

Taking Refuge – Part 1 of 10 (lightly edited transcript)
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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." That's Alex's [Dr. Alex Berzin] translation, 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 Refuge Is

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. That's not the kind of relationship we have with the Triple Gem. We don't hide behind our mother or the Triple Gem. Taking refuge here is in the sense of saying, "It's pouring rain out and we're getting soaking wet and we're going to get a cold if we stay out in the rain." So we want to go to a place that offers protection, and that place is 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. It's rather taking a safe and sound direction in our lives, knowing that the real refuge is the transformed state of our own minds.

And so this section is called "The Methods for Benefiting our Future Lives." When we thought about death and the lower realms, it gave 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.

So this is the part where we are in the outline**. Do you know where we are? Do you see how it's fitting together with what came before and what's going to come now? And the reason I'm going over

this is--and this is really important--the more global a view you have about the outline** and the different steps, the more everything makes sense.

Thinking about precious human life gave 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 have 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. This--teaching these subjects in this order--is a really skillful way for the Buddha to activate 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 really the foundation of the whole thing--it's 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.

If you look on the outline**, 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. This is where we're going to be going in the next few talks, through these five things.

The Causes for Taking Refuge

The First Cause for Taking Refuge

Let's go back to the first point, the reasons for taking refuge. "Why take refuge?" "Why enter into the Buddha's teachings?" It's usually talked about in terms of two and sometimes three reasons 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 something meaningful and worthwhile, because you know what you're doing and why you're doing it.

Refuge is something that grows with time, so the more we have these two 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 you start to see it changing your mind. None of the meditations we've been doing are on-and-off light switches: they're the dimmer or brighter kind, which you hopefully turn towards the brighter.

The first reason for taking refuge is 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 deeply and taste the nectar in the teachings, the more conviction we have in rebirth, the more the whole framework of what's going on in 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 remember to take it off the back burner from time to time, re-examine what you believe in, and try and 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 only think 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 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 and it's 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. 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." Well, if all there is, 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? That 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 tonight. Maybe you're here because I'm more interesting, I don't know. [laughter] Don't think so. I think sitcoms probably make you laugh more. [laughter]

If who we are doesn't end with this life, if something continues onwards, then there is a reason to be concerned about what happens after death. And because 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.

We discussed last time how the lower realms are dependent arising. They arise simply because the cause exists. If the cause didn't exist for lower realms of rebirth, there wouldn't be any lower realms. So the cause exists.

Now, what is the cause for the lower realms? It's our own contaminated actions and afflictions [[Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'](#)]. In our lives, we have to check up: "Do I have afflictions*? 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 afflictions*." And then, "Are my actions motivated by these attitudes? Well, yes, because today somebody at work bugged me and I put him down. And I was very proud and haughty to another person. And then there was someone else whom I kind of manipulated."

When we look at our lives and the state of our minds and the kind of actions that we've done, and 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 so that we don't keep on acting out the same bad habits. I think we come to the Dharma because we're 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 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 afflictions* that cause them because we realize they cause us problems, not only now but they're going to cause us big problems after death. And, we cause problems to other people when we're under their influence.

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 that happiness 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 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's a path, that there's 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 their qualities. 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 the dread of being 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 very 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.

Questions?

[Audience: Inaudible]

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 is definitely going to cause conflict in our mind. It's going to push some buttons -- our emotional buttons and our intellectual buttons. It's quite natural. If it didn't, 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 response to audience:] It does get better. It does get better. The beginning's 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. [laughter] 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 what 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, the Dharma and the Sangha. They are divided into the Ultimate Buddha Jewel and Conventional Buddha Jewel, Ultimate Dharma Jewel and Conventional Dharma Jewel, Ultimate Sangha Jewel and 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. [laughter] It might seem very confusing at first as we go through these different categories of Ultimate and Conventional 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 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 we have the defilements and we can cleanse them. And we have the seeds of the good qualities and we can develop them. There's no huge gap between us and the Buddha. It's just a question of the balance of defilement and the balance of good qualities. If we can diminish one and increase the other, then our mindstream very quickly becomes the mindstream of a Buddha. It's not something mystical and magical. Maybe 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 Dharmakaya and the Rupakaya

You might have heard the word "kaya," a Sanskrit word. It means body; 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 dharmakaya, meaning the truth body and the other one is called the rupakaya, meaning the form body. With this division, the dharmakaya or the truth body is referring to the mind of the Buddha and the rupakaya or form body is referring to the form or the physical manifestation of the Buddha.

The Rupakaya

If we go into a little more depth, the rupakaya can be split 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, 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 has all the physical signs of a fully enlightened being, such as the crown protrusion on the head and the curl and the eyes in the palms of the hand and the Dharma wheels on the feet and the long ear lobes.

The emanation body, or the nirmanakaya, refers to a grosser physical appearance of a fully enlightened being. An example would be Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived 2500 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 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 in an emanation body, which is a much grosser physical appearance, so that we in our 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 you get these two physical appearances.

The Dharmakaya

So when we take the truth body and 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 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, and the second one is the svabhavakaya or 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. When 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. When we talk about the nature body, we're talking about emptiness of that mind and the true cessations of that mind.

[Audience: inaudible]

No, the nature body is the nature truth body. The nature body is a subdivision of the dharmakaya. When you divide the dharmakaya into two, one is the wisdom dharmakaya and one is the nature dharmakaya.

The nature body refers to the emptiness of the Buddha's mind, the lack of inherent existence of the Buddha's mind. The nature body also refers to the cessations on a Buddha's mindstream -- the cessations of suffering and the cessations of the afflictions* and karma. While the wisdom truth body is a consciousness, the nature body is an absence of inherent existence and an absence of suffering and afflictions*.

Consciousnesses are impermanent phenomena; they change 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 deeper 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, a Buddha is obliged 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 the form bodies, they appear as emanation bodies for very obscured beings like us. They appear as enjoyment bodies for the high level bodhisattvas who are much less obscured than us. Is this making some sense?

[Audience: inaudible]

The Buddha is all four kayas. A Buddha has all four.

[In response to audience:] No, because 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. 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.

[Audience:] 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 is a bodhisattva who has completed the whole path and is no longer a bodhisattva.

The Ultimate Buddha Jewel and the Conventional Buddha Jewel

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 their true cessations. The wisdom body is the Buddhas' omniscient minds.

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.

Our two Buddha natures

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. We can also talk about the clear and knowing nature as well as 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. This evolutionary Buddha nature that we have at the present 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.

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 like that of a Buddha's mind because the thing it depends on -- our mind -- is obscured, whereas the Buddha's mind isn't. 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.

So one bar of the railway is the clear and knowing nature of our mind, the fact that our mind is a consciousness. Right now that's obscured, limited, isn't it? But it has potential. As we start to practice the path, what we're going to develop are those good qualities that we have now and we're going to purify the clear and knowing nature of our mind till eventually that becomes the wisdom truth body of the Buddha.

Now, let's talk about 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. 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 the 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.

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, 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.

[Audience:] Is this thing of having a nature body, or saying that we're empty of inherent existence, something that's separating us off from other phenomena that don't 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 inherently existent personality in that.

The fact that we have a mind and the clock doesn't, means 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 us has any concrete findable entity inside of it, that you can pinpoint and say "Ah, that's it".

[In response to audience:] But the clock wouldn't have a nature body, because to call the emptiness of something a nature body, you have to have the wisdom truth 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 truth body. In other words, our emptiness of inherent existence doesn't get that name [nature body] until our mind transforms.

[In response to audience:] We don't have the cessations of the afflictions* on our mindstreams right now. We don't have the cessation of anger on our mindstream. We have the opposite.

[Audience:] If sentient beings are not inherently existent, then who are we developing compassion for?

This is a question that even the great Lamas ask in the debating texts. [laughter] 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. If we take the example of a clock, it might be easier to understand. It might not be, but it might be.

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 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 on the side? 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 you can't find anything that is the clock. Here 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 non-existent. Because there is something here. There's something here and 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 and 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 whom we're developing compassion for.

[Audience:] So what you're saying is that it is our language that is giving us this idea of identity.

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.

[Audience:] Defining things?

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 that makes them something that's solid and concrete, that that's all they ever can be, and we concretize phenomena, that's what the problem is.

[In response to audience:] Yes, 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.

[Audience:] Is the mindstream dependent?

Is our mindstream dependent? I sure hope so.

[Audience:] What is our mindstream dependent on?

What is our mindstream dependent on? First of all, our mindstream is dependent on the previous moment of mind. Isn't it?

[Audience:] What would it mean to say that the mindstream is inherently existent?

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 is 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.

[Audience:] What's 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. So it's like we have a river and the river's changing all the time and at some point we put in the county line. This is King County and that is the next county.

[Audience:] If death is just another moment, then what about all the bardoes?

That's just more moments also. That's just our mind existing in that state.

[Audience:] But death is just one moment, while the bardo consists of many moments?

Yes. When you cross the county line you have the point of crossing the county line. But the counties are both quite large. So life takes up a lot of time and bardo takes up some time. And death is just the line between the two of them.

Taking Refuge in the Dharma: the Ultimate Dharma Jewel and the Conventional Dharma Jewel

Let's get back to Buddha, Dharma, 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 got the "and" and the "on" but what do the other words mean? [laughter]

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, 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.

[Audience:] Did you define an arya as...

Someone who has direct perception of emptiness. 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 afflictions*, 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.

The Conventional Dharma Jewel is 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 oral teachings. The teaching itself. Not the paper and ink of the book.

The Conventional Dharma Jewel is a symbolic representation of the Dharma Jewel. The real Ultimate Dharma Jewel, 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.

[Audience:] Have ordinary people attained any paths in their mindstreams?

You mean us right now at our level? Ordinary people 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.

Taking Refuge in the Sangha: the Ultimate Sangha Jewel and the Conventional Sangha Jewel

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 Jewel is the same thing as the Ultimate Dharma Jewel. It's the arya's knowledge and liberation. In other words, their true paths and their true cessations. 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 cessations. It's not a community of persons, but it is a community of realizations and cessations.

The Conventional Sangha Jewel is any individual arya, meaning an individual person who has realized emptiness or an assembly of ordained beings. The assembly of ordained beings are a

symbolic representation of the Conventional Sangha Jewel. The real Conventional 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. That person can be a monk or a nun or a lay person: it doesn't 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 is a bit confusing.

[Audience:] 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 "I 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.

[Audience: inaudible]

An arya being has realized emptiness directly. 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."

You see, 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.

[Audience:] What's the difference between an arya Sangha and a Buddha?

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 goes on on the third path and fourth path. Those beings are the arya Sanghas.

[Audience: inaudible]

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.

[Audience:] Could you elaborate on the different vehicles?

We have a presentation of different vehicles and we're going to get into this more later on in the outline** 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 you spontaneously have the determination to be free from cyclic existence day and night. The end product of that is arahatship. You've gotten yourself out of cyclic existence, you've removed what's called the afflicted obscurations [Note: 'afflicted obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded obscurations'] from the mind.

But the subtle obscurations, called the cognitive obscurations ['cognitive obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of '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 afflicted obscurations[@], they've also gotten rid of the cognitive obscurations***. 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 as a bodhisattva and go on to become a Buddha.

Purpose of Learning these Terms

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. 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 learnt 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. That we too can get those realizations.

It's not just learning terms and categories, but it's 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. In that way our confidence in them grows.

At the beginning it all seems terribly confusing, and how do 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. That's marvelous and what's even more astounding is that I 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."

When we understand that, it 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.

Role of Mindfulness

[Audience:] Where does breathing meditation and all the mindfulness teachings fit into 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.

Also, 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 mindful, 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, thinking and doing so that we don’t let our energy wander off in a destructive direction. We want to be mindful and aware of the positive things that we want to do. And steer our energy towards that.

So the mindfulness practice is very much a key practice in helping us develop all these different realizations along the path.

[Audience: inaudible]

Right, when you get into the deep levels of the mindfulness practice, then you 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.

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 go home and read through the things, try and remember them, try and make sense of them and most importantly try and think about them, how they relate to yourself and your own Buddha nature, your own potential, what you can become.

**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>

*‘Afflictions’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘disturbing attitudes’.

***‘Cognitive obscurations’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘obscurations to omniscience’.

@‘Afflicted obscurations’ is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of ‘deluded obscurations’.