

Outline for Class 7 Taking Refuge

Once we have established a daily practice, we begin to see the fruits of dharma practice showing up in our lives.

Shinay helps us to recognize our minds states, both on and off the cushion. We begin to have more of a sense of personal comfort and ease. We find it easier to let go of negative thinking, and return to the sense of inner peace that continuously dwells within us.

Decreasing our non-virtuous actions, our minds are clearer and freer. Increasing our positive actions, we gain a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in our lives. Others begin to notice the change in us, and appreciate what spirituality has done for our lives.

Contemplating the Four Ordinary Foundations shows us the defects of ego-centered, worldly life and turns our minds toward the liberation of Buddhahood, which we begin to hunger for.

Now that we have the impetus to live our lives as a means to achieve Buddhahood, we need to establish a new direction for ourselves and bring our lives in harmony with the dharma. This is done first through the practice of Refuge and then deepened through the practice of Bodhicitta.

The Refuge Ceremony

The first formal step for most people who begin the practice of the Buddhadharma is called Taking Refuge. A person is “ready” to take Refuge vows when they are certain that they are interested in pursuing the Buddhist path to its fruition — that is, complete Buddhahood. Each person decides for him or herself when they are ready for taking the vow — there are no set criteria or judgments made by anyone outside ourselves.

Refuge is considered an initial step because it brings our aspiration (in this case, for enlightenment) to the forefront of our lives and signifies our “changing the direction” of our lives from worldly ambitions toward spiritual work and goals.

It is said that taking refuge is a natural tendency for humans, and that taking refuge in enlightened objects “purifies” this natural tendency and uplifts it from the mundane to the spiritual.

The vow is taken in a formal ceremony, with a human preceptor “standing in” for the Three Jewels of Refuge — the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

During the ceremony, the aspirant vows that until they reach enlightenment, they will take Refuge in — that is, trust and follow — the Buddha as the ultimate teacher; the Dharma as the path

that leads to Buddhahood; and the Sangha (both the enlightened sangha of bodhisattvas and enlightened masters and the ordinary sangha of other aspirants) as their guides and companions on the path.

The Buddha, called “the greatest among humans,” is taken as the ultimate teacher because he has freed himself from the sufferings of samsara, and thus can help lead us out of samsara. (It is noted in the writings of many Buddhist masters that because the Buddha is free of samsaric suffering and intention, is eminently qualified to lead others.)

The Dharma, called “peace, the highest of that which is free from desire,” is taken as the path because it can help us replicate the achievement of the Buddha.

The Sangha is taken as guide and companion because they wish only for our own freedom from samsara.

During the Refuge ceremony, the aspirant affirms his wish to seek enlightenment “for the benefit of all sentient beings” and presents himself or herself before images of the Three Jewels as a buddha-in-training. After two repetitions of the Refuge Vow, the preceptor cuts a small bit of hair from the top of the head of the aspirant, signifying (among other things) the aspirant’s offering of themselves to the Three Jewels, and the giving up of any obstacles to their taking the Refuge Vow.

The preceptor then gives a name (called a Refuge Name, or Dharma Name) to the aspirant, signifying their “new birth” into the family of the Buddha. The ceremony also includes prayers said on behalf of the aspirant by the preceptor, and a period of silent meditation during which the transmission of the vow — which dates back 2,500 years to the Buddha himself — is given.

The Refuge Ceremony is a very moving experience, and for many is the intimation of greater things to come, as it is for many the first formal transmission of the wisdom of the Buddha.

It has been said by great masters of the past that the Refuge Ceremony is a gateway to a deeper experience and understanding of the dharma, as any philosophy jumps off the page and into experience with the application of commitment on the part of the student. It is said that when a person takes Refuge, the good karma they accrue increases, because every action is “within the sphere of” enlightened intention and activity.

The Commitments of Refuge

After a person takes Refuge, they are asked to abide by the commitments of refuge, which include:

- Making offerings, when possible, to the Three Jewels and remembering the kindness of the Three Jewels and their qualities.

- Not harming, when possible, any sentient being. Although those who take refuge are asked not to harm beings, this request speaks more about “living consciously” than it does about specific prohibitions. For example, some Buddhists try not to eat meat out of respect for other beings, but other Buddhists recognize that all methods of eating (including vegetarianism, which causes insects to die as crops are raised) cause some form of harm to other beings, and that the ideal is to try to be conscious of all of one’s actions and to try to decrease actions in which we purposefully and angrily harm others.
- Not criticizing the religious beliefs of others.
- Respecting images of the enlightened beings, religious books, and the garb of Buddhist monastics and teachers. Many Buddhists practice this by being mindful not to step over, to sit on, or to place on the floor these images, which symbolize their own enlightened potential.

After taking Refuge, many Buddhists keep a small shrine in their home and make daily offerings of incense, or water or flowers to their shrine. Methods for making these offerings are explained after a person takes Refuge. Buddhists also renew their refuge vows twice daily — once in the morning and once in the evening — to keep their practice vital and progressive.

Buddhists also try to establish (or continue!) a daily practice of prayer and meditation, incorporating what they are learning about dharma with their daily life.

Handout

“The Practices of Tibetan Buddhism,” by Lama Kathy Wesley