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Benefits of having taken refuge

a. We become Buddhists

Last time we talked about the advantages of taking refuge. We spoke about the first benefit – becoming a Buddhist. In other words, one enters the path that the Buddha has described and starts to practice.

b. We establish the foundation for taking further vows

The second advantage is that having taken refuge we become a candidate, or a base for all the other vows that the Buddha gave. When we have confidence in the path that the Buddha set out, we will want to follow it. One of the first things that the Buddha instructs us to do is to observe cause and effect, in other words to leave behind our bad habits and to make some effort to create good ones. To help us, the Buddha very kindly set out precepts. We can choose the level of precepts that we want to take and then do that practice. It's very beneficial, but that has to be done on the basis of refuge. If we don't have refuge and trust in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha then there is no reason to do anything that's prescribed. It is like if you have no faith in a doctor, you will not want to take the medicine that they prescribe.

c. We can eliminate results of previously accumulated negative karma

The third benefit of taking refuge is we are able to eliminate negativities very quickly. One reason for that is that just the thought of turning our mind towards virtuous actions is purifying. Another reason is that once we entrust ourselves to the guidance of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, they teach us further practices for purification.

d. We can quickly accumulate great positive karma

The fourth benefit is that we quickly create a great amount of positive karma. Again, this is because taking refuge itself, recollecting the Triple Gem itself, puts a good imprint on our mind. Also, by following the path, we're led to do all sorts of other virtuous actions which again leave good karmic imprints on our mind. This thing about imprints, you can see it to some extent. For example, we say that taking refuge itself purifies and creates good karma. When you take refuge, see for yourself what effect it has on your mind.

In fact, you can see the effect any action has on your mind. When you sit down on a Sunday afternoon watching a football game and everybody's yelling and screaming, can you feel the energy in your mind? Can you feel the energy in your body? Or when you watch a movie that's full of violence, it affects your dreams at night even though it's just a movie. You can see how it affects your mental energy, and how that in turn affects your physical energy. And that's just sitting and watching something.

If you imagine the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha instead – you think of their good qualities, you take refuge and imagine light coming into you – that definitely leaves an imprint too. It changes the whole feeling, the mental tone, and it also does something to your physical energy. We can see it when we look at our own experience. This shows us why an act in and of itself can be either purifying or creating a negative impression. Watch your own experience, watch what happens when you think about different things.

e. We cannot be harmed by humans and non-humans

The fifth benefit of taking refuge is that we can't be harmed by humans and non-humans. This happens because after taking refuge, we engage in the practice of purification, and that stops the negative karma that would cause us to experience external harm. In addition, if you take refuge, your mind is in a positive state. Even if other people are trying to harm you externally, your mind doesn't interpret it as harm. You interpret it instead as a benefit. Refuge becomes a powerful protection.

When I was in Southeast Asia, I found that people there are dreadfully afraid of spirits. There are many spirit stories. The people all want some quick, cheap and easy method to stop the spirits. It's funny because if you give them a red string to tie around their neck, they feel, "Ok now I'm protected," but if you tell them to take refuge, they don't like that very much. But really in the scriptures it says that taking refuge itself is the one thing that protects you against harm from spirits.

The story of a spirit who tries to harm others is told. One time, the spirits went to the cave of a great meditator to harm him. Seeing that the meditator was meditating on love and compassion, the spirits changed their mind. They couldn't harm that person. Why was that meditator meditating on love and compassion? Because he took refuge and he was following the path.

The whole idea is that whenever we keep our mind in a virtuous state, we do less to attract negative energy towards us, be it the negative energy of humans or spirits. Whereas when our mind is in a negative state, when our mind is critical and judgmental, we interpret everything as harmful. In addition, through our actions, we attract negative energy towards us. For example, when we act obnoxious, other people return the 'favor'. We can easily see that.

f. We will not fall to unfortunate rebirths

The sixth benefit is that we won't fall to unfortunate rebirths. This is, again, because we purify the negative karma and create good karma. More importantly, if we can remember the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha at the time of death, then the mind becomes very virtuous. When our mind is in a virtuous state, there is no possibility for negative karma that we have created in the past to ripen. Whereas if we spend our life creating good karma but still there is some negative karma in our mindstream, and at death we completely blow it and get very angry or attached, then that sets the environment for the negative karma to ripen.

The idea is to train our mind in remembering the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as much as possible when we are alive. Then at the time we die, remembering them will come very easily. Basically, the tendency is that we die just like we live. If we live in attachment, anger and ignorance, we tend to die that way. If we train our mind to think about Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, taking refuge in them, and if we train our mind to think about loving-kindness, they become our second nature and arise quite easily in the mind at the time we die. If they are in the mind, then at that moment no negative karma can ripen. Dying becomes easy this way. You recognize that the Triple Gem are your objects of refuge who will guide you in this life, in the intermediate state and in future lives. You don't have to fear anything. Your mind relaxes, you can think virtuously and at death you just take off the way a bird takes off. The bird doesn't look back. It just goes forward. This is the benefit of training our mind in refuge and being able to recall it at the time of death.

While we are healthy we tend to forget about taking refuge. We are involved in our day-to-day activities, busily running around. We are completely convinced that we are always going to be healthy because we are healthy right now. But all the people who were operated on today, all the people who died today,

they were at one time healthy like us. Because of impermanence, because of transience, illness, old age and death eventually come around. I think it must be terrifying to have to face surgery or death without any kind of refuge, without any kind of feeling of trust in something beyond one's own ego. When we are in stressful situations like having an illness, it becomes very clear that we have very little control over our body or over much of our experience.

Whereas if the mind is trained in refuge then even if the body is out of control, the mind can be peaceful and calm. Even though there might be physical pain, there's no mental pain. I think a lot of the difficulty we experience when we are sick or dying is not due so much to the physical pain. Rather, it is due to the mental pain that comes in reaction to the physical pain. If we can have refuge, then all that gets solved.

g. In general our virtuous purposes and temporal goals will be fulfilled

The seventh benefit of taking refuge is that in general all of our virtuous purposes will be fulfilled. That includes also our temporal goals. But this is not a money back guarantee. It doesn't mean that just because you have taken refuge, you are going to get a new car [laughter]. What it is saying is that if we take refuge and generate a good motivation, we create the karma for our temporal and ultimate goals to be fulfilled.

Also if we take refuge before we engage in an activity, it puts our mind in a very positive frame and we are filled with confidence. We don't feel alone in whatever work we are undertaking, and that shift in our mental attitude automatically makes what we do more successful. That's why they say before we engage in any kind of action, for example, if you are traveling or doing a project, it's very good if you spend a few minutes and take refuge. It puts the mind in a positive frame and helps with our karma. It helps with our attitude. It helps with our confidence and so on. That is why taking refuge every morning is highly recommended. We start our day having that positive frame of mind. It allows us to accomplish the things we want to achieve in this life as well as in future lives.

Also, if we practice, then even if we don't achieve our desired goal or things don't turn out the way we planned, the mind doesn't freak out. For example, you are working on a project and it doesn't come out as you like because you don't have control over all the different conditions leading into it. Still, if the mind has refuge, you don't freak out. When we have refuge, our mind is directed towards more long-lasting and broader goals. If things don't turn out the way we want, the mind automatically thinks about the different teachings the Buddha gave and is much more accepting of the situation. We stop all those other problems that come out of frustration, anger or resentment.

h. We will quickly attain Buddhahood

This one actually encapsulates the previous seven. By taking refuge and following karma, then we are able to have a precious human life, meet qualified teachers, hear teachings, and have the necessary circumstances to practice. By doing these over many, many lifetimes, then we eventually become Buddhas. This is all done on the basis of taking refuge.

To see how valuable and how important refuge is, you can look at your friends or other people, either people who have no spiritual practice whatsoever or people who get involved in weird types of teachings and teachers. You can see the effects that it has on them this lifetime, and by inference you could see what is going to happen to them next lifetime based on what they are doing this lifetime. You come to appreciate having refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. They seem like a life raft in an ocean of confusion. It's good to think about the different situations. Think about your friends' and relatives' experience, and what happens in people's lives when they don't have refuge, and then you can appreciate your opportunity better.

When I was teaching in Montana there was one woman who came to the teaching. Her brother had just died. He had gotten involved in a satanic cult. The people there wanted to sacrifice him and I think he killed himself before they could do that. That happens in this country. This happens as a result of taking refuge in the wrong object. Over and over again we can see what happens when people don't have the karma to meet good refuge objects. Their life gets totally confused now and, of course, future lives are a continuation of that confusion. Having met the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and as our understanding grows, we come to see how precious and valuable it is. The refuge becomes the concrete pillar of your life. It becomes the thing that enables you to make sense of everything and gives you a good direction to go in your life.

Just listen to other people's stories or read the newspaper with a Dharma mind. Then these types of things become quite evident. One woman just told me a few days ago that her marriage was breaking up because her husband got into some kind of group. I don't know what exactly it was, but they were one of these groups that was going to save the world and he just got completely into this save-the-world trip. As a result his whole family became unsaved. We need to reflect on our fortune and make use of it when we see how important our refuge is.

Specific guidelines for the practice of refuge

Now we come to the section of how to train the mind, what guidelines to follow after having taken refuge. The reason that the Buddha explained guidelines is that refuge is the entry into the path. It's the gateway into the path. Having taken refuge, then in order to keep our refuge alive, in order to make it grow, in order to make our spiritual practice actually go ahead, the Buddha gave certain guidelines for the refuge practice. By the way, taking refuge is something completely voluntary. You can do it if you want. You don't have to do it if you don't wish to. It's completely up to you.

There're some specific guidelines as well as some general or common guidelines. The specific guidelines: for each object of refuge, there is one guideline to practice and one action to abandon. They come in pairs of what to practice and what to abandon.

1. Having taken refuge in the Buddha: a. do not turn for refuge in worldly deities.

[Earlier part of this section lost due to change of tape.]

There's a story which shows how worldly deities are not reliable refuge objects. A man with a goiter was sleeping on a mountain pass. Some spirits came up and wanted to harm him. But because he had some kind of blessing from a Lama, they couldn't harm him. They decided to take his goiter instead. They couldn't eat him so they took his goiter. When he woke up in the morning he was so happy because he had no more goiter. It was just what he wanted, to get rid of the goiter. He thought these spirits were great. He told his friend who also had a goiter. His friend then came and slept on the mountain pass thinking that his goiter would disappear too. Well, the difficulty was that the spirits didn't like the taste of the first goiter. When the second man came, they put what was left of the first goiter back to him so his goiter wound up to be twice the size.

The point of the story [laughter] is that spirits aren't reliable. First they take it and then they give it back. The whole idea when we take refuge, is that we want somebody who is reliable, who is constant in the help they give, and spirits aren't. Many people are involved with channeling and so forth these days. Many of the spirits that are contacted are worldly beings who are just like human beings – some of them have wisdom and some of them don't. Some of them tell the truth and some of them don't. They are not reliable refuge objects. This is why we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and not in spirits. But if you want to make some kind of offering for worldly purposes, that's okay.

b. respect all images of the Buddha

The thing to practice in terms of taking refuge in the Buddha is to treat the different representations of the Buddha with respect. This is not because the Buddha will get upset with us if we don't treat the statues properly, or that the statues are going to get mad at us or something like that. Rather, psychologically you can see if we value the Buddha, then we want to treat the different representations with respect because it has symbolic meaning for us. It's like if you value your grandmother, then the things she gives you, even the little things, you save and you treat them very well. You value a card your grandmother gave you when you were five years old, not because the card is so valuable, but because you value her and the card somehow represents her. A photograph of somebody you care very much about is just paper and different chemicals, but you keep it well because it is something valuable to you. The idea is that when we value something, we also value its representations.

For that reason it is recommended that we keep the Buddha's statues in a high place. We keep them clean. We dust our shrine every day and keep everything on it clean.

They also say don't use Buddha statues as collateral for loans. Here, I don't think any bank would take one. Maybe in Tibet, people were tempted to do that. The idea is not to use religious objects the same way we would use our ordinary material. For that reason also, whenever Dharma books are sold or whenever Buddha statues are sold, the profit made from that should go towards another Dharma activity. It shouldn't be used for supporting ourselves. The idea being not to sell Buddha statues the same way you would sell used cars, but to regard them with an attitude of respect, and not just be seeking to make profits so that oneself can have a bigger and better house and better food to eat. If you make a profit, you invest it in other Dharma activities.

[Audience:] What are the karmic manifestations if we become the buyer instead of the seller?

Whenever this has been asked of my teachers, they say that you as the buyer don't create negative karma if you have an attitude of respect towards it and you weren't looking at it as ordinary material. It depends on the buyer's mind, what is in their own mind.

I remember my teachers being very, very strict about this [using the profit for other Dharma activities]. There was one shop in Singapore where they sold all these Buddha statues and when these people came to offer money to Lama Zopa, he couldn't refuse the money, but he had it kept aside. He gave it away or he used it for Dharma purposes, but never for personal use. Even money that was given to him from people who sold statues for profit, he used it with that attitude. In the Tibetan tradition they are quite strict about this. Maybe other traditions are not quite as strict, but I think it is helpful because then the mind doesn't get into a materialistic attitude with respect to Dharma objects.

They also say regarding Buddha statues that it's good when we look at them, not to say, "Oh, this one is beautiful and that one is ugly" just because the artistry is good for one painting or statue but is not so good for the other. How can a Buddha's body ever be ugly? It's fine to comment on the artist's capabilities, but not on whether the Buddha is beautiful or not beautiful.

Similarly, it is good to try and treat all the different paintings and statues equally. In other words, don't put the beautiful ones at the front of the altar and the chipped broken ones into the garbage dump; not having a mind that sees the expensive Buddha images as beautiful and the chipped ones as ugly. But try to have an attitude that sees the representation of the Buddha in whatever form it is as something that is attractive and beautiful. Also, don't put the statues on the ground or in a dirty place, but value them.

Of course all that is quite relative and whether we are treating the statues with respect or not really depends on the mind. There is another story that illustrates this. Somebody was walking down the road and saw a Buddha statue sitting on the ground. It was raining. The person had much respect for the Buddha statue and didn't want it to get wet. The only thing that was lying around was an old shoe. So he put the old shoe on top of the Buddha statue to protect it. This person created a lot of good karma because of wanting to protect the statue.

After a while, it stopped raining. The sun came out. Somebody else walked down the road, saw the statue, and said, "Yuck, who put an old smelly shoe on top of the Buddha? This is horrible!" And that person took the shoe off. [laughter] That person also created good karma because of his positive attitude.

2. Having taken refuge in the Dharma:

a. avoid harming any living being

Then in terms of the Dharma, having taken refuge in the Dharma, the thing to abandon is harming all sentient beings. Specifically, it refers to killing but in a more general sense, it means to abandon verbally abusing them and also having malicious thoughts towards them. The whole reason that this is the guideline for having taken refuge in the Dharma is because the purpose of the Dharma, the essence of the Buddha's teachings, is to help others as much as you can, and if you can't help them, then at least don't hurt them. The bottom line of the Dharma is non-harmfulness. That is why harming is to be abandoned once we have taken refuge in the Dharma. It's the whole purpose of our practice.

b. respect the written words which describe the path

To have respect for the physical representations of the Dharma, in other words the scriptures. This includes the books and now in our age, Dharma tapes, videos, etc. Again, this means not selling them

just to earn your livelihood, but using the profit for other Dharma activities. It means keeping your Dharma books in a high and clean place. Technically speaking when you set up your altar, your Dharma books should be above the Buddha statues. They are because the Dharma books represent the Buddha's speech. Of all the ways that the Buddha benefits us, speech is the most emphatic one since we receive the most benefit from it. Therefore we respect it the most and put it highest. Now often in the West, we have a bookshelf where we put the Buddha statues on the top and the books on the shelves (below). I don't know. Technically speaking the best thing would be to have the books higher.

Now sometimes in Tibet they put the books so high that nobody ever reads them. They have all the Kangyur* and Tengyur# wrapped up beautifully, because it says here that you are supposed to wrap your books and keep them clean. You put them in these glass cabinets and nobody ever reads them. You just touch them with your head as you go by. That's a way to show respect and that's good. Maybe once a year somebody makes an offering and requests that the sutras be read and they are all taken down to be read. This is good, but it's limited.

From my viewpoint I would rather see Dharma books arranged in such a way that people see them and want to read them, rather than to have them kept so high that people find it troublesome to gain access to the books, "Oh I have to get a step ladder."

When you are reading a Dharma book, don't put your book down and put your coffee cup, your glasses or your phone bill on top of it. It's not because the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Sangha gets offended by this. It's a practice in mindfulness in how we treat material things. If we value the path to enlightenment, we will value the representations. We especially value the books because we learn so much about the path through the books that we want to treat it properly. It's like when you get married, you might have your wedding photographs but you don't put your dirty dishes on top of it. You don't put your old shoes on top of a photograph of your child whom you care about because it ruins it. It is the same with Dharma books. It's a way of becoming mindful of how we interact with the things in our environment.

Especially important here is Dharma materials, like your old notes or even flyers from Dharma courses or things with Dharma words on it. The way to dispose of those is by burning or recycling them. In other words don't use your Dharma notes to line your garbage can, or something like that.

Actually technically speaking, they say to not step on any written word, or put your rubbish on it. In the West though, we have written words on the streets, on the sidewalks, on our shoes, and things like that. For the West we need to interpret it in terms of Dharma materials. Instead of just throwing them in the garbage, we should put them aside to burn. There is a very short prayer you can say. Even if you don't know the prayer, what you can do is think that you are sending the materials away but also asking more to come to you and asking that the Dharma reappear again in your life.

If you have bookshelves, keep your Dharma books on the high shelf. Don't put your playboy magazines and your consumer's guides on the top shelf and your Dharma books on the bottom shelf interspersed with various novels and shopping guides. Try to keep your Dharma books all together in one respectful area. Again this is training us to be aware of how we deal with things in our environment. It's very helpful. Often we are just spaced out in what we do with things. We don't pay any attention to where we put things. Having this kind of guidelines makes us more mindful.

3. Having taken refuge in the Sangha:

a. do not cultivate the friendship of people who criticize the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, who teach wrong views or who act unruly

Having taken refuge in the Sangha, the thing to abandon is cultivating friendships with people who criticize Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, people who criticize your teacher, people who have wrong views or people who are very unruly or do many negative actions. The reason for this is that we could be influenced by them. This does not mean that you remove these people from the field of your compassion. It doesn't mean that you cut off all your friendships with all your old friends and that anybody who is in the least bit immoral, you stick your nose up at them, turn away and say, "I am not going to associate with you." That is not the meaning of this.

The meaning of this is that we are very easily influenced by the things in our environment, especially by the people we cultivate friendships with. Therefore it's very important for us to cultivate friendships with people who are interested in creating virtuous actions and leaving behind harmful ones. We can clearly

see this. Let's say, if you have a precept not to drink, if you hang around people who drink at every meal, it's going to be very difficult for you to keep that precept. If you hang around people who act very, very negatively, you become like that. If we hang around people who are always criticizing the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, it's going to create doubt and confusion in our own mind. It might make us develop the skeptical, cynical mind that some of these people have.

The reason here for abandoning cultivation of these friendships is not because the people are bad or evil, but because we can be influenced in a harmful way since we still have defilements. However, we should definitely keep these people within the realm of our compassion. When we have a relationship with these people, we want to be kind, but we have to be attentive that we don't get influenced in a harmful way. If we cultivate friendships with people who don't value ethics, then our good friend, for example, in an attempt to help us, may ask us to get involved in a shady business deal. They think the shady business deal is a great way to make a lot of money. But it can be unethical and if we are close friends with that person, it becomes real sticky. How do we tell them we don't want to get involved? We may wind up getting involved and our ethics deteriorate.

This is why I am stressing that the group continues to meet [even if I'm away teaching elsewhere]. You cultivate Dharma friendships amongst each other. Dharma friends are incredibly important, because they are the people who are trying to go in the same direction that we are going in. They understand that part of us. They also want to keep good ethics. They are also trying to develop loving kindness. They aren't going to look at us and say, "Why are you meditating? It's better to watch TV." "Why are you reading that Dharma book? It's so boring." These are the people who are going to appreciate our spiritual practice. Cultivating friendships with them is very helpful. We can take that good energy from our Dharma friends. As for our friends and relatives who aren't as interested in the Dharma, when we become very strong, we can share our good energy with them and become a positive influence on those people.

b. develop respect for monks and nuns

The thing to practice in relationship to the Sangha, (this is another one that people go bananas over) is to respect the Sangha members, specifically monks and nuns, and not to get into this super critical mind. It is so easy for us to look at monks and nuns with a very critical mind. I remember when my teacher was teaching us this, he was telling us, "You guys, most of all, are the ones who criticize the monks and nuns because you are closer to them." We usually sit in lines according to our ordination order when we do puja, and Geshela was saying you can look up the line and start criticizing – this one burps; that one is sloppy; this one comes late; that one is dumb; this one doesn't clean up after himself; that one criticizes people; this one still gets angry; that one is uncooperative; this one doesn't tie his shoe laces. [Laughter]

Geshela was saying with our critical mind we can go up and down the line and criticize everybody, but then what we are doing is when we get into that, we miss out on all the positive influence that these people can have on us. Even though the monks and nuns may not be perfect, still by the fact that they are trying to keep good ethics, that part of them at least is setting a good example for us. By understanding in that way, we show respect towards them and not get into a criticizing mode. Showing respect towards monks and nuns doesn't mean that you grovel at their feet. It doesn't mean you go berserk and get uptight around them. It means that for the benefit of your own practice, you try and see their good qualities.

Now it may happen that you see people mess up. Monks and nuns are only human. We have faults and we mess up. The idea is that when you see somebody mess up, try not to focus on, "Why did that person mess up? They are a Sangha member. They are supposed to be perfect. They aren't keeping good ethics. They are supposed to be my example. I want a good example. They are letting me down?!" and go on a big rant and rave.

When we see people make mistakes, it is helpful to recognize that they are human beings. They can also come under the influence of their delusions and karma. Generate a feeling of compassion for them and try and help. There can be many different ways of helping. If you know the person well enough, you can go to them privately and ask if they need some help. With other people, you might have to go to their teacher and say something. Some things are no big deal. You just let go. If somebody didn't pick up after himself, you don't need to go tell the abbot, "This guy left his dirty socks on my floor!" [laughter] But on more serious breaches, you could talk to the person's teacher. You could talk to some of their other Dharma friends depending on their relationship with them. You could talk to them. Try and have a feeling

of compassion for them instead of getting into this critical mind. See that even if somebody messes up, still they are doing many things that are good. Even though they may break one vow, they may keep many others. Try in this way to get some benefit from the way we interact with people.

I find that people very often go to extremes and say, "Okay, you are a monk or a nun. You are up on some cloud. You are perfect. You never make any mistakes." When they see you get annoyed, all of a sudden they lose their refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Simply because they saw one monk or nun get annoyed. Something isn't right in that attitude. It's expecting too much from people and going from the extreme of idolization and high expectation to the extreme of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, discarding the person's good qualities along with the bad ones.

Response to audience questions

Respond to wrongdoings with compassion

Being accepting of the imperfections of monks and nuns is very much in line with our development of compassion, but sometimes we find it much harder to be compassionate towards people whom we consider more advanced than us. When a doctor makes a mistake, we file a malpractice suit. When we make a mistake, it's okay. We should have compassion for everybody, but often in our culture we don't.

The thing is, even if you investigate and find that somebody's doing something unethical, should you abandon the judgmental mind? Should you abandon criticism? Yes. We have to abandon the judgmental, critical mind in any case. Why? Because that mind is full of anger and jealousy. But that doesn't mean that you don't intervene. If somebody is doing something unethical, out of compassion you should intervene and prevent the harm from happening if you can. But you can do that without this very judgmental mind.

I see some cultural differences in people's attitude towards monks and nuns who make mistakes. In Asia, I don't think they tend to get into idolizing people quite as much. If you remember, at the psychology conference, it was mentioned, at least in the Japanese Jodo-Shinshu tradition, that they see their priests as older brothers and sisters in the practice, not as perfect human beings. He gave the example of a bouquet with a snake inside. They expect people to have faults. They don't flip out when it happens. Often the Tibetans are very much like that too. They don't get nearly as bothered when people do unethical things. Americans tend to get quite freaked out, or they tend to go into the whole denial trip. That's not saying that Asians don't deny. Very often it's very neatly swept under the rug and ignored. But in the West we have an especially hard time with this.

In the West, when things happen in churches or even in Buddhist groups, people either go to the extreme of denying it, covering it up and painting this person as glorious, or they go to the extreme of getting angry, belligerent, disillusioned and judgmental and critical and making a big scandal about it. Personally speaking, I don't think either attitude is beneficial. If somebody's acting unethically and you know about it, it's something that needs to be dealt with. But it should be done without a critical, scandalous mind. It needs to be dealt with through compassion for the person who is acting unethically, compassion for the people that person harms by their actions, and compassion for yourself. Skillful intervention can resolve it.

In the case of the Tibetans, to have compassion towards people who are harming you is hard, and not all of the Tibetans do it. But the thing is that some of them are able to do it and you can see the beneficial results of that. Again, having compassion doesn't mean that you're inactive. For example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is always telling people, "Don't hate the Chinese," even though they destroyed the country. But His Holiness certainly isn't passive in the situation. He works very actively for human rights in Tibet and Tibet's freedom.

Views on Sangha members who enjoy luxuries - investigate before jumping to conclusions

I remember when I was in Malaysia, some people came up to me. Apparently a new temple had been built and there was a monk residing there. One man was upset because the monk had air conditioning in his room. "This monk has air conditioning! He's totally involved in the sense pleasure of samsara. This is

totally degenerate!” This man was very upset because he as a layperson didn’t have air conditioning. Why should this monk who is supposed to be renounced have air conditioning? The monk should be able to put up with no air-conditioning. The man was very upset about it. And I was thinking, “Wow, it must be so nice for this monk. He can meditate and do his work in peace without sweating all the time,” because Malaysia is very hot. But in the eyes of this layperson, he couldn’t see anything but the monk having air conditioning when he doesn’t.

Actually, it depends on how that monk got the air conditioning. It is very possible that some devotee came into the temple and said, “Here’s money. Use it for an air conditioner.” When somebody gives you money for that, you have to use it as the patron asked. You can’t divert it for another thing. If some patron came to the temple and told him to buy air conditioning, he has to accept the money and use it for the air conditioning, unless he can discuss it with the patron and convince him otherwise. I think we have to research and find out why this monk has the air conditioning before we criticize.

Sometimes people would come and say, “I saw these monks riding around in a Mercedes. Should a monk do that?” Again, how do I know? Maybe a follower invites them somewhere and comes to pick them up in a Mercedes. You can’t say, “I’m sorry, go get a Volkswagen. I’m not going to ride in this.” [laughter] Or sometimes, especially in Asia, people will offer cars to the temple. Maybe some devotee offered it, and the monk’s using it. I can’t say. Of course if the monk from his own side said, “Please give me a lot of money because I want a Mercedes,” that’s not so cool. But just because we see somebody riding in a Mercedes, we shouldn’t jump to any conclusion. We don’t know how they got it. We don’t know what the situation is.

Before criticizing, I think it is better to investigate. That’s what I would tell these people. “Go and ask him whose Mercedes it is, and why he’s driving in it. Don’t ask me because I don’t know.” But they didn’t want to do that fearing they might offend him. Instead they preferred to gossip behind his back. That idea I don’t like so much.

[Audience:] What if a monk who has an elaborate lifestyle tells you to live simply?

Well, I think living a simple life is very good advice. Leading a simple life doesn’t mean that you have to go without air conditioning. Maybe you do a lot of work. You want to do meditation and having air conditioning would be very helpful. And if you can afford it, why not? I think it completely depends on the mind and on the motivation of everybody involved in the situation. If somebody offers you something that you didn’t ask for, actually by your bodhisattva vows, you are supposed to accept it. Then maybe you can give it away to somebody else later. But if it’s something that enables you to do your work better, you use it.

You may also encourage people to have simple lives because in general, it is better to lead a simple life. But that doesn’t mean you are telling people, “Don’t get things that might make you life easier” if making their life easier helps them to do their Dharma practice better. In other words telling people to lead a simple life is helping them get free of the mind that says, “I need this and I have to have this and I want this and I can’t do anything unless I have all these things around me.” Is that clear?

[Audience:] What about in a situation like in a poor village, where Sangha members are living in great riches and the population is starving?

Again it depends on how they got the things. If it’s all contributed ethically, they can use it, but they may decide that rather than live very opulently themselves, they want to give some of the wealth back to the village. They may decide to do that. Sometimes you may encounter villagers who won’t accept anything. There are times when [lay] people refused to accept things I offered to them because I am a nun. They feel that they can’t take anything from a nun. I feel that if I offer people something, I want people to take it, but some people won’t accept.

People have to look at their own minds and their own situation. If you are living opulently as a religious person going, “I am so glad that I am a religious person because people make offerings to me. I don’t have to live like all these poor villagers,” then something is very wrong with your practice. But if you have a different attitude towards the things and you try to give it away but the people won’t accept it, or they will be very offended if you don’t accept their offering, then maybe you have to make use of some of the offerings.

I think what I am getting down to is, we have to look at each individual situation before we evaluate.

Take refuge in the right objects

[In response to audience:] You bring up a very interesting point in that in general in our life we take refuge in all sorts of samsaric things. We take refuge in the mirror. We take refuge in the clock. You know what is the real center of our refuge taking? The refrigerator! [laughter] That's where we really take refuge. And the telephone, the movies, our magazines and the television. The idea of taking refuge isn't anything new. We take refuge all the time in an attempt to stop our confusion and our suffering, but all these things are just wrong objects of refuge.

For our refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to be worthwhile, it involves reducing our cravings for frivolous things. The real meaning of taking refuge is to help us overcome our craving. It's not like, "I'll make offerings to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and then I'll go eat some ice cream and some pie."

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>

* The Kangyur Collection is a group of Sanskrit classics that trace their origin primarily to Shakyamuni Buddha

The Tengyur Collection is a large group of over 3,500 books written mostly in Sanskrit during the period from about 200 AD to 1000 AD, and later translated into Tibetan. These texts are often meant to explain the books of the Kangyur Collection, but also cover a very wide range of other subjects such as poetry, grammar, science, architecture, painting, and medicine.