

**Contents (click on heading to view text)**

- Consistency in meditation
  - A hundred thousand offerings
  - Second preparatory practice: Obtaining offerings properly and arranging them nicely
    - *Making offerings with a pure heart*
    - *Making dishonest offerings – the five wrong livelihoods*
    - *Offering our practice*
  - Third preparatory practice: Sitting in the 8-point posture, in a positive frame of mind, take refuge and generate bodhicitta
    - *The Dharma refuge*
    - *The Buddha refuge*
    - *The Sangha refuge*
    - *The Guru embodies the three jewels of refuge*
    - *Refuge visualization*
    - *Attitude of caution, conviction and compassion*
    - *Not a matter of blind faith*
    - *The Four Immeasurables*
    - *Simple visualization*
  - Q&A
- 

Lamrim is a gradual path – something we develop gradually in our mind. This course is to try and give you a general overview of the Buddhist path so that when you "meet" other teachings, or when you go on short courses and so on, you will know where to put whatever you have learned in terms of the whole path.

This overview will help you "fill in the gaps". Many of you have had teachings in the past but you haven't been able to put them all together in a consecutive framework. I'm trying to fill in the gaps so that you may be able to do so. So it is taking a lot of time and I want to ask you to please bear with me. My intention in doing this course was, like what I said, to give you an overview and to fill in the gaps. If I go quickly, I won't fulfill either of these purposes. It would wind up being another short course and you will be, again left without a framework and many "gaps". I can't tell you when it is going to be over. But, as in most things in life, we should be concerned with the process of taking in the teachings and not the goal of finishing them.

Very often when we go into a retreat, we are so anxious to go but as soon as we start, we count how many days we have left because we can't wait to finish. We are always very goal orientated.

Here, we are really trying to work on learning the path as a gradual process. I hope that by doing it slowly, the purposes I have described will be fulfilled. So far, we have talked about the qualities of the compilers, the qualities of this particular teaching (the lamrim), the fact that it's set up as a gradual path so that we know where all the other teachings we hear fit into the path. It helps us to avoid becoming sectarian. It shows us how all the teachings fit into a path for us to follow.

We have also covered:

- How the Lamrim should be studied and taught
- Qualities of the teacher and how to select a qualified teacher
- Qualities of a student so that we will know how to gradually develop them within ourselves
- How to listen to the teachings, the benefits of listening to the teachings
- How to listen without the faults of the three vessels
- How to give the teachings
- The etiquette that is involved on the student's part and the teacher's part

And then I took one session to describe to you the whole framework of Buddhism covering:

- the body & mind

- reincarnation & karma
- cyclic existence & rebirth

Even though the Lamrim is said to be a gradual path, in fact, it requires knowledge of the whole path.

It is not taught like in the Western system, where things are in sequential order. With the Lamrim, the more you understand the beginning, the better you understand the end; the more you understand the end, the better you understand the beginning.

### Consistency in meditation

In the last session, I started getting into the preparatory practices and how to construct a meditation session. Remember that meditation should be done on a daily basis. You can do meditation retreats – with four to six sessions a day – but it is really important to be very consistent in your daily sessions, to do some meditation everyday, whether you are sick or not sick, whether you are rushed or not rushed.

Keep consistency and be very patient with yourself.

You have to find the right amount of effort in your meditation. You don't want to push yourself so badly that you get stressed out. On the other hand, you don't want to be lazy and not use all of your potential. It is a process of finding a delicate balance within us. This is something that we have to learn by trial and error.

Before we start the meditation session, first we clean the room to provide a clean environment for ourselves and to invite the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

And then we arrange the altar. I've described how to set it up, where to put the different pictures and so on and the reasons for doing that. Then we talked about how to make offerings.

### A hundred thousand offerings

Incidentally, when you do your preliminary practices, there are certain practices that many people do a hundred thousand times, to purify and to accumulate positive potential or merit. The practice of making a hundred thousand water bowl offerings is one of them.

Others include refuge recitations, prostrations and mandala offerings. You don't have to do a hundred thousand. Don't worry. You don't have to do it tomorrow. But just to let you know that it is a very beneficial practice, so beneficial that many people actually undertake to do a hundred thousand.

The reason for doing a hundred thousand times, as one teacher put it, is that it gives you an opportunity to do one right. In other words, to really fully offer something or to fully bow down to the Buddha, it really takes a lot of practice.

#### **Making meaningful offerings**

We, Americans, sometimes get so hung up on the numbers. We're so production orientated – "I want to do one hundred thousand. I have done how many thousand today and then this multiplied by how many days..." We are so concerned with the numbers and how long it is going to take us, as if we're producing merit on a production line.

We completely forget about the attitudes we're trying to generate and the feeling of confidence in the Buddha, the willingness to make offerings, the joy in making them, or the humility with which we want to show respect to the objects of refuge.

It is really important not to get so hung up on numbers but to really look at the meaning. For example, when you watch Lama Zopa prostrate, he'll just sit there for one minute. Then he does his prostration, and he'll do it so slowly, really concentrating on everything, so that one prostration is really meaningful.

Whereas, the rest of us prostrate quickly and our mind is all over the place. We shouldn't get so hung up

in the formality. Try and concentrate on the meaning, even if it means doing less.

## Second Preparatory Practice: Obtaining offerings properly and arranging them nicely

The second of the six preparatory practices is obtaining the offerings properly and arranging them nicely. I've talked about how to arrange them nicely. Now I want to talk about obtaining them properly.

There are two ways that we can look at the kinds of things not to offer – things we obtain dishonestly.

This dishonesty can be in terms of:

- Obtaining things through stealing, lying and other negative actions like that.
- Offering things with the wrong motivation, e.g. offering them in order to obtain reputation so that everybody can come to your house and say, "Oh wow, you have such a fancy altar!"

Sometimes that happens in our mind. We want to make a really impressive altar – not because we really regard the Buddha with any special respect – but because we want all our friends to respect us for having such expensive statues and antiques.

Actually, it says in the scriptures we shouldn't differentiate between an expensive statue and a cheap broken statue. The Buddha's body is beyond value.

So we shouldn't look at one statue and say, "This statue is beautiful. It costs ten thousand dollars and I got it at this really expensive store. But that statue is really ugly – it is broken and it is cheap!"

We are not looking at the material of the statue. If we do, it is basically regarding Buddha statues like we do cars. Our spiritual practice helps us go beyond that.

We think of the Buddha statue as a representation of the enlightened form. It reminds us of the qualities of the Buddha so that we generate those qualities in ourselves.

### **Making offerings with a pure heart**

Here's a really interesting story about making offerings with the wrong motivation. A hermit was up in the mountains and his patron was coming that day to bring him food and offer him things. So the hermit thought, "I am going to make my altar really nice." So, he cleaned everything and he put out extra offering bowls. He made extra *tormas* and decorated everything really nicely.

Just as he was done, all of a sudden, he realized that his motivation was to impress his patron so he could get more stuff. As soon as he realized how rotten his motivation was, he took up some dirt off the floor in his cave and he threw it all over the altar.

At that time, there was another hermit in another place who had psychic power and he saw this first hermit do this, and he said, "That person just made a very pure offering. That person just practiced the Dharma by throwing dirt on the altar."

What he was doing at that moment wasn't throwing dirt at the Buddha. He was throwing the dirt at his own rotten motivation.

When we offer things, let's do it with a really pure heart of confidence in the Triple Gem. Do it without attachment to the things or hoping to receive reputation or get things from somebody else.

It's good before you make your offerings, to pause and really try and generate the altruistic intention and check your motivation before you do it.

### **Making dishonest offerings – the five wrong livelihoods**

There is another way in which we can obtain and make offerings in a dishonest way – according to the five wrong livelihoods. There are five sub-categories.

### **1. Offerings obtained through flattery**

We have a friend and we flatter them, "Oh you're so nice! You're so generous! You're so kind!" And the reason we're praising them is with the hope that they would like us and then give us things. So the problem isn't in praising somebody. The problem is praising them with the intention to flatter them so that you get something out of it for yourself.

And we do this all the time. Being kind to other people with the intention that they would like us or give us something.

Even at Christmas time, when you give your mailman and the newsboy a present, do you really give it to them because you like them and you want them to be happy? Or do you give it to them because you want them to deliver your mail and not to mess up?

What is really our intention? Are we giving with an honest mind or to flatter them so that we get something for ourselves? Anything obtained through flattery that we use to make an offering is something obtained through one of the five wrong livelihoods.

### **2. Offerings obtained through hinting**

This is something we do a lot. "Oh you know, what you gave me last year was really, really useful!" meaning, "Why don't you give it to me again this year!" [laughter]

In all sorts of little ways, we drop hints. "Oh gee, this is really helpful! Where did you get this? It is so hard for me to go over there and get it." We say such things with the intention to somehow manipulate the other person so that they give us what we want.

I'm not talking about genuinely thanking somebody for something they did for us. That's one thing. But when we thank them with the intention of dropping a hint so that they do it again, then that's one of the five wrong livelihoods.

### **3. Offering a small gift to get a bigger gift**

You give your boss a small present with the hope that he will give you a big bonus. Or, during Christmas, giving someone a small present with the intention that they'll open our present after they have already given us one that is worth more. Or giving your grandmother something with the hope that she will leave you her legacy. Giving of small gifts, not because we really care, but in order to receive more than we give – is a form of bribery, isn't it? I give you something so you would give me something back in return.

### **4. Using coercive methods**

This happens when we put people in such a spot that they must give us something. This depends so much on our motivation.

If I give you a whole big teaching on the merit of generosity with the intention to hit you with a donation basket as you're leaving, then that would be wrong livelihood on my part. Because my intention is to make you feel, after having this teaching, that you can't walk out of the room with a good conscience without giving. [laughter]

Whenever we manipulate people in such a manner, we are forcing people into making charity, even though we might be doing it with a beautiful smile on our face, looking completely innocent.

### **5. Obtaining things through hypocrisy**

This is pretending to be something that you aren't. Imagine that you happen to come over and I decide to do a big elaborate *puja* and take out my *dorje*, bell and drum; and put on big clothes and burn things and do all sorts of extravaganzas, to make you think: "Wow, she must be a great tantric practitioner! I am going to make offerings."

Pretending to be a great practitioner when you aren't in order to get offerings is being a hypocrite in your practice. When your patron comes over, or someone who makes offerings comes over, then all of a sudden, you start doing a lot of practice. All of a sudden, you start looking like a very pure practitioner and behave properly. But as soon as your patron is away, then you are lying and stealing and being rude and inconsiderate again.

I remember the first time that I heard this teaching about the five wrong livelihoods, I was so shocked

because as a child, I was actually taught that these were things I was supposed to do in order to get things.

In other words, it is very rude to ask people to give you something directly but it is okay to hint; it is okay to flatter; it is okay to give them a small present so they'll give you a big one. It is okay to do all of those things. But to ask a person directly would be very rude. We weren't allowed to do that. I remember thinking how curious this is – how all these dishonest ways of procuring things are so deeply ingrained in our society!

### **Offering our practice**

If we get anything from these five wrong livelihoods, and offer them to the Buddha, it is not a pure offering. What pleases the Buddha is not having the material on the altar. What pleases the Buddha most is our own practice.

If we use all sorts of devious methods and dishonest motivation to get things and then offer them, our practice is very impure and so the offering is impure.

When we are offering a substance on the altar, we are really offering our practice. We are not offering a material. The Buddha doesn't need the candle but what does please the Buddha is if we practice properly, if we get the candle in a proper way.

This is something to think about – to go over our lives and see how we get the things that we have. How much do we use these five ways to get gifts or to get things from other people or to influence other people?

And, then, try and think how we can cultivate a more honest, compassionate and kind motivation towards these people so that how we interact with them is coming from a really kind heart and not any devious method.

### **Third Preparatory Practice: Sitting in the 8-point posture, in a positive frame of mind, take refuge and generate bodhicitta**

Sitting in the 8-point posture: there are seven points with regard to the physical posture and the eighth point refers to the mental attitude.

#### **1. The legs**

In terms of your physical posture, the ideal to aim for (but we have to modify it according to our physical ability) is sitting in the Vajra position. This is sometimes called the lotus position but from a Buddhist point of view, it is not called 'lotus', it is called 'Vajra'. You put your left leg on your right thigh and then the right leg on the left thigh.

Now, many people can't do that. It hurts too much. So, you can sit cross-legged. You can sit in a 'half-Vajra' – with your left leg up on the right thigh and the right leg down.

You can sit cross-legged in the Indian style like what we did in kindergarten. You can sit in Tara's position where your legs aren't crossed at all but you have your left leg tucked in and your right leg right in front of it. That is also very comfortable.

Sit on a cushion. That prevents your legs from falling asleep.

If you are uncomfortable sitting in any of those ways, then sit on a chair. That's okay because we all aren't great meditators from day one. It takes time. It is good if you can slowly try and sit in a Vajra position; maybe do it for thirty seconds or one minute or five minutes at the beginning of your meditation session. Sitting in a perfect position makes some kind of imprint in your mind so that gradually – as you improve physically and mentally – you can do it longer.

## **Be comfortable**

It is important to be comfortable in your meditation posture for most of your session because you are trying to work with your mind. Meditation is what you do with your mind, not so much with your body.

But like I said at the retreat, don't lie down when you meditate. It is a very bad habit to get into. It is too much like sleeping and you'll probably wind up sleeping.

We want our mind to be alert when we meditate. So, we should try to have our body in an alert position. When you go to university, you don't lie down on the floor and listen to your professors. When you take your exams, you don't lie down.

If you have some incredible physical ailment, which some people have, in which sitting cross-legged or sitting on a chair is just too painful, then lie down. Or when you are sick and you are trying to meditate but you can't sit up, then lie down. But in normal circumstances, try and sit erect if you can.

## **2. The back**

The second of the seven-point position is to have an upright body, to have your spine erect. It is very helpful to imagine that you're pulled up by a string from the crown of your head that helps you to keep your back straight.

## **3. The shoulders**

The third point is to have your shoulders level. You don't want them slumping forward; you don't have them back like in the army. But they are level and you are sitting up straight.

## **4. The hands**

The fourth point is to have your right hand on your left, about four fingers' width below your navel. Your thumbs are touching, forming a triangle, which puts your thumbs at about the level of your navel. Your hands are in your lap and against your body.

Sitting in this position helps the circulation of the inner energies in your body. And since our mind is related to these inner energies, if the energies circulate well, then the mind becomes more manageable. And by the way, with your arms, there is a little bit of space between your arms and your body. They are comfortably relaxed so that air can circulate.

## **5. The eyes**

Lower your eyes. If it is possible, keep your eyes open a bit. Firstly, because light will enter and that prevents you from going to sleep. Secondly, meditation is purely a mental thing. It is not done with a visual consciousness.

If your visual consciousness is still functioning (there is light entering your eyes) and you can meditate, then you are really developing the ability to meditate while you are having some sense stimuli. That will help you a lot during the break time when you are walking around so that you can still hold the visualization or hold the mindfulness of the breath.

You look downwards – sometimes they say towards the tip of your nose, but it doesn't mean cross-eyed because you'll get a headache. You can gaze downwards, but your eyes aren't really focused on anything. It is just to put your eyes somewhere so that you no longer pay attention to the visual stimuli but you really rely on the mental consciousness. Don't roll your eyes back in the socket.

## **6. The mouth**

Keep your mouth closed, unless you have a cold or something like that. And keep it in a relaxed position.

## **7. The tongue**

Have your tongue touch the upper palate. This prevents a strong flow of saliva.

## **8. The attitude**

Before we meditate, we have to check our frame of mind and see what's going on in our mind. You don't just sit down and then start to meditate right away. But you have to sit and check, "What frame of mind am I in?" That's why it is recommended to do a little bit of breathing meditation and you check: "Am I under the influence of the attachment? Am I angry right now? Am I jealous? Am I falling asleep?"

Check what's going on in your mind right now.

Is your mind really scattered – under the influence of a lot of attachment? Day dreaming about all sorts of things you would rather be doing than meditating – pizza and chocolate cake, boyfriends and girlfriends, bowling alley and the mountains, or whatever your thing is.

Instead of letting the mind wonder excitedly or agitatedly, do the breathing meditation to calm it down.

If you are angry when you sit down to meditate, then you have to meditate a little bit on patience to calm your mind down and get rid of the anger.

If you don't deal with these things at the beginning, then as you start to do the meditation, they will keep coming up and definitely distract you from the object of meditation.

If you sit down and you are falling asleep, then when you are doing the breathing meditation, you can inhale the light and exhale the smoke. All that heaviness of body and mind, you imagine as exhaling in the form of smoke. And then you inhale light – that is a very alert mind and all the good qualities you want to develop. You imagine that light permeating your body and mind.

Or you can imagine a very bright pinpointed light between your eyes. A really bright light that completely illuminates your body and mind through and through. This helps to dispel the dull mind.

So, do a little bit of breathing meditation at the beginning to get your mind in a neutral frame of mind – to make that transition from running around all day to sitting down and trying to direct your mind towards a positive object.

Sometimes, the breathing meditation is a whole meditation in itself. In this particular context, we are talking about it as a preparation for doing the prayers and for your analytical meditation session.

Then, we have to take refuge and generate bodhicitta. Now, we get into the refuge visualization. This is quite an extensive teaching, this teaching on refuge, and actually the subject of refuge comes up much later in the Lamrim. So, I will just briefly explain to give you some idea of it...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

...The idea is that when you hear something, try to practice it as best as you can, but don't expect yourself to understand everything. Don't expect yourself to do it perfectly. We've got to pull our mind out of this Western achievement-orientated education and really see learning Dharma as a process.

In Dharma education, it isn't sufficient to hear a teaching one time and say, "Oh, I heard that teaching. Look, I have my notebook. I know exactly how to do the visualization. I know exactly what the points are in the meditation. So I don't need to hear it again."

In Western education, once you have all the information written down, you don't need to hear it again. For Dharma, that is not true. It isn't a matter of getting the information. It is a matter of meditating.

And so the first few times when you hear a teaching, you're busy taking notes because you're trying to get the information. The more you hear the same teaching, then, you can put down your pen and start to really contemplate while you are hearing the teaching.

You come to have a really deep feeling in you when you are listening. This is a very different approach to education. It is an experiential approach. You should be having an experience when you listen to the Dharma teaching, not just collecting information.

So, that is a little bit of sidetrack but I hope it will help you when we start talking about refuge here, so that you'll begin to understand that it is an understanding that we develop very gradually.

### **The Dharma refuge**

In the lesson that we had on rebirth and karma, we had talked about our mind being under the influence of ignorance, attachment and anger. Due to these afflictions [['Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron](#)

now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'], we do actions with our body, speech and mind that leave imprints on our mind stream.

Then, at the time of death, due to the propulsion of the karma, due to the grasping of our ignorant and attached mind, we crave for another body, grasp for another body, and the karma ripens and throws us into a particular body. And so, cyclic existence carries on from one rebirth to the next.

Now, the way to stop this is to stop the cause of cyclic existence, which is the ignorance – this fundamental misunderstanding of who we are, how we exist and how phenomena exist.

With an ignorant mind, we superimpose a way of existing on reality that it doesn't have. What we need to develop is the wisdom mind that sees that our superimposition has never existed and will never exist. In other words, we see the complete lack of our superimposition; we see the emptiness. (The absence of all that super-imposed fantasized ways of existing.) So, with wisdom, we cut the root of ignorance.

The wisdom is the essence of the Fourth Noble Truth, the truth of the Path. With the Path, we cut off the first two Noble Truths of suffering and its causes, and achieve the third Noble Truth, which is the truth of cessation, in other words, the absence of suffering and its causes; the emptiness of the suffering and its causes. So, these last two Noble Truths – the true path and the true cessation – those two are the Dharma refuge.

When we say, "I take refuge in the Dharma", that's what we're taking refuge in. The path (ethics, concentration and wisdom) and the result (cessation of all the sufferings and their causes) are the real Dharma refuge.

The text, the teachings and the scripture that explain how to develop that path and obtain the cessation are the conventional Dharma. The real Dharma is those realizations themselves.

### **The Buddha refuge**

If we understand that, then we'll understand who the Buddha is, or who Buddhas are. Buddhas are beings who have the true cessations and true paths developed to the fullest extent in their mind streams. Buddhas who are founding Buddhas – like Shakyamuni Buddha who taught the Dharma in a historic period when it wasn't visibly present in the world – are the expounders of the Dharma, the ones who show us the path to attain the cessation. So, that is the Buddha refuge.

### **The Sangha refuge**

The Sangha refuge refers to all the helpers on the path. The people with the initial insight, direct insight into emptiness and who have some level of cessation. In other words, they have some levels of the real Dharma, of the true cessations and true paths in their own mind stream. These highly realized beings are the real helpers on the path. The monks and the nuns are their standards or their representatives. But when we say we take refuge in the Sangha, it is really taking refuge in these beings who have the direct perception of emptiness. We are not referring here to monks and nuns.

### **The Guru embodies the three jewels of refuge**

We have these Three Jewels of Refuge – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. You'll notice that we always say, "First, I take refuge in the Guru". So some people ask, "Do the Tibetans have four jewels of refuge? What's wrong with them? All the other Buddhists have three – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Isn't three good enough?"

The answer is that the Tibetans still have three jewels of refuge. But they see the Guru as the embodiment of all three. The Guru embodies the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The Guru is regarded as special here because it is our spiritual master that gives us access to all of the inspiration, from the Buddha down through the lineage, to the present day. The spiritual master provides the link between the Buddha and us through this transmission of inspiration from generation to generation.

We have talked a lot about how important a pure lineage is. About how we feel that we're stepping in a historically spiritual way, from generation to generation – not in the "blood" way but in the sense of the inspiration of the Buddha getting passed down from teacher to student, teacher to student.

So, our teacher is highly regarded because they are the ones who give us access to that lineage. But they

are not a fourth object of refuge.

### **Refuge visualization**

In refuge visualization, remember that this is on an imaginary level. Don't expect to see anything with your eyes. If I say, "Think of your mother"; you can have a picture of your mother very easily in your mind. Visualization just refers to that image coming to your mind. If I say think of your workplace, then that image comes to your mind.

In the context of taking refuge, to visualize this or that, just means that mental image coming into your mind. It doesn't mean that you see everything vibrantly clear with your eyes. It just means to imagine.

We are trying to visualize things that will enhance us spiritually. So we are going to visualize the three objects of refuge and then generate the attitude to actually take refuge in them.

### **The elaborate visualization**

There is one big throne and on top of it, you have five smaller thrones – one in the center, one in the front, side, back and the other side.

On the big throne, on the smaller center throne (which is slightly higher than the other four thrones), you imagine your root spiritual master in the form of the Buddha. You are not taking your spiritual master's personality and imagining them as the Buddha, but you are trying to connect with what is the essence of your spiritual master.

The essence of your spiritual master isn't their sense of humor. It isn't their patting you on the head. It isn't their kind look.

Their essence is compassion. Their essence is wisdom. You are not imagining the personality of your teacher as the Buddha but the qualities of your teacher appearing as the Buddha. So, it is like seeing your teacher in a pure way. So, your root teacher (root guru) is in the form of the Buddha.

Then, in the throne in front of your root teacher, you have all your other spiritual masters – all the other teachers you have directly taken the teachings from and whom you've made that connection with, are in the front in their normal form. You can also visualize your root guru there in his or her normal form.

To the left of the Buddha on the big throne (to your right if you're facing the Buddha), you have Manjushri and all the lamas or spiritual masters of the profound lineage on a smaller throne. This is the lineage of teachings that primarily emphasizes wisdom, primarily emphasizes emptiness. These lineage lamas of course have all the different techniques. But that tradition emphasizes the wisdom aspect of the path. You have the lineage lamas like Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, Buddhapalita, down to Lama Tsong Khapa and the Kadampa geshees and so on.

To the right of the Buddha on the big throne (to your left if you're facing the Buddha), you have Maitreya and all the teachers from the vast lineage emphasizing the teachings on bodhicitta, on altruism, on compassion, on a smaller throne. And here you have Maitreya, Asanga and down the line to Lama Tsong Khapa and the Kadampa masters. So you have Lama Tsong Khapa and the Kadampa masters on both sides.

For the smaller throne at the back of the Buddha, you have Vajradhara surrounded by all the lamas of the experiential lineage. This would mean, if you're practicing specific deities, the lamas of that lineage. Like if you're practicing Dorje Jigje or Yamantaka, then visualize all of those lamas. Or if you're practicing Heruka, then all of those lamas of that lineage.

Sometimes they call the lineage on the back throne the lineage of the blessings of the practice. Or they say it is Shantideva there and all the lamas of that tradition. So there are different ways of explaining the back throne.

Around these five smaller thrones but still on the one big throne, you have circles of the different tantric deities. You have circles of all the other Buddhas, like the thousand Buddhas of the fortunate eon or the eight Medicine Buddhas. You have a circle of bodhisattvas, a circle of arhats, a circle of dakas and dakinis which are special beings who have realized emptiness and help us along the path, and a circle of Dharma protectors.

All of them are made of light, so don't worry about how you see them: "This guy is sitting in front of that one, so I can't see the one at the back." Everything you're visualizing is made of light – not concrete forms. Visualizing them made of light helps us to remember also that none of the objects of refuge are inherently existent.

At the sides of the lamas or in front of them, you have the Dharma texts. Here, you have the three objects of refuge. You have the Buddha in the form of Shakyamuni in the center, the essence of what is your teacher. Also the Buddha in the form of the meditational deities and all of the other Buddhas in these concentric circles. You have the Dharma in the form of the texts that are sitting either in front or to the side of the lamas. You have the Sangha in the form of the bodhisattvas, the arhats, dakas and dakinis and the Dharma protectors.

When you try to visualize, don't expect to have all the details crystal clear. If you just get a basic general feeling of where everybody is sitting, that's good enough. Like when you are at a party, you can't see the people behind you but you have a feeling of who is behind you. It's like that. Be gentle with yourself. Don't worry about whether they have blue eyes or brown eyes. But do get a feeling for the objects of refuge.

So, you have all the objects of refuge. They are all made of light. They are all looking at you with a very friendly and delighted expression. This is actually very important – when you think of the refuge objects, think of them smiling at you. Don't think of the Buddha looking and saying, "I saw you, you were naughty today!" [laughter]

We shouldn't import our Christian ideas into Buddhism. Remember that whenever the objects of refuge look at us, they look on us with a pleased and delighted face, not with a critical and judgmental one. They look at us – pleased and delighted – because they have great compassion, because they have such a kind heart and love for us.

Also, they look at us – very pleased – because they are very happy that we are practicing the Dharma. When we are imagining them, it signifies that we are starting to practice, doesn't it? Even though we might behave in all sorts of not-so-nice ways some other time, by the very fact that we are now sitting down to practice and put our mind in a good direction, that causes the Buddhas and teachers to look at us with a kind face.

They are all made of light. You can imagine they're all talking to each other too. They are not just sitting there, falling asleep. [laughter] All the different lamas, they can be debating and discussing the Dharma.

As for yourself, you are sitting in your ordinary form. On your left you have your mother; on your right your father; in front of you everybody you don't like; and around you all the other sentient beings. All are looking towards the Buddha. You put all the people you don't like in front of you, the idea being that we can't escape all the people that we don't like. We especially have to develop a compassionate attitude, wanting to lead them to enlightenment.

When we do the refuge, imagine that we're leading all the beings including our enemies. It is really important. So you imagine that the people you don't like, having faith in the Buddha. You imagine your mother and father having faith in the Buddha.

### **Attitude of caution, conviction and compassion**

What is the attitude to cultivate when we take refuge? This attitude has a couple of main ingredients. The first aspect is a sense of caution or dread towards the sufferings of cyclic existence, specifically the sufferings in the lower realms. In other words, we really dread having a lower rebirth. Or we're very cautious about the danger of being stuck in samsara.

The more we understand the disadvantages of samsara, the deeper our refuge will be. Because it is the wish to escape all of those unsatisfactory conditions that is propelling us to go towards the objects of refuge for guidance.

The second aspect is the mind of faith and confidence in the Triple Gem and their ability to guide us. So, here you can see that we need some understanding of the qualities of the Triple Gem.

Taking refuge isn't like an on-and-off light switch. It is not whether you have taken refuge or you haven't.

Taking refuge is a matter of degree – a process – not a goal.

When you start to practice and do this visualization, you probably don't have much refuge. You don't understand the visualization much. You don't understand the Dharma much. But then as you begin to learn the whole path, you begin to understand things, you start putting them into practice in your own life, then things make much more sense and then your sense of confidence in the Triple Gem's ability to guide you really increases. Refuge is something you develop over time.

The more you practice, the deeper your refuge becomes. Because the more you practice, the more you become convinced that the methods really work, and that what the Buddha said is really true. So your confidence and your faith automatically grows from dimmer to brighter.

The basic practice in taking refuge is the sense of caution or dread, and confidence in the Triple Gem. And, especially since we want to be practitioners of the Great Vehicle, the third aspect is to have a sense of compassion as well. Out of compassion for all the sentient beings who have been so kind to us, we want to attain the state of full enlightenment so that we can be most effective in benefiting them. And we are convinced we are capable of attaining it.

So, we have compassion for others. We have the aspiration for enlightenment. We have the conviction that it is possible to do it. In that way, our refuge becomes a Mahayana refuge. Taking refuge, not only to prevent our own sufferings and to lead us to liberation, but also for the benefit of others. By transforming our own minds, we become more capable of helping others, of leading them on the path to enlightenment.

First of all, we do the visualization, we think of the reasons why we are taking the refuge – the caution, the conviction and the compassion. And then, saying the words, 'Namo Gurubhya, Namo Buddhaya, Namo Dharmaya, Namo Sanghaya' is just a natural, spontaneous expression of our own internal feeling.

It is not the words that are important. It is cultivating the feeling of refuge. So sometimes what you might want to do is to really sit and meditate on these factors beforehand to cultivate the wish to take refuge and then say the words afterwards.

Other times as you are saying the words, you can think of the reasons and try to develop the feeling. It is not the words of the refuge formula that is important; it is the feeling of it.

### **Not a matter of blind faith**

When we take refuge, it takes a lot of internal questioning. Very often, our refuge isn't really stable. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem doesn't mean having blind faith in them. If we are taking refuge out of an attitude of blind faith, we are approaching it wrongly. It isn't a case of: "I believe in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha because everybody says so and everyone else does it. And mummy and daddy said so."

We are really trying to develop through our own understanding, awareness of their qualities and awareness of the entire path to enlightenment. Understanding how important the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are, in our own spiritual development.

Again, the deeper our understanding of the path, the deeper our refuge. And refuge isn't a wavering mind. Refuge is a very clear mind. When I was in Montana, I met one man. He had just taken refuge and had been studying with one Geshe. But he was telling me that he was also thinking of becoming a Catholic. Somehow, his mind wasn't at all clear about what he believed in. It was kind of like, "Buddha is nice and I like the Dharma teachings, but I also like the Catholic Church".

His mind wasn't really clear about what is the source of our problems and difficulties. What is a reliable guide on the path? What is the path? What are we aiming for? His mind wasn't clear on all these questions. It was just more caught up with what feels good.

Many of us may initially come into the Dharma because it feels good. But what we want to do as we progress, is to deepen our understanding so that we have a very sound philosophical basis for our refuge. It's not just because it feels good. Because Buddha, Dharma and Sangha feel good one day and then the next day you're saying God created the world. And so you are not really clear in your own mind what you believe in.

It is something we have to work on because very often our minds aren't clear about what we believe in

and what we don't believe in. That's usually the case. We shouldn't think, "Oh, I am bad because I am not convinced."

But just recognize the level of clarity in our mind and know that with time, we are going to have to study more and contemplate more to figure out: "Do I believe in reincarnation and karma, and in emptiness and wisdom as the path to enlightenment? Or do I believe that God created me and that receiving God's grace is the path to enlightenment?" So we're going to have to think about these things.

And as we do, then our refuge becomes clear. Most of us have grown up in other religions. Sometimes, it is not rejection of other religions that we take into Buddhism. Sometimes, it is our affinity with other religions that we take into Buddhism. We're each going to be slightly different. It's good to be aware of this.

When you take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, for the people who feel close to Jesus or to the prophets, it doesn't mean that you have to disavow Jesus and say, "I don't believe in Jesus anymore." But you have to be very clear what is your philosophical basis that explain what are the problems, what are the causes of them, what is the path to the cessation, and what is the liberation from them. You have that philosophical basis cleared and then you can say, "Jesus was a bodhisattva." He had some understanding of emptiness; he had some understanding of compassion; he was helping a lot of people.

You can still have faith in Jesus and in the example he had set. But your philosophical framework for that is not that he is the Son of God, but rather, that he was a bodhisattva appearing in that form to correspond with the mentality of the people in that historical time.

So, if any of the Saints are really inspiring to you, you can see those Saints but through a Buddhist philosophical view. I have a special liking for Saint Francis. I think he is really quite remarkable in his simplicity. If you have seen the film, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, you can see his whole simplicity – when he took all the fabric of his father's shop and threw it out of the window, he was just really saying, "I am not attached to all these worldly things."

Of course it doesn't mean that we need to do that to our father's shop. But you can look at what it symbolized and recognize that he had some awareness that material things and sense pleasures were not the way to happiness. He definitely had some compassion. So, you can still admire those beings with those qualities but see them within a Buddhist philosophical context.

### **Understanding the philosophy behind symbols**

Another thing that I've noticed sometimes with people in approaching Buddhism is that they blend Buddhism with a lot of other things, so that their refuge becomes very unclear.

I was just reading one book. The woman in it seemed to like Buddhism because she liked the symbol of Tara. But, similarly, she liked Catholicism because she liked the symbol of Mary. She was actually in her spiritual search – searching for these feminine symbols. So her mind wasn't really concerned with the philosophical view – what is suffering, what are the causes, what is the path and what is the result. But her mind was more focused on: 'I want some symbols that make sense to me'. So, that's okay. That's where this particular author of this book was at, and it was beneficial.

But what I am saying is, if you have that idea, don't just leave it at that. If you start asking yourself, 'Do I believe that Mary was the mother of God?' Or 'Do I believe in Tara as the emanation of wisdom and compassion?' – you have to have this very clear philosophically. In other words, refuge doesn't mean that you like the symbols of the refuge.

Symbols are symbols. Symbols do speak to us, but symbols represent something behind them. So, our refuge shouldn't be because we like the symbols. The refuge should be because we understand the philosophy behind them. And the symbols help us to communicate with that philosophy. This takes a lot of searching and working with things on our part.

Taking refuge is not an easy thing. It is really a developmental process that extends over years and lifetimes. And the deeper our understanding of the entire path, the deeper is our refuge.

But we should try and be mindful of exactly what do we believe in. Have clarity because the clearer we are, then the more heartfelt our refuge and our spiritual practice is going to be.

### **Imagine light entering you**

When we are saying, "I take refuge in the Gurus", imagine that from all the refuge objects (especially from the spiritual masters), much light is coming and entering into you through the crown of your head. It is also entering all the sentient beings around you – including all the people you have fights with who are sitting in front of you.

You are leading all of them into enlightenment. And the light is coming in and purifying all of you. And it is purifying all the negative karma and especially any negative karma created in association with your spiritual masters. And then the light comes and it gives you inspiration. So, it gives you the feeling that you can develop the path, that you can develop the qualities, especially the qualities of the spiritual masters. And then, thirdly, you get a feeling that you are completely taken care of by your spiritual masters.

So you have these three things: the light coming and purifying, inspiring, and giving you the feeling that you are completely under their guidance and care.

You might do this in an extended version, like you might say twenty-one times, "I take refuge in the Gurus" and then twenty-one times, "I take refuge in the Buddhas" and then twenty-one times, "I take refuge in the Dharma", and then twenty-one times "I take refuge in the Sangha".

The way we usually do it is to say each one, one time but we do the whole set three times. There are different ways of doing it. You can say each one three times; you can say each one a hundred and eight times.

But, with each one that you are doing, for example, when you say, "I take refuge in the Buddhas", then from all the Buddhas in the refuge visualization, you imagine light coming into you and all the sentient beings around you. It is purifying your negative karma, especially negative karma created in regard to the Buddhas. It is inspiring you with their qualities, so you feel you can gain their wisdom and compassion. And you feel that you're completely under the care of all the Buddhas.

Then you go on to the Dharma. You take refuge in the Dharma. Here, you concentrate on the light coming from all the texts, from the scriptures that you've imagined. And the light purifies and inspires. And you are taken care of under their guidance.

And then with the Sangha, you concentrate on the bodhisattvas, the arhats, the dakas and dakinis and the Dharma protectors, and the light is coming in purifying, inspiring and making you feel that you are completely under their care.

And then, after that, you generate the bodhicitta. I won't go into the bodhicitta very much now. I'll save that for the end of the series. Otherwise, I am teaching the end of the path at the beginning.

Here, you really meditate very much on loving-kindness and on altruism. You can see how these two things are very important at the beginning of your meditation session. You take refuge so that you have a very clear idea of what you believe in and whose guidance you are following. That is really important before you meditate – whose guidance are you following? What path are you following? What do you believe in?

And we generate bodhicitta so that we know why we are following the path. And what we are going to do with it. It is not just for our own rebirth. It is not just for our own liberation. But we are really doing it so that we can attain enlightenment and lead others to the state of full enlightenment.

### **The Four Immeasurables**

In our prayer sheet, when we do our prayers before teachings, we have the refuge formula 'Namo Gurubhya, Namo Buddhaya, Namo Dharmaya, Namo Sanghaya' then we have refuge and bodhicitta together in that one prayer. And, then, we have the Four Immeasurables.

The Four Immeasurables are to reinforce our good motivation.

"May all sentient beings have happiness and its causes" – that is immeasurable love, because love means wanting all sentient beings to be happy and have the causes of happiness.

“May all sentient beings be free of suffering and its causes” – that is compassion.

“May all sentient beings not be separated from sorrowless bliss” – that is immeasurable joy.

“May all sentient beings abide in equanimity, free of bias, attachment and anger” – that is immeasurable equanimity. It is “immeasurable” because the number of sentient beings you are applying this to is immeasurable. And also because your love, compassion, joy and equanimity are immeasurable.

All these prayers are designed to help us in the correct direction and to know why we are taking that direction. So these prayers may not be worded in this exact way, but the basic refuge and bodhicitta and the four immeasurable prayers come at the beginning of almost any kind of sadhana or Dharma practice that we do. They are such an intrinsic part of our meditation.

### **Simple visualization**

If this whole complicated visualization with the big throne and the five thrones and the concentric circles and all that is too much for you to visualize... then you can just simply imagine the Buddha. Imagine that the Buddha is the essence of all the spiritual masters, the essence of all the Buddhas, the essence of the Dharma and the essence of the Sangha.

So you can concentrate completely just on the image of the Buddha as the embodiment, the essence of all three jewels of refuge.

## **Q&A**

### **[Audience: Inaudible]**

Vajradhara is a tantric manifestation of the Buddha. They say when the Buddha taught the tantric teachings he appeared not in the form of a monk but in the form of a tantric deity. Vajradhara is made of light, blue in color and adorned with jewel ornaments. Sometimes he is shown singly and sometimes he is shown in union with Vajradhatu Ishvari – a female Buddha. And together in union, they represent the combination of wisdom and method; the female being wisdom and the male being method, showing that we need both of these put together in one mind.

### **[Audience: Inaudible]**

There is one big Buddha in the center. That's Shakyamuni Buddha in the form of a monk, the essence being your spiritual master. Shakyamuni is wearing the robes of a monk. He has long ear lobes because when he was a prince, all the earrings stretched out his ears. He has what is called the thirty-two signs and the eighty marks of a fully enlightened being. These are physical marks and signs that show someone's attainment but we can't always see those on ordinary people, when they appear in ordinary ways. But we imagine the Buddha in that form. He is sitting and holding a begging bowl in the left hand and his right hand is in the earth touching position.

### **[Audience: Inaudible]**

You say you feel uncomfortable imagining your parents, leading your parents in taking refuge because you feel that maybe you are pushing your religion on them. I don't think you need to think you're pushing your religion on them. Try and think of them as having a very clear mind and their having the ability to really have confidence from their own side in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In other words, you are not pushing them or forcing them, but from their own side imagining them being much clearer about their own beliefs, imagine them having a much stronger spiritual aspiration than they presently have, because they have that capability.

### **[Audience: Inaudible]**

I am trying to rephrase it just to see if I know what you mean. That it made you feel uncomfortable when we speak of moving away from the objects of the senses.

What does it mean to move away from the objects of the senses? It doesn't mean that you isolate yourself

and live in a cave. It doesn't mean being physically isolated. Of course, if there is something that you are very, very attached to, you might have to stay away from it a little bit. If you are on a diet, you don't go to an ice-cream parlor.

But what we are talking here about moving away, is a mental movement. In other words, rather than grasping after physical pleasure all day, from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed, always thinking, 'I want beautiful things; I want beautiful smells; I want good food; I want good touches; I want this; I want that.' Always having our mind completely wrapped up in wanting exterior things.

It means that we see those things and we contact them. There is nothing wrong with them but they are not going to give us ultimate, lasting happiness. So we have a more balanced attitude towards them. We experience them but we don't have the attitude of, 'I've got to have this to be happy!' And we don't make the purpose of our life to have all these things. Rather, we have them and use them. But the real thing that is going to make us happy is our own internal spiritual development.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

We have to approach this with a really gentle attitude. Buddhist practice isn't about your having to do this or do that. I think a lot of that is really a left-over from our Christian upbringing.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

We don't deny our feelings. We don't say, 'I don't feel sad'. We don't suppress things. We recognize what we are feeling and then we ask ourselves, 'Is this a feeling that reflects the reality of the situation or is this feeling generated by my misconceptions?'

In other words, we wake up today and we are so depressed because we can't be with our best friend. We just miss our friend so much that we feel we can't get through the day, because we can't be with them. And we feel sad. But then we ask ourselves, 'Is this a feeling that actually represents reality?' Everybody else in the world lives without our friend. How come we are so overwhelmed because we can't be with them? And is our friend really this incredible, wonderful, fantastic person that is always going to make us happy? Well, no, because sometimes they are grouchy.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

No. All Buddhists aren't Buddhas.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

You can't say about a person who is involved in Buddhism that he or she would feel this or don't. Because everybody who comes to Buddhism, comes in at different levels of practice. Everybody is capable of practicing different things. So everybody who is a practitioner of Buddhism doesn't all feel the same thing.

We come where we are at right now. Then, we can try and transform ourselves. We can come and we experience something. We start to practice Dharma and our feelings change. But you can't say "I am a Buddhist, therefore I should feel this". I am a Buddhist and I feel what I am feeling. But then, I have the choice of: "Do I want to continue feeling this?" Or, if my feeling is based on unreality and inaccuracy, I can change my feeling.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

For example, you come and you are grieving. Your mother just died. You really love your mother a lot. You really miss her. So you are unhappy. And you are grieving. And you let your grief out. But, then, you can also start to ask yourself, 'Well, am I grieving because I care so much about my mother or am I more involved in my own loss at this point?' In other words, is my attention on what is my mother experiencing right now or is my attention on what I am experiencing because I miss her?

If we see that we are grieving because we are focused on our mother – we know that our mother committed a lot of negative karma and we are worried about her; then we'll do a lot of prayers and make offerings and dedicate the merit for her benefit.

If we are concerned that I can't be with my mother and I miss her, we are not concerned at all about her and what her experience is. We are just concerned about "me" because I lost somebody I like. That is a very selfish attitude, and that's not based on the reality of the situation. The reality is that it's more important to be concerned about her and her experience because her making the transition from one lifetime to the next is the important thing at this juncture.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

We try to develop a realistic way of looking at things. We have to accept what our feelings are but we can't get stuck in them. We can't have the notion that, 'I feel this, therefore it's right.' Or, 'I feel this, therefore it's good'. It is just: 'I feel this'. We shouldn't say, 'I feel this, therefore, I should continue to feel this'. It is just 'I feel this'.

Now, let's check if this feeling is productive. If this feeling is harming me and leading me to negative states of mind, and it's keeping me spiraled up in my own depression and limiting my potential, then, what is the use of this feeling? We can't be attached to our feelings.

If we are attached to somebody, we miss that person and long for that person. So, our mind is completely distracted. We can't relate to all the people we are with because we are daydreaming about the person we aren't with. Then, we are being very unrealistic. So we can't cling on to that feeling, 'Oh my dear friend whom I miss so much'. We have to let go at some point.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

If you are doing a simple visualization, you could do that. As your visualization expands, then if you can imagine all of the lineage lamas, then that is very good. Then, you get more of a feeling of something being passed down from one person to the next. I remember during the time when I was studying some of Chandrakirti's things, somehow, when I thought of the profound lineage, I imagined the whole group of lamas there, but I especially thought of Chandrakirti. This was because I was studying his things and I really appreciate what he was doing.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

What do the people look like? You can see some of the paintings. We can bring in one of the thangkas next time. But I think you can imagine them like ordinary human beings too. Sometimes you will see different paintings of them. Sometimes, they are wearing hats or they're debating or something like that. As you learn more about the different lamas and their life stories and you see pictures of them and you study their texts, then you get more of a feeling for them.

**[Audience: Inaudible]**

That is one of the thirty-two signs of a fully enlightened being and it's one of the really top-most signs. In other words, to get enough positive potential to accumulate that sign, you really have to be top. I can't remember exactly, but basically it represents in a general way all the realizations of fully enlightened beings. It is called the usnisha and they say it is a physical lump; it's not just a tuft of hair.

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This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>