



# Sravasti Abbey



# Refuge

## RESOURCE BOOK

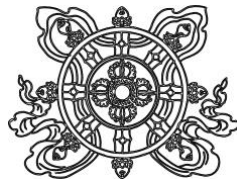
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# Refuge Resource Book

Edited by

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SRAVASTI ABBEY

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## PREFACE

When we take refuge, we trust our spiritual development to the guidance of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Whether it is done formally in a ceremony or in our hearts throughout the day, taking refuge always serves as the foundational step that points our lives in a positive direction and moves us along the path to discovering our inner, unlimited potential for awakening.

This booklet was compiled as a resource to prepare for formally taking refuge and any or all of the five lay precepts. It may also serve as a valuable resource for renewing and deepening our refuge over time.

Sravasti Abbey  
Newport, WA, USA





# REFUGE GROUPS BY VENERABLE THUBTEN CHODRON

## Purpose

The purpose of a refuge group is to prepare participants for formally taking refuge in the Three Jewels and taking any or all of the five lay precepts. Studying and discussing these topics together helps us understand them correctly and deepens our present understanding. It also gives us a forum for discussing our hesitations, doubts, and questions, and to share our insights and understandings with others. In this way, we give support to and receive support from Dharma friends as we practice the path together. Some refuge groups have found the meetings so helpful that they continue to meet from time to time after the refuge ceremony to “check in” and see how everyone is doing.

## Readings

Please read and discuss in the following order:

1. Refuge and precepts ceremony, by Ven. Thubten Chodron
2. Taking Refuge from *Open Heart, Clear Mind*, by Ven. Thubten Chodron
3. Refuge, by Lama Thubten Yeshe
4. Taking Refuge and the Meaning of the Three Jewels, by Ven. Thubten Chodron
5. Practical Guidelines for Good Living from *Taming the Mind*, by Ven. Thubten Chodron)
6. Life Without Sila is Like a Car Without Brakes, by Bhikkhu Ajahn Amaro
7. Introduction and precept chapters from *For a Future to Be Possible*, by Thich Nhat Hanh
8. The Healing Power of the Precepts, by Thanissaro Bhikkhu
9. Guidelines for the Practice of Refuge from *Pearl of Wisdom, Book 1*
10. Refuge and Precept Discussion Questions, by Ven. Thubten Chodron

## Format

The group meets together as often and as many times as it likes until the people in it have completed studying and discussing the readings, and until they feel prepared to take refuge and precepts. At the beginning of each meeting, one person should lead a brief motivation and then initiate the discussion, either sharing some of his or her ideas, or posing some questions for everyone to think about. People should talk personally and honestly and share their reflections and experiences—that’s how to develop Dharma friendships and how to give and receive help with doubts.

## Multiple Interpretations

As you will see from the readings below, there are various interpretations of refuge and precepts as described in different Buddhist traditions and by different teachers. This broad exposure can encourage us to think more deeply about each precept, and help us become more aware of our actions. We need to be very clear what each precept means, especially when the meaning of the precept has been expanded to include things not specifically mentioned in it.

It is also important to distinguish between breaking a precept from the root and committing a minor transgression. If you receive the precepts from a Sravasti Abbey monastic, the precepts are as follows. To break the precept of avoiding killing from the root, one must kill a human being with all the parts of the action intact (i.e. one has identified the person to kill, has the intention to kill, kills the person, the other person dies before oneself, and one rejoices at having killed). This is different from putting an animal to sleep, which is a less serious transgression of the precept, not a root transgression one. Such an action still should be abandoned, but it is not as severe as deliberately killing a human being.

The precept to avoid stealing is broken from the root if one steals something of enough value that the legal system in the country would hold one accountable for stealing.

The precept to avoid unwise sexual contact is broken from the root if one commits rape, if one has a sexual relationship outside one's committed relationship, or if one is single and the other person is in a committed relationship. Less heavy transgressions would include, unprotected sex where there is possibility of transmitting disease, and using others for our own pleasure—even if they consent—when there is a likelihood of them getting hurt.

The precept to avoid lying is broken from the root by claiming to have spiritual attainments that one knows one does not have. Since the precept against intoxicants does not involve a naturally negative action (i.e. an action which by its nature is negative), there is no division into breaking it from the root and committing a minor transgression.

The boundaries of some precepts may vary according to the preceptor giving them. For example, I (Ven. Chodron) give the intoxicant precept in a very clear way: no alcohol, recreational drugs or tobacco, not even a very tiny amount! Also, one is to abandon all misuse of prescription drugs. This makes the precept very clear and easy to keep.

The meaning of each precept can be expanded from what is written, and this is helpful for increasing our awareness. However, when we take a precept, we are committing ourselves to following it only as it is written. For example, if we expand the meaning of abandoning intoxicants, it could refer to stopping any intoxicating activity, i.e. anything we do to distract or “intoxicate” ourselves, for example, spacing out by watching TV, going shopping when we are bored, and so on. Certainly, it would be to our advantage to abandon all activities done with a motivation seeking distraction; however, it is not required that we do this when we take the intoxicant precept. The precept itself refers to abandoning only alcohol, recreational drugs, including abuse of prescription drugs, and tobacco—that's already a lot!

Each person may take any or all of the five precepts at the time of taking refuge. Each person should let the preceptor, e.g. Venerable Chodron, know which precepts he or she wishes to take.

## **For Further Study and Exploration**

For questions to stimulate further exploration, see the section “[Refuge and Precept Discussion Questions](#).”

For a compilation of additional teachings on the meaning and benefits of taking refuge in the Three Jewels, see this webpage of [online teaching resources](#).

## **Recommended Reading**

*The Library of Wisdom and Compassion* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Ven. Thubten Chodron, published by Wisdom Publications

Volume 1: *Approaching the Buddhist Path*

Volume 2: *The Foundation of Buddhist Practice*

Volume 3: *Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature*

Volume 4: *Entering the Buddhist Path: The Three Jewels and the Three Higher Trainings*

*The Compassionate Kitchen: Buddhist Practices for Eating with Mindfulness and Gratitude* by Ven. Thubten Chodron, published by Shambhala Publications



## LONG REFUGE AND PRECEPTS CEREMONY

*After taking refuge and precepts, this ceremony is also a good way for lay practitioners to purify and restore their precepts. It is good to recite and reflect on this text on full and new moon days, or twice monthly on any days that you can. Ven. Chodron wrote this based on the teachings of Lama Thubten Yeshe.*

### Purification Verse

.....  
*Every harmful action I have done  
With my body, speech, and mind  
Overwhelmed by attachment, anger, and confusion,  
All these I openly lay bare before you. (3x)*  
.....

### Taking or Renewing Refuge and Precepts

Spiritual mentors, Buddhas and bodhisattvas who abide throughout infinite space, please pay attention to me. From beginningless time until the present, in my attempt to find happiness, I have been taking refuge; but the things I have relied upon have not been able to bring the lasting state of peace and joy that I seek. Until now, I have taken refuge in material possessions, money, status, reputation, approval, praise, food, sex, music and a myriad of other things. Although these things have given me some temporal pleasure, they lack the ability to bring me lasting happiness because they themselves are transient and do not last long. My attachment to these things has in fact made me more dissatisfied, anxious, confused, frustrated and fearful.

Seeing the faults of expecting more from these things than they can give me, I now turn for refuge to a reliable source that will never disappoint me: the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha. I take refuge in the Buddhas as the ones who have done what in the depth of my heart I aspire to do—purified their minds of all defilements and brought to fulfillment all their positive qualities. I take refuge in the Dharma, the cessation of all undesirable experiences and their causes and the path leading to that state of peace. I take refuge in the Sangha, those who have directly realized reality and who want to help me do the same.

I take refuge not only in the “outer” Three Jewels—those beings who are Buddhas or Sangha and the Dharma in their mindstreams—but I also take refuge in the “inner” Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha that I will become in the future. Because I have the Buddha potential within me at this very moment and will always have this potential as an inseparable part of my mind, the outer Three Jewels will act as the cause for me to be transformed into the resultant inner Three Jewels.

The Three Jewels are my real friends that will always be there and will never let me down. Being free of all judgment and expectations, they only wish me well and continually look upon me and all beings with the eyes of kindness, acceptance and understanding. By turning to them for refuge, may I fulfill all wishes of myself and all beings for good rebirths, liberation and full awakening.

Just as a sick person relies on a wise doctor to prescribe medicine and on nurses to help them, I as a person suffering from the constantly recurring ills of cyclic existence, now turn to the Buddha, a skillful doctor who prescribes the medicine of the Dharma—ethical conduct, concentration, wisdom, altruism, and the path of Tantra. The Sangha act as nurses who encourage me and show me how to take the medicine. However, being surrounded by the best doctor, medicine and nurses will not cure the illness; the patient must actually follow the doctor’s advice and take the medicine. Similarly, I need to follow the Buddha’s guidelines and put the teachings into practice as best as I can. The Buddha’s first advice, the first medicine to take to soothe my ills, is to train myself in the five precepts. Therefore, with a joyful heart that seeks happiness for myself and others, today I will commit myself to follow some or all of those precepts.

1. From my own experience and examination, I know that harming others, specifically taking their lives, harms myself and others. Therefore, I undertake to protect life and to avoid killing. By my doing this, all beings will feel safe around me and peace in the world will be enhanced.
2. From my own experience and examination, I know that taking things that have not been given to me harms myself and others. Therefore, I undertake to respect and protect others’ property and to avoid stealing or taking what has not been freely given. By my doing this, all beings can be secure around me and harmony and generosity in society will increase.
3. From my own experience and examination, I know that engaging in unwise sexual behavior harms myself and others. Therefore, I undertake to respect my own and others’ bodies, to use my sexuality wisely and kindly, and to avoid sexual expression which could harm others or myself physically or mentally. By my doing this, all beings will be able to relate to me honestly and with trust, and mutual respect among people will ensue.
4. From my own experience and examination, I know that saying untrue things for the sake of personal gain harms myself and others. Therefore, I undertake to speak truthfully and to avoid lying or deceiving others. By my doing this, all beings can trust my words and friendship among people will increase.
5. From my own experience and examination, I know that taking intoxicants harms myself and others. Therefore, I undertake to avoid taking intoxicating substances—alcohol, recreational drugs and tobacco—and to keep my body and environment clean. By my doing this, my mindfulness and introspective alertness will increase, my mind will be clearer, and my actions will be thoughtful and considerate.

Having previously wandered in confusion and used misdirected methods in an attempt to be happy, today I am delighted to choose to live in accord with these wise guidelines of the Buddha. Remembering that the Buddhas, bodhisattvas and arhats—those beings I admire so much—have also followed these guidelines, I too will enter the path to liberation and awakening just as they have done.

May all beings throughout infinite space reap the benefits of my living in accord with the precepts! May I become a fully awakened Buddha for the benefit of all!





# **TAKING REFUGE FROM *OPEN HEART, CLEAR MIND***

## **BY VEN. THUBTEN CHODRON**

A general understanding of the three principal realizations of the path gives us an excellent foundation for taking refuge in the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha. When we have the determination to be free from difficulties, we'll seek a guide to show us how. When we genuinely cherish all beings, we'll seek someone to show us the most effective way to benefit them. As we recognize that the realization of emptiness is the key to freeing ourselves and to leading others to liberation, we'll yearn to receive proper instruction so we can meditate on emptiness.

The Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha are the Three Jewels of refuge. The Buddhas are all beings who have attained enlightenment; the Dharma is the realizations and teachings that lead us to liberation; the Sangha, in the strictest sense, refers to all those who have actualized this liberating wisdom by realizing emptiness directly.

Taking refuge in the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha is the gateway to enter the path. Taking refuge implies taking responsibility for our experience. Our happiness and suffering come from our own attitudes and actions. If we don't do anything to alter these, our situation won't change. However, we need to learn how to transform our attitudes and actions; we need others to show us the way to develop our good qualities. Others can't do the work for us, because only we can change our minds. Taking refuge means turning for guidance to the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha with confidence that we can improve and with trust that they will guide us in the proper direction.

In this chapter we'll look at the qualities of the Three Jewels of refuge—the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha—and will address the frequently asked question, “Do Buddhists believe in God?” Then the reasons people take refuge and the meaning of confidence (or faith) will be explored. The ways the Three Jewels can benefit us will be explained by analogy to a doctor, medicine and nurse; and lastly the refuge ceremony will be described.

### **The Three Jewels**

What are the qualities of the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha that make them reliable objects of refuge?

The Buddhas have completed the entire path to enlightenment and thus are able to show us the way. If we want to go to Hawaii, we should follow the instructions of someone who has been there. Otherwise, we could find ourselves in trouble! Since the journey to enlightenment is an even more delicate matter, it's essential that our guides have experienced it.

Shakyamuni Buddha is the particular Buddha who lived 2,500 years ago in India. (Sakya was his clan, Gotama his family name and Siddhartha his personal name.) There are other beings who have attained Buddhahood as well. “The Buddha” generally refers to Shakyamuni Buddha. However we shouldn't think of him as totally separate from other Buddhas for they all have the same realizations.

Being omniscient, the Buddhas automatically know the most skillful way to guide each being to enlightenment. There are many stories in the sutras of how the Buddha guided people who were even worse off than we are.

One man, for example, was so stupid he couldn't even remember the two words his tutor tried to teach him. Disgusted, the tutor threw him out. The man eventually met the Buddha, who gave him the job of sweeping the courtyard of the monks' assembly hall. The Buddha told him to say, "Remove dirt, remove stains," while he swept. After some time, the man realized the dirt and stains referred to weren't ordinary ones: dirt meant the mental obscurations to liberation and stains referred to the obscurations to full enlightenment. In this way, the man gained understanding of the path and eventually became an arhat or liberated being. If the Buddha has the skill to help someone like this, then he'll definitely be able to guide us!

The Buddhas have infinite, impartial compassion for all beings, so we can be assured of their continual help. Buddhas aren't like ordinary beings who help their friends and harm their enemies, or who help someone when she's nice, but not when she's in a bad mood. Rather, the Buddhas see beyond our superficial differences and weaknesses and have a constant, unbiased wish to help each of us.

A Buddha's ability to help others isn't limited by selfishness or ignorance. However, a Buddha can't make someone act in a certain way. Nor can the Buddhas counteract our karma. They can't erase the karmic imprints from our mindstreams or prevent them from ripening if all the necessary conditions are present. Buddhas can guide, inspire and teach us, but we're the only ones who can control our thoughts, words and deeds.

Just as the sun shines everywhere without discrimination or restriction, Buddhas help everyone equally. However, the sun's rays can't go into an upside-down pot. If the pot is on its side, a little light can go in. If it's upturned, then light floods into it.

Similarly, according to our attitudes and actions, we have different levels of receptivity to the enlightening influence of the Buddhas. A Buddha helps others effortlessly and spontaneously, but how much we receive depends on us. If we don't try to remedy our attachment, anger and closed-mindedness, we prevent ourselves from receiving the inspiration of the Buddhas. However, the more we follow the path, the more our minds automatically open to receive the Buddhas' inspiration and help.

Because our minds are obscured by disturbing attitudes and karma, we can't communicate directly with a Buddha's omniscient mind. Therefore, out of compassion, the Buddhas manifest in a variety of forms to guide us.

One form is called the enjoyment body. This is the subtle body a Buddha takes to teach the high bodhisattvas in the pure lands. Pure lands are places established by various Buddhas, where advanced practitioners can practice free of hindrances.

However, at the moment, our minds are so concerned with material things that we haven't yet created the causes to be born in pure lands. Therefore, out of compassion, Buddhas manifest in grosser bodies, appearing in our world in order to communicate with us. For example, a Buddha could manifest as our teacher, or as a Dharma friend. A Buddha could even appear as a bridge or an animal, or as a person who criticizes us in order to make us deal with our anger. However, the Buddhas don't announce what they're doing and we seldom recognize them.

Referring to the magnificent qualities of Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived 2,500 years ago in India, Buddhists praise his qualities:

*You, whose body was formed by a million perfect virtues,  
Whose speech fulfills the hopes of all beings,  
Whose mind perceives all that is to be known,  
To the prince of the Shakyas, we pay homage.*

## **The Dharma and Sangha**

Dharma refers to two things: (1) the realizations of the path, particularly the wisdom directly realizing emptiness; and (2) the cessations of all sufferings and their causes brought about by these realizations.

The Dharma is our real protection. Once our minds have become the path and attain the cessations, no external or internal foe can harm us. In a more general sense, Dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha that show us the way to actualize the realizations and cessations.

Sangha are all those who have directly realized emptiness. Thus, they are reliable friends who encourage and accompany us on the path. Strictly speaking, the term “Sangha” refers to anyone with the direct realization of emptiness be that person ordained or not. Included in the Sangha are arhats, those who have freed themselves from cyclic existence. Bodhisattvas who have directly realized emptiness are also Sangha. These noble bodhisattvas have control over their rebirth process. Due to their great compassion, they continuously and voluntarily return to our world to guide us.

More commonly, “sangha” refers to the communities of monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to actualizing the Dharma, although they may not yet have attained realizations. In the West, some people use “sangha” to refer to the community of lay followers as well. However, this is not the traditional usage of the word.

## **Do Buddhists Believe in God?**

People from Judeo-Christian backgrounds often ask if Buddhists believe in God. This depends on what is meant by the word “God,” for there is a diversity of opinions in the Judeo-Christian world about who or what God is.

If by the word “God” we refer to the principle of love and compassion, then yes, Buddhists accept those principles. Love and compassion are the essential core of the Buddha’s teachings. Many similarities exist between Jesus’ and the Buddha’s teachings in this regard.

If we take “God” to refer to one who has infinite love and wisdom and who is free of vengeance and partiality, then yes, Buddhists accept this. Love, wisdom, patience and impartiality are qualities of all the Buddhas.

If “God” is used to refer to a creator, then Buddhist have a differing view. From a Buddhist viewpoint, there was no beginning to the continuities of physical matter and consciousness (see the chapter on rebirth). Since many logical difficulties arise if the

existence of a creator is posited, Buddhists propose an alternative explanation. Thus, Buddhists don't accept the ideas of original sin or eternal damnation. Nor is faith alone sufficient to attain peace.

It must be emphasized, however, that Buddhists see the plurality of religious beliefs and practices as beneficial. Since people don't think in the same way, a diversity of beliefs enables each person to select a system that helps him or her to live a better life. Thus, Buddhists emphasize the importance and necessity of religious tolerance.

## **Why Take Refuge?**

Two principal attitudes cause us to turn to the Three Jewels for refuge. These attitudes also help to deepen our refuge as time goes on. These are: (1) dread of continuing the way we are, and (2) confidence in the abilities of the Three Jewels to guide us.

Realizing how often our disturbing attitudes overwhelm us, we fear they'll propel us towards unhappiness now and an unfortunate rebirth in the future. Looking even further ahead, we dread being trapped in cyclic existence, taking one uncontrolled rebirth after another. We know that no matter where we're born, there's no lasting happiness.

Because we don't know how to solve these dilemmas, we must seek advice from those who do. But we must be careful about whose instructions we follow, for if we pick a guide who is limited in compassion, wisdom and skill, we won't be able to improve. Thus, it's essential to examine closely the qualities of possible sources of help. When we have confidence in the abilities of another to guide us, then we'll listen to their instructions and practice what we learn.

## **Confidence Versus Blind Faith**

The term "confidence" in Buddhist scriptures is often translated as faith. However, the English word "faith" has connotations of someone who believes in something but doesn't know why. Blind faith of this sort isn't cultivated in Buddhism. "Confidence" expresses the meaning better: we know about the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha and we trust their ability to help us. Three kinds of constructive faith or confidence are developed in Buddhist practice: (1) convinced confidence, (2) aspiring confidence, and (3) admiring or clear confidence.

Convinced confidence arises from understanding. For example, we hear about the disadvantages of the disturbing attitudes and learn techniques to overcome them. We then examine our lives to see if disturbing attitudes cause us problems and if the techniques effectively counteract them. In this way, we'll develop conviction that it's necessary and possible to eliminate the disturbing attitudes. Through reason and our own experience, we'll become convinced that contemplating impermanence will diminish our unreasonable attachments. Because this kind of faith is based on understanding, it's firm and valid.

We can gain convinced confidence that the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha are able to lead us from our confusion. We don't need to believe in the greatness of the Three Jewels just because someone told us to, for that would be like buying a laundry soap simply because the commercial said it was good. Rather, through learning and reflecting on the

qualities of the Three Jewels, we'll understand and will be convinced. Such conviction makes us feel close to the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha.

Aspiring confidence is the second kind of confidence. Reading about the benefits of a kind heart and observing the wonderful effects altruistic people have upon the world, we'll aspire to increase our love and compassion. Learning about our Buddha nature and the qualities of the Three Jewels, we'll aspire to become Buddhas. This kind of faith is very invigorating and gives us enthusiasm for the Dharma practice.

Clear or admiring confidence makes our minds joyful. For example, we hear about the qualities of the bodhisattvas and Buddhas—their impartial compassion and penetrating wisdom—and admire them with a happy heart. By focusing on others' good qualities and rejoicing, admiring confidence arises within us.

Confidence in the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha makes our hearts peaceful and gives direction to our lives. As the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*:

*The wise take faith and intelligence  
For their security in life;  
These are their finest wealth.  
That other wealth is just commonplace*

In Buddhism, faith or confidence is developed slowly, and it arises through knowledge and understanding. By relying on the guidance of the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha, our understanding of the three principal realizations of the path will grow. Conversely, by deepening our inner understanding and transforming our minds, our confidence in and reliance upon the Three Jewels increase. This occurs because we discern through our own experience that the direction provided by the Three Jewels resolves our unsatisfactory situations. In this way, taking refuge involves taking responsibility for our own experience, as well as relying on the guidance, instruction and inspiration of those who can show us the way to transform our minds.

## **Doctor, Medicine and Nurse**

Refuge is likened to the doctor, medicine and nurse a sick person relies upon to be cured. We're like a sick person because we're afflicted with many unsatisfactory situations in this and future lives. Seeking a solution, we consult a qualified doctor, the Buddha. The Buddha diagnoses the cause of our illness: the disturbing attitudes and the confused actions we've done under their influence. Then he prescribes the medicine of the Dharma, the teachings on how to gain the realizations and cessations leading to enlightenment.

We must practice the teachings to attain the result. It isn't sufficient just to hear the Dharma. We have to actively apply it in our daily lives and in our relationships with others. This means we try to be mindful and notice when disturbing attitudes arise. Then, we apply the remedies enabling us to perceive the situation clearly. If sick people have medicine but don't take it they aren't cured. Similarly, we may have an elaborate shrine at home and a huge library of Dharma books, but if we don't apply patience when we meet a person who annoys us, we've missed the opportunity to practice.

The Sangha are like the nurses who help us take the medicine. Sometimes we forget which pills to take when, so the nurses remind us. If we have difficulty swallowing huge pills, the nurses break them into bits for us. Similarly, those with realizations of the path are the real Sangha who help us practice the Dharma correctly when we get confused. Monks and nuns provide a good example, and any practitioner who is more advanced than we are can help us.

Our Dharma friends are very important, for we're easily influenced by the people we're around. When we're trying to improve ourselves, it's important to be around people who encourage us in this pursuit. If we spend time with people who enjoy gossiping and criticizing others, that's what we're likely to do when we're with them. When we're near people who value self-cultivation, their example and encouragement will influence us positively. For that reason the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*:

*Wise ones, do not befriend  
The faithless, who are mean  
And slanderous and cause schism.  
Don't take bad people as your companions.*

*Wise ones, be intimate  
With the faithful who speak gently,  
Are ethical and do much listening.  
Take the best as companions.*

How are we to link this advice with our effort to develop impartial love and compassion for everyone? Mentally, we try to look beyond people's superficial qualities and cherish them all equally. However, as we aren't yet Buddhas, we're still easily influenced by others.

Thus, for the benefit of everyone, it's wiser to form friendships with people who live ethically and value self-cultivation. Although mentally we can have equal love and compassion for everyone, physically we should remain near those who influence us positively. When our minds become stronger, then we can be around anyone without being influenced by his or her bad habits.

## **The Refuge Ceremony**

Although taking refuge is done in our hearts and doesn't require a ritual, participating in the refuge-taking ceremony allows us to receive the inspiration of the lineage of practitioners that began with the Buddha and continues down to the present. Also, we're formally entrusting ourselves to the guidance of the Three Jewels.

By taking refuge, we're making a firm statement to ourselves and to the holy beings that we'll take a beneficial direction in life. We're determined to stop letting our selfishness and ignorance fool us into chasing after useless pursuits. Instead, we'll get in touch with our inner wisdom and compassion. Making this decision and taking refuge is a very precious moment in our lives, for we are embarking on the path to enlightenment.

In the Tibetan tradition this verse of taking refuge and generating the altruistic intention is recited in the morning upon awaking and before all meditation sessions:

*I take refuge until I have awakened in the Buddhas, the Dharma and the Sangha. By the merit I create by engaging in generosity and the other far-reaching practices, may I attain Buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings.*





## REFUGE BY LAMA THUBTEN YESHE

*The late Lama Yeshe was a founder of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition and well-known Tibetan meditation and religious teacher.*

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*“Buddhist refuge is a process of turning inward that begins with our discovery of our own unlimited potential as human beings.”*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dharma means understanding reality. Meditation and prayer are not Dharma; they are merely tools for reaching this inner wisdom. Even if we meditated all day, but totally lacked Dharma understanding, we would achieve precious little. Nor are religious texts Dharma; they are merely books about Dharma, means for communicating information about Dharma. True Dharma or religion is a personal experience that each of us must elicit from within himself alone. There is a Dharma bell within us and we should use it to awaken and activate our own dormant wisdom. Usually our mind is completely occupied with stale, unprofitable, repetitious thoughts: clutching at fantasies, and giving way to anger, jealousy or despair when they elude us. Practicing Dharma means ringing our inner wisdom-bell, being always on the alert and clearing away the refuse that clogs our mind, the attachments and addictions that haunt our daydreams. By making this our daily practice, we ourselves become Dharma; all our energy becomes Dharma wisdom. Then we are truly taking refuge, allowing the inner Dharma alone to regulate our lives.

The third object of refuge is the Sangha. Sangha consists of those who are endowed with wisdom. They are like the nurses and friends who help us to recuperate from an illness. Sangha is not only those who wear red or yellow robes, but also those friends who influence us beneficially. These spiritual friends energize and inspire us, and are therefore to be clearly distinguished from ordinary friends who hold us back. For example, everyone at this present meditation course comes from a different background and has a different outlook. But we have opened our hearts to each other and shared some profound experiences. We may in fact feel more warmly towards friends we have made here than towards older friends

at home. Why is this? Because we sense a spirit of unity: together we have responded to the beauty of Dharma wisdom.

True spiritual friends support one another in their practice and promote each other's growth in knowledge and awareness. We need support because we are so easily influenced by our environment and by the people around us. Let us suppose that I am a heavy drinker but have decided to take myself in hand and give the habit up. Then a friend says, "What a hot day! Let's have a drink somewhere." So I go with him that day, and again the next day, and soon I find myself back in the same old rut.

Moreover, in ordinary friendships we often confuse attachment with affection. For instance, my friend might show his apparent affection for me by suggesting that we go on a drinking bout together. If I decline, he might think me unfriendly and feel rejected, so I give in. This is how friends can bring us down. He didn't use threats or force but by displaying the kind of affection that consists only of clinging and attachment, he led me into a situation I would rather have avoided. It is therefore essential that we develop the wisdom-eye that distinguishes true love from mere attachment, and that can see the difference between what benefits us and what harms us. We should rely entirely on this wisdom, rather than on our ever-fluctuating emotional responses.

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

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

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

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

Since most of our problems involve other people, it is important to be aware of our behavior and to avoid harming anyone.

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

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

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

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

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

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# TAKING REFUGE AND THE MEANING OF THE THREE JEWELS BY VEN. THUBTEN CHODRON

*Edited Teaching Transcript*

We've talked about the possibility of rebirth in the states of tremendous suffering or tremendous limitations. If we think deeply about this possibility, we want to find some way out, some way to prevent it from happening. We want some medicine to take before the disease strikes, some Dharma vitamins so we don't get sick. That's why sometimes "Dharma" is translated as "preventive measures." The idea being that Dharma consists of measures you take and apply to your mind that protect you or prevent you from experiencing difficult situations.

## **What is refuge?**

Because we have a sense of dread about the future, a sense of concern about what will happen after death, and because we seek some direction, some security in an insecure world, we look for refuge. Now, refuge is a tricky word in English. It can be misunderstood. Sometimes it's translated as "taking a safe and sound direction in life," and that's very much what it is. Taking a direction.

The problem with the word "refuge" is that sometimes it gives us the idea of hiding away from something. Like when you're a little kid, you take refuge behind your mom, and then the big bad bully next door can't get at you. But that's not the kind of relationship we have with the Triple Gem. We don't hide behind our "mother," the Triple Gem. Taking refuge here is in the sense of saying, "It's pouring down rain, we're getting soaking wet, and we're going to get cold if we stay out in the rain." So we want to go to a place that offers protection, and that place is in the Dharma realizations. That's the real refuge, the real thing that we're going to. It's not a question of hiding behind the Dharma or hiding behind the Buddha and the Sangha and saying, "Buddha and Sangha, you go out and you clear away my problems." That's not the meaning of refuge. Rather, it is taking a safe and sound direction in our lives, knowing that the real refuge is the transformed state of our own minds.

When we think about death and the lower realms, it gives us some concern about our future lives. Given that we have this concern, we now come to the two stages in the path that constitute the method to do something, to act. The two things that we are going to do are take refuge and then observe karma.

Thinking about precious human life gives us the ability to see our potential. Then after we've seen our potential, we become persuaded to make use of it. The first way to make use of it is to prepare for our future lives. In order to prepare for future lives, we need to have some concern about them. So we think about death and the possibility of being born in the lower realms. Now we're looking for a method to prevent that, so we have the subject of refuge and then after that the subject of cause and effect, or karma and its results. Teaching these two subjects in this order is a really skillful way for the Buddha to engage us.

Refuge is a very important part of the path because it is the gateway to the Dharma. They usually say that refuge is the gateway to entering into the Buddha's teachings; that bodhicitta, the altruistic intention, is the gateway to entering into the Mahayana teachings; and taking empowerment is the gateway for entering into the tantric teachings. Refuge is the foundation of the whole thing -- it's about really making a decision about the path that we're taking, the direction we're going. It's a very important point, a very fundamental decision in our life.

There are several main headings under refuge. We talk first about the reasons for taking refuge, second about which objects to take refuge in, third about measuring the extent to which we have taken refuge, fourth about the benefits of having taken refuge, and then fifth about points for training after we've taken refuge. So this is where we're going to be going in the next few talks, through these five things.

### **The first cause for taking refuge**

Let's go back to the first point in the reasons for taking refuge. Why take refuge? Why enter into the Buddha's teachings? There are generally two or sometimes three reasons given for taking refuge. It's important to understand the reasons, especially since we take refuge every day.

We took refuge here before we did the teachings, and you do the prayer for refuge every day before you do the meditation sessions. It's important to understand the reasons for refuge and to think about them before you say the prayer. That helps to make the prayer feel more meaningful and worthwhile, because you know what you're doing and why you're doing it.

The feeling of refuge is something that grows with time, so the more we have the causes in our mindstream, the deeper our refuge is going to be. Of course, at the beginning the causes aren't going to be very strong, so our refuge isn't going to be very strong. But as we continually cultivate the causes and put effort into that, then the refuge becomes much, much stronger and we start to see it changing our mind. None of the meditations we've been doing are like an on/off switch; they're more like a dimmer switch which you, hopefully, gradually, turn towards brighter.

The first reason for taking refuge is to combat a sense of dread and caution concerning rebirth in unfortunate realms, or even in the whole cycle of existence, but at least some sense of dread in taking rebirth in the lower realms. This is a call for us to look beyond the scope of this life. Of course, people can come and listen to teachings and benefit a great deal without believing in rebirth. One doesn't need to believe in rebirth to benefit from Buddha's teachings. But, just by the placement of this point, we can see that to really go deep and taste the nectar in the teachings, the more conviction we have in rebirth the more the whole framework of the Dharma is going to make sense to us.

Don't feel bad if you don't believe in rebirth and you've put it on the back burner. But also take it off the back burner from time to time and re-examine what you believe in, and try to understand rebirth, because that really does change the whole perspective with which we look at our lives and our relationship to Buddhism. It does make a difference.

You can see that if we only believe in this life, and we come upon a problem, what do we take refuge in? We take refuge in whatever is going to relieve the misery of this life. If

we don't believe in past and future lives, then we're only thinking in terms of what's going to cure our problem now. When we're hungry we take refuge in food. When we're lonely we take refuge in friends. When we're tired we take refuge in our bed. If we think only in terms of this life, all we need to take refuge in is sense pleasure, because that's the thing that is going to do something to remove the current pain. But I think all of us are here because we've realized, to one extent or another, that sense pleasure isn't the be-all and end-all; it is not going to cure our problems. If we have some feeling for past and future lives, we can see how limited sense pleasures are in curing our problems. When we have concern for what happens to us at death and afterwards, we're going to seek a much broader source of happiness than just something that fills our stomachs and makes us happy for the moment.

There is benefit to the feeling that who we are is not just limited to this body but is a continuum -- our mindstream is a continuum. It inhabits this body for a while, then it goes on to another body. This mindstream can even go on to become a buddha. So you can see that belief in future lives is important because if we don't believe in future lives, then we can say, "Well, I've got to become a buddha now or there's nothing, because after I die there's just complete darkness." If there really is just nothingness after I die, that sounds like a good cessation of my problems. So why practice the Dharma? Why try and become a buddha? I'll just wait until I die. Maybe I'll hurry it along a little bit, because that will end my problems. Do you understand what I'm saying? If we're just looking at only this life, we run into some problems about what our aims in life are. Why aim for buddhahood if at death it's just all nothing and your problems are going to end anyway? Really, what's the use? You could be home watching TV.

But if we believe that our mindstream doesn't end with this life, if something continues onward, then there is a reason to be concerned about what happens after death. And because the interrelation between cause and effect works, because what we are going to be after we die depends on what we're doing now, then this life becomes very meaningful. And we realize we can do something. We have some power to change things in this lifetime and those changes will influence what happens later. But if we don't think that anything happens later, then nothing has much meaning. This sense of caution, of an awareness of danger that could happen if we continue the way we are, can be a very strong motivating force for practicing Dharma.

Now, what is the cause for the lower realms? It's our own contaminated actions and disturbing attitudes. In our lives, we have to check up, "Do I have disturbing attitudes? Do I have contaminated actions?" We check up further, "Yes, I get angry and I have a lot of clinging and I'm very jealous. I'm lazy and belligerent and stubborn. I have the whole bag of disturbing attitudes." And then we consider, "Are my actions motivated by these attitudes?" Well, yes, because today somebody at work really bugged me and I put him down. And with someone else, I was very proud and haughty. And then there was someone else who I kind of manipulated.

When we really look at our lives, at the states of our mind, and at the types of actions that we've done, and then we weigh the possibility of our taking a lower rebirth, we get quite concerned. We realize that if the cause is there, it's very easy for the result to come. It's only a matter of time. That sense of concern is going to motivate us to practice. It's going to motivate us to seek an alternative way to interact so that we don't keep on acting out the same bad habits.

I think we come to the Dharma because we're really sick of some of our bad habits. We're fed up with the mind that gets angry uncontrollably. One part of our mind gets a buzz off of being angry and another part of us is saying, "Gosh I wish I didn't just do this all the time! I certainly would be more peaceful if I didn't get so irritated and annoyed." We're trying to seek some liberation, some guidance, away from our harmful actions and the disturbing attitudes that cause them because we realize they cause us problems, not only now in this life, but they're going to cause us big problems after death. Plus we cause problems to other people when we're under the negative influence of our habitual states of mind.

This is one of the motivating factors that's going to make us seek some guidance, some method, some path, some example or role model for what we can do to get out of the "banana mind." Or, as Lama Yeshe used to call it, the "monkey mind." Because our mind is like a monkey. A monkey picks up every interesting object it comes across. It's completely scattered and undirected. So, having some concern about where the "monkey mind" will take us, we want to seek a mind-tamer, a "monkey mind" tamer. That's the first motivation - - what's going to happen at death and afterwards.

Then, if we're even more advanced, we're going to be concerned not just with the lower rebirths, but the upper realms as well. When we realize that the happiness found in the upper realms is also temporary, we're going to seek liberation from all of cyclic existence. The dread can be either directed to the lower realms or to all of cyclic existence. But we start with where we are -- if we're sitting in the fire, let's at least get into the frying pan and then take the next step.

## **The second cause for taking refuge**

The second cause for taking refuge is what's called faith, or confidence, or conviction. It's a sense of confidence that the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha have the ability to show us a correct method to not only prevent lower rebirth, but also to prevent all of the pain in all of samsara. Thus we're not just going away from a bad situation, but we're going towards a better one. We have confidence that there is a path, that there is someone to lead us along that path, and that we have some friends to travel it with.

To develop deep confidence in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, we have to know the qualities of all three. A lot of this section on refuge is going to be talking about just that. If we know what their qualities are, we develop respect and admiration for the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. We also develop some conviction that they have the ability to lead us out of the mess that we're in.

## **The third cause for taking refuge**

The third reason for taking refuge has to do with the Mahayana, the vehicle of mind that is concerned with the problems and difficulties of all beings. If we want to take a safe and sound direction in our lives not just because we're concerned with our own possible rebirth, and not just because we're concerned with our own cycling in cyclic existence, but because



we have compassion for all sentient beings, then we take the Mahayana refuge. It's a vaster way of taking refuge.

You can see how refuge is going to grow. First we start out with dread of our own lower rebirth, then we increase that dread to include beings born anywhere in cyclic existence, and then we increase it beyond that by saying, "Well, not only me but anybody, any sentient being, anywhere, who is born in cyclic existence. I dread that. I'm concerned with that." That can be a strong motivating factor for taking refuge. When we have concern for the welfare of all beings -- a truly compassionate attitude -- then our refuge becomes really, really powerful. We're not concerned just with ourselves, but we feel the force of concern for limitless beings. In this way you can make your refuge stronger.

I'm teaching here according to the traditional Tibetan outline that Lama Tsong Khapa designed, and so we get into a lot of deep stuff. A lot of it can definitely cause conflict in your mind. It's going to push some buttons -- your emotional buttons and your intellectual buttons. And that is quite natural. If it didn't push your buttons, then what's the use? If you came here and everything I said just reinforced everything you already believed in, then I wouldn't be helping you at all to get unstuck from the anger, the attachment, the ignorance, and the contaminated actions. I'd just be reinforcing them. As soon as Dharma starts making our ego feel very comfortable, then we know something's wrong in what we believe.

But the button pushing does get better. It does get better. The beginning is particularly difficult, I think, because we encounter so many new ideas -- rebirth, lower realms, Buddha. Who in the world was Buddha? We come in contact with so many new things in the beginning that sometimes it makes us feel overwhelmed. But if you can get through that initial shock and start looking for answers to the myriad questions that come up, and if you start to examine the resistance in your own mind to some of the new ideas, then slowly, slowly some awareness comes in. But it takes time. Don't expect everything to be crystal clear and neon signs to flash. My experience wasn't like that. Maybe some people who have incredibly strong imprints from previous lives can be born in the West and then they walk into a Dharma talk and go "Hallelujah." But I've met very few people like that. So it takes some time and energy. But bear with it. It bears fruit.

## **What to take refuge in**

Now we're going to go to the second section, which covers which objects to take refuge in. If we're seeking a safe and sound direction, then first we want to recognize the proper objects to take refuge in and then understand the reasons why they're suitable objects of refuge.

So we have the Buddha and the Dharma and the Sangha. Each are divided into two. They are divided into the ultimate Buddha Jewel and the conventional Buddha Jewel; the ultimate Dharma Jewel and the conventional Dharma Jewel; the ultimate Sangha Jewel and the conventional Sangha Jewel.

Now we're going to get into a bit of technical information here, and it's going to lead to a few new words. Don't freak out, it's OK. It might seem very confusing at first as we go through these different categories of ultimate and conventional within each of the Three Jewels. But if you can begin to understand this, it will help you understand what Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are, so that then when you say "Namo Buddhaya, Namo Dharmaya,

Namo Sanghaya” and “I take refuge until I’m enlightened in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha,” you have a much better understanding of what you’re saying. It will help you to understand the prayers and generate that feeling in a much stronger way.

## **Taking refuge in the Buddha**

Let’s start with the Buddha. The Buddha is someone who has, on the one hand, completely purified his mind of all defilements and stains, and, on the other hand, has completely developed all of the good qualities to the fullest extent. So if somebody ever asks you “What’s a Buddha?” you don’t need to say, “Some guy wearing saffron robes sitting on a lotus.” Because then people don’t understand. They don’t get it. But if you say “This is what a Buddha is: any person who has completely purified his or her mind of all the defilements and stains, so that they never get angry again, they never get attached, they never get jealous, or proud, or lazy, or whatever. And they have also taken all of the good qualities that we have at present and developed them to their complete fullest extent.” If we understand that as being what a Buddha is, then it becomes completely possible that we can become one. Why? Because, although we have the defilements, we can cleanse them. And we have the seeds of the good qualities, and we can develop them. There is no huge gap between us and the Buddha. It’s just a question of the balance of defilement and the balance of good qualities. And if we can diminish the one and increase the other, then our mindstream very quickly becomes the mindstream of a buddha. It’s not something mystical and magical. It might feel like that when you’re having the realizations, but you see it’s actually some kind of scientific process that we’re going through.

## **The Buddha Jewel: The rupakaya and the dharmakaya**

Now, when we talk about the Buddha, sometimes you might have heard the word kaya, a Sanskrit word. It means body, but not body in the sense of the physical body, but body in the sense of corpus or collection or group. Sometimes we talk about three kayas, or bodies, of the Buddha and sometimes this can be divided into four kayas of the Buddha. And sometimes it’s only divided into two kayas of the Buddha. It does make sense.

If we take the division into two kayas -- two groups or collections or corpuses of qualities of the Buddha -- one is called the rupakaya, meaning the form body, and the other one is called the dharmakaya, meaning the truth body. With this division, the rupakaya, or form body, is referring to the form or the physical manifestation of the Buddha, while the dharmakaya, or the truth body, is referring to the mind of the Buddha.

## **Rupakaya**

If we go into a little more depth, we take the rupakaya, the form body, and split it into two. Of the two kinds of rupakaya, one is called the sambhogakaya, often translated as the enjoyment body, and the other one is called the nirmanakaya, or the emanation body. These are two different physical aspects of a buddha. When a fully enlightened one appears in a

body made of light in a pure land, teaching the bodhisattvas, teaching the Mahayana teachings, and has all the 32 signs and 80 marks of a buddha, then that is called a sambhogakaya or enjoyment body. This is a rather mystical or ethereal physical appearance of a buddha in a body of light, residing in a pure land, teaching the bodhisattvas. The sambhogakaya [enjoyment body] has all the physical signs of a fully enlightened being, such as the crown protrusion on the head, the curl, the eyes in the palms of the hand, the Dharma wheels on the feet, and the long ear lobes.

The other kind of rupakaya is called the emanation body, or the nirmanakaya, and refers to a grosser physical appearance of a fully enlightened being. An example would be Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived 2,500 years ago.

The division of the rupakaya, the physical aspect, into the enjoyment body and the emanation body, represents the different ways a fully enlightened being can appear in the world in order to benefit others. One way they can benefit others is to appear in an enjoyment body in a pure land and teach the high-level bodhisattvas. But we don't have access to a pure land, we haven't created that positive potential, so out of compassion the buddhas appear to us in an emanation body, which is a much grosser physical appearance, so that we, in our current form, can communicate with them. The form body of a buddha is acting for the purpose of others in an active form of compassion. When you have the compassion that wants to liberate others from their suffering, you want to appear in a physical form, and thus we get these two physical appearances.

## **Dharmakaya**

So when we take the truth body [dharmakaya] and the two aspects of the form body, the enjoyment body and the emanation body, we get three kayas or three bodies of the Buddha. Now if we want to get four bodies, then we then take the dharmakaya, or truth body, and we subdivide it into two also. So you see how we're doing this. We're just getting more subdivisions. Sounds like a housing development doesn't it? The dharmakaya can be subdivided into the jhana dharmakaya which is translated as the wisdom truth body, or wisdom dharmakaya, and the second one is the jhana svabhavikakaya, or just say nature truth body, the nature body of the Buddha.

When we talk about dharmakaya as one thing -- the truth body -- it refers more to the mind of the Buddha. As we subdivide the dharmakaya, we're going to get a little more technical. When we talk about the wisdom truth body, we're talking about the consciousness of the Buddha, the mind of the Buddha, the wisdom of the Buddha, the omniscient mind. When we talk about the nature body, or nature truth body, we're talking about the emptiness of that mind and the true cessations of suffering and the cessations of the disturbing attitudes and karma.

So, wisdom truth body is a consciousness, while the nature body is an absence of inherent existence and an absence of suffering and disturbing attitudes. Consciousnesses are impermanent phenomena, they change moment by moment by moment by moment. The nature body, being emptiness and cessations, is a permanent phenomenon. It doesn't change. Why? Because it is a negative phenomenon. It is a lack of something, an absence of something. If you don't understand it, that's OK. We go slowly. If you hear it now, then later when you hear more, and you start understanding more deeply the difference between

permanent and impermanent, this will become clear. But it's good just to hear it now and think about it. So what we're emphasizing here with the dharmakaya is the mind of the Buddha, the wisdom mind of the Buddha, and then the fact that that mind is empty of inherent existence.

It's said that the dharmakaya, the truth body, fulfills one's own purpose. Because of having a truth body, because of one's mind being a buddha's mind, one no longer suffers. One no longer has problems and confusion. But because a buddha also has very strong compassion and wants to work for the benefit of others, then a buddha is compelled by his compassion to appear in physical forms that can communicate with sentient beings, because sentient beings cannot communicate directly with the Buddha's mind. We don't have the clairvoyant powers; our minds are too obscured to communicate directly with the truth body of the Buddha.

Therefore, the buddhas appear in either of the form bodies [rupakaya]; they appear as emanation bodies for very obscured beings like us, and they appear as enjoyment bodies for the high-level bodhisattvas who are much less obscured than us. Is this making some sense? The Buddha is all four kayas. The Buddha has all four.

A buddha cannot do without the rupakaya. Why? Because the whole purpose of becoming a buddha is to benefit others. If you don't want to benefit others, it's useless to become a buddha. The whole reason to become a buddha is to benefit others, and the only way to benefit others is to appear in physical forms that can communicate with them. So once somebody has become a buddha, they are not going to hang around in their own nice nirvana and enjoy it because that wasn't their aim and their purpose to start with. Any buddha that exists is going to have all four of these bodies.

Does it mean that all buddhas are bodhisattvas? No, a buddha and a bodhisattva aren't the same. A bodhisattva is somebody who is going to become a buddha. A buddha was a bodhisattva who has completed the whole path, and so is no longer a bodhisattva.

## **The ultimate and conventional Buddha Jewels**

The conventional Buddha Jewel is the rupakaya, which is the enjoyment body and the emanation body. The more we understand this, the more we realize how it relates to many other things. When we talk about our buddha nature, our buddha potential, we can talk about our buddha nature in two ways, too. We can talk about the emptiness of inherent existence of our current mindstream and the clear and knowing nature and all the different impermanent factors of our mindstream. We have those two kinds of buddha nature. The evolutionary buddha nature is the clear and knowing nature of our mind, all the different impermanent factors of our mind, like the little bit of compassion we have now, the little bit of wisdom, the little bit of concentration, all these different factors that are the evolutionary buddha nature that we have at the present -- these can develop over time to become the wisdom dharmakaya. There's a connection between where we are now and the wisdom dharmakaya -- what we're going to become when we are a buddha.

The ultimate buddha jewel is the dharmakaya, which has two subdivisions: the nature body and the wisdom dharmakaya. The nature body is the emptiness of the buddhas' minds and the true cessations of afflicted or obscured minds. The wisdom body is the buddhas' omniscient minds.

At the present our mind is also empty of inherent existence, but because we don't have a buddha's mind, that emptiness is not just like that of a buddha's mind because the thing it depends on, our mind, is obscured and a buddha's mind isn't. So when our present mind becomes a buddha's mind, then the emptiness of inherent existence of that mind is called the nature body. However, its very nature of being empty doesn't change.

The progression of our two buddha natures to enlightenment is like a railway track. A railway track has two bars on it. This is a very rough analogy. The analogy has its limitations, but we can think about one bar of the railway as being the clear and knowing nature of our mind and all the factors that we have now such as the little bit of wisdom, little bit of compassion, little bit of love, little bit of concentration, little bit of patience, all those factors that we have now at the present. And then just the clear and knowing nature of our mind, the fact that our mind is a consciousness. However, right now that consciousness is obscured, limited, isn't it? But it has potential. And as we start to practice the path, what we're going to develop are those good qualities that we have now in small amounts, and we're going to purify the clear and knowing nature of our mind till eventually that just becomes the wisdom truth body of the Buddha -- omniscience.

Now for the other bar of the railway track. Right now our mind is also empty of inherent existence. In other words, right now we don't have a solid concrete permanent identity. We think we do -- that's our problem -- but we don't. We don't have this solid, concrete, independent, inherently existent personality, and neither our mind nor our body nor anything is inherently existent. That lack of inherent existence doesn't change. But when our mind, the clear and knowing nature of our mind, becomes a buddha's mind then automatically we call our lack of inherent existence by a different name -- we call it the emptiness of a buddha's mind. We call it the cessations on a buddha's mind. We call it the nature body.

When we're going towards enlightenment, we're not destroying a person, we're not destroying inherent existence, because a solid concrete personality never existed to start with. What we're destroying is our wrong idea that there is one. That's what's getting abandoned. But right now, our mind is equally as empty of solid, concrete inherent existence, as any other phenomenon, including a buddha's mind. Because of that we have the potential to become a buddha. Because, you see, if things did have solid concrete independent entities, then there's no way we could change because I am what I am, what I am, what I am, and I can't change. But we do change, don't we? Whether we want to or not. So that in and of itself shows that there's no solid concrete entity there.

## **How things exist**

Is this thing of having a nature body, or saying that we are empty of inherent existence, is this something that sets us apart from other phenomena that do not have mindstreams? No, because everything is equally empty of inherent existence. If we take the clock here, it's not that the clock has some real inherent existence. It's not like you can find some real clock inside of this mass of different parts. Similarly we're a mass of body and mind and there is no inherent existent personality in that. So it's not just that we have a mind. The fact that we have a mind and the clock doesn't does not mean we're different from a clock. But that's on

a relative level. On a deeper level, the mode of existence, the way we exist, neither the clock nor we have any concrete findable entity inside that you can pinpoint and say “Ah, that’s it.”

But the clock wouldn’t have a nature body either, because to call the emptiness of something a nature body, you have to have the wisdom body there, too. That’s why we don’t call our emptiness of inherent existence a nature body -- it’s because our conventional mind is not a wisdom body. It’s not a wisdom truth body. In other words, our emptiness of inherent existence doesn’t get that name until our mind transforms. The name is dependent. The cessations of the disturbing attitudes -- this is also meant by the nature body -- we don’t have those cessations on our mindstreams right now. We don’t have the cessation of anger on our mindstream. We have the opposite.

Here is a question that even the even the great lamas ask in the debating texts. They say if sentient beings are not inherently existent, then who are we developing compassion for? Here we have to understand that there is a difference between not being inherently existent and not existing to start with. There is a difference. So if we take the clock, it might be easier to understand.

If we look at the clock, we see a clock here, it functions, we can read the time, right? When we’re not analyzing, when we’re not looking closely, when we’re not trying to pinpoint anything, we all look and say, “Oh yes, there’s a clock and it functions to read time.” But if we ask, “What is the clock? There’s got to be something that I can find that is the clock, that I can isolate as being the clock.” Then what are we going to isolate as being the clock? Is it going to be this part? Is it going to be this part? Is it the front? Is it the back? Is it the gears? Is it the battery? Is it the numbers? Is it the buttons? When you start taking it apart and laying it all out on the table, can you find anything that is the clock? You can’t find anything. When you analyze anything, you can’t find the thing that is it. At that point we’re looking for the deeper nature of something, trying to pinpoint it, and whenever we try and do that, we always wind up with nothing. We can’t find anything. But that doesn’t mean that things are totally nonexistent. Because there is something here. There’s something here and it functions; we can use it.

It’s the same with sentient beings. There are sentient beings. We’re all sitting here in this room, I think we would all agree. There’s Sandy and me sitting here in this room. But then we try and find concrete personalities, and we look, and we ask, “Who is Lillian?” Is her body Lillian? Is her mind Lillian? If we start taking it apart, what are you going to find that is Lillian? You can’t find anything in the body or in the mind that you can isolate and say “Ah, got her, this is what she is. I can draw a circle around this. This is what she is. This is all she’s going to be. This is everything and it’s permanent and solid and concrete.” We can’t find anything that we can identify as that person. But when we don’t analyze, we see the body and the mind, and we give it the label “person.” The sentient beings we’re working for are those sentient beings that are the ones that we’re developing compassion for.

You might ask, “Is it our language that is giving us this idea of identity? Is there something underneath, but we can’t describe it because our language is a limitation?” Part of the problem is our language, but that’s not the only thing. It is not really a problem of language because buddhas also use language. The problem is our making our concepts really, really solid and thinking that our language is solid. Making everything solid. That’s our problem.

And not just defining things but thinking that things are their definitions. We have to define things to function in the world. But if we think that defining them makes them something that's solid and concrete, then that's all they ever can be, and we concretize phenomena, that's what the problem is.

The clock is dependent. It's made up of non-clock things. It's dependent on things that aren't clocks. Because if you search everything that is in this clock, all you're going to come up with is a bunch of parts, none of which is the clock. So it's dependent on causes, it's dependent on parts. And clock is something that exists by being labeled on top of that whole dependently accumulated thing.

Is our mindstream dependent? What is our mindstream dependent on? First of all, our mindstream is dependent on the previous moment of mind isn't it? Which doesn't exist. Inherent existence would mean, in relationship to the mindstream, that you can look at the mindstream and you can say, "This is the mind. Here I got it." But what are we going to label as the mindstream? This moment (snap of finger), this moment (snap of finger), this moment (snap of finger), this moment (snap of finger)? What are we going to label? Our eye consciousness, our ear consciousness, our nose consciousness, our tongue consciousness, our mental consciousness? Which consciousness are you going to label as the mindstream? So again it comes down to the fact that the mindstream has many parts in it, and the mindstream also depends on something that existed prior to it. It depends on causes.

It's the fact that things are so dependent that enables our mind to be transformed into a buddha's mind. Because if our mind weren't dependent, if it were independent, then nothing at all could affect it. Nothing could make it change. It would exist independently without any relation to the rest of the universe. And that clearly isn't the case.

What is the difference between going from moment to moment to moment and what we call death? Death is just one of those going from moment to moment that we've marked off as a gross change. But actually, since we were conceived, we've been in the process of dying, and death is just when the body and mind separate.

It's like we have a river and the river's changing all the time, and at some point we put the county line across the river. Over here is one county and over there is another county. So death is just things are changing moment by moment, and we notice only the gross changes and not the moment by moment changes.

If death is just another moment, then what about all the bardos? That's just more moments also. That's just our mind existing in that state. Death is one moment, but the bardo can be many moments. Life takes up a lot of time and bardo takes up some time, and death is just the line between the two of them.

## **The ultimate Dharma Jewel**

Let's get back to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Now we're going to look at the Dharma, in particular the Dharma Jewel. When we talk about the ultimate Dharma Jewel, we're talking about the true cessation and the true path on the mindstream of an arya. Now you're going to say, "What's a true cessation, what's a true path, and what's an arya?"

I'll explain what an arya is, and we'll get into this again later when we talk about the Sangha. In the Mahayana path, once somebody has generated the altruistic intention, then there are five levels of practice that they do in which their mind progresses to become a

buddha. When they're on the third level of that path, then they have direct insight into emptiness, and they see the lack of inherent existence as clearly as we see the palm of our hand. That's what an arya is: someone who has direct perception of reality. "True paths on an arya's mindstream" refers to the realizations of that arya's mindstream. When I say realization, it's a consciousness. Paths are all consciousnesses. A path isn't something external; a path is a consciousness. A path on the mindstream of an arya emphasizes the wisdom that realizes emptiness directly.

A path is defined as a certain level of understanding, a certain level of realization, a consciousness. For example, a path is an arya's wisdom realizing emptiness. Now when you get these path consciousnesses, such as if you've understood emptiness directly, then that enables you to start cleaning your mindstream in such a way that the defilements, the disturbing attitudes, never can come back again.

Right now, for example, we may not be angry, but our anger can come back again. When we get to the level of being an arya, due to having the wisdom that understands emptiness directly, due to having that true path in our mindstream, then what is called the artificial level of anger, or the artificial level of ignorance, never arises again on the mind. It has ceased, and we have the cessation of that level of defilement. We have the stopping, or the absence, of that. That is what is meant by cessation.

There are many paths; there are many cessations. There are many paths because there are many consciousnesses, even in one person. All the different realizations of any particular arya can be considered a path. Then there are many different cessations: the cessation of anger, the cessation of attachment, the cessation of the artificial levels, the cessation of the innate levels of the defilements.

This is what is meant by Dharma. That's the ultimate Dharma Refuge. And why is that called the ultimate Dharma Refuge? Because when somebody has that on their mindstream, they're free. You don't have to worry about all this junk coming back. The ultimate refuge is not something external to grab on to. The ultimate refuge is this transformed state of our own mind. And here, before we've transformed our own mind, we take refuge in the transformed state of other people's minds because those mindstreams have the qualities that we want to develop. And those people can show us how to do it.

As the conventional Dharma, we have what is called the 84,000 Dharma teachings. And when it says the scriptures, it doesn't mean the books, it means the teachings. The teachings. The oral teachings. The teaching itself. Not the paper and ink of the book. This is a symbolic representation of the Jewel of Dharma. The real ultimate Jewel of Dharma, the real deepest level thing to get is the cessation and the path on the mindstream. As a way of communicating that to us, we have all the different teachings. Initially the Buddha gave the teachings and they were passed down orally, and then later they were written down. So when it says scriptures, don't think of books -- it just means the teaching in general. They are what point the way for us to understand the deeper level -- the ultimate Dharma.

Right now, at our level as ordinary people, we don't have any paths. Because a path is a wisdom understanding emptiness directly. It's a consciousness that is conjoined in some way with that wisdom. That is the path. So only the aryas have those path consciousnesses. We just have regular consciousness. But it can transform into one.



## The ultimate and conventional Sangha

And then we have the sangha. You're all going to roll your eyeballs here. And I don't blame you because every time I hear this, I roll my eyeballs too. I completely sympathize. The ultimate Sangha is the same thing as the ultimate Dharma. It's the arya's knowledge and liberation. In other words, their true paths and their true cessations. And although sangha usually means community, here in the sense of the ultimate community it's referring to the community or the gathering of paths and realizations. So it's not a real sangha community -- it's not a community of persons, but it is a community of realizations and cessations.

The conventional Sangha is any individual arya. The conventional Sangha is an individual arya, meaning an individual person who has realized emptiness or an assembly, not of arya's, but an assembly of ordained beings. And the assembly of ordained beings are a symbolic representation of the conventional Sangha Jewel. The real Sangha Jewel is any one particular arya. Now the reason why an individual arya is the Sangha Jewel is because that person has the direct realization of reality. And so that person can be a monk or a nun or a lay person, it doesn't really matter. It's an individual who has understood reality, and it doesn't matter whether they're ordained or not ordained. As a symbolic representation of that, we have the sangha community of ordained monks and nuns, at least four of them together in one place. That is a representation, or a symbol, of the conventional Sangha Jewel. It's not the real Sangha Jewel. I know this a bit confusing.

When we find in prayers the word sangha, how do we know what level to take it at? You have to know about the context. For example, when we say "Namo Sanghaya" or "I take refuge in the Sangha," here it's referring to the true paths and true cessations, and it's referring to any individual who has those on his or her mindstream. That person is going to be a valid object of refuge because they've perceived reality. When we say, "I take refuge in the Sangha," it doesn't mean we take refuge in some monk or nun who has no realizations. We don't take our deepest refuge in them. But that person can symbolize to us an arya being, which is the real thing we take refuge in for the Sangha.

So an arya being has realized emptiness directly, but an ordinary monk or nun hasn't necessarily. They may have, they may not have, but they do symbolize that realization. Even though they may not have those realizations, they can symbolize that, and so the advantage is that if we're around them, we can think, "Oh, these people are showing me, these people are guiding me on that path, so I can get there myself."

The word sangha is particularly confusing because in America they've started calling everybody sangha. Some people use the word sangha to mean anybody who is a Buddhist, or even people who aren't Buddhists. I personally don't use the term sangha in that way. I would prefer just to call that the Buddhist community. In Asia, the word sangha, when it's said in the sense of a community, usually refers to ordained monks and nuns. But when we say we take refuge in the Sangha, then we're taking refuge in any particular being that has direct perception of emptiness, whether or not they're a monk or a nun or not. It doesn't really matter. There are many lay people who are actually the Arya Sangha, who have that realization.

An Arya Sangha has some of the paths and some of the cessations, and the Buddha has all of them. There are five paths, and the Arya Sangha is on the third and the fourth. The fifth is buddhahood. While you're on the third and the fourth, you're in the gradual process

of removing the defilements and developing the qualities. Buddhahood doesn't come instantaneously upon realizing emptiness. It's like when you've realized emptiness, now you have the Windex, and you start squirting it on the mirror and cleaning the mirror. But it's going to take time to do that. And that's what happens on the third path and fourth path. Those beings are the Arya Sanghas.

On the first two paths, if we talk of the Theravada path, a person enters the first path when they have a total determination to be free of cyclic existence. In other words, day and night, they spontaneously want to get out of cyclic existence and attain liberation. That's for somebody on a more modest vehicle. For somebody who is on the vast vehicle, the Mahayana path, then you enter that first path when you spontaneously have, day and night, the wish to become a buddha in order to liberate all others. Combined with that altruism, you also have the determination to be free yourself. But just because you have either the determination to be free or the altruistic intention, it doesn't yet mean that you've realized emptiness. You may have, you may not have.

### **Different vehicles on a path**

We have a presentation of different vehicles and we're going to get into this more later on when we start talking about the qualities of the Sangha. What we have is the hearer's vehicle, the pratyeka buddha or solitary realizer's vehicle, and the bodhisattva's vehicle. In the hearer's vehicle and the pratyeka buddha or solitary realizer's vehicle, the first path is entered when one spontaneously has the determination to be free from cyclic existence day and night. The end product of that is arhatship. You've gotten yourself out of cyclic existence; you've removed what's called the deluded obscurations from the mind.

But the subtle obscurations, called the obscurations to knowing, are still on the mind. That's what prevents the arhat from becoming a buddha, though he or she is out of cyclic existence

When you talk about the bodhisattva's path, they enter the first path when they spontaneously have the altruistic intention to become a buddha for the benefit of all. And when they complete that path, they wind up at buddhahood, and at that point they have not only freed themselves from cyclic existence, they've not only gotten rid of the deluded obscurations, they've also gotten rid of the obscurations to omniscience. So it's a higher level of realization. Somebody might start as a hearer and they go on to become an arhat. Somebody else might start here as a bodhisattva and go on to become a buddha.

It all appears like a mass of confusing names at the beginning. It does get clearer, don't worry. If you have the patience to stick it out and learn this, then later when you hear other teachings, they will make a lot more sense to you, because you'll have a perspective to put them in.

Part of your mind might say "What do I care about paths and realizations and all this kind of gobbledygook?" Well, the reason why is because if we want to attain the happiness of a buddha, these are the things that we want to actualize on our own mindstream. So they aren't intellectual gobbledygook. These are the directions and the things that we want to learn about. It's like if you're in first grade, you might have this idea, "Ooh, I'd like to be a doctor." And you're still in first grade but you learn about grammar school, you learn about junior high, you learn about high school, you learn about undergrad work, you learn about

medical school, you learn about residency. You know all the different things you have to do. And learning all those different things, it gives you a lot more confidence in the people who have done it. So it gives you a better understanding of where you're going because you can see exactly how much has to be learned to do that. It also gives you a better idea of where you're going to go, and a better idea of what your own inner potential is. We too can get those realizations.

It's not just learning terms and categories, but it's really learning what our mind can become. It's also giving us a deeper appreciation of those who are guiding us on the path, because when we say we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, we're getting a deeper idea of exactly what they are and what their qualities are and what they've done. So in that way our confidence in them grows.

At the beginning it can all seem terribly confusing, and we wonder how these things all fit together. After you've learned it more and you become more familiar with the terms, it's actually quite inspiring. It makes the mind very happy to think about it because, "Wow, think about somebody who has altruism day and night spontaneously in the same way that I get angry day and night spontaneously. Wow, what an incredible way to be." There are people like that who exist. I mean that's marvelous and what's even more astounding is that we can become like that. And that there's an actual way to do it. And that's just the first path. So not only do I have the potential to become that, but I have the potential actually to realize emptiness and then to cleanse my mind completely." So you see, when we understand that, it really pulls us out of this little rut of "I'm just little old me who goes to work and comes home and can't do anything right." It completely cancels that very fixed conception of ourselves because we get a whole new vision of what we can become.

## **Meditation and mindfulness**

So where does breathing meditation and all this mindfulness stuff fit in to all of this? The breathing meditation can serve a few functions. First of all it can help us develop concentration, which is a necessary thing, because if we're going to gain any of these realizations, we have to be able to hold them in our mind. We have to be able to concentrate.

As we learn to be more mindful of all the different parts of the breathing meditation, we become more mindful of everything that's going on, and we can develop an understanding of impermanence. We can develop some understanding of selflessness, and that can aid us in developing wisdom along the path too.

Also mindfulness is used in our daily lives to try and be attentive, to be aware, not just of our breath, but when you're driving -- please be mindful. We have to be mindful of the cars, we have to be mindful of what we're saying and thinking of doing so that we don't let our energy wander off in a destructive direction. So we want to be mindful and aware of the positive things that we want to do, and then steer our energy towards that. The mindfulness practice is very much a key practice in helping us develop all these different realizations along the path.

When you get into the deep levels of the mindfulness practice, then you will notice the moment by moment change that's going on with the breath. Then you also notice that there's no self-sufficient person who's breathing. So you can go on many different layers with the mind from this practice.

## **Meditate**

OK, let's sit for a few minutes, digest, breathe, relax. Like I said it's not going to stick in your mind all at once. But you can try to remember them, try to make sense of them, and most importantly try to think about them, how they relate to yourself and your own buddha nature, your own potential, what you can become.

# **GUIDELINES FOR THE PRACTICE OF REFUGE**

*From Pearl of Wisdom, Book 1, published by Sravasti Abbey*

Having taken refuge, a safe and sound direction, in the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—it is advantageous to follow certain guidelines for practice in order to make progress along the path to awakening.

1. In analogy to taking refuge in the Buddha, commit yourself whole-heartedly to a qualified spiritual mentor.
2. In analogy to taking refuge in the Dharma, listen to and study the teachings as well as put them into practice in your daily life.
3. In analogy to taking refuge in the Sangha, respect the Sangha as your spiritual companions and follow the good examples they set.
4. Avoid being rough and arrogant, running after any desirable object you see and criticizing anything that meets with your disapproval.
5. Be friendly and kind to others and be concerned more with correcting your own faults than with pointing out those of others.
6. As much as possible, avoid the ten non-virtuous actions<sup>1</sup> and take and keep precepts.<sup>2</sup>
7. Have a compassionate and sympathetic heart towards all other sentient beings.
8. Make special offerings to the Three Jewels on Buddhist festival days.

## **Guidelines in Terms of Each of the Three Jewels**

1. Having taken refuge in the Buddha, who has purified all defilements and developed all excellent qualities, do not turn for refuge to worldly deities, who lack the capacity to guide you from all problems.
2. Respect all images of the Buddha: do not put them in low or dirty places, step over them, point your feet towards them, sell them to earn a living or use them as collateral. When looking at various images, do not discriminate, “This Buddha is beautiful, but this one is not.” Do not treat with respect expensive and impressive statues while neglecting those that are damaged or less costly.

<sup>1</sup> The ten non-virtuous actions are: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct (three of the body); lying, divisive speech, harsh words, idle talk, (four of speech); covetousness, maliciousness, and wrong views (three of mind).

<sup>2</sup> For a lay person, one can take the eight Mahayana precepts for one day, or one can take some or all of the five precepts for the duration of one’s life. On the basis of refuge, a lay person may also take the bodhisattva precepts and tantric vows.

3. Having taken refuge in the Dharma, avoid harming any living being.
4. Also, respect the written words which describe the path to awakening by keeping the texts clean and in a high place. Avoid stepping over them, putting them on the floor, or throwing them in the rubbish when they are old. It is best to burn or recycle old Dharma materials.
5. Having taken refuge in the Sangha, do not cultivate the friendship of people who criticize the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha or who have unruly behavior or do many harmful actions. By becoming friendly with such people, you may be influenced in the wrong way by them. However, that does not mean you should criticize or not have compassion for them.
6. Also respect monks and nuns as they are people who are making earnest efforts to actualize the teachings. Respecting them helps your mind, for you appreciate their qualities and are open to learn from their example. By respecting even the robes of ordained beings, you will be happy and inspired when seeing them.

### **Common Guidelines**

1. Mindful of the qualities, skills, and differences between the Three Jewels and other possible refuges, repeatedly take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.
2. Remembering their kindness, make offerings to them, especially offering your food before eating. (See the prayers for this.)
3. Mindful of their compassion, encourage others to take the refuge in the Three Jewels.
4. Remembering the benefits of taking refuge, do so three times in the morning and three times in the evening, by reciting and reflecting upon any of the refuge prayers.
5. Do all actions by entrusting yourself to the Three Jewels.
6. Do not forsake your refuge at the cost of your life, or even as a joke.

# PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR GOOD LIVING

BY VEN. THUBTEN CHODRON

From *Taming the Monkey Mind*

Taking refuge in the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha helps us to focus on what is important in our lives. It gives our lives a positive direction and reaffirms our conviction that there exists a path to happiness.

When taking refuge, we're enriched by the knowledge that great beings with full compassion, wisdom and skillful means exist. We gain confidence that by following the path, we'll attain the same state they have. Refuge is also a way of fulfilling a promise we've made to ourselves—a promise to become better people and make a positive contribution to others' welfare.

The real taking of refuge occurs deep in our heart and isn't dependent on doing or saying anything. Nevertheless, we may wish to participate in the refuge ceremony by requesting a monk or nun to formally give us refuge. The refuge ceremony is brief: we repeat a passage after our teacher and open our hearts to make a strong connection with the Three Jewels of the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha. The ceremony also "officially" makes us a Buddhist.

The reason we take refuge is to prevent future suffering and to progress along the path. To be true to our goals, we must act according to this motivation after taking refuge. It's not the case that after we take refuge we're "saved," and thereafter can do anything we please. Taking refuge is the first step in giving our lives a positive direction, and we must continue to channel our energy in that direction. Therefore, the Buddha gave advice on how to practice the Dharma to ensure we remain true to our determination to improve ourselves. The points to train ourselves in are:

1. In keeping with taking refuge in the Buddha, we should rely on a qualified spiritual master. Whoever performs the refuge ceremony for us becomes one of our spiritual mentors. We may have more than one teacher, and it's good to pray to meet fully qualified mentors with whom we feel a close Dharma connection. It's beneficial if we follow the Dharma instructions our teachers give us, care for our teachers' needs and treat them with respect.
2. In keeping with taking refuge in the Dharma, we should listen to and study the teachings, as well as put them into practice in our daily lives. Some people think only monks and nuns study the teachings deeply, and such dedicated study and practice is too difficult for lay followers. This is incorrect. Everyone should listen to and study the teachings as much as possible. If we want to progress along the path, we must practice the Dharma, and receiving instructions is essential in order to practice.
3. In keeping with taking refuge in the Sangha, we should respect the Sangha as our spiritual companions and follow their good example. If we constantly look for others' weaknesses, that's all we'll see. Such an attitude prevents us from appreciating whatever good qualities they have and learning about them.

We shouldn't expect monks and nuns to be perfect. Although they have dedicated their lives to the path, it takes time to gain realizations, and most of the Sangha are endeavoring to pacify their disturbing attitudes and karma, just as we are. Shaving one's head doesn't make one enlightened. However, we can appreciate their effort to practice the Dharma purely, and the good example they set for us. Although individual monks and nuns may have faults, we should respect the fact they have taken the vows set forth by the Buddha.

4. We should try to train ourselves in accordance to the examples set by the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha. If we take their behavior as a model, we'll eventually become like them. When we're in a state of emotional turmoil, it's helpful to ask ourselves, "How would a bodhisattva respond to this situation?" Thinking about this, we'll consider other ways to handle our problem.
5. We should avoid being self-indulgent, running after any desirable object we see. Craving money and status leads us to obsession and constant dissatisfaction. We're much happier when we enjoy pleasures of the senses in moderation.

Similarly, let's avoid arrogantly criticizing whatever we dislike. It's so easy to see others' faults and overlook our own. Yet this doesn't make us or others any happier. It is more constructive to correct our own faults than to point out those of others.

6. As much as possible we should avoid the ten destructive actions and keep precepts. We can take the five lay precepts for the duration of our lives, or the eight precepts for one day. Ethics is the foundation of the practice of the Dharma; without it, there is no way to create the cause for good rebirths or to attain realizations.
7. We should develop a compassionate and sympathetic heart toward all other beings. To do this, it's helpful to continually meditate on love, compassion and altruism. If we don't contemplate patience before meeting a troublesome person, it will be difficult to control our temper. We need to prepare beforehand, by remembering the kindness of others and meditating on patience continually in our daily meditation sessions. Chapter six of Shantideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva's Deeds* is very effective in helping us learn the antidotes to anger. Also see *Healing Anger* by the Dalai Lama and *Working with Anger* by Thubten Chodron.

If we nurture patience in our meditation, then when we go to work or school, we'll be mindful and will notice when we're getting angry. At that time, we will be able to remember what we've contemplated at the meditation sessions and let go of our anger. We won't always succeed, but over time we'll notice progress.

Each evening it's helpful to review our day. If we discover any remaining anger in our minds, we should again reflect on patience and the altruistic intention.

8. On Buddhist festival days, it's advisable for us to make special offerings to The Three Jewels to accumulate positive potential.



Points 5-7 emphasize the importance of improving our relations with others. Following Buddha's teachings doesn't mean performing rites and rituals to gain a superficial feeling of being "holy." It means not harming others and helping them as much as possible in our daily lives.

## **Specific Guidelines**

To help us develop and maintain a good relationship with each of the Three Jewels individually, there are guidelines which are specific for refuge in the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha:

1. Having taken refuge in the Buddha, who has purified all defilements and developed all qualities, we shouldn't turn for refuge to worldly gods who lack the capacity to guide us from all problems. Although some worldly gods have psychic powers, they aren't free from cyclic existence. Taking ultimate refuge in them is like one drowning person asking another to take him to shore.

We should respect all images of the Buddha and avoid putting them in low or dirty places, stepping over them or pointing our feet toward them. Because the statues represent the noble state we want to attain, we should take care of them. The statues don't need our respect, but we need to be mindful of the Buddha's qualities that they represent.

The purpose of having statues of Buddha is to help us remember the enlightened state and work toward attaining it ourselves. Therefore, we shouldn't use religious objects as collateral for a loan or buy and sell them as someone buys and sells used cars—with the motive to earn a living. The profit made from selling statues or Dharma books should be used to purchase or produce more Dharma items, not to buy ourselves a good meal or new clothes.

When looking at various images, it's nonsensical to discriminate, "This Buddha is beautiful, but this one isn't." How can a Buddha be ugly? We can comment on the artist's skills in making a statue or painting, but not on the looks of a Buddha.

Also, don't treat expensive statues with respect while neglecting those that are damaged or less costly. Some people put the expensive beautifully made statues in the front of their shrines so their friends will say, "You have such lovely and costly things in your home!" Seeking praise for owning religious objects is a worldly attitude, and we might as well show off our VCR or bankbook if all we're looking for is admiration from others.

2. Having taken refuge in the Dharma, we should avoid harming any living being. One becomes a Buddha in order to benefit others, and Buddhas cherish others more than themselves. Therefore, if we admire the Buddhas, we should respect all living beings just as they do.

Also, we should respect the written words which describe the path to enlightenment by keeping the texts clean and in a high place. Avoid stepping over them, putting them on the floor, or throwing them in the rubbish when they are old. Old Dharma materials can be burned.

The reason for this is not that the paper and ink of the books are holy in and of themselves, but that these books show the path to enlightenment which we want to develop in our minds. They are our spiritual nourishment. We don't put our food on the floor without something to contain it, because the floor is dirty and we value our food. Similarly, if we remember the importance of Dharma books which nourish us spiritually, we'll treat them properly. These guidelines make us more mindful of how we relate to things in our environment.

3. Having taken refuge in the Sangha, we should avoid becoming close friends with people who criticize the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha, or who are unruly or harm others. We avoid these people not because they're "evil and bad," but because our own minds are weak. For example, although we may want to stop gossiping, if we're constantly in the company of people who gossip, we'll easily resume our old habits. If we are good friends with people who criticize our spiritual beliefs or practices, we may unnecessarily start to doubt them.

However, we shouldn't criticize or be rude to these people. We can have compassion for them, but we won't seek their company. For example, if a colleague is critical of our religious practice, we can be courteous and kind to him at work, but we won't cultivate his friendship after work or discuss religion with him. However, if someone is open-minded and wants to discuss religion in order to understand life, we can freely engage ideas with him.

The bodhisattvas and practitioners approaching arhatship, who don't run the risk of falling back into their old negative behaviors, seek the company of unruly beings in order to help them. However, if our practice isn't yet firm, we have to be careful of the environment we put ourselves in.

Also, we should respect monks and nuns as people who earnestly endeavor to actualize the teachings. Respecting them helps our minds, because it opens us to appreciate their qualities and learn from their examples. By respecting even the robes of ordained beings, we'll be happy and inspired on seeing them.

## **Common Guidelines**

To help us deepen our refuge and extend it to others, there are six guidelines in common for the Three Jewels:

1. Mindful of the qualities of the Three Jewels and the differences between them and other possible refuges, we should repeatedly take refuge in the Buddhas, Dharma and Sangha. The qualities of the Three Jewels are explained in many texts. If we study

these, our understanding of how the Three Jewels guide and protect us will increase. Taking refuge isn't done just once. Rather, it's a process through which we continually deepen our trust in the Three Jewels.

2. Remembering the kindness of the Three Jewels, we should make offerings to them. Some people make offerings thinking that they're paying the Three Jewels back for what they've done or are obliging them to render help in the future. These people go to the temple and pray, "Buddha, if you make my sick relative recover and make my business flourish, I'll make offerings to you each year on this day."

This is the wrong attitude to have when making offerings. We aren't doing business with the Buddhas, as with the attitude, "Buddha, you deliver what I want, then I'll pay you." Offerings should be made with a good motivation, to eliminate our miserliness and to increase our joy in giving.

Some people make offerings as if they were in the business of earning merit. They regard merit as spiritual money and strive to collect it with a greedy mind. This is also an incorrect attitude. While it's beneficial to create positive potential, it's important to dedicate it for the welfare of everyone.

It's good to offer our food before eating. This enables us to stop and reflect for a moment, rather than gobble our food down with voracity the way hungry animals do. To offer our food, we think, "Food is like medicine which cures the suffering of hunger. I must preserve my life so that I can practice the Dharma and be of service to others. Food is the fuel which allows me to do so. Many beings were involved in growing, transporting and preparing this food. They were very kind, and to repay this I want to make my life meaningful. I can do this by offering the food to the Buddha with the motivation to become a Buddha myself for their benefit."

Then imagine the food as pure and sweet wisdom-nectar that gives great bliss. Visualize a small Buddha made of light at your heart center and offer this nectar to him or her. To consecrate it, recite "om ah hum" three times. This is a mantra representing the qualities of the Buddha's body, speech and mind. Then recite the following verses:

*I now take this food, without greed or repulsion,  
Nor merely for health, not for pleasure or comfort,  
But simply as a medicine to strengthen my body  
To attain enlightenment for the benefit of all.*

*The supreme teacher, the precious Buddha,  
The supreme refuge, the holy precious Dharma,  
The supreme guide, the precious Sangha  
To all of the objects of refuge I make this offering.*

*May myself and all those around me  
Never be separated from the Three Jewels in all future lives,  
May we continuously make offerings to the Three Jewels,  
May we receive the blessings and inspiration of the Three Jewels.*

While doing this we can close our eyes for a few moments, or if we're in a public place, we can visualize and say the prayers silently, with our eyes open.

3. Mindful of the compassion of the Three Jewels, we should encourage others to take refuge in them. When we recall how the Buddhas practiced the path and how the Sangha is practicing the path to help us, their compassion towards us becomes obvious. Their kindness to teach us the Dharma, guide us, set a good example and inspire us is inconceivably vast.

Aware of the benefit that taking refuge and following the Dharma has had on our own lives, we'll want to share this fortune with others. However, pressuring people to come to Dharma talks or forcing our beliefs on others is both unskillful and rude. We shouldn't have a football team mentality thinking, "My religion is better than yours. I'm going to win more converts than you." We aren't in competition with other religions.

Nor should we go to the other extreme, keeping all Buddhist activities quiet, not publicizing them at all. If no one had organized and publicized Buddhist teachings, I never would have heard about the Dharma. I'm grateful to those who created the opportunity for me to contact and practice the Buddha's teachings.

Similarly, we can let others know about Buddhist teachings and activities and encourage them to come if they wish. To people who have no interest in Buddhism per se, we can express the meaning of the teachings in ordinary language. After all, much of Buddhism is common sense. For instance, we can talk to others about the faults of anger and how to calm hatred, without using any Buddhist vocabulary. We can explain the disadvantages of selfishness and the advantages of kindness toward others in ordinary language.

In addition, others will notice our behavior and will wonder how we're able to remain calm and happy in bad circumstances. We needn't speak one word of Dharma to them, but by our actions they'll see the benefits of Dharma practice and will be curious about what we do. Some of my relatives once said to me, "You didn't get angry when that person criticized you!" After that, they became more open to learning about Buddhism.

4. Remembering the benefits of taking refuge, we should take refuge three times in the morning and three times in the evening, by reciting and reflecting upon any of the refuge prayers.

It's extremely beneficial to start our day off in a positive way. When the alarm clock rings, let's try to make our first thoughts, "How fortunate I am to be alive and to have the opportunity to practice the Dharma. The Three Jewels are reliable guides to lead me along the path to enlightenment. The best way to take the essence from my life is to develop the attitude of cherishing others and wanting to benefit them. Therefore, today, as much as possible, I'll avoid harming others and will be kind and help them."

Then we can recite three times the prayer for taking refuge and generating the altruistic intention:

*I take refuge until I have awakened in the Buddhas,  
the Dharma and the Sangha. By the merit I create by engaging  
in generosity and the other far-reaching practices, may I  
attain Buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings.*

It takes only a few moments to think about these things and recite the prayer, yet doing so has a significant effect on the rest of the day. We'll be more cheerful and will be sure of our direction in life. Especially if we don't do a regular meditation practice, starting the day in this way is extremely beneficial.

In the evening, after reviewing the day's activities and freeing our minds from any remaining disturbing attitudes that may have arisen during the day, we should again take refuge and generate the altruistic intention.

Before going to sleep, we can envision the Buddha, made of light, on our pillow. Placing our head in his lap, we'll fall asleep amidst the gentle glow of his wisdom and compassion.

5. We should do all actions by entrusting ourselves to the Three Jewels. When we're nervous, it's good to visualize the Buddha, make requests, and imagine light radiating from the Buddha which enters our body, filling it completely. If we're in danger, we can make prayers and request the Three Jewels for help and guidance.

Entrusting ourselves to the Three Jewels also refers to remembering their instructions. For example, when we become angry, we should recall the techniques to cultivate patience. When we feel jealous, we can instead rejoice in others' happiness and good qualities. Our Dharma practice is our best refuge, for with it we'll develop the beneficial and correct attitudes that resolve our problems.

6. We shouldn't forsake our refuge if our lives are threatened or for a joke. Whether we're happy or sad, maintaining confidence in and a good relationship with the Three Jewels is important. Some people become so distracted when enjoying pleasures of the senses that they forget their Dharma practice. Others become so discouraged when misfortune strikes that they forget the Three Jewels. Forgetting our refuge is harmful, for we betray our own inner resolve to make our lives useful.

By knowing that the Three Jewels are our best friends who will never abandon us, we'll always keep them in our hearts, no matter what external conditions we encounter.

All the above guidelines were set forth to help us make our lives meaningful. They are attitudes and actions that we train ourselves in gradually. It's wasted energy to feel we're guilty or bad because we don't follow these guidelines perfectly right now. Such self-judgment immobilizes us.

Instead, we can learn the guidelines and try to implement them as much as we can, reviewing them periodically to refresh our minds. We may choose one guideline to emphasize this week in our daily lives. Next week, we can add another, and so on. In that way, we'll slowly build up the good habits of practicing all of them.

# LIFE WITHOUT SILA IS LIKE A CAR WITHOUT BRAKES

## BY BHIKKHU AMARO

A talk given in Diamond Heights, San Francisco, Summer 1992

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The subject of sila, or virtuous, beautiful conduct, is a very tricky area which people often misunderstand. It is therefore an area where we can benefit from some guidance and instruction -- some understanding about how to best conduct ourselves in the manner in which we relate, both to our own life and to other people.

Often, we are attracted to the Buddha's teaching because it cuts right to the very heart of our experience. I was certainly drawn by the ultimate and incisive nature of it -- in particular, the teachings on emptiness. This seemed to be one of the most important aspects of the teachings -- i.e. that which pertains to transcendent, ultimate reality.

In Western culture, we tend to not want to settle for second best. We want to aim for the top and we can tend towards the same kind of attitude in our approach to religious life. Why bother with the provisional teachings, the kindergarten stuff, when we can go for enlightenment just by the use of these powerful insights into selflessness and emptiness, or into the essential Buddha nature of all beings? You come across this in different Buddhist traditions, particularly Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. This aspect of the teaching, that all beings are Buddhas and everything is perfect just as it is, was stressed in Buddhism's early years in the West. "We just have to awaken to the perfection that comprises everything around us. And once we have that realization we can act in whatever way pleases us. If we are all Buddhas, then we act as Buddhas and everything that a Buddha says and does is perfect." So, the teaching was often interpreted in a way to justify any kind of activity. With the back-up of Ultimate Truth, everything is perfect. So, no matter what I do or how it looks to you, or to the police, it's all perfect.

On an ultimate level this is true. But this truth is something which has caused a great deal of confusion in the Buddhist world. Even though it's a very attractive, powerful, and liberating aspect of the Buddha's teaching, it can be badly misunderstood. I remember years ago being given a book called 'I Am That' by Nisargadatta Maharaj. Reading this book is like listening to God speaking -- mighty stuff. In one passage somebody asked Nisargadatta about his own spiritual training. He very rarely referred to any kind of training at all but just to the act of being awake. He said that if you just wake up to the reality of what you are, then everything is fine. The questioner persisted and eventually he said: "The teacher told

me, 'You are the Ultimate Reality -- do not doubt my words.'" Nisargadatta's comment then is something like: "So, I just acted accordingly." End of subject! I remember thinking, "That's it!? That's all there is to it? Maybe he, as some special kind of person, was the Ultimate Reality, but what about all the rest of us?" It was so raw and direct, but, eventually, something in my heart said, "Yes, it's true -- for everyone. That's all there is to it."

But then we tend to find that what may have been a valid insight, after a while, just becomes a memory of something that we believe we have accomplished. We take it as some kind of credit card that we can keep spending on and never pay the bill -- because there's no one there to send it to. It is just as if you received your account from Visa and returned it to them saying, "There is no one here. No-one actually owns this card. Therefore here is your bill returned." If you did this you'd soon receive a visit from someone in a uniform!

This interpretation has been a common occurrence in the West, causing a lot of distress: people have taken some big mystical experience, or ratification by a spiritual authority (such as being named a Dharma Heir) or some approval by a teacher of great reputation, as an indication of their enlightenment. I've heard of people saying, 'You don't understand what I do because I'm enlightened and you are not. Therefore, you can't understand the motives of my actions. You should not question what I do.' Anything can be justified by this outlet.

In Christian history something very similar to this was known as the 'Antinomian Heresy' (literally it means 'exempt from the law'). There was a group of early Christians who believed that anything done in the name of Christ was a pure act. They caused a lot of trouble and were eventually squashed by the church. I find it interesting to see that the same dynamic occurred so long ago (and has done a few times since then in the Christian world). Individuals thinking that, if they have some kind of credential or authority behind them, like Jesus or a great Guru or Roshi, who says, "Okay, you've got it. Well done, I'm right behind you. You are the owner of the lineage. It's not you acting, it's just the Buddha nature within you" -- taking that for granted, we don't necessarily recognize our own, ego-motivated actions, desires, opinions and views. Or we justify them as being 'Sleeping Buddha' or 'Angry Buddha' or 'Lustful Buddha' and drift further and further off the path. And usually we find that we've taken a number of people with us.

I'm sure many of you are aware of the distress caused in Buddhist circles over recent years around this point and this misunderstanding. As I have said, this ultimate viewpoint is valid. It has its own verity -- that qualities of good and evil are only relative truths. Somewhere in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' it says, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." That is certainly true from the ultimate point of view, but from the relative perspective there is definitely good and there is bad, right and wrong. There is beautiful conduct and that which is ugly. So we must not only take things from the ultimate perspective, but use a bit of common sense as well; not just operate from idealism but look at life in terms of realism and practicality too.

It is stressed over and over again in classical Buddhist teachings that a deep insight does not negate the need to behave respectfully and carefully towards other people, to the things of the earth and towards social conventions. One of the disciples of a Master of Chan meditation was telling me that, even though his teacher is spiritually very highly accomplished, he very rarely gives talks on emptiness. This despite the fact that he is eminently capable of doing so. In most of his Dharma talks he teaches about doing good and



keeping the Precepts. Regardless of his audience he tends to stress the need for a profound sense of moral integrity.

This monk also told me an interesting story about their early days, in the Sixties, when their monastery was situated in an old mattress factory down in the Mission District of San Francisco. In those days, amongst all the other luminaries of San Francisco, there was a character called Sufi Sam. He was one of the psychedelic gurus of the time. Sufi Sam was quite a wealthy man who kept open house and provided free psychedelics and booze for anyone who wanted to come and join the party, that is, be part of his group and/or join in the general spiritual free-for-all. He pulled in quite a few people and actually helped a good number of them. He was very much a do-whatever-you-want-to-do, be-whatever-you-want-to-be kind of teacher, as far as I understand. And he taught that we are all God/Buddha/The Great Whatever-it-is -- however you want to name it.

As the story goes, one day Sufi Sam fell down the stairs and died. The following day about 20 of his disciples -- slightly starry-eyed, long-haired colorful characters -- showed up at this very strict Chinese meditation monastery. They explained that on the previous night, following the death of Sufi Sam, eight of them had all dreamed the same dream. In their dreams, Sufi Sam appeared saying, "You should go to see Master Hua and you should take refuge with him. Don't carry on the way I've been teaching you. Go with him and tidy up your act." It was interesting that, coming from a very liberal and open-ended approach, Sufi Sam should say (albeit under slightly exotic circumstances -- from the other side) that what his disciples should do is learn how to contain and restrain themselves and guide their lives in a more wholesome way.

When Ajahn Chah came to the West he noticed that many people asked questions about selflessness, emptiness, and Ultimate Reality. Yet he could see how people were, how they operated, and he started to stress the keeping of Precepts -- he tried to bring people down to earth. He saw that what we did not need was more of a passport to ignore the practical realities of human living by spacing out into some pseudo-transcendental realm, making that our aim whilst neglecting the world of relative truth.

The reason why the Buddha put a lot of emphasis on the Precepts, and also why the more orthodox Buddhist teachers stress them in other groups in the West, is precisely because of the pain and difficulty caused when we don't abide by some kind of guidance system. You can liken not adhering to a moral discipline to driving a car without brakes. (This is a very apt symbol for San Francisco -- you've got some pretty impressive hills here!) If you imagine what driving a car without brakes here would be like, it doesn't take much to recognize that you could really pile up seriously.

So, that's what the aspects of self-control and self-discipline are about within the Buddhist training -- just making sure that the brakes on your car work. Having a car that can accelerate and go places fast is fine, but if you don't have brakes, when the road bends you will be in trouble. When we reach a stop sign or a crossroads we need to be able to stop. Life is not all empty roads and green lights; other traffic, red lights and so on abound.

What you find in the Buddha's approach towards *sila*, or virtue, is that it is not an imposition upon life -- as if he were thinking, "All religions are about telling people that they can't have fun, so I suppose mine will have to be that way too." His approach was neither an effort to put the dampers on everything people find enjoyable, nor was it a gratuitous imposition of rules upon people. But my experience of it (and what initially

attracted me to the Teaching) was that it was a simple effort to pinpoint the areas of life where we get ourselves into trouble most easily, where life is most karmically loaded; so it's more like pointing out the danger spots and encouraging us to be careful. The Buddha wasn't saying that something is inherently bad or wrong, but that if we don't develop some kind of sensitivity to these difficult areas of our lives, if we don't look out for trouble spots and problems, it's like driving with your eyes closed, or like driving without brakes. "You're going to be fine for a while, friend, but don't expect me to be around to pick up the pieces when you collide with something."

Looking at the Five Precepts for the Buddhist laity, they are very much presented in this spirit. They are there as guidelines to help us, not as the voice of the Lord dumped upon us. So, often people are concerned about what sort of standard to follow, how strictly to apply the Precepts. This is, of course, up to each individual. The Buddha presented them in quite a formalized way so that there is a clear standard, but we can apply them in differing strengths. In different cultures, what is considered right and wrong varies somewhat.

The first precept is not to take the life of any living creature. This comes from a basic respectfulness of life and is about controlling aggression. If it is taken very scrupulously, then we avoid all unnecessary taking of life -- even the tiniest insects, mosquitoes or the greenflies who are doing terrible things to our roses. The precept is there to make us think about what is most important to us. "Are my roses more important, or is the life of this creature?"

I once had a potted plant, a chrysanthemum. At first it looked vital and healthy with lots of flowers, I suspect because it had been jammed full of chemicals in the flower shop. Then, of course, it got a bit exhausted. As you might know, when a flower gets weak the greenflies sniff it out from across the garden. After a while this poor plant was covered in greenfly. I wondered what to do about it. First of all I picked the greenflies off with a feather and took them outside. This was quite laborious because they multiply at an alarming rate. Eventually, I looked at my plant and said, "I am not going to keep a plant anymore. I'll look at it as a greenfly farm. I'll just keep pet greenflies instead!" (Did any of you ever read E. E. Cummings' poem about his uncle Sol's worm farm?) I am not necessarily suggesting that this is the approach one has to take. But, certainly, we can terminate a lot of suffering by changing our attitude to what we expect or want out of life.

Last weekend we were down at the Ojai Foundation having a meditation day, but we were not allowed to use any of their buildings. It seemed that they'd had some problems with the planning authorities so we had to have all of our sittings outside. In that area of the State, there is a very potent biting fly. We could feel these little flies landing on us as we tried to meditate. It was very good for concentration as we felt these little critters land and sink their jaws in. Quite naturally, the first reaction is, "These flies are obstructing my meditation practice, they shouldn't be here." But then I realized that I was just getting annoyed with them for biting me. From their perspective, we came and sat on their hillside, a five-star food source, radiating heat and all sorts of interesting smells. So they think, "Well, whoopee. Drive-in, free burgers." If we just change it around and consider instead -- "I'm not here to meditate, I've just come to feed a few flies. I'm having a fly-feeding day. Of course, if I am going to feed such flies, it is going to hurt a little bit. That's just part of the deal." By changing our mind around we can relate to the whole world in a very different way.

I've just used these examples so we can see how to work with the precepts and use them to help us live in a much more unselfish way. But the precepts don't only relate to external things, they also relate to the inner world. We try to refrain from killing off anything in the mind, like wanting to kill our selfishness, anger or jealousy. Rather we try to develop a mind which is able to work with, accommodate and deal with things in a non-competitive, non-confrontational way. We learn to work with the differing aspects of the mind rather than attacking and aggressing against them.

The second precept is about acquisition or greed, the desire for owning things. The text of the precept is: "I undertake to refrain from taking that which is not given." Which means that we need to learn to live just by what comes to us, to live without taking more than we need from life. So it not only means refraining from stealing possessions or money or defrauding people, but also developing a sense of contentment with what we've got, learning not to chase things just for the sake of acquisition. In this culture, this is a highly rebellious principle: most of us here this evening are not hell-bent on becoming millionaires by the end of the year, but still, the whole ethic of 'more is better' easily creeps into us. Even if we're way above wanting fancy cars or loads of money, we can still want loads of spiritual acquisitions -- sublime states of mind, beautiful Buddha images, or wonderful spiritual books. Often there is greed for significant experiences; these we can end up using solely to gain a reputation for having great wisdom, or to inflate our egos or to impress our friends. So the second precept is helping us to guard against greed of all kinds, and accumulation for its own sake.

The third precept is probably the most tricky one. I have heard tell how, when Ajahn Chah came to the United States in 1979, he was teaching at IMS and giving a talk about the precepts to an audience of around 100 people who were on retreat at the time. When he got onto the third precept, which is about sexuality and the proper use of sexual behavior, he went on for about twenty minutes without giving the translator a chance to get a word in. He really got into his stride! It was quite a task to convey it all in English, but one could see that this was obviously something that needed to be explained in detail. It's an area which is very personal to people and it is difficult to have an objective standard for it -- particularly in today's society where many of the traditional boundaries have shifted radically.

I've contemplated this question a lot because people have asked about it so many times over the years. To use a classical standard -- e.g. to say that people should not have sex before marriage -- is so completely out of tune with the way life is in the Western world these days that if I promoted such a standard there would probably, and rapidly, be a much smaller group of people who gave any credence to the things that I said! Even just the idea that a relationship should be between one man and one woman is a great presumption nowadays. Because to be in a partnership of a man with another man or a woman with another woman is pretty common -- particularly in this town! So one needs to have some sort of objective standard, whereby sexuality is not just being used as a distraction, for some selfish end, or simply to maximize pleasure for oneself, but much more with a quality of responsibility and commitment. A standard that I might suggest (and this is just for everyone to consider...) is to refrain from engaging in sexual intercourse with anyone you wouldn't be prepared to spend the rest of your life with. Not intending to, just prepared to. This is only a suggestion -- I don't want to give anyone heart failure.

Now it might seem to be a bit of a check for someone who has been celibate for the last fifteen years to put such a thing to you. However, even though I was quite libertine in my ways, this is actually the standard that I used to live by before I was a monk; and this was before I was even a Buddhist. I did slip occasionally(!), particularly if I was blind drunk, but I must say that I found it a really helpful standard to consider: "Well, would I be prepared to spend the rest of my life with this person?" If the answer was "No," I found it much better to relate on the basis of friendship and to avoid going into the area of sexual engagement.

This is just a standard for you to contemplate; it might seem somewhat extreme but it does carry the use of sexual energy, and the sexual nature of our bodies, with a due sense of responsibility. So that sex is not just used for pleasure-seeking and so forth, but is a way of bonding ourselves to another person in a way that is wholesome, supportive and beneficial to both sides. The internal aspect of this standard is that we're not just trying to maximize the pleasure principle generally; instead we're inclining more towards a sense of responsibility, of caring for all things mental and physical rather than just using different kinds of pleasure to distract ourselves from boredom or for taking our mind off more painful things.

The fourth precept is on 'right speech'. In some of the Buddha's descriptions of the Five Precepts, he spent more time on this precept than he did on the other four precepts put together. This was quite striking to me when I first came across it, because what it said to me was that speech is our primary area of contact with other people, it is how we relate with others most immediately, most directly and most repeatedly; it is also the most loaded area of activity. Who we think we are and how we present ourselves to others is largely represented by what and how we speak. So the Buddha encouraged a great deal of care and sensitivity in our use of it.

The precept of 'right speech' is not just a matter of not lying, it's also to do with not gossiping, not back-biting, not talking about people behind their backs, and not using abusive or vulgar speech. In this way we're being careful and not letting those tendencies of the mind spill out into a more karmically loaded situation. We're not bringing those things into being carelessly. By applying sensitivity in the way we relate to other people, we're guarding those unwholesome tendencies of mind and restraining ourselves from just dumping them onto other people. We're not relating to others in a dishonest way, or in a selfish, spiteful, aggressive, or abusive way. Those tendencies of mind are checked at the mind door and not spread out into the world.

The last precept is to refrain from intoxication. To refrain from drink and drugs which cause the mind to become heedless. The popular interpretation of this is that it only means to not get drunk. But the wording of it is pretty clear: it means that one should avoid altogether that which causes us to be heedless. Again, I should reiterate that these sort of standards are not absolute; however, this is the pattern laid out by the Buddha, and he did so for a reason. The usual way of thinking is, "Well ... the occasional glass of wine over dinner ... it is uncivilized to say "no." People take you out and want to give you a pleasant evening and then you go and upset them by refusing their offer of a glass of Chablis." We can feel that it's quite unreasonable to refuse alcohol, or to not 'allow' ourselves a drop now and then ... or a few mushrooms....

But this is a standard that we're creating for ourselves because we see that, if we are heedless and careless with life, then we inevitably cause problems for ourselves and for other people. If we're more mindful, then we're much less likely to cause the same kind of

problems. It's a simple equation -- when we're mindful, we don't suffer. There might be pain or difficulty, but there's no anguish. The more heedless and careless we are, the more anguish and difficulty we generate. It is a very direct relationship. If we are deliberately clouding the mind and causing our natural qualities of restraint to be squashed, we might feel great at the time, but I am sure everyone is well-acquainted with what it feels like later on when we realize how we spoke, the things we did and the things that we brought into the world in those less guarded states. Again, I don't want to present this as a moralistic put-down, I simply bring attention to this so that we can notice what we do when the mind is distracted, confused or is modified in that kind of way.

In the formal ceremony of taking the Refuges and Precepts there is a little chant that the person who is giving the precepts recites. It says, "*Sila* is the vehicle for happiness; *sila* is the vehicle for good fortune; *sila* is the vehicle for liberation -- therefore let *sila* be purified."

According to the Buddha's teaching, the whole process of liberation necessarily begins with moral restraint -- a respect for the way that we act, speak and relate with each other. We might feel that to follow our feelings, fears and desires -- to act in a free and uninhibited way -- is Right Action in the sense that we are 'honoring' those feelings. However, that restraint and inhibition can be a very wise sense of right and wrong, and is what the Buddha called *hiri-ottappa* and he described it as 'The guarding and protecting principle of the world' -- *lokapala*. It is that simple feeling of 'This is the right thing to do, this is good, this is noble,' or 'This is wrong, this is ignoble.' To act in a restrained and careful way, keeping the precepts, isn't something which is inherently good -- there is no such thing. But what it does is to free the mind from having to remember and live through the reverberations of unwholesome karmic action. If we're unkind and cruel and selfish then we have to remember that. So it's not that 'goodness' is something absolute; more accurately, it is that if we behave in a good and wholesome way, it leaves the mind clearer and more peaceful than if we behave in a selfish, greedy or cruel way, which leaves the mind in a turbulent state. It's a very straightforward relationship.

So we can see that, just by keeping the *sila*, observing the precepts, the mind is naturally freed from remorse. There's nothing horrible that we have done that we have to justify or remember. When the mind is free from remorse then we feel a natural contentment, a sense of gladness that alleviates self-criticism and depression. (This is perhaps a revolutionary approach to the psychotherapeutic treatment of a negative self-image.) In the same vein, along with that quality of happiness, the body and mind become relaxed and at ease with life. We're not caused to be tense and agitated. When there is that kind of physical and mental ease, then we really begin to enjoy the way we are and the way life is. The mind is open and much more bright.

If the mind is content and joyful with the here and now, then we find that it's much easier to develop meditation. If this 'place' is pleasant and comfortable we are not going to want to be off in the past or the future or somewhere else all the time. If San Francisco is a good town and you enjoy your life here, you don't feel like you have to move to Oregon or England, or to the South of France. This principle works in the same way with the mind.

This is why, if we ever want to develop concentration or good states of meditation, then we behave in a very restrained and careful way. On retreats we have a routine and strict discipline so we're not filling our minds with stuff which we have to remember, causing disturbance. The environment is carefully controlled so as not to create that kind of effect. In

the same way, if our whole life is being guided by sila, then we're consistently providing a quality of joyfulness and contentment in the here and now.

With the development of samadhi -- the more the mind is steady, stable and open to the here and now -- the qualities of insight and understanding naturally arise. The more clearly we look at where we are and what's in front of us, then the more able we are to discern the patterns that are there -- the way that life works and functions. And that quality of 'knowledge and vision of the way things are' then brings about a profound seeing into the true nature of reality. The tendency to reject or grasp hold of things is then weakened -- as we see into the transient nature of things, we no longer try to possess the beautiful or run away from the painful -- instead we experience it directly as a flow of different aspects of nature.

The more empty and serene the mind is in its attitude towards the comings and goings of the changes in the sensory world, the more the heart is at ease with life. There is a realization of the innate, natural freedom of the mind -- there are no obstructions to the natural peace and brightness of the mind. The mind's pure, original nature then becomes the abiding experience, and this is what we mean by 'enlightenment' or 'liberation'. Nothing has been gained, it is merely the discovery of what was always there but had remained hidden.

These steps all occur as a process of evolution, one stage following naturally upon another. Just as we grow from babies into infants, into children, adolescents, then into adulthood and old age -- so too, if we start with sila, then these other steps of the process will occur in time on their own. It is the basis, the sine qua non of the spiritual life -- you can't get to be an adult without having been a child first. If there isn't that basis then, as far as I can see, we are seriously obstructing that whole process of evolution from occurring. We are disabling ourselves from fulfilling the wonderful potential that we have as human beings.

# THE FIVE WONDERFUL PRECEPTS

## BY THICH NHAT HANH\*

From *For a Future to be Possible*

*The Five Wonderful Precepts below are Zen Master Thich Nhat's Hanh's translation of the five basic precepts as taught by the Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha offered these precepts to both his ordained and lay followers so that they could have clear guidelines to lead mindful and joyful lives on the path to awakening. Thich Nhat Hanh has updated the precepts so that they are beautifully appropriate and relevant in today's society. In his book entitled "For a Future to be Possible," Thich Nhat Hanh describes in detail how the Five Wonderful Precepts can be used by anyone in today's world to create a more harmonious and peaceful life.*

### Introduction

I have been in the West for twenty-seven years, and for the past ten I have been leading mindfulness retreats in Europe, Australia, and North America. During these retreats, my students and I have heard many stories of suffering, and we have been dismayed to learn how much of this suffering is the result of alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual abuse, and similar behaviors that have been passed down from generation to generation.

There is a deep malaise in society. When we put a young person in this society without trying to protect him, he receives violence, hatred, fear and insecurity every day, and eventually he gets sick. Our conversations, TV programs, advertisements, newspapers, and magazines all water the seeds of suffering in young people, and in not-so-young people as well. We feel a kind of vacuum in ourselves, and we try to fill it by eating, reading, talking, smoking, drinking, watching TV, going to the movies, or even overworking. Taking refuge in these things only makes us feel hungrier and less satisfied, and we want to ingest even more. We need some guidelines, some preventive medicine, to protect ourselves, so we can become healthy again. We have to find a cure for our illness. We have to find something that is good, beautiful, and true in which we can take refuge.

When we drive a car, we are expected to observe certain rules so that we do not have an accident. Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha offered certain guidelines to his lay students to help them live peaceful, wholesome, and happy lives. They were the Five Wonderful Precepts, and at the foundation of each of these precepts is mindfulness. With mindfulness, we are aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and the world, and we avoid doing harm to ourselves and others. Mindfulness protects us, our families, and our society, and ensures a safe and happy present and a safe and happy future.

In Buddhism, precepts, concentration, and insight always go together. It is impossible to speak of one without the other two. This is called the Threefold Training—*sila*, the practice

\* Although Thich Nhat Hanh's expanded interpretation and explanation of the five lay precepts differs from that explained by Venerable Chodron, reading and thinking about the above explanation can help broaden our understanding and appreciation for what it means to guard our ethical conduct.

of the precepts; *samadhi*, the practice of concentration; and *prajna*, the practice of insight. Precepts, concentration, and insight “inter-are.” Practicing the precepts brings about concentration, and concentration is needed for insight. Mindfulness is the ground for concentration, concentration allows us to look deeply, and insight is the fruit of looking deeply. When we are mindful, we can see that by refraining from doing “this,” we prevent “that” from happening. This kind of insight is not imposed on us by an outside authority. It is the fruit of our own observation. Practicing the precepts, therefore, helps us be more calm and concentrated and brings more insight and enlightenment, which makes our practice of the precepts more solid. The three are intertwined; each helps the other two, and all three bring us closer to final liberation—the end of “leaking.” They prevent us from falling back into illusion and suffering. When we are able to step out of the stream of suffering, it is called *anasvara*, “to stop leaking.” As long as we continue to leak, we are like a vessel with a crack, and inevitably we will fall into suffering, sorrow, and delusion.

The Five Wonderful Precepts are love itself. To love is to understand, protect, and bring well-being to the object of our love. The practice of the precepts accomplishes this. We protect ourselves and we protect each other.

The translation of the Five Wonderful Precepts presented in this book is new. It is the result of insights gained from practicing together as a community. A spiritual tradition is like a tree. It needs to be watered in order to spring forth new leaves and branches, so it can continue to be a living reality. We help the tree of Buddhism grow by living deeply the essence of reality, the practice of precepts, concentration, and insight. If we continue to practice the precepts deeply, in relation to our society and culture, I am confident that our children and their children will have an even better understanding of the Five Precepts and will obtain even deeper peace and joy.

In Buddhist circles, one of the first expressions of our desire to practice the way of understanding and love is to formally receive the Five Wonderful Precepts from a teacher. During the ceremony, the teacher reads each precept, and then the student repeats it and vows to study, practice, and observe the precept read. It is remarkable to see the peace and happiness in someone the moment she receives the precepts. Before making the decision to receive them, she may have felt confused, but with the decision to practice the precepts, many bonds of attachment and confusion are cut. After the ceremony is over, you can see in her face that she has been liberated to a great extent.

When you vow to observe even one precept, that strong decision arising from your insight leads to real freedom and happiness. The community is there to support you and to witness the birth of your insight and determination. A precepts ceremony has the power of cutting through, liberating, and building. After the ceremony, if you continue to practice the precepts, looking deeply in order to have deeper insight concerning reality, your peace and liberation will increase. The way you practice the precepts reveals the depth of your peace and the depth of your insight.

Whenever someone formally vows to study, practice, and observe the Five Wonderful Precepts, he also takes refuge in the Three Jewels—*Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha*. Practicing the Five Wonderful Precepts is a concrete expression of our appreciation and trust in these Three Jewels. The Buddha is mindfulness itself; the Dharma is the way of understanding and love; and the Sangha is the community that supports our practice.



The Five Precepts and the Three Jewels are worthy objects for our faith. They are not at all abstract—we can learn, practice, explore, extend, and check them against our own experience. To study and practice them will surely bring peace and happiness to ourselves, our community, and our society. We human beings need something to believe in, something that is good, beautiful, and true, something that we can touch. Faith in the practice of mindfulness—in the Five Wonderful Precepts and the Three Jewels—is something anyone can discover, appreciate, and integrate into his or her daily life.

The Five Wonderful Precepts and the Three Jewels have their equivalents in all spiritual traditions. They come from deep within us and practicing them helps us be more rooted in our own tradition. After you study the Five Wonderful Precepts and the Three Jewels, I hope you will go back to your own tradition and shed light on the jewels that are already there. The Five Precepts are medicine for our time. I urge you to practice them the way they are presented here or as they are taught in your own tradition.

What is the best way to practice the precepts? I do not know. I am still learning, along with you. I appreciate the phrase that is used in the Five Precepts: to “learn ways.” We do not know everything. But we can minimize our ignorance. Confucius said, “To know that you don’t know is the beginning of knowing.” I think this is the way to practice. We should be modest and open so we can learn together. We need a Sangha, a community, to support us, and we need to stay in close touch with our society to practice the precepts well. Many of today’s problems did not exist at the time of the Buddha. Therefore, we have to look deeply together in order to develop the insights that will help us and our children find better ways to live wholesome, happy, and healthy lives.

When someone asks, “Do you care? Do you care about me? Do you care about life? Do you care about the Earth?” The best way to answer is to practice the Five Precepts. This is to teach with your actions and not just with words. If you really care, please practice these precepts for your own protection and for the protection of other people and species. If we do our best to practice, a future will be possible for us, our children, and their children.

## **The First Precept: Reverence for Life**

.....  
*“Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.”*  
.....

Life is precious. It is everywhere, inside us and all around us; it has so many forms.

The First Precept is born from the awareness that lives everywhere are being destroyed. We see the suffering caused by the destruction of life, and we undertake to cultivate compassion and use it as a source of energy for the protection of people, animals, plants, and

minerals. The First Precept is a precept of compassion, *karuna*—the ability to remove suffering and transform it. When we see suffering, compassion is born in us.

It is important for us to stay in touch with the suffering of the world. We need to nourish that awareness through many means—sounds, images, direct contact, visits, and so on—in order to keep compassion alive in us. But we must be careful not to take in too much. Any remedy must be taken in the proper dosage. We need to stay in touch with suffering only to the extent that we will not forget, so that compassion will flow within us and be a source of energy for our actions. If we use anger at injustice as the source for our energy, we may do something harmful, something that we will later regret. According to Buddhism, compassion is the only source of energy that is useful and safe. With compassion, your energy is born from insight; it is not blind energy.

We humans are made entirely of non-human elements, such as plants, minerals, earth, clouds, and sunshine. For our practice to be deep and true, we must include the ecosystem. If the environment is destroyed, humans will be destroyed, too. Protecting human life is not possible without also protecting the lives of animals, plants, and minerals. The Diamond Sutra teaches us that it is impossible to distinguish between sentient and non-sentient beings. This is one of many ancient Buddhist texts that teach deep ecology. Every Buddhist practitioner should be a protector of the environment. Minerals have their own lives, too. In Buddhist monasteries, we chant, “Both sentient and non-sentient beings will realize full enlightenment.” The First Precept is the practice of protecting all lives, including the lives of minerals.

*“I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.”*

We cannot support any act of killing; no killing can be justified. But not to kill is not enough. We must also learn ways to prevent others from killing. We cannot say, “I am not responsible. They did it. My hands are clean.” If you were in Germany during the time of the Nazis, you could not say, “They did it. I did not.” If, during the Gulf War, you did not say or do anything to try to stop the killing, you were not practicing this precept. Even if what you said or did failed to stop the war, what is important is that you tried, using your insight and compassion

It is not just by not killing with your body that you observe the First Precept. If in your thinking you allow the killing to go on, you also break this precept. We must be determined not to condone killing, even in our minds. According to the Buddha, the mind is the base of all actions. It is most dangerous to kill in the mind. When you believe, for example that yours is the only way for humankind and that everyone who follows another way is your enemy, millions of people could be killed because of that idea.

Thinking is at the base of everything. It is important for us to put an eye of awareness into each of our thoughts. Without a correct understanding of a situation or a person, our thoughts can be misleading and create confusion, despair, anger, or hatred. Our most important task is to develop correct insight. If you see deeply into the nature of interbeing, that all things “inter-are,” we will stop blaming, arguing, and killing, and we will become friends with everyone. To practice nonviolence, we must first of all learn ways to deal peacefully with ourselves. If we create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with family, friends, and associates.

When we protest against a war, for example, we may assume that we are a peaceful person, a representative of peace, but this might not be true. If we look deeply, we will observe that the roots of war are in the unmindful ways we have been living. We have not sown enough seeds of peace and understanding in ourselves and others, therefore we are co-responsible: “Because I have been like this, they are like that.” A more holistic approach is the way of “interbeing:” “This is like this, because that is like that.” This is the way of understanding and love. With this insight, we can see clearly and help our government see clearly. Then we can go to a demonstration and say, “This war is unjust, destructive, and not worthy of our great nation.” This is far more effective than angrily condemning others. Anger always accelerates the damage.

All of us, even pacifists, have pain inside. We feel angry and frustrated, and we need to find someone willing to listen to us who is capable of understanding our suffering. In Buddhist iconography, there is a bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara who has one thousand arms and one thousand hands, and has an eye in the palm of each hand. One thousand hands represent action, and the eye in each hand represents understanding. When you understand a situation or a person, any action you do will help and will not cause more suffering. When you have an eye in your hand, you will know how to practice true nonviolence.

To practice nonviolence, first of all we have to practice it within ourselves. In each of us, there is a certain amount of violence and a certain amount of nonviolence. Depending on our state of being, our response to things will be more or less nonviolent. Even if we take pride in being vegetarian, for example, we have to acknowledge that the water in which we boil our vegetables contains many tiny microorganisms. We cannot be completely nonviolent, but by being vegetarian, we are going in the direction of nonviolence. If we want to head north, we can use the North Star to guide us, but it is impossible to arrive at the North Star. Our effort is only to proceed in that direction.

Anyone can practice some nonviolence, even army generals. They may, for example, conduct their operations in ways that avoid killing innocent people. To help soldiers move in the nonviolent direction, we have to be in touch with them. If we divide reality into two camps—the violent and the nonviolent—and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace. We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves. We must work on ourselves and also work with those we condemn if we want to have a real impact.

It never helps to draw a line and dismiss some people as enemies, even those who act violently. We have to approach them with love in our hearts and do our best to help them move in a direction of nonviolence. If we work for peace out of anger, we will never succeed. Peace is not an end. It can never come about through non-peaceful means.

Most important is to become nonviolence, so that when a situation presents itself, we will not create more suffering. To practice nonviolence, we need gentleness, loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity directed to our bodies, our feelings, and other people. With mindfulness—the practice of peace—we can begin by working to transform the wars in ourselves. There are techniques for doing this. Conscious breathing is one. Every time we feel upset, we can stop what we are doing, refrain from saying anything, and breathe in and out several times, aware of each in-breath and each out-breath. If we are still upset, we can go for walking meditation, mindful of each slow step and each breath we take.

By cultivating peace within, we bring about peace in society. It depends on us. To practice peace in ourselves is to minimize the numbers of wars between this and that feeling, or this and that perception, and we can then have real peace with others as well, including the members of our family.

I am often asked, “What if you are practicing nonviolence and someone breaks into your house and tries to kidnap your daughter or kill your husband? What should you do? Should you act in a nonviolent way?” The answer depends on your state of being. If you are prepared, you may react calmly and intelligently, in the most nonviolent way possible. But to be ready to react with intelligence and nonviolence, you have to train yourself in advance. It may take ten years, or longer. If you wait until the time of crisis to ask the question, it will be too late. A this-or-that kind of answer would be superficial. At that crucial moment, even if you know that nonviolence is better than violence, if your understanding is only intellectual and not in your whole beings, you will not act nonviolently. The fear and anger in you will prevent you from acting in the most nonviolent way.

We have to look deeply every day to practice this precept well. Every time we buy or consume something, we may be condoning some form of killing.

While practicing the protection of humans, animals, plants and minerals, we know that we are protecting ourselves. We feel in permanent and loving touch with all species on Earth. We are protected by mindfulness and the loving kindness of the Buddha and many generations of Sangha who also practice this precept. This energy of loving kindness brings us the feeling of safety, health, and joy, and this becomes real the moment we make the decision to receive and practice the First Precept.

Feeling compassion is not enough. We have to learn to express it. That is why love must go together with understanding. Understanding and insight show us how to act.

Our real enemy is forgetfulness. If we nourish mindfulness every day and water the seeds of peace in ourselves and those around us, we become alive, and we can help ourselves and others realize peace and compassion.

Life is so precious, yet in our daily lives we are usually carried away by our forgetfulness, anger, and worries, lost in the past, unable to touch life in the present moment. When we are truly alive, everything we do or touch is a miracle. To practice mindfulness is to return to life in the present moment. The practice of the First Precept is a celebration of reverence for life. When we appreciate and honor the beauty of life, we will do everything in our power to protect all life.

## The Second Precept: Generosity

.....  
*“Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I undertake to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I undertake to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.”*  
.....

Exploitation, social injustice, and stealing come in many forms. Oppression is one form of stealing that causes much suffering both here and in the Third World. The moment we undertake to cultivate loving kindness, loving kindness is born in us, and we make every effort to stop exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression.

In the First Precept, we found the word “compassion.” Here, we find the words “loving kindness.” Compassion and loving kindness are the two aspects of love taught by the Buddha. Compassion, *karuna* in Sanskrit and Pali, is the intention and capacity to relieve the suffering of another person or living being. Loving kindness, *maître* in Sanskrit, *metta* in Pali, is the intention and capacity to bring joy and happiness to another person or living being. It was predicted by Shakyamuni Buddha that the next Buddha will bear the name Maitreya, the Buddha of Love.

*“Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I undertake to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants and minerals.”* Even with *maître* as a source of energy in ourselves, we still need to learn to look deeply in order to find ways to express it. We do it as individuals, and we learn ways to do it as a nation. To promote the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals, we have to come together as a community and examine our situation, exercising our intelligence and our ability to look deeply so that we can discover appropriate ways to express our *maitri* in the midst of real problems.

Suppose you want to help those who are suffering under a dictatorship. In the past you may have tried sending in troops to overthrow their government, but you have learned that when doing that, you cause the deaths of many innocent people, and even then, you might not overthrow the dictator. If you practice looking more deeply, with loving kindness, to find a better way to help these people without causing suffering, you may realize that the best time to help is before the country falls into the hands of a dictator. If you offer the young people of that country the opportunity to learn your democratic ways of governing by giving them scholarships to come to your country, that would be a good investment for peace in the future. If you had done that thirty years ago, the other country might be democratic now, and you would not have to bomb them or send in troops to “liberate” them.

This is just one example of how looking deeply and learning can help us find ways to do things that are more in line with loving kindness. If we wait until the situation gets bad, it may be too late. If we practice the precepts together with politicians, soldiers, businessmen, lawyers, legislators, artists, writers, and teachers, we can find the best ways to practice compassion, loving kindness, and understanding.

It requires time to practice generosity. We may want to help those who are hungry, but we are caught in the problems of our own daily lives. Sometimes, one pill or a little rice could save the life of a child, but we do not take the time to help, because we think we do not have the time. In Ho Chi Minh City, for example, there are street children who call themselves “the dust of life.” They are homeless, and they wander the streets by day and sleep under trees at night. They scavenge in garbage heaps to find things like plastic bags they can sell for one or two cents per pound. The nuns and monks in Ho Chi Minh City have opened their temples to these children, and if the children agree to stay four hours in the morning—learning to read and write and playing with the monks and nuns—they are offered a vegetarian lunch. Then they can go to the Buddha hall for a nap. (In Vietnam, we always take naps after lunch; it is so hot. When the Americans came, they brought their practice of working eight hours, from nine to five. Many of us tried, but we could not do it. We desperately need our naps after lunch.)

Then at two o’clock there is more teaching and playing with the children, and the children who stay for the afternoon receive dinner. The temple does not have a place for them to sleep overnight. In our community in France, we have been supporting the nuns and monks. It costs only twenty cents for a child to have both lunch and dinner, and it will keep him from being out on the streets, where he might steal cigarettes, smoke, use delinquent language, and learn the worst behavior. By encouraging the children to go to the temple, we help prevent them from becoming delinquent and entering prison later on. It takes time to help these children, not much money. There are so many simple things like this we can do to help people, but because we cannot free ourselves from our situation and our lifestyle, we do nothing at all. We need to come together as a community, and, looking deeply, find ways to be free ourselves so we can practice the Second Precept.

*“I undertake to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need.”* This sentence is clear. The feeling of generosity and the capacity for being generous are not enough. We also need to express our generosity. We may feel that we don’t have the time to make people happy – we say, “Time is money,” but time is more than money. Life is for more than using time to make money. Time is for being alive, for sharing joy and happiness with others. The wealthy are often the least able to make others happy. Only those with time can do so.

I know a man named Bac Sieu in Thua Thien Province in Vietnam, who has been practicing generosity for fifty years; he is a living bodhisattva. With only a bicycle, he visits villages of thirteen provinces, bringing something for this family and something for that family. When I met him in 1965, I was a little too proud of our School of Youth for Social Service. We had begun to train three hundred workers, including monks and nuns, to go out to rural villages to help people rebuild homes and modernize local economies, health-care systems, and education. Eventually we had ten thousand workers throughout the country. As I was telling Bac Sieu about our projects, I was looking at his bicycle and thinking that with a bicycle he could help only a few people. But when the communists took over and closed

our School, Bac Sieu continued, because his way of working was formless. Our orphanages, dispensaries, schools, and resettlement centers were all shut down or taken by the government. Thousands of our workers had to stop their work and hide. But Bac Sieu had nothing to take. He was truly a bodhisattva, working for the well-being of others. I feel more humble now concerning the ways of practicing generosity.

The war created many thousands of orphans. Instead of raising money to build orphanages, we sought people in the West to sponsor a child. We found families in the villages to each take care of one orphan, then we sent \$6 every month to that family to feed the child and send him or her to school. Whenever possible, we tried to place the child in the family of an aunt, an uncle, or a grandparent. With just \$6, the child was fed and sent to school, and the rest of the children in the family were also helped. Children benefit from growing up in a family. Being in an orphanage can be like being in the army—children do not grow up naturally. If we look for and learn ways to practice generosity, we will improve all the time.

*“I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.”* When you practice one precept deeply, you will discover that you are practicing all five. The First Precept is about taking life, which is a form of stealing—stealing the most precious thing someone has, his or her life. When we meditate on the Second Precept, we see that stealing, in the forms of exploitation, social injustice, and oppression, are acts of killing—killing slowly by exploitation, by maintaining social injustice, and by political and economic oppression. Therefore, the Second Precept has much to do with the precept of not killing. We see the “interbeing” nature of the first two precepts. This is true of all Five Precepts. Some people formally receive just one or two precepts. I didn’t mind, because if you practice on or two precepts deeply, all Five Precepts will be observed.

The Second Precept is not to steal. Instead of stealing, exploiting, or oppressing, we practice generosity. In Buddhism, we say there are three kinds of gifts. The first is the gift of material resources. The second is to help people rely on themselves, to offer them the technology and know-how to stand on their own feet. Helping people with the Dharma so they can transform their fear, anger, and depression belongs to the second kind of gift. The third is the gift of non-fear. We are afraid of many things. We feel insecure, afraid of being alone, afraid of sickness and dying. To help people not be destroyed by their fears, we practice the third kind of gift-giving.

The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is someone who practices this extremely well. In the Heart Sutra, he teaches us the way to transform and transcend fear and ride on the waves of birth and death, smiling. He says that there is no production, no destruction, no being, no nonbeing, no increasing, and no decreasing. Hearing this helps us look deeply into the nature of reality to see that birth and death, being and nonbeing, coming and going, increasing and decreasing are all just ideas that we ascribe to reality, while reality transcends all concepts. When we realize the interbeing nature of all things—that even birth and death are just concepts—we transcend fear.

In 1991, I visited a friend in New York who was dying, Alfred Hassler. We had worked together in the peace movement for almost thirty years. Alfred looked as though he had been

waiting for me to come before dying, and he died only a few hours after our visit. I went with my closest colleague, Sister Chan Khong.

Alfred was not awake when we arrived. His daughter Laura tried to wake him up, but she couldn't. So I asked Sister Chan Khong to sing Alfred the *Song of No Coming and No Going*: "These eyes are not me, I am not caught by these eyes. This body is not me, I am not caught by this body. I am life without boundaries. I have never been born, I will never die." The idea is taken from *Samyutta Nikaya*. She sang so beautifully, and I saw streams of tears running down the faces of Alfred's wife and children. They were tears of understanding, and they were very healing.

Suddenly, Alfred came back to himself. Sister Chan Khong began to practice what she had learned from studying the sutra *The Teaching Given to the Sick*. She said, "Alfred, do you remember the times we worked together?" She evoked many happy memories we had shared together, and Alfred was able to remember each of them. Although he was obviously in pain, he smiled. This practice brought results right away. When a person is suffering from so much physical pain, we sometimes can alleviate his suffering by watering the seeds of happiness that are in him. A kind of balance is restored, and he will feel less pain.

All the while, I was practicing massage on his feet, and I asked him whether he felt my hand on his body. When you are dying, areas of your body become numb, and you feel as if you have lost those parts of your body. Doing massage in mindfulness, gently, gives the dying person the feeling that he is alive and being cared for. He knows that love is there. Alfred nodded, and his eyes seemed to say, "Yes, I feel your hands. I know my foot is there."

Sister Chan Khong asked, "Do you know we learned a lot from you when we lived and worked together? The work you began, many of us are continuing to do. Please don't worry about anything." She told him many things like that, and he seemed to suffer less. At one point, he opened his mouth and said, "Wonderful, wonderful." Then he sank back to sleep.

Before we left, we encouraged the family to continue these practices. The next day I learned that Alfred passed away just five hours after our visit. This was a kind of gift that belongs to the third category. If you can help people feel safe, less afraid of life, people, and death, you are practicing the third kind of gift.

During my meditation, I had a wonderful image—the shape of a wave, its beginning and its end. When conditions are sufficient, we perceive the wave, and when conditions are no longer sufficient, we do not perceive the wave. Waves are only made of water. We cannot label the waves as existing or nonexisting. After what we call the death of the wave, nothing is gone, nothing is lost. The wave has been absorbed into other waves, and somehow, time will bring the wave back again. There is no increasing, decreasing, birth, or death. When we are dying, if we think that everyone else is alive and we are the only person dying, our feeling of loneliness may be unbearable. But if we are able to visualize hundreds of thousands of people dying with us, our dying may become serene and even joyful. "I am dying in community. Millions of living beings are also dying in this very moment. I see myself together with millions of other living beings; we die in the Sangha. At the same time, millions of beings are coming to life. All of us are doing this together. I have been born, I am dying. We participate in the whole event as a Sangha." That is what I saw in my meditation. In the *Heart Sutra*, Avalokitesvara shares this kind of insight and helps us transcend fear, sorrow, and pain. The gift of non-fear brings about a transformation in us.



The Second Precept is a deep practice. We speak of time, energy, and material resources, but time is not only for energy and material resources. Time is for being with others—being with a dying person or with someone who is suffering. Being really present for even five minutes can be a very important gift. Time is not just to make money. It is to produce the gift of Dharma and the gift of non-fear.

### **The Third Precept: Sexual Responsibility**

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*“Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I undertake to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.”*

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So many individuals, children, couples, and families have been destroyed by sexual misconduct. To practice the Third Precept is to heal ourselves and heal our society. This is mindful living.

The Fifth Precept—not to consume alcohol, toxins, or drugs—and the Third Precept are linked. Both concern destructive and destabilizing behavior. These precepts are the right medicine to heal us. We need only to observe ourselves and those around us to see the truth. Our stability and the stability of our families and society cannot be obtained without the practice of these two precepts. If you look at individuals and families who are unstable and unhappy, you will see that many of them do not practice these precepts. You can make the diagnosis by yourself and then know that the medicine is there. Practicing these precepts is the best way to restore stability in the family and in society. For many people this precept is easy to practice, but for others, it is quite difficult. It is important for these people to come together and share their experiences.

In the Buddhist tradition, we speak of the oneness of body and mind. Whatever happens to the body also happens to the mind. The sanity of the body is the sanity of the mind; the violation of the body is the violation of the mind. When we are angry, we may think that we are angry in our feelings, not in our body, but that is not true. When we love someone, we want to be close to him or her physically, but when we are angry at someone, we don't want to touch or be touched by that person. We cannot say that body and mind are separate.

A sexual relationship is an act of communion between body and spirit. This is a very important encounter, not to be done in a casual manner. You know that in your soul there are certain areas—memories, pain, secrets—that are private, that you would only share with the person you love and trust the most. You do not open your heart and show it to just anyone. In

the imperial city, there is a zone you cannot approach called the forbidden city; only the king and his family are permitted to circulate there. There is a place like that in your soul that you do not allow anyone to approach except the one you trust and love the most.

The same is true of our body. Our bodies have areas that we do not want anyone to touch or approach unless he or she is the one we respect, trust, and love the most. When we are approached casually or carelessly, with an attitude that is less than tender, we feel insulted in our body and soul. Someone who approaches us with respect, tenderness, and utmost care is offering us deep communication, deep communion. It is only in that case that we will not feel hurt, misused, or abused, even a little. This cannot be attained unless there is love and commitment. Casual sex cannot be described as love. Love is deep, beautiful, and whole.

True love contains respect. In my tradition, husband and wife are expected to respect each other like guests, and when you practice this kind of respect, your love and happiness will continue for a long time. In sexual relationships, respect is one of the most important elements. Sexual communion should be like a rite, a ritual performed in mindfulness with great respect, care, and love. If you are motivated by some desire, that is not love. Desire is not love. Love is something much more responsible. It has care in it.

We have to restore the meaning of the word “love.” We have been using it in a careless way. When we say, “I love hamburgers,” we are not talking about love. We are talking about our appetite, our desire for hamburgers. We should not dramatize our speech and misuse words like that. We make words like “love” sick that way. We have to make an effort to heal our language by using words carefully. The word “love” is a beautiful word. We have to restore its meaning.

*“I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment.”* If the word “love” is understood in the deepest way, why do we need to say “long-term commitment”? If love is real, we do not need long or short-term commitments, or even a wedding ceremony. True love includes the sense of responsibility, accepting the other person as he is, with all his strengths and weaknesses. If we like only the best things in the person, that is not love. We have to accept his weaknesses and bring our patience, understanding, and energy to help him transform. Love is maitri, the capacity to bring joy and happiness, and karuna, the capacity to transform pain and suffering. This kind of love can only be good for people. It cannot be described as negative or destructive. It is safe. It guarantees everything.

Should we cross out the phrase “long-term commitment” or change it to “short-term commitment”? “Short-term commitment” means that we can be together for a few days and after that the relationship will end. That cannot be described as love. If we have that kind of relationship with another person, we cannot say that the relationship comes out of love and care. The expression “long-term commitment” helps people understand the word love. In the context of real love, commitment can only be long-term. “I want to love you. I want to help you. I want to care for you. I want you to be happy. I want to work for happiness. But just for a few days.” Does this make sense?

You are afraid to make a commitment—to the precepts, to your partner, to anything. You want freedom. But remember, you have to make a long-term commitment to love your son deeply and help him through the journey of life as long as you are alive. You cannot just say, “I don’t love you anymore.” When you have a good friend, you also make a long-term commitment. You need her. How much more so with someone who wants to share your life,

your soul, and your body. The phrase “long-term commitment” cannot express the depth of love, but we have to say something so that people understand.

A long-term commitment between two people is only a beginning. We also need the support of friends and other people. That is why, in our society, we have a wedding ceremony. The two families join together with other friends to witness the fact that you have come together to live as a couple. The priest and the marriage license are just symbols. What is important is that your commitment is witnessed by many friends and both of your families. Now you will be supported by them. A long-term commitment is stronger and more long-lasting if made in the context of a Sangha.

Your strong feelings for each other are very important, but they are not enough to sustain your happiness. Without other elements, what you describe as love may turn into something sour rather soon. The support of friends and family coming together weaves a kind of web. The strength of your feelings is only one of the strands of that web. Supported by many elements, the couple will be solid, like a tree. If a tree wants to be strong, it needs a number of roots sent deep into the soil. If a tree has only one root, it may be blown over by the wind. The life of a couple also needs to be supported by many elements—families, friends, ideals, practice, and Sangha.

In Plum Village, the practice community where I live in France, every time we have a wedding ceremony, we invite the whole community to celebrate and bring support to the couple. After the ceremony, on every full moon day, the couple recites the Five Awarenesses together, remembering that friends everywhere are supporting their relationship to be stable, long-lasting, and happy.\* Whether or not the relationship is bound by law, it will be stronger and more long-lasting if made in the presence of a Sangha—friends who love you and want to support you in the spirit of understanding and loving kindness.

Love can be a kind of sickness. In the West and in Asia, we have the word, “lovesick.” What makes us sick is attachment. Although it is a sweet internal formation, this kind of love with attachment is like a drug. It makes us feel wonderful, but once we are addicted, we cannot have peace. We cannot study, do our daily work, or sleep. We only think of the object of our love. We are sick with love. This kind of love is linked to our willingness to possess and monopolize. We want the object of our love to be entirely ours and only for us. It is totalitarian. We do not want anyone to prevent us from being with him or her. This kind of love can only be described as a prison, where we lock up our beloved and create only suffering for him or her. The one who is loved is deprived of freedom—of the right to be him or herself and enjoy life. This kind of love cannot be described as maitri or karuna. It is only the willingness to make use of the other person in order to satisfy our needs.

When you have sexual energy that makes you feel unhappy, as though you are losing your inner peace, you should know how to practice so that you do not do things that will bring suffering to other people, or yourself. We have to learn about this. In Asia, we say there are three sources of energy—sexual, breath, and spirit. *Tinh*, sexual energy, is the first. When you

\* The Five Awarenesses are: 1. We are aware that all generations of our ancestors and all future generations are present in us. 2. We are aware of the expectations our ancestors, our children, and their children have of us. 3. We are aware that our joy, peace, freedom, and harmony are the joy, peace, freedom, and harmony of our ancestors, our children, and their children. 4. We are aware that understanding is the very foundation of love. 5. We are aware that blaming and arguing never help us and only create a wider gap between us, that only understanding, trust, and love can help us change and grow.

have more sexual energy than you need, there will be an imbalance in your body and in your being. You need to know how to reestablish the balance, or you may act irresponsibly. According to Taoism and Buddhism, there are practices to help reestablish that balance, such as meditation or martial arts. You can learn the ways to channel your sexual energy into deep realizations in the domains of art and meditation.

The second source of energy is *chi*, breath energy. Life can be described as a process of burning. In order to burn, every cell in our body needs nutrition and oxygen. In his *Fire Sermon*, the Buddha said, “The eyes are burning, the nose is burning, the body is burning.” In our daily lives, we have to cultivate our energy by practicing proper breathing. We benefit from the air and its oxygen, so we have to be sure that non-polluted air is available to us. Some people cultivate their *khi* by refraining from smoking and talking a lot. When you speak, take the time to breathe. At Plum Village, every time we hear the bell of mindfulness, everyone stops what they are doing and breathes consciously three times. We practice this way to cultivate and preserve our *chi* energy.

The third source of energy is than, spirit energy. When you don’t sleep at night, you lose some of this kind of energy. Your nervous system becomes exhausted and you cannot study or practice meditation well, or make good decisions. You don’t have a clear mind because of lack of sleep or from worrying too much. Worry and anxiety drain this source of energy.

So don’t worry. Don’t stay up too late. Keep your nervous system healthy. Prevent anxiety. These kinds of practices cultivate the third source of energy. You need this source of energy to practice meditation well. A spiritual breakthrough requires the power of your spirit energy, which comes about through concentration and knowing how to prepare this source of energy. When you have strong spirit energy, you only have to focus it on an object, and you will have a breakthrough. If you don’t have than, the light of your concentration will not shine brightly, because the light emitted is very weak.

According to Asian medicine, the power of than is linked to the power of *tin*. When we expend our sexual energy, it takes time to restore it. In Chinese medicine, when you want to have a strong spirit and concentration, you are advised to refrain from having sexual relationships or overeating. You will be given herbs, roots, and medicine to enrich your source of than, and during the time you are taking this medicine, you are asked to refrain from sexual relationships. If your source of spirit is weak and you continue to have sexual relations, it is said that you cannot recover your spirit energy. Those who practice meditation should try to preserve their sexual energy, because they need it during meditation. If you are an artist, you may wish to practice channeling your sexual energy together with your spirit energy into your art.

During his struggle against the British, Gandhi undertook many hunger strikes, and he recommended to his friends who joined him on these fasts not to have sexual intercourse. When you fast for many days, if you have sexual relations, you may die; you have to preserve your energies. Thich Tri Quang, my friend who fasted for one hundred days in the hospital in Saigon in 1966, knew very well that not having sexual intercourse was very basic. Of course, as a monk, he did not have any problem with that. He also knew that speaking is an energy drain, so he refrained from speaking. If he needed something, he said it in one or two words or wrote it down. Writing, speaking, or making too many movements draws from these three sources of energy. So, the best thing is to lie down on your back and practice deep breathing. This brings into you the vitality that you need to survive a hundred-day hunger strike. If you

don't eat, you cannot replenish this energy. If you refrain from studying, doing research, or worrying, you can preserve these resources. These three sources of energy are linked to each other. By practicing one, you help the other. That is why *anapanasati*, the practice of conscious breathing, is so important for our spiritual life. It helps with all sources of energy.

Monks and nuns do not engage in sexual relationships because they want to devote their energy to having a breakthrough in meditation. They learn to channel their sexual energy to strengthen their spirit energy for the breakthrough. They also practice deep breathing to increase the spirit energy. Since they live alone, without a family, they can devote most of their time to meditation and teaching, helping the people who provide them with food, shelter, and so on.

They have contact with the population in the village in order to share the Dharma. Since they do not have a house or a family to care for, they have the time and space to do the things they like the most—walking, sitting, breathing, and helping fellow monks, nuns, and laypeople—and to realize what they want. Monks and nuns don't marry in order to preserve their time and energy for the practice.

“Responsibility” is the key word in the Third Precept. In a community of practice, if there is no sexual misconduct, if the community practices this precept well, there will be stability and peace. This precept should be practiced by everyone. You respect, support, and protect each other as Dharma brothers and sisters. If you don't practice this precept, you may become irresponsible and create trouble in the community at large. We have all seen this. If a teacher cannot refrain from sleeping with one of his or her students, he or she will destroy everything, possibly for several generations. We need mindfulness in order to have that sense of responsibility. We refrain from sexual misconduct because we are responsible for the well-being of so many people. If we are irresponsible, we can destroy everything. By practicing this precept, we keep the Sangha beautiful.

In sexual relationships, people get wounded. Practicing this precept is to prevent ourselves and others from being wounded. Often we think it is the woman who receives the wound, but men also get deeply wounded. We have to be very careful, especially in short-term commitments. The practice of the Third Precept is a very strong way of restoring stability and peace in ourselves, our family, and our society. We should take the time to discuss problems relating to the practice of this precept, like loneliness, advertising, and even the sex industry.

The feeling of loneliness is universal in our society. There is no communication between ourselves and other people, even in the family, and our feeling of loneliness pushes us into having sexual relationships. We believe in a naïve way that having a sexual relationship will make us feel less lonely, but it isn't true. When there is not enough communication with another person on the level of the heart and spirit, a sexual relationship will only widen the gap and destroy us both. Our relationship will be stormy, and we will make each other suffer. The belief that having a sexual relationship will make us feel less lonely is a kind of superstition. We should not be fooled by it. In fact, we will feel more lonely afterwards. The union of the two bodies can only be positive when there is understanding and communion on the level of the heart and spirit. Even between husband and wife, if the communion on the level of the heart and spirit does not exist, the coming together of the two bodies will only separate you further. When that is the case, I recommend that you refrain from having sexual relationships and first try to make a breakthrough in communication.

There are two Vietnamese words, *tin* and *nghia*, that are difficult to translate into English. They both mean something like love. In *tin*, you find elements of passion. It can be very deep, absorbing the whole of your being. *Nghia* is a kind of continuation of *tin*. With *nghia* you feel much calmer, more understanding, more willing to sacrifice to make the other person happy, and more faithful. You are not as passionate as in *tin*, but your love is deeper and more solid. *Nghia* will keep you and the other person together for a long time. It is the result of living together and sharing difficulties and joy over time.

You begin with passion, but, living with each other, you encounter difficulties, and as you learn to deal with them, your love deepens. Although the passion diminishes, *nghia* increases all the time. *Nghia* is a deeper love, with more wisdom, more interbeing, more unity. You understand the other person better. You and that person become one reality. *Nghia* is like a fruit that is already ripe. It does not taste sour anymore, it is only sweet.

In *nghia*, you feel gratitude for the other person. “Thank you for having chosen me. Thank you for being my husband or my wife. There are so many people in society, why have you chosen me? I am very thankful.” That is the beginning of *nghia*, the sense of thankfulness for your having chosen me as your companion to share the best things in yourself, as well as your suffering and your happiness.

When we live together, we support each other. We begin to understand each other’s feeling and difficulties. When the other person has shown his or her understanding of our problems, difficulties, and deep aspirations, we feel thankful for that understanding. When you feel understood by someone, you stop being unhappy. Happiness is, first of all, feeling understood. “I am grateful because you have proved that you understand me. While I was having difficulty and remained awake deep into the night, you took care of me. You showed me that my well-being is your own well-being. You did the impossible in order to bring about my well-being. You took care of me in a way that no one else in this world could have. For that I am grateful to you.”

If the couple lives with each other for a long time, “until our hair becomes white and our teeth fall out,” it is because of *nghia*, and not because of *tin*. *Tin* is passionate love. *Nghia* is the kind of love that has a lot of understanding and gratitude in it.

All love may begin by being passionate, especially for younger people. But in the process of living together, they have to learn and practice love, so that selfishness—the tendency to possess—will diminish, and the elements of understanding and gratitude will settle in, little by little, until their love becomes nourishing, protecting and reassuring. With *nghia*, you are very sure that the other person will take care of you and will love you until your teeth fall out and your hair becomes white. Nothing will assure you that the person will be with you for a long time except *nghia*. *Nghia* is built up by both of you in your daily life.

To meditate is to look into the nature of our love to see the kind of elements that are in it. We cannot call our love just *tin* or *nghia*, possessive love or altruistic love, because there may be elements of both in it. It may be ninety percent possessive love, three percent altruistic love, two percent gratitude, and so on. Look deeply into the nature of your love and find out. The happiness of the other person and your own happiness depend on the nature of your love. Of course you have love in you, but what is important is the nature of that love. If you realize that there is a lot of maitri and karuna in your love, that will be very reassuring. *Nghia* will be strong in it.

Children, if they observe deeply, will see that what keeps their parents together is *nghia* and not passionate love. If their parents take good care of each other, look after each other with calmness, tenderness, and care, *nghia* is the foundation of that care. That is the kind of love we really need for our family and for our society.

In practicing the Third Precept, we should always look into the nature of our love in order to see and not be fooled by our feelings. Sometimes we feel that we have love for the other person, but maybe that love is only an attempt to satisfy our own egoistic needs. Maybe we have not looked deeply enough to see the needs of the other person, including the need to be safe, protected. If we have that kind of breakthrough, we will realize that the other person needs our protection, and therefore we cannot look upon him or her just as an object of our desire. The other person should not be looked upon as a kind of commercial item.

Sex is used in our society as a means for selling products. We also have the sex industry. If we don't look at the other person as a human being, with the capacity of becoming a Buddha, we risk transgressing this precept. Therefore the practice of looking deeply into the nature of our love has a lot to do with the practice of the Third Precept. *"I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct."* Adults who were molested as children continue to suffer very much. Everything they think, do, and say bears the mark of that wound. They want to transform themselves and heal their wound, and the best way to do this is to observe the Third Precept. Because of their own experience, they can say, "As a victim of sexual abuse, I undertake to protect all children and adults from sexual abuse." Our suffering becomes a kind of positive energy that will help us become a bodhisattva. We undertake to protect all children and other people. And we also vow to help those who abuse children sexually, because they are sick and need our help. The ones who made us suffer become the object of our love and protection. The ones who will molest children in the future become the objects of our love and protection.

We see that until the sick people are protected and helped, children are going to continue to be abused sexually. We vow to help these people so that they will not molest children any longer. At the same time, we vow to help children. We take not only the side of children who are being molested, but the other side also. These molesters are sick, the products of an unstable society. They may be an uncle, an aunt, a grandparent, or a parent. They need to be observed, helped, and, if possible, healed. When we are determined to observe this precept, the energy that is born helps us transform into a bodhisattva, and that transformation may heal us even before we begin to practice. The best way for anyone who was molested as a child to heal is to take this precept and vow to protect children and adults who may be sick, who may be repeating the kind of destructive actions that will cause a child to be wounded for the rest of his or her life.

## The Fourth Precept: Deep Listening and Loving Speech

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*“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”*

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There is a saying in Vietnamese, “It doesn’t cost anything to have loving speech.” We only need to choose our words carefully, and we can make other people happy. To use words mindfully, with loving kindness, is to practice generosity. Therefore this precept is linked directly to the Second Precept. We can make many people happy just by practicing loving speech. Again, we see the interbeing nature of the Five Precepts.

Many people think they will be able to practice generosity only after they have accumulated a small fortune. I know young people who dream of getting rich so they can bring happiness to others: “I want to become a doctor or the president of a big company so I can make a lot of money and help many people.” They do not realize that it is often more difficult to practice generosity after you are wealthy. If you are motivated by loving kindness and compassion, there are many ways to bring happiness to others right now, starting with kind speech. The way you speak to others can offer them joy, happiness, self-confidence, hope, trust, and enlightenment. Mindful speaking is a deep practice.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is a person who has learned the art of listening and speaking deeply in order to help people let go of their fear, misery, and despair. He is the model of this practice, and the door he opens is called the “universal door.” If we practice listening and speaking according to Avalokitesvara, we too will be able to open the universal door and bring joy, peace, and happiness to many people and alleviate their suffering.



*The universal door manifests itself  
in the voice of the rolling tide.  
Hearing and practicing it, we become a child,  
born from the heart of a lotus,  
fresh, pure, and happy,  
capable of speaking and listening  
in accord with the universal door.  
With only one drop of the water of compassion  
from the branch of the willow,  
spring returns to the great Earth.*

I learned this beautiful poem when I studied the Lotus Sutra at age sixteen. When you hear “the voice of the rolling tide,” which is Avalokitesvara’s practice, symbolizing the universal door, you are transformed into a child born in the heart of a lotus. With only one drop of the water of compassion from the willow branch of the bodhisattva, spring returns to our dry Earth. The dry Earth means the world of suffering and misery. The drop of compassionate water is the practice of loving kindness, symbolized by the water on the willow branch. Avalokitesvara is described by the Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese as the person holding the willow branch. He dips the branch into the water of compassion of his heart, and wherever he sprinkles that water, everything is reborn. When he sprinkles it on dry, dead branches, they turn green. Dead branches symbolize suffering and despair, and green vegetation symbolizes the return of peace and happiness. With only one drop of that water, spring returns to our great Earth.

In the “Universal Door” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, Avalokitesvara’s voice is described in five ways: the wondrous voice, the voice of the world regarded, the brahma voice, the voice of the rising tide, and the voice of world surpassing. We should always keep these five voices in mind.

First, there is the wondrous voice. This is the kind of speaking that will open the universal door and make everything possible again. This voice is pleasant to hear. It is refreshing and brings calm, comfort, and healing to our soul. Its essence is compassion.

Second, there is the voice of the world regarded. The meaning of the word Avalokitesvara is “the one who looks deeply into the world and hears the cries of the world.” This voice relieves our suffering and suppressed feelings, because it is the voice of someone who understands us deeply—our anguish, despair, and fear. When we feel understood, we suffer much less.

Third, there is the brahma voice. Brahma means noble—not just the ordinary voice of people, but the noble speech that springs forth from the willingness to bring happiness and remove suffering. Love, compassion, joy, and impartiality are the *Four Brahmaviharas*, noble dwellings of buddhas and bodhisattvas. If we want to live with buddhas and bodhisattvas, we can dwell in these mansions.

During the time of the Buddha, the aim of the practice of many people was to be born and to live together with Brahma. It was similar to the Christian practice of wanting to go to Heaven to be with God. “In my Father’s house there are many mansions,” and you want to live in one of these mansions. For those who wanted to be with Brahma, the Buddha said, “Practice the four noble dwellings: love, compassion, joy and impartiality.” If we want to

share our teachings of the Buddha with our Christian friends, it would be the same: “God is love, compassion, joy, and impartiality.” If you want to be with God practice these four dwellings. If you don’t practice these four, no matter how much you pray or talk about being with God, going to Heaven will not be possible.

Fourth, the voice of the rising tide is the voice of the Buddhadharmā. It is a powerful voice, the kind of voice that silences all wrong views and speculations. It is the lion’s roar that brings absolute silence to the mountain and brings about transformation and healing.

Fifth, the voice of the world surpassing is the voice with which nothing can be compared. This voice does not aim at fame, profit, or a competitive edge. It is the thundering silence that shatters all notions and concepts.

The wondrous voice, the voice of the world regarded, the brahma voice, the voice of the rising tide, and the voice of the world surpassing are the voices we are to be mindful of. If we contemplate these five kinds of voices, we assist Avalokitesvara in opening the universal door, the door of real listening and real speaking.

Because he lives a mindful life, always contemplating the world, and because he is the world regarder, Avalokitesvara notices a lot of suffering. He knows that much suffering is born from unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others; therefore he practices mindful, loving speech and listening deeply. Avalokitesvara can be described as the one who teaches us the best way to practice the Fourth Precept.

“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech, and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering.” This is exactly the universal door practiced by Avalokitesvara.

Never in the history of humankind have we had so many means of communication—television, telecommunications, telephones, fax machines, wireless radios, hot lines, and red lines—but we still remain islands. There is so little communication between the members of one family, between the individuals in society, and between nations. We suffer from so many wars and conflicts. We surely have not cultivated the arts of listening and speaking. We do not know how to listen to each other. We have little ability to hold an intelligent or meaningful conversation. The universal door of communication has to be opened again. When we cannot communicate, we get sick, and as our sickness increases, we suffer and spill our suffering on other people. We purchase the services of psychotherapists to listen to our suffering, but if psychotherapists do not practice the universal door, they will not succeed. Psychotherapists are human beings who are subject to suffering like the rest of us. They might have problems with their spouses, children, friends, and society. They also have internal formations. They may have a lot of suffering that cannot be communicated to even the most beloved person in their life. How can they sit there and listen to our suffering, and understand our suffering? Psychotherapists have to practice the universal door, the Fourth Precept—deep listening and mindful speech.

Unless we look deeply into ourselves, this practice will not be easy. If there is a lot of suffering in you, it is difficult to listen to other people or to say nice things to them. First you have to look deeply into the nature of your anger, despair, and suffering to free yourself, so you can be available to others. Suppose your husband said something unkind on Monday and it hurt you. He used unmindful speech and does not have the ability to listen. If you reply right away out of your anger and suffering, you risk hurting him and making his

suffering deeper. What should you do? If you suppress your anger or remain silent, that can hurt you, because if you try to suppress the anger in you, you are suppressing yourself. You will suffer later, and your suffering will bring more suffering to your partner.

The best immediate practice is to breathe in and out in order to calm your anger, to calm the pain. “Breathing in, I know that I am angry. Breathing out, I calm my feeling of anger.” Just by breathing deeply on your anger, you will calm it. You are being mindful of your anger, not suppressing it. When you are calm enough, you may be able to use mindful speech. In a loving and mindful way, you can say, “Darling, I would like you to know that I am angry. What you just said hurt me a lot, and I want you to know that.” Just saying that, mindfully and calmly, will give you some relief. Breathing mindfully to calm your anger, you will be able to tell the other person that you are suffering. During that moment, you are living your anger, touching it with the energy of mindfulness. You are not denying it at all.

When I speak about this to psychotherapists, I have some difficulty. When I say that anger makes us suffer, they take it to mean that anger is something negative to be removed. But I always say that anger is an organic thing, like love. Anger can become love. Our compost can become a rose. If we know how to take care of our compost, we can transform it into a rose. Should we call the garbage negative or positive? It can be positive, if we know how to handle it. Anger is the same. It can be negative when we do not know how to handle it, but if we know how to handle our anger, it can be very positive. We do not need to throw anything away.

After you breathe in and out a number of times to recover your calmness, even if your anger is still there, you are mindful of it, and you can tell the other person that you are angry. You can also tell him that you would like to look deeply into it, and you would like him to look deeply into it also. Then you can make an appointment for Friday evening to look at it together. One person looking at the roots of your suffering is good, two people looking at it is better, and two people looking together is best.

I propose Friday evening for two reasons. First, you are still angry, and if you begin discussing it now, it may be too risky. You might say things that will make the situation worse. From now until Friday evening, you can practice looking deeply into the nature of your anger, and the other person can also. While driving the car, he might ask himself, “What is so serious? Why did she get so upset? There must be a reason.” While driving, you will also have a chance to look deeply into it. Before Friday night, one or both of you may see the root of the problem and be able to tell the other and apologize. Then on Friday night, you can have a cup of tea together and enjoy each other. If you make an appointment, you will both have time to calm down and look deeply. This is the practice of meditation. Meditation is to calm ourselves and to look deeply into the nature of our suffering.

When Friday night comes, if the suffering has not been transformed, you will be able to practice the art of Avalokitesvara. You sit together and practice deep listening—one person expressing herself, while the other person listens deeply. When you speak, you tell the deepest kind of truth, and you practice loving speech. Only by using that kind of speech will there be a chance for the other person to understand and accept. While listening, you know that only with deep listening can you relieve the suffering of the other person. If you listen with just half an ear, you cannot do it. Your presence must be deep and real. Your listening must be of a good quality in order to relieve the other person of his suffering. This is the practice of the Fourth Precept. The second reason for waiting until Friday is that when you

neutralize that feeling on Friday evening, you have Saturday and Sunday to enjoy being together.

Suppose you have some kind of internal formation regarding a member of your family or community, and you don't feel joyful being with that person. You can talk to her about simple things, but you don't feel comfortable talking with her about anything deep. Then one day, while doing housework, you notice that the other person is not doing anything at all, is not sharing the work that needs to be done, and you begin to feel uneasy. "Why am I doing so much and she isn't doing anything? She should be working." Because of this comparison, you lose your happiness. But instead of telling the other person, "Please, Sister, come and help with the work," you say to yourself, "She is an adult. Why should I have to say something to her? She should be more responsible!" You think that way because you already have some internal formation about the other person. The shortest way is always the direct way. "B" can go to "A" and say, "Sister, please come and help." But you do not do that. You keep it to yourself and blame the other person.

The next time the same thing happens, your feeling is even more intense. Your internal formation grows little by little, until you suffer so much that you need to talk about it with a third person. You are looking for sympathy in order to share the suffering. So, instead of talking directly to "A", you talk to "C." You look for "C" because you think that "C" is an ally who will agree that "A" is not behaving well at all.

If you are "C", what should you do? If you already have some internal formations concerning "A", you will probably be glad to hear that someone else feels the same. Talking to each other may make you feel better. You are becoming allies—"B" and "C" against "A". Suddenly "B" and "C" feel close to each other, and both of you feel some distance from "A". "A" will notice that.

"A" may be very nice. She would be capable of responding directly to "B" if "B" could express her feelings to her. But "A" does not know about "B's" resentment. She just feels some kind of cooling down between herself and "B" without knowing why. She notices that "B" and "C" are becoming close, while both of them look at her coldly. So she thinks, "If they don't want me, I don't need them." She steps farther back from them, and the situation worsens. A triangle has been set up.

If I were "C", first of all, I would listen to "B" attentively, understanding that "B" needs to share her suffering. Knowing that the direct way is the shortest way, I would encourage "B" to speak directly to "A". If "B" is unable to do this, I would offer to speak to "A" on "B's" behalf, either with "B" present, or alone.

But most important, I would not transmit to anyone else what "B" tells me in confidence. If I am not mindful, I may tell others what I now know about "B's" feelings, and soon the family or the community will be a mess. If I do these things—encourage "B" to speak directly with "A" or speak with "A" on "B's" behalf, and not tell anyone else what "B" has told me—I will be able to break the triangle. This may help solve the problem, and bring peace and joy back into the family, the community, and the society.

If, in the community, you see that someone is having difficulty with someone else, you have to help right away. The longer things drag on, the more difficult they are to solve. The best way to help is to practice mindful speech and deep listening. The Fourth Precept can bring peace, understanding, and happiness to people. The universal door is a wonderful

door. You will be reborn in a lotus flower and help others, including your family, your community, and your society, be born there also.

Speech can be constructive or destructive. Mindful speaking can bring real happiness, unmindful speech can kill. When someone tells us something that makes us healthy and happy, that is the greatest gift he or she can give. Sometimes, someone says something to us that is so cruel and distressing that we want to go and commit suicide; we lose all hope, all our *joi de vivre*.

People kill because of speech. When you fanatically advocate an ideology, saying that this way of thinking or organizing society is the best, then if anyone stands in your way, you have to suppress or eliminate him. This is very much linked with the First Precept—that kind of speech can kill not only one person, but many. When you believe in something that strongly, you can put millions of people into gas chambers. When you use speech to promote an ideology, urging people to kill in order to protect and promote your ideology, you can kill many millions. The First and Fourth of the Five Wonderful Precepts inter-are.

The Fourth Precept is also linked to the Second Precept, on stealing. Just as there is a “sex industry,” there is also a “lying industry.” Many people have to lie in order to succeed as politicians, or salespersons. A corporate director of communications told me that if he were allowed to tell the truth about his company’s products, people would not buy them. He says positive things about the products that he knows are not true, and he refrains from speaking about the negative effects of the products. He knows he is lying, and he feels terrible about it. So many people are caught in similar situations. In politics also, people lie to get votes. That is why we can speak of a “lying industry.”

This precept is also linked with the Third Precept. When someone says, “I love you,” it may be a lie. It may just be an expression of desire. And so much advertising is linked with sex.

In the Buddhist tradition, the Fourth Precept is always described as refraining from these four actions:

1. Not telling the truth. If it’s black, you say it’s white.
2. Exaggerating. You make something up, or describe something as more beautiful than it actually is, or as ugly when it is not ugly.
3. Forked tongue. You go to one person and say one thing and then you go to another person and say the opposite.
4. Filthy language. You insult or abuse people.

*“I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope.”* This must be practiced with children. If you tell children they are good-for-nothing, they will suffer in the future. Always emphasize the positive, hopeful things with your children, and also with your spouse.

*“I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.”*

Reconciliation is a deep practice that we can do with our listening and our mindful speech. To reconcile means to bring peace and happiness to nations, people, and members of our family. This is the work of a bodhisattva. In order to reconcile, you have to possess the

art of deep listening, and you also have to master the art of loving speech. You have to refrain from aligning yourself with one party so that you are able to understand both parties. This is a difficult practice.

During the war in Vietnam, we tried to practice this. We tried not to align ourselves with either of the warring parties, the communists or the anticommunists. You will be able to help only if you stand above the conflict and see both the good and the bad aspects of both sides. Doing this, you put yourself in a dangerous situation, because you may be hated by both sides. One side suspects that you are an instrument of the other side, and the other side suspects you are an instrument of the first side. You may be killed by both sides at the same time. That is exactly what many Buddhists in Vietnam suffered during the war. We did not align ourselves with the communists, but we did not align ourselves with the pro-American side either. We just wanted to be ourselves. We did not want any killing; we only wanted reconciliation. One side said that you cannot reconcile with the pro-Americans. The other side said that you cannot reconcile with the communists. If we had listened to both sides it would have been impossible to reconcile with anyone.

We trained social workers to go into the rural areas to help with health, economic, and educational problems, and we were suspected by both sides. Our work of reconciliation was not just the work of speaking, but also of acting. We tried to help the peasants find hope. We helped many refugees settle in new villages. We helped sponsor more than ten thousand orphans. We helped the peasants rebuild their destroyed villages. The work of reconciliation is not just diplomatic; it is concrete. At the same time, we were voicing the peace in our hearts. We said the people in one family must look upon each other as brothers and sisters and accept each other. They should not kill each other because of any ideology. That message was not at all popular in the situation of war.

My writings were censored by both sides. My poetry was seized by both sides. My friends printed one of my poetry books underground because the Saigon government would not allow its publication. Then the communist side attacked it on the radio saying that it was harmful to the struggle, probably motivated by the CIA. Nationalist policemen went into bookshops and confiscated the poems. In Hue, one kind policeman went into a Buddhist bookshop and said that this book should not be displayed; it should be hidden and given out only when someone asked for it. We were suppressed not only in our attempts to voice our concerns and propose ways to settle the problems between brothers and sisters, we were also suppressed in our attempts to help people. Many of our social workers were killed and kidnapped by both sides. Each side suspected we were working for the other side. Some of our workers were assassinated by fanatic Catholics who suspected us of working for the communists, and some of our workers were taken away by the communist side. Our workers were quite popular in the countryside. They were very dedicated young men and women, including many young monks and nuns. They did not have salaries, they just wanted to serve and to practice Buddhism. In the situation of war, they brought their loving kindness, compassion, and good work, and received a small stipend to live. They went to the countryside without hoping for anything in return.

I remember a young man named An who specialized in helping peasants learn modern methods of raising chickens. He taught them disease prevention techniques. He was asked by a farmer, "How much do you earn from the government each month?" An said, "We don't earn anything from the government. In fact we are not from the government, we are

from the temple. We are sent by the Buddhist temple to help you.” An did not tell the farmer, who was not so sophisticated, that he was associated with the School of Youth for Social Service, founded by the Department of Social Work of the Unified Buddhist Church. That was too complicated, so he only said that he was sent by the temple.

“Why have you come here from the temple?”

An said, “We are performing merit.” This is a very popular term in Buddhism.

The farmer was surprised. He said, “I have learned that in order to perform merit people go to the temple. Now why are you performing merit here?”

The young man said, “You know, my Uncle, during these times the people suffer so much that even the Buddha has to come out here to help. We students of the Buddha are performing merit right here, where you suffer.” That statement became the ground of our philosophy of social service, engaged Buddhism. The Buddha has to be in society. He cannot remain in the temple any longer, because people are suffering too much.

In a few years, we became very popular in the countryside of Vietnam. We did not have a lot of money, but because we worked in the way of performing merit, we were loved by the people. The communist side knew that and did not want us to be there, so they came to us during the night and asked us who had given us permission to work there. Our workers said that we did not have permission from either the government or the communist side. We were just performing merit here. One time the communists gave the order for our social workers to evacuate an area, saying, “We will not be responsible for your safety if you stay beyond twenty-four hours.” Another time, some fanatics came from the government, unofficially, and asked our social workers if they were really social workers from the Buddhist community. Then they brought five of the students to the riverbank, and, after checking once more to be sure that they were Buddhist social workers, said, “We are sorry, but we have to kill you.” They shot all five of them. We were suppressed by both sides during the night. They knew that if they suppressed us during the day, the peasants in the countryside would disapprove.

One grenade thrown into my room was deflected by a curtain. Another night, many grenades were thrown into our School’s dormitories, killing two young workers, and injuring many others. One young man was paralyzed, and later treated in Germany. One young lady got more than 1,000 pieces of shrapnel in her body. She lost a lot of blood, and was saved by a Japanese friend who was helping us. Later, we were able to bring her to Japan for surgery. They tried to remove the small metal pieces, but 300 pieces that could not be taken out were left in her body.

One day when I was in Paris as representative of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation, to be present at the Paris Peace Talks, I received a phone message from Saigon telling me that four social workers had just been shot and killed. I cried. It was I who had asked them to come and be trained as social workers. A friend who was there with me, said, “Thay, you are a kind of general leading a nonviolent army, and when your army is working for love and reconciliation, there surely will be casualties. There is no need to cry.”

I said, “I am not a general. I am a human being. I need to cry.” I wrote a play six months later about the deaths of these students, entitled, *The Path of Return Continues the Journey*.\*

The work of reconciliation is not diplomatic work alone. It is not because you travel and meet with dozens of foreign ministers that you do the work of reconciliation. You have to use your body, your time, and your life to do the work of reconciliation. You do it in many ways, and you can be suppressed by the people you are trying to help. You have to listen and understand the suffering of one side, and then go and listen to the suffering of the other side. Then you will be able to tell each side, in turn, about the suffering being endured by the other side. That kind of work is crucial, and it takes courage. We need many people who have the capacity of listening, in South Africa, in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe, and elsewhere.

The Fourth Precept is a bodhisattva precept. We need deep study to be able to practice it well, within ourselves, our families, our communities, our society, and the world.

### **The Fifth Precept: Diet for a Mindful Society**

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*“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.”*

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Whenever we take a bath or a shower, we can look at our body and see that it is a gift from our parents and their parents. Even though many of us do not want to have much to do with our parents—they may have hurt us so much—when we look deeply, we see that we cannot

\* See *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993).



drop all identification with them. As we wash each part of our body, we can ask ourselves, “To whom does this body belong? Who has transmitted this body to me? What has been transmitted?” Meditating this way, we will discover that there are three components: the transmitter, that which is transmitted, and the one who receives the transmission. The transmitter is our parents. We are the continuation of our parents and their ancestors. The object of transmission is our body itself. And the one who receives the transmission is us. If we continue to meditate on this, we will see clearly that the transmitter, the object transmitted, and the receiver are one. All three are present in our body. When we are deeply in touch with the present moment, we can see that all our ancestors and all future generations are present in us. Seeing this, we will know what to do and what not to do—for ourselves, our ancestors, our children, and their children.

At first, when you look at your father, you probably do not see that you and your father are one. You may be angry at him for many things. But the moment you understand and love your father, you realize the emptiness of transmission. You realize that to love yourself is to love your father, and to love your father is to love yourself. To keep your body and your consciousness healthy is to do it for your ancestors, your parents, and future generations. You do it for your society and for everyone, not just yourself. The first thing you have to bear in mind is that you are not practicing this as a separate entity. Whatever you ingest, you are doing it for everyone. All of your ancestors and all future generations are ingesting it with you. That is the true meaning of the emptiness of the transmission. The Fifth Precept should be practiced in this spirit.

There are people who drink alcohol and get drunk, who destroy their bodies, their families, their society. They should refrain from drinking. But you who have been having a glass of wine every week during the last thirty years without doing any harm to yourself, why should you stop that? What is the use of practicing this precept if drinking alcohol does not harm you or other people? Although you have not harmed yourself during the last thirty years by drinking just one or two glasses of wine every week, the fact is that it may have an effect on your children, your grandchildren, and your society. We only need to look deeply in order to see it. You are practicing not for yourself alone, but for everyone. Your children might have a propensity for alcoholism and, seeing you drinking wine every week, one of them may become alcoholic in the future. If you abandon your two glasses of wine, it is to show your children, your friends, and your society that your life is not only for yourself. Your life is for your ancestors, future generations, and also your society. To stop drinking two glasses of wine every week is a very deep practice, even if it has not brought you any harm. That is the insight of a bodhisattva who knows that everything she does is done for all her ancestors and future generations. The emptiness of transmission is the basis of the Fifth Precept. The use of drugs by so many young people should also be stopped with the same kind of insight.

In modern life, people think that their body belongs to them and they can do anything they want to it. “We have the right to live our own lives.” When you make such a declaration, the law supports you. This is one of the manifestations of individualism. But, according to the teaching of emptiness, your body is not yours. Your body belongs to your ancestors, your parents, and future generations. It also belongs to society and to all the other living beings. All of them have come together to bring about the presence of this body—the trees, clouds, everything. Keeping your body healthy is to express gratitude to the whole

cosmos, the whole society. If we are healthy, everyone can benefit from it—not only everyone in the society of men and women, but everyone in the society of animals, plants, and minerals. This is a bodhisattva precept. When we practice the Five Precepts we are already on the path of a bodhisattva.

When we are able to get out of the shell of our small self and see that we are interrelated to everyone and everything, we see that our every act is linked with the whole of humankind, the whole cosmos. To keep yourself healthy is to be kind to your ancestors, your parents, the future generations, and also your society. Health is not only bodily health, but also mental health. The Fifth Precept is about health and healing.

*“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society...”* Because you are not doing it only for yourself, to stop drinking one or two glasses of wine a week is truly an act of a bodhisattva. You do it for everyone. At a reception, when someone offers you a glass of wine, you can smile and decline, “No, thank you. I do not drink alcohol. I would be grateful if you would bring me a glass of juice or water.” You do it gently, with a smile. This is very helpful. You set an example for many friends, including many children who are present. Although that can be done in a very polite, quiet way, it is truly the act of a bodhisattva, setting an example by your own life.

Everything a mother eats, drinks, worries about, or fears will have an effect on the fetus inside her. Even when the child inside is still tiny, everything is in it. If the young mother is not aware of the nature of interbeing, she may cause damage to both herself and her child at the same time. If she drinks alcohol, she will destroy, to some extent, the brain cells in her fetus. Modern research has proven this.

Mindful consumption is the object of this precept. We are what we consume. If we look deeply into the items that we consume every day, we will come to know our own nature very well. We have to eat, drink, consume, but if we do it unmindfully, we may destroy our bodies and our consciousness, showing ingratitude toward our ancestors, our parents, and future generations.

When we eat mindfully we are in close touch with the food. The food we eat comes to us from nature, from living beings, and from the cosmos. To touch it with our mindfulness is to show our gratitude. Eating in mindfulness can be a great joy. We pick up our food with our fork, look at it for a second before putting it into our mouth, and then chew it carefully and mindfully, at least fifty times. If we practice this, we will be in touch with the entire cosmos.

Being in touch also means knowing whether toxins are present in the food. We can recognize food as healthy or not thanks to our mindfulness. Before eating, members of a family can practice breathing in and out and looking at the food on the table. One person can pronounce the name of each dish, “potatoes,” “salad,” and so on. Calling something by its name helps us touch it deeply and see its true nature. At the same time, mindfulness reveals to us the presence or absence of toxins in each dish. Children enjoy doing this if we show them how. Mindful eating is a good education. If you practice this way for some time, you will find that you will eat more carefully, and your practice of mindful eating will be an example for others. It is an art to eat in a way that brings mindfulness into our life.

We can have a careful diet for our body, and we can also have a careful diet for our consciousness, our mental health. We need to refrain from ingesting the kinds of intellectual

“food” that bring toxins into our consciousness. Some TV programs, for example, educate us and help us to lead a healthier life, and we should make time to watch programs like these. But other programs bring us toxins, and we need to refrain from watching them. This can be a practice for everyone in the family.

We know that smoking cigarettes is not good for our health. We have worked hard to get the manufacturers to print a line on a pack of cigarettes: “WARNING, SMOKING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH.” That is a strong statement, but it was necessary because advertisements to promote smoking are very convincing. They give young people the idea that if they don’t smoke, they are not really alive. These advertisements link smoking with nature, springtime, expensive cars, beautiful men and women, and high standards of living. One could believe that if you don’t smoke or drink alcohol, you will not have any happiness at all in this life. This kind of advertising is dangerous; it penetrates into our unconscious. There are so many wonderful and healthy things to eat and drink. We have to show how this kind of propaganda misleads people.

The warning on cigarette packs is not enough. We have to stand up, write articles, and do whatever we can to step up campaigns against smoking and drinking alcohol. We are going in the right direction. At last it is possible to take an airplane flight without suffering from cigarette smoke. We have to make more effort in these directions.

I know that drinking wine runs deep in Western culture. In the ceremony of the Eucharist and the Passover Seder, wine is an important element. But I have spoken to priests and rabbis about this, and they have told me it is possible to substitute grape juice for the wine. Even if we don’t drink at all, we can still get killed on the streets by a drunk driver. To persuade one person to refrain from drinking is to make the world safer for us all.

Sometimes we don’t need to eat or drink as much as we do, but it has become a kind of addiction. We feel so lonely. Loneliness is one of the afflictions of modern life. It is similar to the Third and Fourth Precepts—we feel lonely, so we engage in conversation, or even in a sexual relationship, hoping that the feeling of loneliness will go away. Drinking and eating can also be the result of loneliness. You want to drink or overeat in order to forget your loneliness, but what you eat may bring toxins into your body. When you are lonely, you open the refrigerator, watch TV, read magazines or novels, or pick up the telephone to talk. But unmindful consumption always makes things worse.

There may be a lot of violence, hatred, and fear in a film. If we spend one hour looking at that film, we will water the seeds of violence, hatred, and fear in us. We do that, and we let our children do that, too. Therefore we should have a family meeting to discuss an intelligent policy concerning television watching. We may have to label our TV sets the same way we have labeled cigarettes: “WARNING: WATCHING TELEVISION CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH.” That is the truth. Some children have joined gangs, and many more are very violent, partly because they have seen a lot of violence on television. We must have an intelligent policy concerning the use of television in our family.

We should arrange our schedules so that our family has time to benefit from the many healthy and beautiful programs on TV. We do not have to destroy our television set; we only have to use it with wisdom and mindfulness. This can be discussed among the family and the community. There are a number of things we can do, such as asking the TV stations to establish healthier programming, or suggesting to manufacturers to offer television sets that receive only stations that broadcast healthy, educational programs, like PBS. During the war

in Vietnam, the American army dropped hundreds of thousands of radio sets in the jungles that could receive only one station, the one that made propaganda for the anticommunist side. This is not psychological warfare, but I think many families would welcome a TV set that would allow us to see only healthy programs. I hope you will write to TV manufacturers and TV stations to express your ideas about this.

We need to be protected because the toxins are overwhelming. They are destroying our society, our families, and ourselves. We have to use everything in our power to protect ourselves. Discussions on this subject will bring about important ideas, such as to how to protect ourselves from destructive television broadcasts. We also have to discuss in our families and communities which magazines that we and our children enjoy reading, and we should boycott those magazines that spill toxins into our society. Not only should we refrain from reading them, but we should also make an effort to warn people of the danger of reading and consuming these kinds of products. The same is true of books and conversations.

Because we are lonely, we want to have conversations, but our conversations can also bring about a lot of toxins. From time to time, after speaking with someone, we feel paralyzed by what we have just heard. Mindfulness will allow us to stop having the kinds of conversations that bring us more toxins.

Psychotherapists are those who listen deeply to the sufferings of their clients. If they do not know how to practice to neutralize and transform the pain and sorrow in themselves, they will not be able to remain fresh and healthy in order to sustain themselves for a long time.

The exercise I propose has three points: First, look deeply into your body and your consciousness and identify the kinds of toxins that are already in you. We each have to be our own doctor not only for our bodies, but also for our minds. After we identify these toxins, we can try to expel them. One way is to drink a lot of water. Another is to practice massage, to encourage the blood to come to the spot where the toxins are, so the blood can wash them away. A third is to breathe deeply air that is fresh and clean. This brings more oxygen into the blood and helps it expel the toxins in our bodies. There are mechanisms in our bodies that try to neutralize and expel these substances, but our bodies may be too weak to do the job by themselves. While doing these things, we have to stop ingesting more toxins.

At the same time, we look into our consciousness to see what kinds of toxins are already in there. We have a lot of anger, despair, fear, hatred, craving, and jealousy—all these things were described by the Buddha as poisons. The Buddha spoke of the three basic poisons as anger, hatred, and delusion. There are many more than that, and we have to recognize their presence in us. Our happiness depends on our ability to transform them. We have not practiced, and so we have been carried away by our unmindful life-styles. The quality of our life depends very much on the amount of peace and joy that can be found in our bodies and consciousness. If there are too many poisons in our bodies and consciousness, the peace and joy in us will not be strong enough to make us happy. So the first step is to identify and recognize the poisons that are already in us.

The second step of the practice is to be mindful of what we are ingesting into our bodies and consciousness. What kind of toxins am I putting into my body today? What films am I

watching today? What book am I reading? What magazine am I looking at? What kind of conversations am I having? Try to recognize the toxins.

The third part of the practice is to prescribe for yourself a kind of diet. Aware of the fact that there are this many toxins in my body and consciousness, aware of the fact that I am ingesting this and that toxin into my body and consciousness every day, making myself sick and causing suffering to my beloved ones, I am determined to prescribe for myself a proper diet. I vow to ingest only items that preserve well-being, peace, and joy in my body and consciousness. I am determined not to ingest more toxins into my body and consciousness.

Therefore, I will refrain from ingesting into my body and consciousness these things, and I will make a list of them. We know that there are many items that are nutritious, healthy, and delightful that we can consume every day. When we refrain from drinking alcohol, there are so many delicious and wholesome alternatives: fruit juices, teas, mineral waters. We don't have to deprive ourselves of the joys of living, not at all. There are many beautiful, informative, and entertaining programs on television. There are many excellent books and magazines to read. There are many wonderful people and many healthy subjects to talk about. By vowing to consume only items that preserve our well-being, peace, and joy, and the well-being, peace, and joy of our family and society, we need not deprive ourselves of the joys of living. Practicing this third exercise brings us deep peace and joy.

Practicing a diet is the essence of this precept. Wars and bombs are the products of our consciousness individually and collectively. Our collective consciousness has so much violence, fear, craving, and hatred in it, it can manifest in wars and bombs. The bombs are the product of our fear. Because others have powerful bombs, we try to make bombs even more powerful. Then the other nations hear that we have powerful bombs, and they try to make even more powerful bombs. Removing the bombs is not enough. Even if we could transport all the bombs to a distant planet, we would still not be safe, because the roots of the wars and bombs are still intact in our collective consciousness. Transforming the toxins in our collective consciousness is the true way to uproot war.

When we saw the video of Rodney King being beaten on the streets of Los Angeles, we did not understand why the five policemen had to beat a defenseless person like that again and again. We saw the violence, hatred, and fear in the policemen. But it is not the problem of the five policemen alone. Their act was the manifestation of our collective consciousness. They are not the only ones who are violent and full of hatred and fear. Most of us are like that. There is so much violence in all big cities, not only Los Angeles, but also San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Tokyo, Paris, and elsewhere. Every morning, when going to work, policemen say, "I have to be careful or I may be killed. I will be unable to return to my family." A policemen practices fear every day, and because of that, he may do things that are quite unwise. Sometimes there is no real danger, but because he suspects he may be shot he takes his gun and shoots first. He may shoot a child playing with a toy gun. One week before Rodney King was beaten, a policewoman in Los Angeles was shot in the face and killed. It is natural that the police in the area became angry when they heard this, and they all went to the funeral to demonstrate their anger and hatred to society and to the administration for not providing them with enough safety. The government is not safe either—presidents and prime ministers get assassinated. Because society is like this, policemen and policewomen are like that. "This is, because that is. This is like this, because that is like that." A violent society creates violent policemen. A fearful

society creates fearful policemen. Putting the policemen in jail does not solve the problem. We have to change the society from its roots, which is our collective consciousness, where the root-energies of fear, anger, greed, and hatred lie.

We cannot abolish war with angry demonstrations. We have to practice a diet for ourselves, our families and our society. We have to do it with everyone else. In order to have healthy TV programs, we have to work with artists, writers, filmmakers, lawyers, and legislators. We have to step up the struggle. Meditation should not be a drug to make us oblivious of our real problems. It should produce awareness in us, and also in our families and in our society. Enlightenment has to be collective for us to achieve results. We have to stop the kinds of consuming that poison our collective consciousness.

I do not see any other way than the practice of these bodhisattva precepts. We have to practice them as a society in order to produce the dramatic changes we need. To practice as a society will be possible only if each of us vows to practice as a bodhisattva. The problem is great. It concerns our survival and the survival of our species and our planet. It is not a matter of enjoying one glass of wine. If you stop drinking your glass of wine, you do it for the whole society. We know that the Fifth Precept is exactly like the first one. When you practice non-killing and you know how to protect the lives of even small animals, you realize that eating less meat has to do with the practice of the precept. If you are not able to entirely stop eating meat, at least make an effort to reduce eating meat. If you reduce eating meat and drinking alcohol by fifty percent, you will already be performing a miracle; that alone can solve the problem of hunger in the Third World. Practicing the precepts is to make progress every day. That is why during the precept recitation ceremony, we always answer the question of whether we have made an effort to study and practice the precept by deep breathing. That is the best answer. Deep breathing means that I have made some effort, but I can do better.

The Fifth Precept can be like that, too. If you are unable to completely stop drinking, then stop four-fifths, or three-fourths. The difference between the First and the Fifth Precept is that alcohol is not the same as meat. Alcohol is addictive. One drop brings about another. That is why you are encouraged to stop even one glass of wine. One glass can bring about a second glass. Although the spirit is the same as the First Precept, you are strongly recommended not to take the first glass of wine. When you see that we are in great danger, refraining from the first glass of wine is a manifestation of your enlightenment. You do it for all of us. We have to set an example for our children and our friends. On French television they say, "One glass is all right, but three glasses will bring about destruction." They do not say that the first glass brings about the second, and the second brings about the third. They don't say that, because they belong to a civilization of wine. Here in Plum Village, in the Bordeaux region of France, we are surrounded by wine. Many of our neighbors are surprised that we don't profit from being in this area, but we are a pocket of resistance. Please help us.

When I was a novice, I learned that from time to time we had to use alcohol in preparing medicines. There are many kinds of roots and herbs that have to be macerated in alcohol to have an effect. In these instances, alcohol is allowed. When the herbs have been prepared, we put the mixture in a pot and boil them. Then they no longer have an intoxicating effect. If you use some alcohol in cooking, the result may be the same. After the food is cooked, the alcohol in it will not have an intoxicating nature. We should not be narrow-minded about this.

No one can practice the precepts perfectly, including the Buddha. The vegetarian dishes that were offered to him were not entirely vegetarian. Boiled vegetables contain dead bacteria. We cannot practice the first Precept or any of the precepts perfectly. But because of the real danger in our society—alcoholism has destroyed so many families and has brought about much unhappiness—we have to do something. We have to live in a way that will eradicate that kind of damage. That is why even if you can be very healthy with one glass of wine every week, I still urge you with all my strength to abandon that glass of wine.

I would also like to say something about not using drugs. As alcohol has been the plague of one generation, drugs are the plague of another. One young girl in Australia told me that she did not know anyone in her age group who does not take drugs of one kind or another. Often young people who have taken drugs come to meditation centers to deal with the problem of facing life as it is. They are often talented and sensitive people—painters, poets and writers—and becoming addicted to drugs they have, to a small or large extent, destroyed some brain cells. It means that they now have little stability or staying power, and are prone to sleeplessness and nightmares. We do what we can to encourage them to stay for a course of training in the meditation center, but because they are easily disillusioned, they tend to leave when things become difficult. Those who have been addicted to drugs need discipline. I am not sure that a meditation center like Plum Village is the best place to cure victims of drug addiction. I think that experts and specialists in this field are better equipped than we are. A meditation center should be able to receive educators and specialists in drug addiction as well as the victims of drug addiction for short courses in meditation to make its resources available where they are truly needed.

The practice that we offer is that of the Fifth Precept, to prevent someone from becoming involved with drugs in the first place. Parents especially need to know what spiritual food to give their children. So often, children feel spiritually starved by the wholly materialistic outlook of their parents. The parents are unable to transmit to the children the values of their spiritual heritage, and so the children try to find fulfillment in drugs. Drugs seem to be the only solution when teachers and parents are spiritually barren. Young people need to touch the feeling of deep-seated well-being within themselves without having to take drugs, and it is the task of educators to help them find spiritual nourishment and well-being. But if educators have not yet discovered for themselves a source of spiritual nourishment, how can they demonstrate to young people how that nourishment may be found?

The Fifth Precept tell us to find wholesome, spiritual nourishment, not only for ourselves but also for our children and future generations. Wholesome, spiritual nourishment can be found in the moon, the spring blossoms, or the eyes of a child. The most basic meditation practices of becoming aware of our bodies, our minds, and our world can lead us into a far more rich and fulfilling state than drugs could ever do. We can celebrate the joys that are available in the simplest pleasures.

The use of alcohol and drugs is causing great damage to our societies and families. Governments work hard to stop the traffic of drugs. They use airplanes, guns, and armies to do so. Most people know how destructive the use of drugs is but they cannot resist, because there is so much pain and loneliness inside them, and the use of alcohol and drugs helps them to forget for a while their deep malaise. Once people get addicted to alcohol and drugs, they might do anything to get the drugs they need—lie, steal, rob, or even kill. To stop the

drug traffic is not the best way to prevent people from using drugs. The best way is to practice the Fifth Precept and to help others practice.

Consuming mindfully is the intelligent way to stop ingesting toxins into our consciousness and prevent the malaise from becoming overwhelming. Learning the art of touching and ingesting refreshing, nourishing, and healing elements is the way to restore our balance and transform the pain and loneliness that are already in us. To do this, we have to practice together. The practice of mindful consuming should become a national policy. It should be considered true peace education. Parents, teachers, educators, physicians, therapists, lawyers, novelists, reporters, filmmakers, economists, and legislators have to practice together. There must be ways of organizing this kind of practice.

The practice of mindfulness helps us be aware of what is going on. Once we are able to see deeply the suffering and the roots of the suffering, we will be motivated to act, to practice. The energy we need is not fear or anger; it is the energy of understanding and compassion. There is no need to blame or condemn. Those who are destroying themselves, their families, and their society by intoxicating themselves are not doing it intentionally. Their pain and loneliness are overwhelming, and they want to escape. They need to be helped, not punished. Only understanding and compassion on a collective level can liberate us. The practice of the Five Wonderful Precepts is the practice of mindfulness and compassion. For a future to be possible for our children and their children, we have to practice.



# THE HEALING POWER OF THE PRECEPTS

## BY THANISSARO BHIKKHU

From *Noble Strategy*

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The Buddha was like a doctor, treating the spiritual ills of the human race. The path of practice he taught was like a course of therapy for suffering hearts and minds. This way of understanding the Buddha and his teachings dates back to the earliest texts, and yet is also very current. Buddhist meditation is often advertised as a form of healing, and quite a few psychotherapists now recommend that their patients try meditation as part of their treatment.

Experience has shown, though, that meditation on its own cannot provide a total therapy. It requires outside support. Modern meditators in particular have been so wounded by mass civilization that they lack the resilience, persistence, and self-esteem needed before concentration and insight practices can be genuinely therapeutic. Many teachers, noticing this problem, have decided that the Buddhist path is insufficient for our particular needs. To make up for this insufficiency they have experimented with ways of supplementing meditation practice, combining it with such things as myth, poetry, psychotherapy, social activism, sweat lodges, mourning rituals, and even drumming. The problem, though, might not be that there's anything lacking in the Buddhist path, but that we simply haven't been following the Buddha's full course of therapy.

The Buddha's path consists not only of mindfulness, concentration, and insight practices, but also of virtue, beginning with the five precepts. In fact, the precepts constitute the first step in the path. There is a modern tendency to dismiss the five precepts as Sunday-school rules bound to old cultural norms that no longer apply to modern society, but this misses the role that the Buddha intended for them: as part of a course of therapy for wounded minds. In particular, they are aimed at curing two ailments that underlie low self-esteem: regret and denial.

When our actions don't measure up to certain standards of behavior, we either (1) regret the actions or (2) engage in one of two kinds of denial, either (a) denying that our actions did in fact happen or (b) denying that the standards of measurement are really valid. These reactions are like wounds in the mind. Regret is an open wound, tender to the touch, whereas denial is like hardened, twisted scar tissue around a tender spot. When the mind is wounded in these ways, it can't settle down comfortably in the present, for it finds itself resting on raw, exposed flesh or calcified knots. When it's forced to stay in the present, it's there only in a tensed, contorted, and partial way. The insights it gains tend to be contorted and partial as well. Only if the mind is free of wounds and scars can it settle down comfortably and freely in the present and give rise to undistorted discernment.

This is where the five precepts come in: They are designed to heal these wounds and scars. Healthy self-esteem comes from living up to a set of standards that are practical, clear-

cut, humane, and worthy of respect; the five precepts are formulated in such a way that they provide just such a set of standards.

*Practical:* The standards set by the precepts are simple—no intentional killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, or taking intoxicants. It's entirely possible to live in line with these standards—not always easy or convenient, maybe, but always possible. Some people translate the precepts into standards that sound more lofty or noble—taking the second precept, for example, to mean no abuse of the planet's resources—but even those who reformulate the precepts in this way admit that it's impossible to live up to them. Anyone who has dealt with psychologically damaged people knows the damage that can come from having impossible standards to live by. If you can give people standards that take a little effort and mindfulness but are possible to meet, their self-esteem soars dramatically as they find themselves actually capable of meeting those standards. They can then face more demanding tasks with confidence.

*Clear-cut:* The precepts are formulated with no ifs, ands, or buts. This means that they give very clear guidance, with no room for waffling or less-than-honest rationalizations. An action either fits in with the precepts or it doesn't. Again, standards of this sort are very healthy to live by. Anyone who has raised children has found that, although they may complain about hard and fast rules, they actually feel more secure with them than with rules that are vague and always open to negotiation. Clear-cut rules don't allow for unspoken agendas to come sneaking in the back door of the mind. If, for example, the precept against killing allowed you to kill living beings when their presence is inconvenient, that would place your convenience on a higher level than your compassion for life. Convenience would become your unspoken standard—and as we all know, unspoken standards provide huge tracts of fertile ground for hypocrisy and denial to grow. If, however, you stick by the standards of the precepts, then as the Buddha says, you are providing unlimited safety for the lives of all. There are no conditions under which you would take the lives of any living beings, no matter how inconvenient they might be. In terms of the other precepts, you are providing unlimited safety for their possessions and sexuality, and unlimited truthfulness and mindfulness in your communication with them. When you find that you can trust yourself in matters like these, you gain an undeniably healthy sense of self-esteem.

*Humane:* The precepts are humane both to the person who observes them and to the people affected by his or her actions. If you observe them, you are aligning yourself with the doctrine of karma, which teaches that the most important powers shaping your experience of the world are the intentional thoughts, words, and deeds you chose in the present moment. This means that you are not insignificant. With every choice you take—at home, at work, at play—you are exercising your power in the on-going fashioning of the world. At the same time, this principle allows you to measure yourself in terms that are entirely under your control: your intentional actions in the present moment. In other words, they don't force you to measure yourself in terms of your looks, strength, brains, financial prowess, or any other criteria that depend less on your present karma than they do on karma from the past. Also, they don't play on feelings of guilt or force you to bemoan your past lapses. Instead, they focus your attention on the ever-present possibility of living up to your standards in the here and now. If you live with people who observe the precepts, you find that your dealings with them are not a cause for mistrust or fear. They regard your desire for happiness as akin to theirs. Their worth as individuals does not depend on situations in which there have to be

winners and losers. When they talk about developing loving-kindness and mindfulness in their meditation, you see it reflected in their actions. In this way the precepts foster not only healthy individuals, but also a healthy society—a society in which the self-esteem and mutual respect are not at odds.

*Worthy of respect:* When you adopt a set of standards, it's important to know whose standards they are and to see where those standards come from, for in effect you are joining their group, looking for their approval, and accepting their criteria for right and wrong. In this case, you couldn't ask for a better group to join: the Buddha and his noble disciples. The five precepts are called "standards appealing to the noble ones." From what the texts tell us of the noble ones, they aren't people who accept standards simply on the basis of popularity. They've put their lives on the line to see what leads to true happiness, and have seen for themselves, for example, that all lying is pathological, and that any sex outside of a stable, committed relationship is unsafe at any speed. Other people may not respect you for living by the five precepts, but noble ones do, and their respect is worth more than that of anyone else in the world.

Now, many people find cold comfort in joining such an abstract group, especially when they have not yet met any noble ones in person. It's hard to be good-hearted and generous when the society immediately around you openly laughs at those qualities and values such things as sexual prowess or predatory business skills instead. This is where Buddhist communities come in. They can openly part ways with the prevailing amoral tenor of our culture and let it be known in a kindly way that they value good-heartedness and restraint among their members. In doing so, they provide a healthy environment for the full-scale adoption of the Buddha's course of therapy: the practice of concentration and discernment in a life of virtuous action. Where we have such environments, we find that meditation needs no myth or make-believe to support it, because it's based on the honest reality of a well-lived life. You can look at the standards by which you live, and then breathe in and out comfortably—not as a flower or a mountain, but as a full-fledged, responsible human being. For that's what you are.



## FIVE FAULTLESS GIFTS

"There are these five gifts, five great gifts — original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning — that are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and are not faulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and brahmans. Which five?

"There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the first gift, the first great gift — original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning — that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is not faulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and brahmans...

"Furthermore, abandoning taking what is not given (stealing), the disciple of the noble ones abstains from taking what is not given. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the second gift...

"Furthermore, abandoning illicit sex, the disciple of the noble ones abstains from illicit sex. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the third gift...

"Furthermore, abandoning lying, the disciple of the noble ones abstains from lying. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the fourth gift...

"Furthermore, abandoning the use of intoxicants, the disciple of the noble ones abstains from taking intoxicants. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the fifth gift, the fifth great gift — original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning — that is

not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is not faulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and brahmans. And this is the eighth reward of merit, reward of skillfulness, nourishment of happiness, celestial, resulting in happiness, leading to heaven, leading to what is desirable, pleasurable, and appealing; to welfare and to happiness."

— Anguttara Nikaya 8.39

## **FIVE BLESSINGS**

"Five blessings, householders, accrue to the righteous person through his practice of virtue: great increase of wealth through his diligence; a favorable reputation; a confident deportment, without timidity, in every society, be it that of nobles, brahmans, householders, or ascetics; a serene death; and, at the breaking up of the body after death, rebirth in a happy state, in a heavenly world."

— Digha Nikaya 16

## REFUGE AND PRECEPT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*The following questions will support thoughtful contemplation as one prepares to take or renew refuge and precepts. These questions are valuable for those studying on their own as well as those meeting in refuge discussion groups.*

### Refuge Discussion Topics

1. Are there certain things in cyclic existence that you take refuge in, such as people, material possessions, social status, praise? What is the effect of relying on them for lasting happiness and freedom from suffering?
2. What are your reasons for taking refuge? How do you think taking refuge in the Three Jewels will benefit you and those around you?
3. What qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha make them reliable objects of refuge?
4. How will taking refuge and keeping any/all of the lay precepts impact your life?
5. What habits or activities will you have to change to keep the precepts?
6. How will taking refuge and living according to the precepts contribute to the quality of your life?
7. How will they prepare you for death?
8. In your own experience, what has deepened your understanding and faith in the Buddha? The Dharma? And the Sangha?
9. What are the causes for taking refuge? To what extent have you cultivated these in your life so far? How can you cultivate these even further?
10. Why is the Dharma considered our actual refuge?
11. How can we evaluate or gauge the extent to which we have taken refuge in our lives?

## **Precepts Discussion Topics**

### **The first precept: Refrain from killing**

1. Do you consider some types of intentional killing acceptable and feel okay about doing them? Killing bugs or mice? Euthanasia of pets? Abortion? Assisted suicide?
2. How else could you approach the above situations so that you can avoid killing?
3. Make examples of killing from your own life experience done with each motivation: anger, attachment and ignorance.
4. What are some of the benefits you would experience by refraining from any killing any living being, even the smallest insect?

### **The second precept: Refrain from stealing or taking what is not freely given**

1. When you think of taking things that are not freely given, what do you consider acceptable? Do you notice a feeling of entitlement with certain things like making personal phone calls or photocopies at your workplace, downloading pirated music or movies, not paying taxes, etc. Make examples from your own life. Do you borrow things or money and not return them (Library books? Loans from friends? Other possessions?)
2. Do you want to continue such actions? How can you change that behavior?
3. What are some benefits you will experience by refraining from taking what is not freely given by others?

### **The third precept: Refraining from unwise and unkind sexual activity**

1. When we're involved in unwise sexual behavior, we're imagining attaining some pleasure for ourselves. What are some of the inevitable, unintended consequences of engaging in unwise sexual behavior?
2. Make examples of some of the ways that holding the precept to refrain from unwise and unkind sexual behavior protects you.
3. List some of the benefits for you and those close to you i.e. family, community, from your refraining from unwise and unkind sexual behavior.



### **The fourth precept: Refraining from lying**

1. Make examples of some of the small, medium and big lies you've told in your life. Did they bring the result you wanted, or did they lead to more problems?
2. What kind of lies do you think are okay to tell in life? What is your motivation for telling these lies? Is lying in these circumstances really necessary? And where do you draw the line on lying?
3. Do you get confused when you lie? For example, you can't remember what you told to whom? What happens when people figure out that you have lied to them?
3. What are some of the benefits you will experience from completely refraining from lying?

### **The fifth precept: Refraining from intoxicants (Alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and misuse of prescription drugs)**

1. Do a life review of your use of intoxicants—alcohol, recreational drugs, tobacco, and abuse of prescription drugs. What was your motivation for using these? What were the results of using them for yourself and for others?
2. What would be most challenging for you about refraining?
3. What kind of situations are you likely to find yourself in when it could be challenging to keep this precept? What ideas do you have for avoiding such situations or dealing with the challenges you face in them?
4. We think that alcohol and/or drugs will be fun and will bring us happiness. Discuss some of the unintended consequences of drug and alcohol use.