

Taking Refuge – Part 8 of 10:
Benefits of Having Taken Refuge (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 1992.

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Tonight we come to the topic of the benefits of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Having seen that we need some help and that there are others capable of guiding us, then what kind of benefit can we expect to receive by taking refuge?

a. We Become Buddhists

The first benefit is we become a Buddhist. You may say, “What is so great about becoming a Buddhist? I am already a member of this club and that club and a member of another club, what do I need another membership card for?” Becoming a Buddhist is not joining a club and getting a membership card, rather it means that we are starting on the path to enlightenment. So, one of the benefits of taking refuge is that it initiates us onto the path to enlightenment.

Of course we can create good karma without taking refuge and you can be doing practices that are beneficial to yourself, but the meaning of becoming a Buddhist is that you are actually stepping onto the path that the Buddhas follow. You are trying to go in that same direction that the Buddha went.

This can bring up the whole subject of, “Well, is Buddhism the only path that is going to lead you to enlightenment?” We have been through this a few times and I thought of another example that might help illustrate this point. For instance, from here to downtown there are many roads that will take you downtown. There is more than one way to go downtown. You can drive a long way. You can drive a short way. You can go on the highway or you can go on the side streets. But not every road that you take from here where we are now will lead you downtown.

We tend to go to extremes of saying, “It’s got to be Buddhist and if you are not a Buddhist you are going to hell.” That is completely erroneous. On the other hand thinking in the other extreme and saying, “Everything is the same and all religions are the same,” is like saying you can drive any direction that you want from here on Fifty-fourth Street and you will wind up downtown. But that is not true, because if you drive north from here you will wind up in Vancouver and not downtown! So I think we have to use our discriminating wisdom and not get hung up in words and labels – that is not important, but we do have to look at the meaning and what is going on.

A Travel Story

Once when I was traveling, I went to one center that had been established for many, many years. Many people come to it. Most of the places I go to, when I arrive the people say, “Oh we are so glad you have come. We are looking forward to your teachings. We do not know much about Buddhism, but we are looking forward to it.” Well I got to this particular place and they said, “Oh we are very glad you have come, but you really should know we are not Buddhists.” They went to great lengths to tell me repeatedly that they were not Buddhists, but they said that they were very advanced and have a very advanced philosophical system. They said I should understand that when I teach there, I am teaching very high-class people who know what they are talking about.

They said that the system they were following and Buddhism come to the same point. They gave me many of their books to read – many, many books – and I cannot claim to have understood them. In fact,

I do not think I did because there was incredible vocabulary in there, you have to learn very specialized vocabulary to understand the books.

So I was riding in the car going somewhere, talking to some of the members and asking them questions because I was trying to understand their philosophical system. They kept insisting that their system and Buddhism led to the same goals and I was trying to understand what it was they believe. I did not understand all the “universal mind”, “cosmic mind” and “over self” vocabulary and I was really trying to understand the meaning of the words and asking questions, trying to get to some definitions. It was a very interesting discussion, because at the end I think we could not prove that both systems were getting to the same place, because we could not understand what the other was saying!

We Need to Be Astute

I think it is just too glib to say that all is one and it all leads to enlightenment when we cannot even understand what the other people really believe, let alone what our own system believes. We need to be aware and astute here and not be fanatical and close-minded, but we don't want to be sloppy either. When we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha we are saying that we have examined the qualities of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, know something about the path, have confidence in it and decide that this is the direction that we want to go in.

There may be other teachings that are very good. All religions have something good in them. All religions exist to bring human happiness. By taking refuge, however, we are declaring that this particular systematization is something that speaks to our heart. We have confidence in it, are going to follow it and therefore we make a clear decision in our lives. I think that is important.

Settling Down to One Path

I am always talking about the example of someone studying crystals on Monday night and holistic healing on Tuesday night, etc. We can continue to do that. There is no pressure to take refuge. It is our own spiritual practice; we are the ones that are responsible. But at some point we might actually want to find one principal direction and settle down and do that.

For instance, when you are young you date a lot of guys, but at a certain point you will probably get married. It is like you get tired of going out with all these different guys, so you think marriage might be better. Of course, marriage brings a whole new set of headaches, but you do have the opportunity to go deeply into the relationship that way. Well it is the same thing here, becoming a Buddhist and taking refuge does not mean you do not learn about crystals and holistic healing anymore. You can still learn about those things, but you have your principal thing designated and that cuts out the confusion just as getting married cuts out the confusion of fifty million guys. But taking refuge does bring you some new headaches initially because you have to start looking at your mind.

We Begin to Purify

It is not that Buddhism brings headaches to us, but sometimes the idea of commitment to one path can make a lot of stuff come up in our life because that is when we really begin the process of purifying. When we begin to purify, all of our junk comes up. When we begin to meditate, we have to look at what is in our mind. Whereas when we go from one spiritual thing, to the next spiritual thing, to the next, it is like we are in a spiritual amusement park, getting amused by all the external things, so of course we do not look at our mind. But when we take refuge, we have to start looking at our mind. That is why I say practicing is like living in a garbage dump initially [laughter]. But there is hope. I firmly believe that it is possible to transform the garbage dump into something better, but we have to start out where we are.

If we do not really take refuge, even though we may create a lot of good karma, that karma will not be dedicated for the attainment of enlightenment, because we have no faith in enlightenment and no faith in the Buddhist path. So this first step of making a commitment, becoming a Buddhist, entering into the Buddhist path, really clarifies where we are going. Then when we create good karma we can dedicate it for the attainment of the goal of enlightenment. Whereas, if we do not really have much confidence in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, we may create good karma but we will not dedicate it for the attainment of enlightenment because if you do not believe in enlightenment, why would you dedicate the good karma for that?

[Audience:] If you have not taken refuge but still believe in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and enlightenment and you dedicate good karma, are you saying that that dedication does not count?

Well you can believe in enlightenment and dedicate for that without having taken refuge. I think it will bring that result, but you have to ask, "Have you not taken refuge then?"

b. We Establish The Foundation For Taking All Further Vows

The next benefit of taking refuge is that it establishes a foundation for taking all further vows. The reason for this is that taking refuge confirms in us that we want to attain liberation. Taking refuge confirms that we want to follow the path set out by the Buddha and thus having confirmed that, it sets the stage so that we can actually take the different levels of precepts or vows that can help us accumulate good karma and help us abandon our habitual confused behavior.

Also, if your refuge is very strong you will keep your vows well. If your refuge is not very strong, then you will not keep your vows well. If you have not taken refuge, then you will not follow the precepts. If you do not believe in the path and the goal that the Buddha explained, you will not follow the method to get there.

Three Sets of Vows

Refuge serves as the foundation for taking any further vows or initiations. There are actually three sets of vows that one can take as a Buddhist.

The first level is called pratimoksha or individual liberation vows. These include the five lay precepts, the monks and nun's vows and also one day vows. The second type of vows is called the bodhisattva vows. The third type is the tantric vows.

These are in order of how easy or difficult it is to keep them. In other words, the individual liberation vows are the easiest to keep because they point out physical and verbal behaviors that are to be abandoned. The bodhisattva vows are more difficult to keep because they point out mental behaviors to be abandoned, as do the tantric vows which are even more difficult to keep.

Nowadays, because initiations are given very freely, sometimes people's first exposure to Buddhism is through an initiation. They might say something like, "I've taken Yamantaka initiation but I am not a Buddhist." Actually, refuge vows are given as part of the initiation ceremony, but if the person does not consider themselves a Buddhist then they have not taken the bodhisattva vows or the tantric vows and if you have not taken those, you have not taken the initiation. So people may say they have taken an initiation, they may think they have and that's okay, there is nothing wrong with saying that or thinking that, but if one has not taken refuge in one's heart either in a separate ceremony or in the earlier part of the initiation, then one really has not taken an initiation.

Refuge Vows are the Door

That is why refuge is the door to the Buddha's teachings. It is the doorway that you enter into to be able to commit yourself to any of the further practices. Like I continually say, somebody can learn Buddha's teachings and practice them without being a Buddhist. If something the Buddha taught helps your life, practice it. It does not matter if you take refuge, or if you don't take refuge.

But now when we talk about taking refuge we are talking of actually settling down and getting into the path and doing it; it is a different level of involvement. The advantage of taking refuge is that you get to take precepts. You are probably going, "Ugh, I get to take precepts. Who wants to take precepts! When I take the one day Mahayana precepts, I can only eat one meal a day. I can't sing and dance. I can't have sex. I can't do this. I can't do that. Why is this an advantage?" [Laughter] Well that shows us something about what we think is important in life.

The advantage of taking precepts is that it acts as a framework for us to become more mindful, more aware of what we are saying, thinking and doing. If you take a precept to do, or not do, something that has been in your mind all day, you become much more aware of what is going on instead of just being

on automatic. Taking precepts is very beneficial that way. Also, by keeping the precepts, we continually create good karma no matter what we are doing as long as we are not directly breaking the precepts.

There is a refuge ceremony for people who wish to take refuge. When you take refuge you automatically take the precept not to kill. In addition, if people want to take any of the other precepts at that time they may, because taking refuge gives one the ability to take the five lay precepts for one's life and one gets all the advantages of taking the precepts.

c. We Can Eliminate Results of Previously Accumulated Negative Karma.

The third advantage of refuge is that it helps us to eliminate the negative karmic imprints on our mindstream. Previously in our confusion we may have acted destructively in verbal, physical and mental ways and we have those imprints on our mind and they will bring results. Taking refuge helps us to purify that because if we take refuge, we take vows, and vows help us to purify our past negative karma. If we take refuge, we are also more likely to do the other practices that help us to purify, like doing the four opponent powers and doing purification meditation. Also if we take refuge we have a deeper connection with the Buddha and by making offerings, doing prostrations and so forth to the Buddha, this also helps to purify our negative karma, because we are generating very positive attitudes when we are doing these practices. Refuge can be a very strong purification of all the different karmas that we have created.

d. We Can Quickly Accumulate Great Positive Karma

Offerings to the Buddha

The next benefit of taking refuge is that it enables us to create a vast store of positive potential for very similar reasons. In other words, if we take refuge then we are more likely to engage in the practices that are going to create positive potential in our lives. Also when we take refuge, because of the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, they become very strong objects for us with which to create karma because of their qualities. If we make offerings to the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, we create a very strong, powerful karma compared to offering to our best friend, unless your best friend is a Buddha!

In other words, according to the level of a person's spiritual realizations, the qualities they have and their relationship to us, we create karma. Some people and some things are heavier objects karmically for us than others. The Buddha, Dharma, Sangha are heavy because of their qualities. If we have taken refuge and are prompted to make prostrations, or offerings, or serve the Buddhist community in some way, then because of the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and because they are very strong objects with which we create karma, we create a lot of good karma through our prostrations, offerings and so on.

Is this making sense? Is this clear? It might sound like we are just trying to get people to give money to the temple by saying that they get all this extra merit if they offer to the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, or they get all this extra positive potential if they help the Buddhist community. Shouldn't we help everybody and not just Buddhists? Well yes, of course we should help everybody, but what we are saying with this example is that when you give to a charity you want to give to a charity that is going to be able to make full use of what you give to them.

You are not going to give to a charity where your stuff just gets frittered away. Because the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha have the qualities that they do, any way in which we help them, becomes us helping all other sentient beings because the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha are working for the benefit of all those sentient beings. So it is not that I am being narrow-minded and will only help the Buddha and will not help this other person because he's not Buddhist, it is that if you help the Buddha and help people who are working for the benefit of other sentient beings, as you help them, they in turn help a huge array of people.

[Audience:] Does this mean that we should give to the Buddha rather than to the poor and needy?

I was trying to differentiate. I am not saying to not give to other charities. It is great to give to other charities and we definitely should give to other charities, but when we make offerings to the Buddha, due to the power of the Buddha, due to the Buddha's qualities, there is some additional benefit that accrues to us. When we help the poor and needy, we also get some additional benefit due to their state of need. Giving to the poor and needy, because of their state of existence, creates more good karma than giving to your friend who is a millionaire. So I am not in any way advocating one thing over the other, but I am trying to say that different objects have different responses to us and we have different responses to them.

[In response to audience:] Your question is if there can be people who are Buddhist who don't call themselves Buddhist, then what is the benefit of focusing on things that do call themselves Buddhists? Well, because it might help your mind. In other words if something calls itself Buddhist it does not mean it is completely pure. I am not saying that everything that has the label 'Buddhist' is one hundred percent kosher, don't get me wrong. And I am not saying that everything that isn't Buddhist is not kosher, but what we are saying here is that it does make a difference in your mental state.

They say that when you offer anything to anybody, imagine that person is a Buddha. You then create the same karma as if you are offering to a Buddha because in your mind you are imagining that person as a Buddha. That does not mean that if we offer guns to someone to commit harm but think that we are offering the guns to a Buddha, then it is the proper way to practice. What we need to take note is that whatever I say here is a general guideline. Everything depends, if this hasn't gotten into your mind yet. [laughter] We have to get out of the black and white mentality that many of us grew up in. Everything depends.

Offerings and Karma

[Audience:] If the poor do not have the qualities of the Buddha, but we give to them while thinking they are the Buddha, how does that create the same karma as giving to the Buddha?

I am going to give you my personal opinion here. It seems to me that we create karma both due to how we are thinking of the object we are giving to and what they are in actual fact. So from our side, giving to somebody who is a Buddha and giving to somebody who is not a Buddha but thinking they are a Buddha, from our side it is the same karma. But in terms of the karma we create due to their qualities, it seems like it is going to be different karma. So maybe it is both the same and different depending on which side you look at it from. [Laughter]

They also say that if you offer one apple to the Buddha and imagine that you are offering the whole sky full of beautiful fruit, you actually create the same karma as if you are offering the whole sky full of fruit. In that way you create the same karma whether you offer that actual physical object or not. I remember discussing this with one teacher and saying, "Well how could that be because if I actually had tons and tons of bushels of apples, wouldn't giving all of that be better than to give one apple?" I did not get a real clear answer on this or maybe I got a clear answer but didn't understand it, or I can't remember it, but my own current state of thinking is that from our side, imagining it and offering it is the same as if you actually have those things. But from the side of the physical substance that you actually give, there is a difference between giving one apple and giving ten barrel fulls of apples.

So it seems to me that there are two kinds of karma involved – the karma that you get from the visualized offering and the karma that you get from the actual offering. So in response to your question, it seems to me that there are two kinds of karma, the karma that you get from imagining somebody being a Buddha and the karma that you get from them actually being a Buddha or not being a Buddha.

Visualized Offerings

[In response to audience:] If you are doing the visualized offerings because you are actually very miserly and do not want to give anything, then you are not really practicing properly. On the other hand if you are really poor and you do not have much, but you give one apple with a real dedicated heart, because

of the power of your thought, your motivation and your wish, that offering is much more valuable in terms of your motivation than somebody who is giving fifteen truckloads and can well afford to do so. So it seems like there are many different factors here upon which the karma depends. It depends on your motivation which involves your visualization and it depends on the actual physical thing. It depends on so many different circumstances.

[Audience:] What are the five lay precepts?

The five lay precepts are not killing, not stealing, not committing unwise sexual behavior, not lying and not taking intoxicants. There are different ways of giving refuge. Some teachers give refuge saying that you have to take all five precepts, i.e., either all or nothing. Other teachers give it saying that if you take refuge, you definitely have to take the first precept of not killing. As for the remaining four, you can choose to take one, two, three, or all four of them. Or you can choose not to take any of the four. The ones that you did not take as precepts, you can take them as aspirations or wishes for your mind to be able to be peaceful about doing them in the future.

I do it this latter way so that people can choose which (of the four) to take as precepts and which to take as aspirations, but people have to be very clear about their choice before the ceremony. Let us say you take the precept not to steal today, but tomorrow when you want to take something from the company for your own personal use, you say that you did not take the precept of not stealing, that you only took the wish and the aspiration to someday take the precept of not stealing. This is not allowed.

[Audience:] What is the definition of 'intoxicants' in the precept of not taking intoxicants?

In the Tibetan tradition intoxicants include alcohol, cigarettes (I think snuff is considered tobacco) and any kind of drugs that make you lose your senses like cocaine, grass or heroine. Caffeine, interestingly enough, is not considered an intoxicant. You can drink coffee, tea and Coca-Cola.

Unwise Sexual Behavior

[In response to audience:] The Buddha did not say anything specific about premarital sex. When you look at Buddhist societies they are very down on premarital sex, but the Buddha himself did not say anything specific about it. He did say that to have sexual relationships with somebody who is under the control of somebody else, in other words a child who is under the control of the family, that that is an improper object, an improper person. So then I guess teenagers have to think, "Am I under the control of my parents? Is the person I am going with under the control of their parents?"

Especially included in unwise sexual behavior is any kind of sexual contact that would cause harm, would spread diseases. Although the Buddha didn't specifically mention it because maybe this was not an issue in ancient India, unwise sexual behavior includes just about any irresponsible sexual behavior that hurts other people's feelings, like sleeping with somebody and dropping them the next day and they wind up crushed. The Buddha did not say anything about that specifically because I do not think in ancient India this was a big issue. Marriages were arranged and you did not date so there was no possibility for this to happen. But my own personal opinion is that I think this would fall within the realm of what Buddha was talking about when he talked about unwise sexual behavior and doing things that harm other beings.

Polygamy and Polyandry

[In response to audience:] When you look at the vows, the Buddha did not prohibit polyandry or polygamy. Polyandry is having more than one husband. In ancient India men often had multiple wives. Many of the kings had multiple wives. That was okay under Buddhism. In Tibet the women have multiple husbands. That was okay under Buddhism. These things are out in the open and societally accepted so that they are not going to hurt other people's feelings.

Now if you move into our culture, would polygamy or polyandry be okay here? I don't think so, because the way our culture is set up, people are supposedly monogamous. It seems to me that a lot of this depends really on what is acceptable in the society. So maybe because this was acceptable in Indian society, the Buddha did not speak out against it in that particular context.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Because many Westerners can't stand anything that involves limiting their amount of pleasure. Whenever I teach the precepts, people have so much difficulty with this precept of not committing unwise sexual behavior.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Where some people are at in terms of their own feelings, they do not want anybody to say anything to them about how they should behave. If they come out with a rule for themselves, that is fine, but they do not want anybody else telling them what they can and cannot do. This is a very hard, tough, rebellious mind and it almost does not matter what the Buddha says, they do not want to have anybody telling them anything. But if they came out and said that same thing for themselves, that would be okay. Here we are talking about people's different states of mind and everyone is quite different. Even within this group here, we are quite different.

Homosexuality and Lesbianism

[Audience:] What does the Buddha say about homosexuality and lesbianism?

This one is interesting. I have been trying to get some resources on this because in Lama Tsongkapa's text, the Lamrim Chenmo, there is some comment about homosexuality. I asked a friend of mine who is a Theravada monk and he says that as far as he knows, he has not seen anything in the Pali scriptures about this. So I am not sure what exactly is going on, but at least in Lama Tsongkapa's view, homosexuality is something that is to be avoided. In general, especially among the Zen tradition, you will find many people who are gay practicing Zen because they say that the Buddha does not care whether you are gay or not.

I once asked one of my teachers about this because somebody who was gay came to me and wanted to know about this. This subject is incredibly difficult to talk with Tibetan monks about, it is extraordinarily difficult. They don't talk about it. They say that in Tibetan society nobody is homosexual. I have my doubts about that. Anyway my teacher's answer was that attachment is attachment, it does not matter what the object is, so from his viewpoint whether you are homosexual or heterosexual, it is not really important – attachment is attachment.

Birth control and Abortion

[Audience:] What did the Buddha say about birth control and abortion?

They did not have birth control in the time of the Buddha so there was not anything specifically said about this, but we can say that abortion from a Buddhist viewpoint would be taking the life of a child. That does not mean that people who have abortions are bad. His Holiness says that this is always a very difficult decision. It is a very hard thing to decide upon, but if one believes that abortion is taking a life and one does not want to get oneself into that position, then the best thing to do is to use some kind of preventive measures so that you will not encounter that. But isn't that just common sense?

[In response to audience:] People have to be reasonable. If you use birth control you know it is not one hundred percent effective. You know there is a possibility it won't work. So if a pregnancy results that is unwanted, you accept it.

It seems to me that in anything we do in our life, we should try and think of the different results that could come about and go into the situation with our eyes open. Then we could say, "Yes this could happen. It's a risk, but I'm willing to engage in this even though there is a risk. If it comes out the way I don't want it to, I will bear that responsibility and follow through on it." Usually we do not want to see the results of our behavior unless they are good results and when bad results come, we often get angry at somebody else thinking that this should not happen to us.

Lying

[In response to audience:] Technically speaking to break the lying precept from its root means that you lie about your spiritual attainments. Now that does not mean that you can lie about everything else. If you lie about everything else it does damage the precept, but it does not break it from the root. But you

do damage it and you do create negative karma. The precept is specifically about lying. I think some people may generalize it to any kind of harmful speech, but I have learned about it as specifically lying. I think it is wise in any case to abandon any kind of harmful speech, whether we have the precept to do so or not.

[Audience:] What about gossip?

Well we have to understand what gossip means. Talking about somebody else does not mean that you are gossiping. It is what you are saying, why you are saying it and how you are saying it that determines whether you are gossiping. I really hope that when a doctor refers a patient to a surgeon, that the doctor talks about that patient to the surgeon. [laughter] So just talking about other people does not necessarily mean gossip. We have to think about why we are talking about them. What are we saying and what is our attitude towards them?

In a similar way – and here we are getting into more fine-tuning – pointing out a seemingly negative quality of somebody is not necessarily criticizing them. For example, if you are in charge of hiring people for a job and a person has a quality that does not seem appropriate for the job, you can say that the quality does not seem appropriate for that job. But that does not mean that you are angry and are blaming and criticizing.

Review Your Speech

I think the real key to having good speech is thinking before we speak and really checking our motivation. I have emphasized again and again that it is very helpful to sit down every evening and think about what you said, felt, thought and did during the day. You begin to notice patterns coming up, specifically patterns of really sloppy speech, or harmful speech. As soon as you start noticing those patterns it makes it much easier to stop them. You know the kinds of situations you are likely to do it in and you can be more mindful when you get in that kind of situation. Or you may get a kind of feeling in your mind and it is easier to identify this if you have been able to recognize it a lot in the past. So identifying it is the first step. Then keeping your mouth shut is another step. [Laughter]

Breaking Precepts

[Audience:] When we take precepts we have to confront the issue of what happens when we break them, so what do we do if we break them?

The reason we take precepts is because we cannot keep them purely. If you could keep them purely, then you do not need to take precepts. But to take the precept, you have to have some reasonable confidence that first of all you want to keep it, that you want to keep it well and you are going to put some effort into it, so it is not just thinking that you will take the precept but don't have to keep it. You should think that this is something that you want to do, have some confidence you can do it, but you don't necessarily expect to do it one hundred percent perfectly because if you could, you would not need the precept. So going into it with that kind of attitude, then we are fully aware that sometimes we are going to transgress. So what do we do then?

Regret, Restoration, Determination and Remedial Behavior

Our usual pattern when we transgress is to think, "I'm guilty. I'm bad. I'm horrible. How could I do this? I don't want anybody to know because then they will know what an idiot I am blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." We have this whole tape we play for ourselves. [Laughter] Instead of playing that tape, we develop a sense of regret for what we have done, which is the wisdom mind recognizing our mistake. We do not beat ourselves up emotionally about it, but we recognize it and do not rationalize it.

Then we restore the relationship somehow by taking refuge in the holy objects, or generating altruism towards other sentient beings. Then we make some kind of determination not to repeat it again according to what we are capable of, and then we do some remedial behavior, generally some kind of purification practice, community service, or some kind of positive action.

That is why I really encourage you in the evening to look over the day, rejoice in what went well, in the good karma we created, and go through the four opponent powers for the things that we messed up on.

That is a really nice way to complete the day and to evaluate the day and go on. If we do that, then we will begin to notice patterns and we will start to take some active steps to counteract those patterns.

Purification and Rejoicing

[Audience:] Is there a psychological benefit of doing purification first and rejoicing second?

That is the order in the Seven Limb Prayer and there must be a reason for it. It might be that in order to allow ourselves to see the good things, we first have to clean up the mess. It could be that we clean up the mess through doing the confession first, then we can see the virtues better. I think with Westerners, it is sometimes skillful to do it the other way though.

Another possible reason for doing the confession before the rejoicing is because if you rejoice, but you do not do it properly, you could become proud; whereas if you do the confession first and look at your garbage, becoming proud is not so much of a danger. I think sometimes in the West we neglect the rejoicing part. It's really funny because in the West we go to the extreme of getting very proud and arrogant and also to the extreme of totally putting ourselves down. I think we have to learn to realize our mistakes, but also rejoice in our good qualities. Do not neglect either of them.

Pride and Shame

[Audience:] What is the relationship between pride and shame?

Well sometimes we are very ashamed and so to cover it up we put on a big show and become very proud. So pride and shame very much correspond. Some people who are very proud, the whole reason for the pride is because they don't like themselves very much. I think that this is always helpful to remember because sometimes when we are around people who are very proud, we get jealous. There is no need for us to get jealous of somebody's good qualities. If they do have those good qualities, that is fine. If they are just blowing themselves up out of all proportion, we don't need to get jealous either because what they are doing is inaccurate and is indicative of their own internal pain.

The Refuge Ceremony

[In response to audience:] Some teachers say you only take refuge once. My teachers used to let people take refuge several times, so I do it that way. The person who does the refuge ceremony becomes one of your spiritual teachers. I think it is wise to reflect upon that and then one chooses whether to take refuge with that person doing the ceremony or not. We have to remember we are taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, not in that person, but that person becomes one of our spiritual teachers because they did the ceremony and provided the link with the lineage.

In terms of taking precepts, Lama Yeshe said that once you have the five lay precepts you do not need to keep taking them again and again unless you have broken them from the root.

Breaking Precepts From the Root

[Audience:] What would be breaking the precepts from the root?

Each of the precepts has to have an object you recognize, a motivation, the actual doing of the action and the completion of the action. So for instance with killing, to break the precept from the root, one has to kill a human being. But that does not mean that it is okay to kill animals. This would be the intentional killing of a human being where the other person dies before you do, so it is not about getting into a car accident because there is no intention there.

Then for stealing, it is to steal things that you know do not belong to you, things that are considered by the society to be of value and that you could be penalized for taking.

For unwise sexual behavior, it is going outside of one's relationship, or going with somebody who is in another relationship and knowing that they are in a relationship, knowing what you are doing and then having the pleasure at the end.

With lying, it is lying about one's spiritual attainments, saying you are a bodhisattva, or have realized emptiness, or attained dah, dah, dah, when you have not.

As for the intoxicant precept, I give it very strictly and intoxicants include anything...the Buddha said even one drop of alcohol. Some teachers say (I think they do this for Westerners) that it means getting out of control with the intoxicant, so one glass of wine is okay. But that is not the way I do it because I figure you do not get drunk if you do not take even one glass. I think it is much easier to make it clear.

[Audience:] What about foods that are cooked with alcohol in it?

I have been in that situation and I have learned to ask before hand or spit it out. I think if you know something has liquor in it and you eat it that is a problem. If you do not know and you have no intention, I still think it is wise to spit it out. Well technically speaking the alcohol has evaporated through the cooking. But personally speaking, the way I keep that precept, is no spaghetti sauce with wine even if it has been cooked for ten hours, because for me I think it is just much better to be very clear about this.

[In response to audience:] There are some actions that are naturally negative and then there are others that are prohibited because the Buddha said so, the Buddha made a vow. Something like killing or stealing is naturally negative whether you have a precept or not. If you kill or steal you create negative karma by that action.

Taking alcohol itself is not a naturally negative action. It is negative only if you have taken the precept. The reason the Buddha made that precept and encouraged us to avoid intoxicants is because if you get intoxicated, then you are quite likely to break all the other precepts. But the alcohol in and of itself is not a negative thing. It is what you do when you are drunk or doped up that is harmful.

[Audience:] Can you explain more about ‘knowing the object’ as part of breaking a vow from the root?

It means that you literally know the object. “Here is Joe Blow. I want to kill Joe Blow. This is Joe Blow and I have the motivation to kill him.” So it is not an accident. You do it, he dies and you are glad about it.

Some people kill people but they really do not want to. Maybe you are a soldier at war. In that kind of situation it is not the same karma. You are killing, but it is not the same karma as if you volunteered to kill someone. Doing it but with a mind that regrets doing it is quite different.

Now in terms of the precept, in terms of our monks and nun’s vows, when you are doing it if you have a mind of regret and do not have one single moment of wishing to conceal it, then it is not a complete transgression. But if you did it, felt happy about it and even if you did not intend to conceal it and your regret comes some time afterwards – the next day the regret comes – it is still broken.

[Audience:] What about suicide?

Technically speaking to have a complete action of killing it involves killing another human being and it involves that person dying before you do. Now in suicide those two factors are missing, but I think it is still quite negative karmically.

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>