

Preliminary Practices and Their Importance

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In our lives as human beings, many things are required of us, and we engage in many kinds of activities. But the most important thing we can do in our life is spiritual practice, which allows us to accomplish peace and happiness not only in this life but also in future lives. The Buddha's teaching says that every sentient being possesses buddha nature. All sentient beings, and not only human beings, have the seed of the Buddha within them, so that if we meet with the right methods we can accomplish buddhahood. Every sentient being possesses buddha nature. In this sense, then, everyone is equal. I feel that the Buddha was the first person to pronounce equal rights, and not only for human beings but for every sentient being, and he did so on this basis.

But at the moment, we do not realize our buddha nature. We cannot see the true nature of

our minds because of the two obscurations: the obscuration of defilements and the obscuration of knowledge. Due to this great ignorance or lack of wisdom, we cling without any logical reason to the idea of a self rather than seeing the true nature of our minds. And as a result of the buildup of strong habitual tendencies, accumulated over a very long period of time, we cling to our aggregates as a self.

When you cling to self, then naturally there are others. When you have self and others, there is attachment to your side, anger toward others, and ignorance in general. These are the three main defilements. From these three arise pride, jealousy, stinginess, and so on. This array of defilements drives us to action, or karma, and due to our actions, we are caught up in what we call samsara, or the circle of existence.

As long as we are in samsara, we are not free from suffering. According to the teachings, samsara is divided into six realms: three lower realms and three higher realms. The three lower realms are the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the animal realm. The hell realm and the hungry ghost realm are not directly visible to us. Instead, we learn about their nature and characteristics from the sutras and from the authentic commentaries. But the animal realm is

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visible to us, and we can easily see how animals suffer. The three higher realms are the human realm, the demigod realm, and the god realm. In these realms, there appears to be a mixture of happiness and suffering. However, if we carefully examine them, we find that there is no real happiness. It is only when we compare an experience to great suffering that it will appear as happiness. When we think carefully, however, we can see that even the experiences we consider to be happiness are, in reality, another kind of suffering.

Our human life involves four major experiences of suffering. Everyone who goes through life undergoes the suffering of birth, the suffering of old age, the suffering of sickness, and the suffering of death. And in everyday life, there are many kinds of problems that bring us suffering. We do not have direct access to the realms of the gods and the demigods, but we can learn about them from authentic teachings.

Demigods are by nature jealous. They are aware that they are not equal to the gods, and they are in great competition with them. Because their merit is not equal to that of the gods, they are always defeated. In this way, they experience great suffering.

In the god realm, there are three different levels. The first is what we call the realm of desire, or the *kamadhatu*, with six different levels. The gods of the *kamadhatu* have great palaces, magnificent bodies, and luxurious lives, but they do not live forever. One day, they realize with certainty that they are going to die. They know not only that they are going to die, but that since their entire life has been spent indulging in enjoyments and never thinking about the spiritual path, most of them will fall into the lower realms. These gods have a certain kind of clairvoyance, so that they know the state into which they are going to fall, and this knowledge causes them tremendous mental suffering.

There are higher classes of gods, like those who reside in the *rupadhatu*, which means the form realm. There is also the *arupadhatu*, or the formless realm. Through the power of their worldly meditation, these beings have attained a very high level. In these states, there is no visible suffering, physical and mental, like we have. However, the strength and power of these gods' worldly meditation eventually expires, and they fall again into the lower realms where they experience worldly sufferings. This pattern goes on and on, and so it is called the circle of life or the wheel of life. A wheel turns one round and then another,

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and it does not stop. Like a wheel, we are born here, go through this life, and then we die and begin our next life.

Of course, there is the question of whether there is a next life in the first place. Some people say that there is and some people say that we do not know. Many people believe that there is no such thing as a next life because we do not see it. However, we can infer a next life because of the difference between the body and the mind. The body is visible. We know where it comes from, how it is formed, how it grows, and how it is sustained. We can see it with our eyes, touch it with our hands, and describe its color, size, shape, and so on. Eventually, of course, this body will be disposed of in one way or another.

The mind is something different. We can not see it with our eyes, touch it with our hands, or describe its color, size, or shape. The mind is something else altogether, something invisible. Even so, the mind is more powerful. The physical body will not function without the mind. A body without a mind is a dead body. The mind is the most important determinant of all good things and all bad things, all virtuous deeds and all non-virtuous deeds. When we die, our bodies will be disposed of in one way or another, but the mind

cannot be washed or cremated or buried. Because it is invisible, it cannot disappear. And if it cannot disappear, then it must enter another life. This is the logical argument to establish that the mind continues from life to life.

Once we can establish that there will be a next life, the question from whence our present mind comes arises. And this allows us to establish that there was a previous life. In this way, we learn to see that the cycle of life goes on and on.

Throughout samsara, everyone is suffering. Of course, in poor countries, there is great physical suffering from things like hunger and poverty. In developed countries, too, as everyone can see, people are still not satisfied, even though we have many facilities. There are always problems and things to complain about. This shows us that all of samsara is suffering. Whether you are a believer or a nonbeliever, whatever your religion, philosophy, or ideology, everyone can agree that no one wants suffering and everyone is longing for happiness. For the sake of happiness, we develop our nation's infrastructure. For the sake of happiness, we practice. For the sake of happiness, too, we do bad things, hoping that by doing this or that we might gain a certain kind of happiness. Everything that people do is for the sake of happiness.

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But we cannot achieve real happiness by exerting ourselves in making material progress. This is obvious. The only way to achieve real happiness and peace is through spiritual practices that change the mind. In religious teachings, we can find such practices. There are many different religions in the world, and I believe that every religion has its own beauty and its own ways to help humankind. People are different, and a variety of spiritualities is necessary. To make an analogy, there is not one medicine that can cure all diseases. You need different medicines – even different medical systems – for different kinds of diseases. For example, Ayurvedic medicine is very effective for certain diseases, and allopathic medicine is more effective for others. Likewise, a variety of spiritual practices is necessary to suit peoples' different inclinations.

Since I am a Buddhist, I speak from a Buddhist point of view. Buddhists teach that the way to achieve real peace and happiness is through the practice of what we call Dharma. The word *dharma* in Sanskrit has many different meanings in different contexts, but when we refer to the holy Dharma, we refer to the teachings of the Buddha – teachings that have the power to change our minds.

If we were to claim that the Buddha is great just because of his own majesty, we would not really be establishing that the Buddha is great. Instead, we first look to the teachings that the Buddha gave. Then, when we practice them, we gain experience. The Dharma changes our mental attitude. It gives us the strength to face problems and to develop spiritually. It is on this basis that we say that the teacher is great. The one who has given such a great teaching must be a great religious founder.

According to the Buddha's teachings, the only way to overcome suffering is to practice the Dharma. To do this, you need a basis upon which to develop. This base is buddha nature. Every sentient being has buddha nature, which means that every sentient being who meets with the right methods can become a Buddha. Among beings, human beings have the best chance of doing so. The lower realms have unimaginable amounts of suffering and ignorance, so that there is absolutely no chance for them to practice the Dharma. In the higher realms, the demigods and the gods have much greater attributes – better places, better bodies, longer lives, and generally a far better world than the one that human beings experience. Yet the human realm involves aspects of both the higher and the lower realms in an opportune

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combination. We have the leisure, the freedom, and the chance to practice the Dharma, and, at the same time, we have suffering that helps lead us to the spiritual path. In this way, in terms of a base upon which to practice the Dharma, a human life is best.

This human life is very difficult to obtain, especially a human life endowed with all the prerequisites for spiritual practice. A human life, free from unfavorable conditions and possessing favorable conditions, is very difficult to obtain from many points of view: from a numerical point of view, from the cause point of view, from the example point of view, and from the nature point of view. From a numerical point of view, for example, it seems at first glance that there are very many human beings, so many that some parts of the world have the problem of overpopulation. But when you compare the number of humans to other living beings, the number of human beings is not so great. It is possible to count how many people live in a given country, for example, but it is very difficult to count how many insects live in even a single house.

Not only is a human rebirth difficult to obtain, it is also very precious. A human rebirth is more precious than what we call a wish-fulfilling jewel. It is said that there is a special jewel that can fulfill

all of your wishes if you clean it and place it on a high place. This jewel can bestow all of your material needs like food, shelter, medicine, clothes, and so on. However, it cannot bestow liberation or enlightenment, or even a higher rebirth. This human life is more precious, then, than a wish-fulfilling jewel because based upon this human life we can accomplish a higher rebirth, liberation, and even ultimate enlightenment. Thus we can see that this human life is exceptionally precious. Due to our own merit, virtuous deeds, and special prayers, we have been born as human beings free from all the unfavorable conditions, and we have attained a life that has all the favorable conditions.

We should take advantage of such a rare and precious opportunity. We cannot be sure that we will have such an opportunity in the next life. Therefore, while we have the chance, we should make the most of it. We must try to practice and to gain at least some steps towards liberation and enlightenment. Liberation and enlightenment are not things that anyone can give you like a gift or bestow upon you as a result of your prayers. The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path of liberation, but liberation itself depends entirely upon you." The Buddha also said, "You yourself

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are your own savior." Nobody else can save you. Only we can save ourselves.

The way that the Buddha helped sentient beings was not by performing miracles or helping with his hands, but by showing us the right direction. He said, "This is the right way, and that is the wrong way. If you go that way, you are going to suffer. But if you go this way, then you will be freed from suffering." The Buddha has shown us the path, but to reach the destination we ourselves have to travel there. The Buddha cannot transport us there. We have to make the journey ourselves.

The Buddha is like a doctor. If you are sick, it is important to have a good doctor. But after the consultation, the main thing is for the patient to follow the doctor's advice, take the right medicine, observe the right protocols for healing, and so on. You might have the best doctor, but if you do not follow the doctor's advice, if you do not take the right medicine, if you do not do the right things, then you will not cure your disease. Similarly, the Buddha is like a doctor, the Dharma is like the medicine, and we ourselves are the patient. The main cause of recovery is the patient following the doctor's advice. By doing the right things, we can

cure our disease. This is why it is said, “You yourself are your own savior.”

Therefore, having all the opportunities that we are born with as human beings, and having all the necessary conditions, we should not waste them. We must capitalize on our opportunity quickly because one can never know when this life will end. The Buddha said that all compounded things are impermanent. Compounded things means things that are created through causes and conditions. All such things are impermanent.

It is said that the end of gathering is separation. Whenever we gather for an event, it is easy to see that eventually we will all go separately in our respective directions. But we often think of other types of gatherings – like family, for example – as permanent. They are also only temporary. No one lives forever. Furthermore, the end of accumulation is exhaustion. No matter how much you accumulate of wealth, possessions, material things, and power, these things do not last forever. Eventually they are all exhausted.

The end of rising high is falling. No matter what height you reach, you will eventually fall. History tells us that in ancient times there were universal emperors who conquered many continents. Even in modern history, there are

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empires that have owned almost the entire world. But they do not last forever. Eventually, they all lose territory until they are very small. Thus the end of height is to fall.

Last, the end of birth is death. Any life form that is born into this world must end with death. There is no one who is born who does not die. There is not even the slightest doubt about this. We read histories of great masters who were very holy, who devoted their entire lives to the benefit of other sentient beings. But today even those great ones are just historical figures. There are also great statesmen, great emperors, great leaders, our own ancestors, and so on. There have been many great people who today no longer exist. And one hundred years from now, no one who is reading this will remain in this world. Therefore, the end of birth is death.

Furthermore, no one can tell us when our death will come. There is complete uncertainty about when death will take us. Although there are divinations, astrological predictions, and prophecies that might tell you that you are going to live for a certain number of years, there is no certainty in this. For example, consider a lit candle. Although the candle may be very tall and shining brightly, a gust of wind can blow it out at any

moment. Similarly, outward events like accidents, heart attacks, and other things can overtake us.

Internally, our physical body is made up of elements like heat, water, and so on. When the elements are balanced, we are healthy and happy. But if the elements are unbalanced, the body becomes disturbed, and all kinds of pains and sickness can arise. Certain diseases can also arise by eating bad food. All of these considerations illustrate that there is no definite life span. Certain obstacles can blow it out like a candle at any moment. Therefore, it is very important to use this precious life in the most effective way so that it is not wasted. This life should be used in a purposeful way, for the sake of the highest benefit to oneself and all beings. We can best do this through practicing the spiritual path so that we can reach at least certain steps towards liberation and enlightenment.

Today we find that many people are interested in the Dharma path, and many people follow a set of associated traditions. We go to temples, do prostrations, recite prayers and mantras, make offerings, perform circumambulations, and do meditations. All of this is of course very meritorious. But these practices alone are not truly

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effective unless we are making inner mental changes.

First, we have to think, what is the most important thing in life? Many people want nothing more than higher positions, wealth, fame, friends, and supporters. But all of this worldly prosperity has no ultimate purpose. In the human realm, very few people attain an age of even one hundred years. Our lifetime is just a matter of, at most, one hundred years. And after that, our worldly attainments will not matter. On the day that you leave this world, no matter how clever you are, how powerful you are, how rich you are, how many supporters you have, or how many friends you have, none of these will help. We must die by ourselves, alone. Nobody can share that suffering or prevent it for us.

The only thing that will help at that moment is our Dharma practice. The virtuous deeds that we do can help us at that moment, and for this reason it is very important to perform positive actions right now, while we can. You never know whether or not you will have an opportunity to practice in the future. Many people think, "At the moment, I am young, so for the time being, I will enjoy life, and then when I get older, I will enter the spiritual path." But there are many young people who die

before very old people. Many healthy people die before people who are very sick. In the end, no one can ever truly tell. Therefore, it is important to begin the spiritual path right away and then to practice it very diligently.

Although we may perform many practices associated with the Dharma, I feel that far too often we are not truly thinking about them. We just do what others are doing. In particular, among those of us who traditionally follow the Dharma, we often simply imitate others, thinking, "All of these people are going to the temple and praying, and I will too." But we are not really thinking about why we are practicing the Dharma, about the benefit of practicing the Dharma, about the consequences of not practicing the Dharma, and so on. This is why I think, first of all, that it is very important for us to consider what is the most important thing in life. How can we achieve real peace and happiness? Reflecting on this question, we realize that the only way to achieve real peace and happiness is to practice the Dharma.

How, then, can we practice the Dharma? True Dharma practice is not just praying or going to temples or making offerings, doing prostrations, or performing circumambulations. True Dharma practice is changing our minds. If you recite many

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prayers, recite many mantras, and do lots of circumambulations, of course this is meritorious; these actions add up and they are very virtuous deeds through which you can earn great merit. But if your mind remains unchanged, that alone will not accomplish liberation or enlightenment.

To change our minds, it is essential that we do such preliminary practices as contemplating the suffering of samsara, the difficulties of obtaining a precious human birth, impermanence, and the law of karma or cause and effect. By contemplating these things, we begin to think, "Why are we here? Why do we have to go through this life with all its sufferings? Why do we have to suffer? Who is doing all this? Why must we toil through so many different kinds of experiences that we encounter?" In response to these questions, the Buddha said that everything is created by our own karma. There is no outside creator who is responsible for our happiness and our suffering. It is our own deeds.

Those who believe that everything is created by a creator can blame whom they may, even the deities. If you believe that a deity creates suffering and happiness, then, of course, that deity is to blame. However, we may worship deities and pray to them, and yet they do not help us when we are in a crisis.

For example, in South India, there is a small village with a typical village school. Since the village and the school are very poor, of course the roofs are all made of grass. One day there was a big fire. The roof burned very quickly, and soon the entire school was on fire. All of the small children were unable to escape, and many of them died. Of course, their parents were terribly sad and they experienced great suffering. Their parents were very religious. Every day, they did pujas in their homes in front of statues of deities, and they made offerings and did traditional prayers. Their main prayer was, of course, for the safety of their children. All parents love their children, and every day they prayed for them. When the children died in the fire, however, the parents became so angry at their gods that they threw all of the statues into a ditch. If we believe that there are gods that create suffering, then of course we cannot blame the parents for discarding their statues. If we believe that the deities create all suffering and all happiness, then why would they give us suffering?

But in the Buddhist tradition, we cannot lay blame at the feet of deities. The deities may help us in certain ways, but the main determinant is our own actions. It is due to our own bad deeds that we face suffering. It is also due to our own good

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deeds that we enjoy life. Because we have done virtuous deeds in the past, today we enjoy life. And because we have done non-virtuous deeds in the past, today we suffer. Therefore, we cannot blame anybody else.

This is the Buddhist teaching of the law of cause and effect, or the law of karma. All good things in our lives, like a long life, good health, prosperity, and the fulfillment of our wishes are due to the good deeds that we have performed in the past. Likewise, all bad things such as short life, sickness, poverty, and not being able to fulfill your wishes, failures, etc. are also due to our actions, the non-virtuous deeds that we have committed in the past. Today we suffer from these deeds, so we cannot blame anybody else. We have to blame ourselves. This is the basic meaning of the law of karma. In order to practice the Dharma seriously, it is very important to think about this, and then to realize how important it is to practice the Dharma, to do so without wasting any time, and to do so effectively.

Among ordinary people, there are of course millions and millions who are not interested in any kind of spiritual path. There are many who are interested in a spiritual path. Among these, there are some who appear to practice the Dharma, but

do not really practice the Dharma. Even though we may recite prayers, wear robes, go to the temple, meditate, and so on, our minds can still be filled with worldly attachments and worldly thoughts. In this way, even apparent spiritual practice can be linked to worldly gain. Although these actions appear to be spiritual practices, in reality they are simply another worldly activity. In order to make our actions a true spiritual path, we should try not to think of worldly gains. We must try to embark on a true Dharma path that will lead to liberation and enlightenment. Even if we cannot do this perpetually, we can start by doing it for at least a few hours today.

This is why, in *Parting From the Four Attachments*, it says, “If you have attachment to this life, you are not a religious person.” Actually, in Tibetan, the word *religious* is *dharmic* person. This point is very important. If we practice the Dharma but we do not do it the right way, the practice becomes just another worldly activity and is not a true Dharma practice.

The foundation of practice depends on what we call *ngondro*, which means “preliminary practice.” This is very important because through *ngondro* or foundation practices, we establish the basis of our path, our religious practice, our spiritual practice,

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genuine Dharma that will lead to liberation and enlightenment.

Nowadays many people think that *ngondro* practice is just about counting refuge prayers, mantras, mandala offerings, and things like that until you reach a certain number. If you reach this number, then you expect something to happen automatically. But unless these practices actually change your mind, then no matter how many mantras you recite or how many mandala offerings you make, it will not make a real difference. It is when you are truly changing your mind that your practice is very good, even if you are only reciting a few mantras.

First of all, reflection on the suffering of samsara, the difficulty of obtaining a precious human life, impermanence, and the law of karma are very important. These are not something that you count or recite. Rather, you have to think about them in everyday life, while you are working, when you are in the midst of people, when you are in your busy life. You can reflect on these at any time. You can think of samsara, and you can think of suffering, and you can think of impermanence. You do not have to do this in a temple or in your shrine room or the like. Even while you are working or while you are traveling,

you can think about these things, and doing this will lead your mind to the spiritual path.

So far, I have tried to describe these practices in common language and to say in plain words what the preliminary practices really mean. More formally, we can explain the preliminary practices by dividing them into common and uncommon preliminary practices. Some preliminary practices are common to all the Mahayana paths, whether Sutrayana or Mantrayana, and these are called the common preliminaries. In addition to these, there are foundational practices primarily practiced in the Mantrayana, also known as the Vajrayana. These are called the uncommon preliminaries.

The first practice of the uncommon preliminaries or *ngondros* is taking refuge. It is also part of the common practices. Refuge has many different levels. The two main levels are worldly refuge and beyond-worldly refuge. Worldly refuge itself has two parts, object worldly refuge and mental worldly refuge. Object worldly refuge occurs when people face a crisis in life, a desperate situation, and they take refuge in spirits and local deities, or trees, mountains, rocks, and the like. This is called taking object worldly refuge. Mental worldly refuge occurs when we take refuge in the right object such as the Buddha, Dharma, and

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Sangha, but the purpose of doing so is only to have a long life, good health, prosperity, success, and to fulfill our wishes. Although the Triple Gem is the right object, the main purpose is still a worldly one. Both worldly refuges are not the right refuge.

Beyond-worldly refuge also has two types, that of the Hinayana, or Lesser Vehicle, and that of the Mahayana, or Greater Vehicle. The Hinayana vehicle can, in turn, be divided into that of the *shravakas* and the *pratyekabuddhas*. This comes to four major refuge paths in total, each with its own cause, object, duration, and purpose. These factors separate worldly from non-worldly refuge.

The main cause of worldly refuge is fear. Fear arises when we have some crisis in life, and due to this fear, we take refuge. The object of worldly refuge, as I said, is worldly deities. The duration of this refuge is only as long as it takes to overcome the temporary problems or sufferings, and the purpose is just for your own sake.

In the Hinayana refuge, the main objective of the *shravaka* is not to become a Buddha but to become an arhat. Therefore, *shravakas* take refuge mainly in the Sangha. The *pratyekabuddha's* main objective is to become a *pratyekabuddha*, which is not a fully enlightened being. Their main object of

refuge is the Dharma. These are the two types of Hinayana refuge.

Next, Mahayana refuge has three main causes. Generally the causes of taking refuge are fear, faith, and compassion. All three of these causes are present in the Mahayana refuge, but the most important one is compassion. In the Mahayana, every practice that we do is not for the sake of ourselves, but for the sake of all sentient beings. To have this goal, it is necessary to have compassion. If you do not have compassion, how can you have a mind to help sentient beings? Thus the main cause of Mahayana refuge is compassion.

The object of refuge, as in all Buddhist traditions, is the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, but the Mahayana explanation is different. In the Mahayana tradition, the Buddha refers to one who possesses the three *kayas* or bodies: the *dharmakaya*, the *sambhogakaya*, and the *nirmanakaya*. *Dharmakaya* means the “body of reality.” The *dharmakaya* is not something that we gain from the outside when the obscurations are cleared away. The *dharmakaya* is something that we already have and are unable to see because of the obscurations.

The *dharmakaya* is also said to be doubly pure. Due to the natural purity that we all have, the true nature of the mind is pure and never stained with

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obscurations. If the true nature of the mind were itself stained with obscurations, then we would never be able to become free from them. But we can become free because the obscurations are only temporary and not part of the nature of the mind itself. We all possess this natural purity. But we do not see it because at the moment we have the obscurations. The Buddhas, through their accumulations of merit and wisdom, have cleared away all of the obscurations including their propensities. Thus, the *dharmakaya* of the Buddhas is said to be “doubly pure.”

Sambhogakaya means “body of enjoyment.” When all obscurations are cleared away, great qualities are attained. We do not have these qualities at the moment, but when obscurations are cleared, you gain great powers. The ordinary physical body becomes the Buddha’s body with thirty-two signs and eighty qualities. The ordinary voice becomes the voice of the melody of Brahma, with the sixty branches. The ordinary mind becomes omniscient wisdom.

Nirmanakaya means “body of emanations.” To explain them, the *dharmakaya* is invisible and beyond ordinary perception. The *dharmakaya* is ultimate reality, and it is only visible among Buddhas. The *sambhogakaya* is visible to the highest

level of the Buddha's followers like the Bodhisattvas, but it is not visible to ordinary beings. However, the *nirmanakaya*, or emanation body, is revealed wherever, whenever, in whatever form the situation requires. It may be a human form, an animal's form. All kinds of different forms can appear to help beings. The Buddha as one who possesses the three *kayas* is described only in the Mahayana.

Next, the term *Dharma* encompasses two aspects: the Buddha's teachings and realizations. The realizations are what Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have gained by eliminating all obscurations and thus fulfilling the truth of cessation and the truth of the path. This explanation of the Dharma is also specific to the Mahayana.

Finally, the term *Sangha* actually means "community." In the context of the Mahayana refuge, the term refers to the holy community, the true Sangha, namely, the Bodhisattvas who have already reached the irreversible state. In this way the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are the objects of refuge. The Mahayana's special refuge is with these objects.

Then we come to the duration of refuge: since our goal is to accomplish ultimate enlightenment

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for the sake of all sentient beings, we take refuge until enlightenment is reached. For example, if you need to go to an unknown place, the first thing you need is a guide who can show you the path. In this way, the Buddha is our guide. We need to rely on the guide until we reach our destination, and in this case, our destination is to accomplish ultimate enlightenment. Therefore, until enlightenment is reached, we take refuge in the Buddha.

To reach your destination, you need to actually travel on the path, by walking, by car, or by other means. Like this, we take refuge in the Dharma as our actual path. When one takes such a long and difficult journey, having trusted companions is very helpful. And therefore, we take refuge in the Sangha as our companions.

The purpose of Mahayana refuge is not for one's own sake, but for the sake of all sentient beings. Because we believe in a cycle of rebirth, it follows that all sentient beings have been our mother and our very dear ones in previous lives. We are born into different families, take different forms, and lead different lives, but at one time or another, everyone – every sentient being – has been our parent, our very dear friend, and so on. Due to the change of life, we do not recognize each other and we see some people as friends, some as

enemies, and towards some we are indifferent when, in reality, everyone is the same. Everyone is everyone's mother.

It is not proper to now ignore all of our mother sentient beings and seek liberation or enlightenment only for ourselves. Even on the worldly level, imagine that your closest family members, dearest ones, friends, or relatives are in great suffering while you yourself are in a safe and happy place. If you are a good-hearted person, you would not feel happy in such circumstances. Even if you were unable to help them, you would at least try to do something to share their miseries. Similarly, all sentient beings are our mothers. All sentient beings have been our very dear ones. Ignoring them and just seeking liberation or enlightenment for oneself alone is not right.

Instead, we seek enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. The main purpose of taking refuge is not for your own benefit, your own way of being, but for the well-being of all sentient beings. This focus is what makes the Mahayana refuge special in terms of the cause, object, duration, and purpose of refuge.

Taking refuge is the very first of the preliminary practices. Of course, those who are followers of the Vajrayana path also need to take Vajrayana refuge,

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which a teacher can only give when you receive a major empowerment. It is also important that one create enlightenment mind. Refuge and enlightenment mind go together because, as I said, the main purpose is to help the sentient beings.

To enter the spiritual path, and to succeed in attaining full enlightenment, we have to overcome our many obscurations. We have many negative deeds that we have accumulated throughout many lifetimes, and these have to be purified. The best way to purify them is through the practice of the Vajrayana path, through Vajrasattva meditation and the recitation of Vajrasattva's one hundred-syllable mantra.

At the same time, we need to accumulate merit, and there are many ways to do this. The most effective way is to make mandala offerings. All of these are, of course, Vajrayana practices, and one can only do them after receiving a major empowerment.

To receive blessings quickly, another crucial practice is guru yoga. In order to attain enlightenment, you need to realize the nature of the mind. The nature of mind cannot be realized by explanation or by giving examples or by giving logical reasoning. It can only be realized through the accumulation of merit and through receiving

the blessings of the guru. Therefore guru yoga is very important. In this way you should emphasize the preliminary practices.



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