor for generating wisdom in the practice of Buddhadharma, we should choose an appropriate virtuous object of observation, one that will not induce negative emotions and will instead aid in awakening our wisdom. For example, if we recite the name of a Buddha, then that name is our object of observation; if we watch the counting of our breath, then the breath is our object of observation. When this kind of positive force gradually becomes strong, our mind will abide in a tranquil state for a long period on the name of the Buddha or the breath. Consequently, the disturbance created by other emotions will diminish. This



is just as a punch that lands on an infant may be fatal, while a punch of the same force landing on a giant may feel as light as a feather. Therefore, meditative concentration causes our mind to be as stable as a huge rock, so that it is invulnerable to distraction by external objects.

Abidance on nothing means that there is no object for the abiding; one directly sets the mind on the nature of the mind. Actually, a more accurate description is that the mind has nothing to abide on. Practice in the Zen tradition and the Great Completion (*Dzogchen*) employs this method. I will provide further details on it under the section heading “The road of sudden cultivation according to *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》”. Perhaps someone may say, “Since there is such a wonderful straightforward method, why discard the shortcut and seek the lengthy route, undertaking the graduated practice for three countless great aeons?” We must understand that, for most people, the meditation on abidance on nothing is like “a mosquito trying to bite an iron cow; there is nowhere for it to penetrate” as we say in Chinese. If we do not have a clear-eyed teacher guiding us in this kind of meditation, then we should count ourselves fortunate to have simply frittered away our time while trying to practise it, for we could have ended up degenerating into “Crazy Zen” or even becoming possessed, experiencing unthinkable consequences. We might as well be honest and proceed in a secure manner, as the Chinese saying goes, “Practise slowly and arrive quickly; practise from the bottom and arrive at the top.”

Whether we practise the abidance on something or the abidance on nothing, these methods are to help us emerge

from the deluded chaotic continuity of our life. With training, we will cause our mind to achieve stability, and our previous passive states of aimless drifting and compliance with afflictions will be transformed. This is the prerequisite to awakening our primordially enlightened nature.

The purpose of practising meditative concentration is to induce wisdom (*prajna*). One may ask: In that case, is meditative concentration able to directly produce wisdom? The answer is no. There are many non-Buddhists who cultivate the four *dhyanas* and the eight *samadhis*, but those who achieve uncontaminated wisdom are few and far between. So we can see, meditative concentration does not automatically produce wisdom. Especially with respect to the meditative concentration that is the abidance on something, if one remains abiding in the state of having an object of observation, there is no way one can penetrate emptiness and directly realise reality. We need to extricate ourselves from the apprehending agent and the apprehended object; and once we have freed ourselves from the senses and the objects, and the apprehending agent and the apprehended object have vanished, then the wisdom of *prajna* will appear clearly. The function of meditative concentration is to help us pacify our turbulent continuum, so that it becomes like a calm water surface that is free from waves and can clearly reflect all objects in it. Therefore, meditative concentration is the basic condition for generating wisdom, but wisdom is not a definite consequence of cultivating meditative concentration.

In addition, two other prerequisites are needed. The first is to establish the right view through hearing and contemplating



the scriptural teachings. In Buddhism, there is a wealth of material on the theory regarding right view. Particularly in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the Mind-Only, Middle View, Tiantai 天台, and Huayan 华严 schools all have systems of theory so profound that they would be difficult for one to know exhaustively even if one were to engage in serious study of them into one's old age. However, we do not need to feel intimidated. In reality, from the point of view of practice, it suffices to master just one relevant right view. We can depend on the view of impermanence, the view of selflessness, the Middle Way view of the Mind-Only, or the view of emptiness of the Middle View. Any of these can help us to eliminate the two types of grasping and to penetrate emptiness. The content in this section highlights the unique part of Buddhadharmā that is not common to the non-Buddhist systems in the world.

The second requirement is to have the guidance of a spiritual guide who can lead us to penetrate the nature of the mind. Our spiritual world is extraordinarily complex, like a thick book with thousands of pages, and what we are looking for is just one specific page. Studying the scriptural teachings helps us to comprehend the content and special features of this page and to understand the method for finding it. If we lack the relevant knowledge, then even if we were to continuously flip through the pages day after day, and even if we were to flip to the correct page by some stroke of luck, how would we be able to recognise it? This is where we need the affirmation of the spiritual guide. What is most important is that relying on the spiritual guide can help us to adjust the direction where we will look and effectively prevent us from going astray. Our spiritual world is

really wondrous. Very often, when we imagine emptiness in a particular way, it will manifest some facsimile state to tempt us and try to catch us. While facing the unpredictable conditions on the journey of practice, the spiritual guide is like “an old horse that knows the way” as we say in Chinese, who can lead us on the correct route based on his own experience.

## **6. The road of sudden cultivation according to *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》**

Differing from the gradual cultivation in the Scriptural Approach, the Zen tradition, with its foothold in the primordially enlightened nature, established various Dharma practices to help learners directly penetrate emptiness. This is the path of sudden cultivation or sudden realisation. Here, I will provide a brief introduction according to *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 on the method of utilising the mind in the Zen tradition.

To train in Buddhism, we first need to go for refuge. Refuge according to *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 begins directly with the Three Jewels of innate nature, taking the Buddha as meaning enlightenment, the Dharma as meaning the genuine, and the Sangha as meaning purity.

Regarding the practice and achievement of the Three Jewels of innate nature, the Sixth Patriarch cautioned his disciples, “In your own mind, go for refuge in enlightenment, so that the false and deluded are not generated. Have few desires and be content, and be able to transcend wealth and sensual pleasures: this is called the Two-legged Honoured One. In your own mind, go for refuge in the genuine, being without false



views in every thought. If you are without false thoughts, then there is no self or persons to become proud, greedy or attached: this is called the Honoured One Who Has Transcended Desire. In your own mind, go for refuge in purity, [realising] your innate nature to be completely unpolluted by all states of life's concerns and desires: this is called the Honoured One among assemblies." By establishing the Three Jewels of innate nature in accordance with the primordially enlightened nature, abiding in them, and constantly maintaining a meditation that is undefiled, not false, and unpolluted, we will be able to achieve the Three Jewels of innate nature.

The practice of ethics, meditative concentration, and wisdom taught in *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 is different from that in the Scriptural Approach. According to the explication provided by the Sixth Patriarch, meditative concentration and wisdom are not different: "This Dharma teaching of mine is based on meditative concentration and wisdom. But don't make the mistake of thinking that meditative concentration and wisdom are separate. Meditative concentration and wisdom are of one essence and not two. Meditative concentration is the body of wisdom, and wisdom is the function of meditative concentration. Wherever you find wisdom, you find meditative concentration. And whenever you find meditative concentration, you find wisdom. What this means is that meditation and wisdom are the same." Since one imputes meditative concentration and wisdom in accordance with the different functions of the primordially enlightened nature, meditative concentration and wisdom are naturally not different. If we can abide in the primordially enlightened nature, then we

will be immovable and invulnerable to external disturbances, and this is what is meant by meditative concentration being the essence of wisdom. The meditative concentration cultivated in the hearer's vehicle demands stricter conditions in terms of the environment, whereas the meditative concentration cultivated in the Zen tradition requires one to be inseparable from the primordially enlightened nature in every thought when walking, standing still, sitting or lying down; whether within the formal practice session or outside of it, one is able to utilise discrimination and yet not be controlled by external objects.

The primordially enlightened nature is fundamentally immovable and free from chaos, but it is not devoid of awareness like wood or stone. On the contrary, the primordially enlightened nature has the function of being all-knowing. Therefore, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not need to give rise to any thought, yet they know everything within the dharma realm. This is because their minds coexist with all phenomena and also abide immovably, whereby they can clearly reflect everything without exception. On the other hand, the mundane mind dwells in the state of polluted consciousness, having its own objects and limitations; when it is attached to a particular circumstance, it becomes blind to other phenomena.

Furthermore, *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 also takes 'non-form', 'no-thought', and 'non-abiding' as the three essential points for the utilisation of mind: "Good friends, since ancient times, this Dharma teaching of ours, has proclaimed no-thought as its doctrine, non-form as its essence, and non-abiding as its basis. Non-form is to be free of form in the presence of forms. No-thought is not to think in regard to thoughts. Non-abiding



is the original nature of all beings, to take good or evil, pleasant or ugly, and even enemy or friend in the world, during times of words, fights and disputation, as empty, with no consideration of reward or retaliation. Thoughts follow each other but do not abide; past, present and future thoughts follow one after the other without interruption. If a single moment of thought were interrupted, the dharma body becomes separated from the material body. As thoughts follow each other they do not abide in anything. If a single moment of thought abides (in something), then successive thoughts will abide – that is what is meant by bondage. If successive thoughts follow one another without abiding in anything, then you will be free from bonds. Therefore non-abiding is the basis.”

Regarding taking non-form as the essence, the Sixth Patriarch’s explication is: “Good friends, non-form means externally to be free of all forms. If you can just be free of forms, the essence of your nature is perfectly pure. This is why we take non-form as our essence.” The essence of the mind is without any form. A chair has form, a house has form, but our mind is like space, without form. In everyday life, we are always talking about our moods: the mind is happy, the mind is in pain, the mind is pondering over something, and so on, but what exactly is the mind? When we try to look at it, we cannot find any trace of it. This is what is meant by the finding of the mind as being something unattainable.

In stating that no-thought is taken as the doctrine, “thought” refers to the fabrication of mind. *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 says, “Not being stained by any external objects is (what is) referred to as no-thought. If you remain free from

objects in your thought, you will not give rise to thoughts about anything. But do not stop thinking about everything and cast aside all thoughts. If a single moment of thought is cut off, you will die and be reborn somewhere else.” No-thought seems on the surface to be the elimination of thought, with the mind not fabricating anything. In reality, the practice of Zen does not eliminate the arising of thought, and it especially will not pursue the simplistic state of being devoid of thought. It is thought and also no-thought, such that when the mind is in the process of fabrication, it is not entrapped in the states of the mind of fabrication. In other words, through thought, one penetrates the mind essence of no-thought, abiding in no-thought and yet not impeding the arising of thought.

In stating that non-abiding is taken as the basis, even though one may be carrying wood, transporting water, walking, standing still, sitting or lying down, the mind should not adhere or attach to the object. Therefore, the eating and sleeping of Zen masters are a marked contrast to ours in terms of intrinsic quality. Mundane beings are used to attaching to objects. With the arising of thought, they definitely cling to a certain object and cause the mind to be entrapped in it. Zen masters, on the other hand, are able to maintain the observance of the view in daily activities, as it is said, “Although one eats rice in the three meals, one has not bitten even a grain of rice.” This is not saying that everything one eats is tasteless, for otherwise one will not be different from wood and stone, or a fool. Many people misunderstand the non-discrimination in Zen to be an utter lack of awareness. In reality it is not like that, as the meaning of non-abiding is discrimination without attachment.



Although knowing what is good or bad, or what is cold or warm, one does not have the slightest attachment, and in particular, good or bad emotions will not be stirred up. One understands and discriminates things, but is not polluted by anything. The practice of non-abiding is also repeatedly emphasised in *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》. The *Sutra* says, “A Bodhisattva should practise generosity without regard to sight, sound, touch, flavour, smell or any thought that arises in it. Thus should a Bodhisattva practise generosity without being supported by any notion of sign.” In whatever we do, including the practice of the deeds of others’ welfare, we should not have attachment. This calls for the awakening of the primordially enlightened nature, for otherwise it will be difficult for us to accomplish non-abiding.

In *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, the Sixth Patriarch also explained the practice of concentration in a deed. What is concentration in a deed? This means constantly maintaining a straightforward mind, an ordinary mind. *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 says, “Good friends, concentration in a deed (一行三昧) is to always practise the straightforward mind in all places, whether walking, standing still, sitting or lying down. It is as *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, ‘A straightforward mind is the place of enlightenment; a straightforward mind is the pure land.’ Do not have crooked thoughts and conduct, while you talk about being straightforward with your mouth, or speak of concentration in a deed with your mouth but not practise with a straightforward mind. Simply practise with a straightforward mind, and don’t become attached to any dharma. The deluded person is attached to the external attributes of dharmas and grasps to

the concentration in a deed, saying that sitting motionlessly, eliminating delusions and not thinking thoughts, the mind achieves concentration in a deed. Such an interpretation is the same as an insentient object; and would constitute the cause and condition of obstructing the path.” What is a straightforward mind? It is allowing the mind to be liberated from its habitual contorted state. What is an ordinary mind? It does not refer to the usual unstable fluctuating mind. If we, out of delusion, were to take that as the ordinary mind, then there is no doubt that we would be deceiving ourselves and others. The ordinary mind refers to the original mind that is without fabrication.

So we can see from this that the essential reason for the Scriptural Approach and the Zen Approach leading to their difference in being gradual and sudden, is that they have different views and methods of practice. The practice of the Scriptural Approach begins with the deluded mind; through ethics, meditative concentration and wisdom, it brings about the gradual dissolution of the mundane mind and penetrates emptiness. In contrast, the Zen Approach directly establishes a foothold in the primordially enlightened nature; by coming to know it and familiarising with it, the practice of unsurpassable Buddhahood is accomplished. Therefore, the Scriptural Approach and the Zen Approach differ in their means for penetrating the primordially enlightened nature, the former employing gradual entry and the latter direct entry. For that reason, the Zen Approach is called the path of sudden cultivation in this composition.



## **7. Consideration of the Dharma approach of sudden cultivation**

The Zen tradition starts from a very profound point but once you have penetrated it, it is direct and simple, and the results remarkable. Precisely because its point is so profound, the faculty of its practitioner and the qualification of its teacher are also extraordinary. After undergoing the tremendous flourishing of “a single flower opening to yield five petals”, that Dharma withers and gradually declines. Looking at it today, we cannot help but see it as being lonesome at its lofty position. So what is the problem?

The hallmarks of the Zen tradition are its non-usage of written formulation and its distinctive transmission beyond the scope of the scriptural approach, which are often interpreted by later people as an excuse for not learning the scriptural teachings. In reality, if we lack the right view as the means for discerning the Dharma, then we may experience great haziness when it comes to the task of recognising the primordially enlightened nature, and we can end up mistaking as the primordially enlightened nature the two kinds of grasping to self and to phenomena that have been packaged and modified by our consciousness. The function of the mind is very powerful; whatever you imagine the primordially enlightened nature to be, the mind will display a facsimile state to tempt you and cause you to enter a mental state created by the ego, which in fact is unrelated to emptiness. It is only by depending on the right view and the valid cognition based on scriptural authority that we will be able to accurately

distinguish the various states that appear in the course of our practice.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the reason why the Zen tradition did not particularly attach importance to the scriptural teachings or emphasise hearing and contemplation had to do with its historical background. One reason was that the doctrine was widespread then and the learners in general were of high calibre. So their view was already adequate for practice and they did not need to put much effort in that area. Instead, they could devote their energies more to the Dharma of realisation. The second reason was that many great masters emerged during that time, and even if the learners were slightly weak in terms of view, they had the privilege of having spiritual guides by their side to instruct them, whereby they would not go so far as to have significant inaccuracies occur in their practice.

However, for people nowadays, if they lack the guidance of a spiritual guide and are also devoid of the right view, then what can they practise while sitting in the meditation hall? Where will they proceed to? From what I have observed and understood, the situation is not optimistic. As the inner world is so complex, it is not an exaggeration to say that it is full of traps everywhere. If we do not have access to the instructions of a wise teacher, it is best for us to choose a method that is more secure and foolproof, so as to save ourselves from wasting our life and even becoming possessed and going crazy.

On top of that, we should also attach great importance to the building of the foundation. After the Tang and Song dynasties, the Zen tradition deteriorated, spawning various



kinds of bizarre offshoots—Crazy Zen, Wild Fox Zen, Word Zen, and Verbal Zen—and even becoming the content of empty discussion of scholars posing as lovers of culture. It feels unbearable that the sacred spiritual tradition of an era had sunk to such depths. In my many years of training, I deeply recognised that the various practices of the Buddhadharmas share some common foundation that cannot be circumvented. Besides the listening, contemplation, and right view mentioned above, there are refuge, generating a pure motivation and ethical discipline. If we try to bypass them and look for a shortcut, we will only end up moving further and further from our destination. An advanced practice like Zen requires especially the establishment of a firm foundation. Otherwise, our thought and conduct will not be consistent with each other. Therefore, for many people these days, seeing the nature of mind seems out of reach, like a cloud on the horizon. In reality, seeing the nature of mind does not have to be so mysterious and difficult. Of course it requires complete causes and conditions; it is not that we will immediately see the path after having engaged in some casual discussion about it. We do need the appropriate accumulation of the foundation.

On the other hand, the practice of Zen is indeed unconventional. As is the case with *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, its view and practice technique are forceful, swift and remarkable. However, it does not have the complete structure for the practice of the path to enlightenment. As a Mahayana practitioner, besides seeing the nature of mind, one also needs to generate *bodhicitta* and traverse the bodhisattva path; in that way, one will achieve great compassion and attain the two

excellent qualities of compassion and wisdom that the Buddha possesses.

So we can see from this discussion that the study and practice of Zen cannot be divorced from the scriptural teachings. If one is separated from the Mahayana's generating of pure motivation that is a union of compassion and wisdom as well as the foundation building in Buddhadharmā, errors may occur or one may end up building castles in the air. In my personal training, I have combined the Scriptural Approach and the Zen Approach. In fact, the Scriptural Approach provides service to the Zen Approach, and the Zen Approach cannot be divorced from the Scriptural Approach. When the lineage master Bodhidharma came to the east, he imprinted the four volumes of *Lankavatara* 《楞伽》 on his mind. After the fourth and the fifth Patriarchs, the emphasis shifted to *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, *Vajracchedikasutra* 《金刚经》. Besides these, the Zen tradition also has as many as a hundred volumes of *Collected Works of the Zen Tradition* 《禅宗全集》, the quantity of its material easily exceeding that of any one of the various schools of the Scriptural Approach. Therefore, although the hallmarks of the Zen tradition are its non-usage of written formulation and its distinctive transmission beyond the scope of the scriptural approach, its lineage masters still attached great importance to the instructional role played by the scriptural teachings in the disciples' training, as in the expression "utilising the gradual to realise the sudden". The tradition of Zen Approach is worthy of serious consideration by today's learners and deserves to be passed down and fully developed.

Appendix:

3

## **Going for refuge in the Sangha**

I go for refuge in the Sangha  
May all sentient beings  
Lead the congregation in harmony  
Without any obstacle throughout

The Sanskrit word “Sangha” includes the Sangha of mundane beings and the Sangha of noble beings. Not only is the Sangha Jewel the teachers of humans and gods, it is also like a pillar upholding the enterprise of the Tathagatas and a dignified symbol of the long endurance of the genuine Dharma. In the absence of the Sangha community, the Buddhadharma will not spread in the world.

To go for refuge in the Sangha is to take as the ultimate objects of refuge the qualities possessed by the Sangha of noble beings, namely their excellent qualities of uncontaminated wisdom and liberation. However, as a matter of fact, this kind of refuge is inseparable from the Sangha of mundane beings. For example, today we generate a pure motivation and go for refuge; if we do not have the causes and conditions yet to meet the Sangha of noble beings, do we pass our time waiting, at the risk of this life going by in vain? We need to know that our refuge consists of all the Sangha Jewel of the ten directions and three times, rather than a particular member of the Sangha or a particular master. Not only that, without emphasising one at the expense of the others, we also need to take the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha as the complete objects of our refuge.

Of course, going for refuge in all of the Sangha Jewel does not equate with devoting ourselves to all who are ordained. It is very likely that the Sangha community in real life consists of members of varying calibre. Practitioners need to selectively devote themselves to spiritual guides. Both the *Agamasutras* 《阿含经》 and the Mahayana scriptures repeatedly emphasise the importance of the spiritual guide. Hence, it is said that the



focus of refuge in the Sangha is precisely to choose a qualified spiritual guide and to take that person as a good guide for one's practice.

## 1. Choosing a spiritual guide

A spiritual guide is a good teacher and beneficial friend who is endowed with the right view, excellent qualities and talent, and can guide sentient beings to abandon negativities, practise virtue, and approach the path to Buddhahood. A spiritual guide is also known as the virtuous friend and the victorious friend. The well-known account of the *Fifty-Three Visits of Sudhana* provides a model for relying on a spiritual guide. So how do we find a spiritual guide? Many selection criteria are provided in the Sutras and treatises. (Please refer to the first part of this book: *A Handbook for Training in Refuge*)

As summarised by Tsongkhapa, the ten criteria for choosing a teacher are: the teacher (1) is subdued, referring to one who is concordant with ethics; (2) is serene, referring to one who is concordant with meditative concentration; (3) has eliminated delusions, referring to one who is concordant with wisdom and has abandoned afflictions; (4) has higher excellent qualities, referring to one who has ethics, meditative concentration, and wisdom, without any compromise; (5) is courageous, referring to one who is not weary when benefiting others; (6) is rich in scriptures, referring to one who has much hearing; (7) has realised reality, referring to one who possesses the true meaning; (8) is skilled in teaching, referring to one who is not wrong; (9) is greatly compassionate, referring to one

who holds no expectations; and (10) is free from despondency, referring to one who teaches respectfully at all time.

Someone who possesses these excellent qualities can serve as the object of reliance of sentient beings. However, during this degenerate or Dharma-ending age, it is difficult for us to meet a fully qualified spiritual guide; and even if we are fortunate enough to meet one, we will likely encounter various obstacles so that we will not be able to always remain by the side of the teacher. However, we cannot train in the Buddhadharma without the guidance of a spiritual guide, and so in case the causes and conditions are incomplete, we might as well first rely upon a spiritual guide who has fewer excellent qualities. Here I will simply discuss a few points that are the basic qualifications a spiritual guide must possess. In other words, these are the minimum requirements for a spiritual guide. If even these basic qualifications are not fulfilled, we will have to proceed cautiously and not rely upon the person blindly.

These three basic qualifications are having pure ethics, possessing the right view, and having compassion. Among these, possessing the right view is the most crucial. This is the core of the practice of Buddhadharma and the unique feature of Buddhism that is not common to other religions. It is as the Buddha said in the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* 《圆觉经》, “Sentient beings of the degenerate age will generate the great aspiration and seek a spiritual guide. Those who wish to practise should seek out someone who knows everything correctly, whose mind does not abide in forms or signs, who is not attached to the states of the hearers and solitary realisers, and whose mind is constantly pure even while manifesting the concerns of



life. He points out the various faults, praises pure conduct and prevents sentient beings from transgressing ethical discipline. If one seeks such a person, one can attain unsurpassable perfect complete enlightenment.” So, this passage is sufficient for us to see that right view is the primary requirement among the basic requirements. If the view of the spiritual guide is not correct, then the spiritual guide’s guidance can only be a case of the blind leading the blind; what liberation can there be to speak of?

## 2. The function of the spiritual guide

In the Mahayana and Hinayana Sutras and treatises, the Buddha often praises the importance of the spiritual guide. *Mulasarvastivada Vinayaksudrakavastu* 有部毗奈耶杂事 contains this account: “Venerable Ananda said, ‘Practitioners can accomplish their goals through the power of virtuous friends. Having virtuous friends, they become far from negative friends. Therefore, we can know that virtuous friends are half of pure conduct.’ The Buddha said, ‘Ananda, do not say that virtuous friends are half of pure conduct. Why? Virtuous friends are the whole of pure conduct; it is through them one separates from negative friends and will not commit negativities. One will always cultivate virtues, be pure and wholesome, and possess the fully accomplished signs of the perfect pure conduct. Due to causes and conditions, if one encounters a virtuous companion and abides with that companion, then there is nothing, including Nirvana, that one cannot accomplish. For that reason, they are said to be the whole of pure conduct.’” This tells us that

by devoting ourselves to a spiritual guide, we distance ourselves from negative friends, will never create negativities again, and will always practise virtuous conduct. That is why it is said that there is great purpose in relying upon the spiritual guide; it is the whole of pure conduct, which is the guarantee for the full completion of the entire practice.

In *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》, there are many passages indicating the function of the spiritual guide. “*Bodhi* is the wisdom of *prajna*. People of this world possess it fundamentally and naturally. It is only because their minds are deluded that they are unable to realise it by themselves. You must rely on a great spiritual guide to direct you to see the true nature of mind.” It also says, “If they do not realise it by themselves, then they must seek a great spiritual guide, one who understands the Dharma of the Supreme Vehicle, to directly indicate the genuine path; the spiritual guide connects with the great causes and conditions. As it is said, guidance causes the seeing of the nature, because all the virtuous dharmas can be produced due to the spiritual guide. The Buddhas of the three times and the twelve divisions of the canon are fundamentally and naturally present within the natures of people; if they cannot realise that by themselves, they must seek a spiritual guide’s instructions in order to see that.” Although worldly people possess primordially the wisdom of *bodhi*, they are trapped in a deluded dream and are unable to know the true nature of mind. Only a spiritual guide who has truly seen the nature of mind can help to unveil the method of practice of the Supreme Vehicle for us, so that we can directly penetrate the self-nature. Only a clear-eyed experienced person who truly understands all the pitfalls of the path of practice can



guide us to avoid the manifold traps and to smoothly progress ahead. If that person is still groping in the dark, even though he can provide assistance on certain levels, he will not be able to solve our fundamental problem. Hence, the spiritual guide as mentioned in *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 needs to be a clear-eyed person who has seen the true nature of mind. Only then can he guide us to penetrate the nature of mind.

When we flip through the pages of the history of the Zen tradition, we see that they are replete with accounts of disciples who travelled long distances to seek a teacher and sacrificed themselves for the sake of Dharma. Also, the legacy of many related Zen expressions has been left behind and such expressions are in use to this day. For example, “yunshui” 云水 (“cloud-water”) and “xingjiao” 行脚 (“journey-feet”) refer to ordained people who look for a teacher and seek the path by crossing rivers and mountains and travelling to various places to seek and visit wise teachers. The *koans* of the tradition frequently contain lively anecdotes of the spiritual guides who make use of these opportunities to teach the Dharma in accordance with the individual circumstances. In the presence of a lineage master, frequently just a few words are adequate to cause the Dharma seeker to penetrate the true nature of mind. Furthermore, there are also other extraordinary unconventional measures, such as the Linji shout 临济喝, Yunmen cake 云门饼, Zhaozhou tea 赵州茶, and Deshan staff 德山棒, all of which are skilful means employed by lineage masters to guide their disciples. Of course, we also need to know that *koans* record only the climax sections where the realisations occur. The fact that learners are able to attain realisations right there and then

and thoroughly see their nature of mind cannot be isolated from their previous accumulation. It is only due to the outer and inner causes colliding in that manner that the moment of cognizance is produced; this is not something that can be rigidly replicated and blindly imitated.

### **3. The criteria for relying upon a spiritual guide**

A spiritual guide should certainly be chosen on the basis of satisfying the appropriate criteria. Likewise, for a Dharma student to be a qualified disciple, certain requirements have to be fulfilled. Otherwise, even if one has the conditions to meet a spiritual guide, one will not be able to gain much from the encounter, and may even create negative karma as a result.

If we say that being endowed with ethical conduct, possessing the right view, and having compassion are the minimum requirements for someone to be a spiritual guide, then the summary in *The Way to Buddhahood* 《成佛之道》 by Venerable Yinshun 印顺法师, “Observe his excellent qualities and ignore his shortcomings; comply and do not disobey”, can be regarded as the minimum requirements for someone to rely upon a spiritual guide. To “observe his excellent qualities and ignore his shortcomings” is especially an important test of the students’ faith. The mundane mind is polluted, and what is seen by such a polluted mind is very likely inaccurate or even completely wrong. Therefore, once we have chosen a teacher through our observation and decided on the teacher whom we will rely upon, we should not judge the teacher with the mundane mind in a presumptuous manner.



Mundane beings always begin everything from the self. They are attached to “my” knowledge, “my” way, and “my” understanding. If we do not let go of such hindrances, then the Buddhadharma that we have learnt will likely come under the influence of the ego and become corrupted. With respect to relying upon the spiritual guide, we should all the more let go of the good and bad sentiments as well as views of “I”. Otherwise, the strictness of the spiritual guide will be taken to be harshness, and his compassion leniency. Very often we already harbour all kinds of preconceived notions regarding the spiritual guide, and once they do not match up to reality, we will immediately make a judgement based on the view of the “I” rather than the Buddhadharma, and thereby produce doubt and even rejection.

Once there was a person who was relying upon a Zen master to learn the Dharma. One day, the Zen master accidentally sat on a needle. He sprung up, exclaiming “Aiyo!” The student instantly lost his faith and concluded that the Zen master had not attained realisation, for otherwise he would not have reacted in such a way to a needle. The Zen master came to know that the student had abandoned him and left, and lamented, “Oh, poor thing. He should have known that not only I, but also the needle and the exclamation ‘Aiyo’, are not truly existent!” This is a lively and thought-provoking anecdote. As beginners, it is very probable that we also experience doubt like that of the student in the anecdote. The question is: How do we handle all such circumstances and not allow this kind of doubt to turn into impulsive reactions and mistakes?

Although the Buddhadharma emphasises wisdom and underscores self-reliance, it is at the same time inseparable from

the important favourable condition of faith. It is as said, “Faith is the mother of the excellent qualities of the path.” The more advanced the Dharma teaching, the more important faith is. If we lack confidence in the spiritual guide, then we will not be able to take on great Dharma. The Buddhadharma is very deep and subtle, but it is also very ordinary. To see the true nature of the mind may not turn out as spectacular as we have imagined, with light radiating and the earth shaking when it occurs. When we first see it, it will likely be very ordinary, and this is something that requires faith to accept. Afterwards, when we progressively become familiar with the nature of the mind under the guidance of the teacher, we will gradually develop the strength of the mind. If we have never generated faith in the spiritual guide, then we ourselves will not be qualified Dharma vessels; so how can we be used to fill the pure rain of Dharma nectar?

Although refuge in the Sangha Jewel takes the entire Sangha community as the objects of refuge, practice should still be actualised in reliance upon a spiritual guide. After we have chosen and decided upon a spiritual guide, we must give rise to pure unpolluted confidence in the spiritual guide. Only in this way can we come to understand the fundamental reality under the guidance of the spiritual guide and find the entry point to awakening our primordially enlightened nature. Eventually, we will achieve the essential meaning of life, one that is enlightened rather than deluded, genuine rather than false, pure rather than polluted.

**Conclusion**

Today I have given an introduction to the topic “From the Three Jewels for upholding to the Three Jewels of innate nature”. The final goal of going for refuge in the Three Jewels is to achieve the Three Jewels of innate nature, but this achievement is inseparable from the outer Three Jewels for upholding. The theme of this summer camp is “*Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 and Buddhadharma in life”. For the purpose of this camp, I restudied *Platform Sutra* 《坛经》 and offered some of my thoughts to all of you. I hope it will provide some inspiration for your training.





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