

# Buddha Nature

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe





KHENPO NGAWANG DHAMCHOE

Buddha Nature

*Copyright © 2021 by Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe*

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.*

*First edition*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.*

*Find out more at [reedsy.com](https://reedsy.com)*

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	v
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
Introduction	1
Right Motivation for Studying this Teaching	3
Homage to the Teaching Lineage	5
The Sakya lineage of masters	5
The Guru Manjushri	7
Bodhicitta	8
Causes of Becoming a Bodhisattva	10
Compassion	10
Emptiness	11
Bodhicitta	12
Buddha Nature	13
The base, the path and the result	13
Naturally present buddha nature	14
Cultivated Buddha nature	15
Indicators of Buddha nature	15
Different viewpoints on Buddha nature	16
Obstacles to Cultivating Buddha Nature	20
Affliction mind	20
Wrong friends	21
Wrong spiritual teacher	22
Poverty	23
Lack of freedom	23
Taking Refuge	25
The benefits of Taking Refuge	25

Protection from harmful mind, body, speech and emotion	26
Protection against self-grasping	26
Protection from the wrong path	27
Protection from the wrong methods	27
Protection from rebirth in lower realms	28
Four components of refuge	29
The length of refuge	30
Purpose of taking refuge	31
The objects of refuge	31

## Preface



*Buddha Nature* is one of four booklets that serve as readings for the second year of The Autumn Buddhist Philosophy Course. They concern another of the main traditions of Buddhism, the Mahayana tradition. The Mahayana accepts the main teachings of the Theravada tradition, but in addition, proposes the path of the bodhisattva striving to become a fully awakened Buddha for the sake of all sentient beings. There are four booklets in The Mahayana series – *Buddha Nature*, *Parting From the Four Attachments*, *The Two Truths* and *The Six Paramitas*.

These booklets are based on the recorded teachings of Khenpo Ngawang

Dhamchoe.

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe is one of the most highly qualified Tibetan Buddhist Sakya lamas in Australia. He is highly respected in Australia and internationally for his profound knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, the clarity and inspirational qualities of his teachings, and his understanding of the western mind.

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe has been a monk since 1971. At the age of nine, he entered the Sakya Monastery in Bir, India, and remained there for 10 years. When Khenpo was 19, the principal of Sakya College in Dehradun, His Eminence Khenchen Appey Rinpoche, asked the Sakya Monastery to send senior monks to join the Sakya College. Sakya College is one of the most famous Tibetan philosophical institutes in India. It was established by His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin and His Eminence Khenchen Appey Rinpoche.

Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe was chosen to join the Sakya College. He studied there for just over 10 years, from 1979 to 1990. In his sixth year he was nominated as the Discipline Master. This was a challenging role, as some of the monks, including his peers, were older than him. In Khenpo's seventh year he was appointed a Teacher's Assistant, and in the eighth year he studied for the degree of Kacho Pa – the equivalent of a Bachelor of Arts, requiring intensive study. In Khenpo's ninth and tenth years he studied for the degree of Loppon, equivalent to a PhD degree. At the same time, he taught and conducted examinations at the college.

In 1994 His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin appointed Khenpo as Resident Teacher at Sakya Tharpa Ling, a Buddhist centre in Sydney, following the passing of the 14th Gyalsay Tulku Rinpoche. In 2002, His Holiness bestowed on him the title of 'khenpo', or abbot, in recognition of his teaching ability. The bestowal of the term 'khenpo' recognises something considered rare and precious. His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin recognised Khenpo's special qualities and deep understanding of Buddhist philosophies, both in sutra and tantra, and held an Enthronement Ceremony in the Bir Monastery Northern India, promoting Khenpo from the term Loppon to Khenpo in March 2002.

The term 'khenpo' has at least three meanings in Tibetan Buddhism: a



scholar who has completed an extensive course of study in sutra and tantra, a senior lama who can give ordinations, and the head of a monastery. The khenpos have been the main channels for keeping the purity of Buddha's teachings alive from generation to generation within the Tibetan monastic tradition.

Since 2017 Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe has lived and taught at Kamalashila Tibetan Buddhist Centre near Tilba on the South Coast of New South Wales, although he travels to many countries to spread the Dharma.

From 2017 to 2019, Khenpo taught the first component of the Seven Year Complete Path for senior students which was coordinated by the International Buddhist Academy in Kathmandu under the strict guidance of, and within the program developed by, His Holiness the 42<sup>nd</sup> Sakya Trizin.

In 2019, Khenpo began to develop The Autumn Buddhist Philosophy Course, a three-year program teaching the main concepts and practices of the three main traditions of Buddhism – Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana. The inaugural program began in 2022.

There are many to thank for *The Mahayana Booklets* but first and foremost we would like to thank Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe for his precious teachings which he has given so generously and diligently to his students over so many years. They have greatly helped his students to understand and to apply the Dharma in their lives to such good effect. These Booklets were prepared over three years and with many hours of work by transcribers and editors. The best gift of appreciation we can give our teacher in return is to try these methods and to practise the Dharma.

*May the precious Dharma continue down through the ages  
to guide countless beings on the Path.*

*Carole Kayrooz Emeritus Professor and Lael Morrisey,  
November 2022*

## Acknowledgements

We have many to thank for their work on *The Mahayana Booklets*, a series based on teachings by Khenpo Ngawang Dhamchoe.

*Buddha Nature* is one of the booklets in the series. It was prepared over several years and with many hours of work by transcribers and editors. *Buddha Nature* was transcribed by Grace Musameci and edited by Gerlese Akerlind, Lael Morrissey, Robert Garran and Carole Kayrooz.

Lael Morrissey and Ulladulla Printing and Signage prepared the layout and design.

# Introduction

All living beings possess buddha nature, which means the inherent potential to attain buddhahood. This booklet explores buddha nature and draws from the text, *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*, by Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182-1251). *Clarifying the Sage's Intent* describes the complete Mahayana path.

*The Sage's Intent* is a very famous and classic work. In Tibetan, the title is *Thub pa dgongs gsal*. 'Thub pa' means the Buddha. 'Dgongs gsal' means a wish-mind to clarify what being a buddha means. Most of the teachings we study are translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan, but *Clarifying the Sage's Intent* originated in Tibet, so this teaching is authentic and was kept right from the beginning. In Sanskrit, the title is *Munimath Prakasha Nama Shastra*. *Muni* means like a buddha, or a sage. *Math Prakasha* means attained, reached. *Prakasha* means clarifying. *Shastra* means a teaching. So, the title means 'Clarifying the Sage's Intent'. It means that the topic of these teachings is going to be clarifying what the Buddha taught in the sutras.

The Buddha gave innumerable teachings. Subsequent commentaries by masters on Buddha's teachings, such as *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*, are intended to clarify Buddha's thoughts on the teaching – what he means, why he explains these things. At the time of the Buddha, it is thought that listeners' minds were much clearer than in modern times. Listeners could hear directly what Buddha was talking about. And then, as time went by, our minds became busier, more inferior, degenerated – meaning that even if the teacher is teaching perfectly clearly, our minds are not in a position to capture this.

For this reason, many bodhisattvas and great masters try to make things a bit easier to understand through commentaries, which are also teachings. As

## BUDDHA NATURE

Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism, stated in his *Letter to a Friend*, 'I'm not repeating the teaching of the Buddha ... I am attempting to make what the Buddha said a bit more clear for this age.' Nagarjuna gave an example: 'If you build a white house, it's already white. But then, when the moon rises, the context changes and it makes it even whiter.' In the same way, Buddha's teaching is very clear, but in this age of degeneration, we can't hear the teachings clearly. So, Nagarjuna and other teaching commentaries are designed to make it a bit easier for us to hear more clearly.

Similarly, in writing *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*, Sakya Pandita doesn't mean to imply that Buddha's teaching is not clear, so he needs to clear things up. Buddha's teachings are already clear, but in our degenerated times we cannot hear as clearly as when Buddha first gave the teachings, so Sakya Pandita makes it a bit clearer for us to understand.

But first, we start by paying homage to the lineage of masters who have taught about buddha nature and address the right motivation for studying this teaching.

# Right Motivation for Studying this Teaching

Having the motivation for this teaching on buddha nature is extremely important. If the motivation is healthy, then the result will be healthy. The motivation is a little like the root of a tree. If the root of the tree is poisoned, then whatever grows from that tree becomes poisoned: it will become harmful to us and others. But if the root of the tree is healthy, it is a little like medicine, and whatever grows from that tree has the potential to heal you and others. In this way, right from the beginning, we must cultivate the supreme motivation. The supreme motivation is, 'I must attain full enlightenment for the sake of countless other sentient beings.' For that purpose, I am interested to learn this precious Buddhadharma.

Learning is not just for the sake of gaining intellectual knowledge. Khenchen Appey Rinpoche often reminded us when we were studying, 'If your motivation to study is only that of a scholar, then your understanding is going to be very shallow. However, if you are doing study for the sake of taming your afflicted mind, then you can hear the teachings at a much deeper level.' To study for intellectual reasons is a good motivation, but it is not the best motivation. The best motivation is to want to take the medicine that helps us out of being victims of our own afflicted mind. Dharma is the best medicine to overcome that afflicted mind. It's best to think, 'I am studying Dharma to free myself from this afflicted mind, and also I am here to help others who are victims of that afflicted mind, to free them from that state of mind.' This is the right motivation for understanding buddha nature.

## BUDDHA NATURE

So, at every teaching it is important to remind oneself, 'I must attain fully the incomparable buddhahood for the sake of other sentient beings, and for that purpose I am listening to this precious Buddhadharma, in general, and in particular, this teaching on *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*'. This is the first point to gain the right motivation.

# Homage to the Teaching Lineage

## The Sakya lineage of masters

It is important to pay homage to the Sakya lineage of masters who cultivated the right wisdom and passed down the wisdom of buddha nature, also leading to the text on *Clarifying the Sage's Intent* by Sakya Pandita, one of the founders of the Sakyapa tradition.

There are five founders of the Sakya tradition are: Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092-1158); Sonam Tsemo (1142-1182); Jetsun Dragpa Gyaltsen (1147-1216); Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen (1182-1251); and Drogon Chogyal Phagpa (1235-1280). Sakya Pandita is particularly significant for us right now because he is the author of *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*, our main text for this booklet. He was a Tibetan master of great scholarly achievement, and the fourth of the five founders of the Sakyapa tradition.

I will not spend much time on the history of Sakya Pandita, because you may read about this in books which have been written down and translated. But in short, Sakya Pandita was a Tibetan master of great scholarly achievement. He is held to be an emanation of the Bodhisattva Manjushri in human form, the embodiment of the wisdom of all the buddhas. Sakya Pandita was honoured by the great Indian Pandit, Sakya Sri Bhadra, who was the last Abbot of Nalanda University, itself the site of ancient Buddhist learning before it was sacked by Muslim armies. Sakya Pandita was the first Tibetan master who received the title of Pandit from an Indian master, a title which indicates mastery of all major branches of traditional knowledge. Plus, he

is the only person in Tibetan history who, without relying on an Indian master, completely translated the entire teachings from Sanskrit to Tibetan. Sakya Pandita was also the first Tibetan Master to actually translate back from Tibetan to Sanskrit. So, he was a very highly qualified master, well renowned amongst both Indian masters as well as Tibetan masters. All four major Tibetan Buddhist schools – Nyingma, Kagyu and Sakya (which arose at a similar time) and then later, the Gelug School – highly praised Sakya Pandita and commonly accepted him as the emanation of Manjushri. Sakya Pandita composed five major texts, *The Treasury of Logic of Valid Cognition*, *Discrimination of the Three Vows*, *The Entrance Gate for the Wise*, *Clarifying the Sage's Intent* and *The Elegant Sayings of Sakya Pandita*. He also composed many sutras and tantras.

The highest teaching in the Sakya tradition is *Lam Dre*, which means the Path (*lam*) and the Result (*dre*). The *Lam Dre* was originally bestowed upon Virupa, an Indian Monk, by the tantric deity, Nairatmya, in 7-8 CE. The teaching then entered Tibet through the Indian Pandita, Gayadhara, who worked with the Tibetan Master, Drogmi Lotsawa Sakya Yeshe, in India to translate a plethora of Buddhist tantras in 11 CE. By the time Drogmi returned to Tibet, he was an adept scholar and meditation master.

Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, the first founder of the Sakyapa tradition, was the first to hold the *Lam Dre* lineage of transmission in the Sakyapa family. Before Sachen Kunga Nyingpo's time, the *Lam Dre* was solely a secretly transmitted oral lineage. Subsequently, the *Lam Dre* grew to be the main practice of the Sakyapa. It was both an oral and written lineage that flourished, from father to son, through the five Sakya founders, and then came in an unbroken lineage of transmission to the current, 43rd patriarch, His Holiness the Sakya Trizin.

Sachen Kunga Nyingpo received teachings from his Masters, his father, Khon Konchok Gyalpo, and also his guru, Bari Lotsawa. At the age of twelve, on the instructions of his guru, he performed six months of single-pointed meditation practice until Manjushri appeared to him and gave him the famous four-line pith instruction known as *Parting From The Four Attachments*:

*If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.*



## HOMAGE TO THE TEACHING LINEAGE

*If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.  
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhicitta.  
If grasping arises, you do not have the view.*

Hearing this only once, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo realised its profound importance and became an emanation of Manjushri.

In summary, the *Lam Dre* tradition goes back to Drogmi Sakya Yeshe, who brought the tradition to Tibet in the 11th century. Later, it was passed on to Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, the first founder of the Sakya tradition, who himself received *Lam Dre* as well as many other teachings directly from Master Virupa for an entire month. Sachen Kunga Nyingpo then instructed his two sons, Sonam Tsemo (the 2nd Sakya founder) and Jetsun Dragpa Gyeltsen (the 3rd Sakya founder), who became accomplished Masters of Lam Dre. And then Sakya Pandita (the fourth founder) wrote *Clarifying the Sage's Intent* as a commentary on the *Lam Dre* teachings.

### The Guru Manjushri

Next, we pay homage to the Bodhisattva Manjushri himself, a future buddha and the source of Sakya Pandita's emanation. When Sakya Pandita pays homage to Guru Manjushri, he is making a commitment: 'I'm going to compose this very important text, *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*. I am making a commitment. I pay homage to my Guru and to Manjushri.' To 'pay homage' has an interdependent nature. Having an interdependent nature means that if you create the *cause*, then naturally it brings its own *result*. So right from the beginning, if you 'pay homage to Manjushri' (the cause) the result will be in the cause and so eventually your mind gets sharper (the result). This sharper mind helps us to understand these profound teachings of the Buddhadharma. For this reason, we pay homage to Manjushri.

Therefore, at the beginning of the teachings we recommend to chant Manjushri as the prayer and Manjushri as the mantra, because from the perspective of the Manjushri blessing and wisdom, there is no difference between all the buddhas. All are equal. There is not one buddha more blessed

than others; there is not one buddha having more wisdom than others – they are all equal. But at the same time, each buddha has a unique wish or desire to help other sentient beings. In this way, Manjushri's unique desire was to help others to develop their wisdom mind. Sometimes we say Manjushri is the father of all the buddhas, because every Buddha gained enlightenment through wisdom, and the nature of wisdom is Manjushri. That is the reason we pay respect to Manjushri in the beginning.

Like us, Manjushri also benefitted from others in coming to understand the Dharma. So that is why we pay homage to Manjushri and the Guru. In Sanskrit, they say *Namo Guru*, where *namo* means prostration, and *Guru* means teacher. So, *Namo Guru Manjushri* means, 'I pay homage to the Guru and Manjushri'. Here the Guru and Manjushri are one.

## Bodhicitta

Next, we pay homage to bodhicitta. When you pay homage to bodhicitta, ultimate happiness comes, or arises, from the buddhas. Ultimate happiness, the ultimate benefit, is the fruition of all the temporary benefits. Temporary benefits means that life after life, one is reborn as a human and hears the Dharma. Ultimate benefit means that, as this Dharma practice accumulates over lifetimes, ultimately you attain buddhahood.

The great master, Aryadeva, states in the *Four Hundred Stanzas*, 'It is extremely important to commit all the virtues to attain human rebirth, because if one is not in a human state of life, one is not in a position to hear the Dharma and to practise it'. So, if you are reborn in the lower realms, even if the Dharma is made available to you, you are karmically restricted in understanding the Dharma. So therefore, until we reach buddhahood, we must have a higher rebirth (that is, be born as a human) in order to be able to understand and practise the Dharma.

Buddha shows us through his blessing how to attain buddhahood. Buddha's blessing is a tricky word to translate. The blessing means Buddha clearly emphasised what are the actual causes that help you to have a higher rebirth – which is essential to be able to understand and practise the Dharma. The

## HOMAGE TO THE TEACHING LINEAGE

moment you understand what Buddha is talking about, your understanding is the blessing of the Buddha, because without that understanding, you are not going to practise, and then you have not received the blessing of the Buddha. So, in that way, the blessing is not someone giving you a higher rebirth as such, the blessing is giving you the idea of how to obtain a higher rebirth.

Just studying the teaching of the Lord Buddha is a valid cause to have a higher rebirth and have the opportunity to practise the Dharma – but still, this is just a temporary benefit. For the ultimate benefit, the Buddha taught Great Compassion, bodhicitta and emptiness. So, these three factors lead us to buddhahood, the ultimate benefit. So, these kind of causes will help us to attain higher rebirth. The path that will lead us to liberation is impossible without the teachings of the Buddha. For this reason, the Buddha is the source of both temporary and ultimate benefit.

# Causes of Becoming a Bodhisattva

All buddhas come from bodhisattvas. This means that no beings jump straight from sentient beings to buddhahood. Before you attain buddhahood, you need to become a bodhisattva. After becoming a bodhisattva, then you become a buddha. The *cause* of becoming a buddha is to become a bodhisattva.

Now, where do bodhisattvas come from? Bodhisattvas come from three things: emptiness, compassion and bodhicitta. But there are different versions of compassion, and different versions of emptiness. So, it is easy to become mixed-up. But when we say bodhicitta, there is only one meaning, there is nothing to mistake. Bodhicitta is a mind that wants to attain full buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.

## Compassion

There are three types of compassion: compassion for sentient beings, compassion when one sees harm and compassion from understanding objectlessness. But I'm not going to go into detail on these. Generally, every sentient being has compassion – a dog has compassion, humans have compassion, other animals have compassion. But we don't say that this compassion is the cause of becoming a bodhisattva. The direct cause of becoming a bodhisattva is great compassion – to wish all beings to be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. Lesser compassion may be a contributing factor if you keep cultivating it, keep generating it, so that one day it may become great compassion. But general compassion is not the direct cause of becoming a bodhisattva.

The reason I am saying this is because some people think, 'Oh, every religion is the same, because they all talk about compassion. All beings are the same, because everyone has compassion.' But while the word 'compassion' may be in every religion, the compassion they are referring to is a very general type of compassion. But the type of compassion that is the cause of becoming a bodhisattva is a very particular compassion, to wish all beings freedom from suffering and the causes of suffering.

## Emptiness

Emptiness has many aspects: emptiness as the selflessness of the person; emptiness as selflessness of all objective aspects of phenomena; emptiness as selflessness of subjective phenomena; and emptiness of the five aggregates. I'm not going to go into detail on these, but not one of these emptinesses is the cause of becoming a bodhisattva. The emptiness we are talking about here is to understand the selflessness of *all* phenomena – the emptiness of all previous emptinesses. This kind of emptiness is the direct cause of becoming a bodhisattva.

Khenchen Appey Rinpoche says it is very complicated to understand what emptiness is. It is not easy and not straightforward to understand emptiness. Therefore, you need to spend enormous time and study on it, without rushing, from a restful state of mind, carefully listening to the teachings on emptiness. Then analyse, think again and again, and each and every time you will get clearer and clearer in your understanding. Then, one day you may understand what the real meaning of emptiness, i.e. what the selflessness of all phenomena is. And this very understanding of emptiness is the object of your meditation when you meditate on emptiness.

If you don't have that good an understanding when you meditate on emptiness, it is very easy to make a mistake. You may think you are doing the right meditation on emptiness, but in the end, you may be doing the wrong thing; that leads to the wrong path rather than to the right path. For example, sometimes people think emptiness means nothingness, then they get the wrong view of it. Sometimes people think emptiness means there is no cause

and effect, and that disrespects cause and effect. Emptiness does not mean nothingness, nor that there is no cause and effect. Emptiness, the selflessness of all phenomena, means there are no externally existent objects – rather, it is the subject, the mind, that creates all phenomena. This is regarded as the absolute nature of all phenomena.

## Bodhicitta

As stated above, bodhicitta is a mind that wants to attain full buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. Thus, *Clarifying the Sage's Intent* pays homage to bodhicitta. But somewhere you may have studied or heard about the *Madhyamakavatara* by Candrakirti, an earlier commentary on the nature of Bodhisattvas. The *Madyamakavatara* pays homage to compassion, great compassion. But in the end, both homages have the same meaning. Sakya Pandita pays homage to bodhicitta as a more direct cause of buddhahood, and Candrakirti pays homage to compassion because compassion is the direct cause of bodhicitta. So, when we pay respect to the cause (that is, compassion), then naturally you also respect the result (that is, bodhicitta).

In the Indian tradition, when a master or guru comes, people touch their forehead to the master's or guru's feet, because the lowest part of the body is the feet. So, when we pay homage to that lowest part, that means we also pay homage to the guru's entire qualities. So similarly, when you pay homage to compassion, then you also pay homage to the entirety of other causes. So, paying homage to bodhicitta in *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*, and paying homage to compassion in the *Madyamakavatara* are different aspects of the same meaning.

In summary, the three causes of becoming a Bodhisattva are: great compassion, emptiness and bodhicitta. So, anyone who has these three, then can be a bodhisattva. The reason you want to be a bodhisattva is to attain buddhahood. Without the bodhisattva stage, you cannot attain buddhahood. That is why it is very important to reach the bodhisattva stage. Therefore, Sakya Pandita says, 'For the sake of other sentient beings, I pay homage to the bodhisattvas.'

# Buddha Nature

So first, we talk about buddha nature. There are two types of buddha nature. One is naturally present and abiding in all sentient beings (*rang bzhin gnas rigs*). It is naturally arising and uncompounded wisdom. The second is cultivated, or developed, buddha nature (*rgyas 'gyur gyi rigs*). It is through this developing potential that we can properly cultivate the virtues of the Mahayana (If you are interested in studying buddha nature in more detail, the *Uttaratantra*, told to Asanga by the bodhisattva Maitreya, explains buddha nature in great depth.)

## The base, the path and the result

The text, *Clarifying the Sage's Intent*, distinguishes three parts: the base, the path and the result. Due to our background, we are often brought up with the concept that the base, path and result are separate. But the real meaning of the base, path and result is that they are one stream of the mind. It can be very hard to comprehend that the first part, the base, means the base of the mind, which is buddha nature. The next part, the path is following the Dharma. Then the last part, buddhahood, is the result.

All this exists in our mind. Both samsara and buddhahood are the result of the mind. The root of this is also our own mind. If our mind grasps deeply at a self, then this very mind generates samsara experiences. If the root of your mind is enlightened and strives towards awakening, empathy and compassion for the sake of all sentient beings, then it generates as bodhicitta. Such a mind produces buddhahood. When this mind is untrained, this untrained mind is

the base mind. Then, this very untrained mind we start to train, by taking refuge, generating bodhicitta and turning it into the path. And then through this path, we transform or purify the mind. The result is then that this very mind, ultimately, becomes buddhahood.

Other than this mind, there is no base, there is no path, there is no result. These are different stages of the mind that we call the base, the path and the result. Or we could equally see different stages of the mind as samsara and buddhahood, because without this mind, there is neither samsara nor buddhahood. So, this is very important. One must have a clear understanding. Other than the mind, there is no path.

## Naturally present buddha nature

Buddha nature abides in all sentient beings. But when we say this, sometimes the words or language can confuse us. Because when we say ‘abide’, instantly we think about something existent, because if it is non-existent, then we think there is nothing to abide. But it doesn’t mean that. What ‘abide’ means in this context is that the natural nature of all beings’ minds is to be free from the four extremes: existence; non-existence; both existence and non-existence; neither existence nor non-existence. For instance, when we talk about Seven Point Mind Training, it is said you abide in the *alaya* consciousness when you meditate on emptiness. *Alaya* is mere awareness, without grasping anything, before the mind grasps anything, just mere awareness. And then, due to whatever condition comes or whatever imprint is in that *alaya*, then different thoughts arise. But the awareness before thought arises is called *alaya*. The nature of this awareness is free from existence, non-existence, both; and neither – free from all the extremes.

So, this is what we call buddha nature, which means that we, from a practitioner’s mind point of view, or someone even not human, an animal’s mind point of view, the nature of the mind is not different. The nature of all minds is the same, free from the four extremes. So, whether you are a Dharma practitioner or non-practitioner, we all abide in this buddha nature. Whether you are a practitioner or non-practitioner; whether you are human



or non-human, buddha nature never discriminates. Everyone has that nature of the mind. So that is buddha nature, which is the seed to attain buddhahood. It is a mind free from the four extremes. I will just emphasise that this mind that is free from the four extremes is the seed to buddhahood, and that is the 'abide' we talk about. If you look at it from that point of view, there is nothing to abide. But that mind that is very free from all four extremes we call the seed.

## Cultivated Buddha nature

Everyone has naturally present buddha nature, but only the person who has cultivated bodhicitta has cultivated buddha nature. If you have not cultivated bodhicitta, then you do not have this buddha nature. Even if you are doing something virtuous, you are not necessarily cultivating buddha nature, unless you have bodhicitta mind.

In Sanskrit, cultivated buddha nature is called *gutara*. Sanskrit is a very rich language. Just one word has so much meaning. *Gutara* can be broken down into 'gu' then 'ta' and then 'ra'. So 'gu' is the 'qualities', the Buddha's qualities, and 'ara' means liberator, liberating, liberation. The 'qualities' are wisdom. Through wisdom, it 'liberates' you from samsara. Without wisdom, you are unable to be free from samsara. So, it is wisdom that liberates you from samsara. That is what 'gutara' means. So, once you cultivate bodhicitta, which cultivates buddha nature, then it liberates you from samsara. That is the meaning. That is cultivated buddha nature.

## Indicators of Buddha nature

Now, to know whether or not one has cultivated buddha nature, there are four indicators, or signs. The first sign is spontaneously born compassion. Spontaneously born compassion means that no one taught you the importance of compassion, you were just born with it. When you see someone suffering, you are willing to help him or her or it to be free from suffering and the cause of suffering. So generally, if you have that quality, that means

buddha nature or bodhicitta mind is awakening.

The second sign is, you are always interested to hear the Dharma. Whether you are Buddhist or non-Buddhist, you are always interested, deeply interested. Not just interest, but deep interest; not just an enquiring kind of mind, not just wanting to find out what Buddhism is about, but a deep interest within you. That is the second sign of the awakening of the bodhicitta mind.

And the third sign of buddha nature is that you are a naturally tolerant person. No matter how much people cause you trouble, you never overreact. As humans, we always believe that what happens 'out there' controls our emotions. So then, we are always working hard to fix those things out there, but are never successful. But in the Dharma, we say it is up to oneself. If we do not wish to become disturbed, then there is nothing out there that is able to disturb our mind. So, in this way, no matter what is going on out there, you never disturb yourself, you always feel tolerance, patience. So, this is the third sign you have cultivated buddha nature mind.

The fourth sign of buddha nature is that you are naturally more interested in performing virtuous rather than non-virtuous actions.

These four are signs that your buddha nature is awakening. When you have these four and come to the Dharma, it is more stable and easy for you to take on the Dharma than if you are not in that state. This is what helps us to prepare to enter into the path. The preparation is that we train ourselves to be more compassionate, we train ourselves to be more tolerant, we train to increase our interest in the Dharma, and we train to be more virtuous. These are how to prepare our mental soil to grow this bodhicitta or buddha nature.

## Different viewpoints on Buddha nature

There are slightly different points of view on buddha nature in different schools of Buddhism, which can be a little bit confusing. In the Mahayana tradition, there is the Cittamatra school, founded by Asanga, and the Madhyamaka school, which follows the works of Nagarjuna. The Cittamatra point of view of buddha nature is that buddha nature is a seed, something that exists on top of the mind. It is kind of separate to the mind, the seed is

separate. But for some beings, this seed does not exist on top of the mind, so these beings can never attain buddhahood. However, the Madhyamaka does not separate mind and seed. As I mentioned earlier, for them, buddha nature means that the absolute nature of the mind is free from the four extremes: existent, non-existent, both and neither. That which is free from these four extremes is buddha nature. So, it is not a separate thing. That means that from a Madhyamaka perspective, the perspective presented in this booklet, there are no beings with an absence of buddha nature. Every being has buddha nature.

Sometimes Madhyamaka practitioners interpret the Cittamatra view in the following way. From an individual point of view, we came from beginningless samsara. None of us can say where we began. But this mind, if you do not bring it onto the path, do not practise Dharma, then this very mind does not end – it is endless, samsara is endless. That means you have been in samsara for endless time. It means you are never going to reach enlightenment, because for samsara there is no ending. From that point of view, Cittamatra practitioners say some beings do not have a chance to attain enlightenment for endless time, and they equate this to not having buddha nature.

The Madhyamaka interpretation is, for instance, imagine we have just \$5 in our pocket. With only \$5, sometimes you may say, ‘I don’t have any money’. It doesn’t mean you totally do not have money – you have \$5 – but that \$5 is not enough. So then, you equate \$5 to not having any money. It’s the same with someone who takes endless time to reach buddhahood. From one point of view, you could say that this means they don’t have buddha nature. But this doesn’t actually mean they do not have buddha nature, but that from a time perspective, they may as well not have buddha nature.

I have two stories of where buddha nature is not awakened. I will just summarise them. One is about Angulimala, who killed 999 people and collected the fingers of those he killed and turned them into a necklace. Although he was a ruthless brigand, he converted to Buddhism when he came into contact with the Buddha, and ultimately redeemed himself. During Angulimala’s time, he had met the wrong teacher. In order to destroy Angulimala, the teacher taught him in the wrong path, that you need to

kill a thousand people to be a Brahman. So, Angulimala believed it, and he killed 999 people, and then the last one he was going to kill was his mother, when Buddha came to tame him. So, Buddha tamed Angulimala, and with that, Angulimala reached arhatship. Buddhists see the Angulimala story as a lesson that anyone can change their life for the better, even the least likely people.

But later on, in one of the kingdoms, the whole town came to kill Angulimala because they hadn't heard he was already tamed and practising Dharma. They thought he was still a criminal, so they believed the villagers were not safe and they all came and tried to kill him. So, when they approached the Buddha, and the Buddha told them Angulimala was no longer a criminal, that he had been tamed and was a great practitioner, they were very surprised. Then the king, Prasanajit, complained to Buddha. 'If you had the power to tame Angulimala, why didn't you tame him right from the beginning, before he killed those 999 people?' Then Buddha replied, 'In your town, there are five people killing chickens every day. So, why don't you stop them? Why allow them to kill all these chickens in your village?' And then the king replied, 'Oh that's true. It's not right'. He saw that he had been kind of hypocritical; we always see others' faults and not our own.

So, the king went back to his town and stopped these five people who were killing chickens every day. These five had no choice, they had to stop. But then their family took over killing the chickens. So, the killings never stopped. So, at this point, temporarily, they did not have buddha nature awakened, because even though they were encouraged by the king to commit virtuous deeds, they still encouraged others to be non-virtuous in their place. So, this shows that, temporarily, their buddha nature had not yet awakened.

It is the same in our society. No matter how much you try to help people to do Dharma practice, they are not interested at all. So, this is a sign they really are not ready. But for some, there is no need to give any kind of help, just naturally they will approach you, saying 'I am very interested. Can you lend me a book or can you teach me something?'

And the second story is of a Chinese child. The parents work hard and were devoted to the Buddhadharm. They always went to the temple. But their

## BUDDHA NATURE

child – their one child – refused to go to the temple. So, they forced him to go. But when he arrived at the temple, he didn't want to look at the Buddha. Then, skilfully, the parents asked him to bring something from the temple, but he just rubbed his hand with the cloth and brought it without touching the icon. This was also a sign that buddha nature had not yet awakened in him. So, there are some beings in whom buddha nature is not yet awakened.

# Obstacles to Cultivating Buddha Nature

It is important to know the obstacles that may cause us to lose the opportunity to cultivate buddha nature. Again, this is very important. There are five obstacles: affliction mind, wrong friends, wrong spiritual teacher, poverty and lack of freedom.

## Affliction mind

The first obstacle is the defilements of affliction mind, such as anger, attachment, jealousy. These are obstacles to cultivating buddha nature. None of them are powerful in the beginning. They are very weak. They only become powerful the more you become used to them in your mental stream. The more you let them settle in your mind, then they become more dominant in your life, like a habit. Then one day, what seemed a very simple, harmless affliction of the mind is going to be so difficult to get rid of. It's the same with weeds. When a weed first comes, it is very easy to pull out. But if you leave it as it is, then it becomes harder to pull out. It is the same weed, but the more you leave it to grow, the harder it is to pull out. It is the same with mental defilements, the more you leave them to grow in your mental stream, the harder they are to pull out.

In this way, we become a little bit attached to the affliction, and so we do not pull it out, and we let it become attached. Then one day, that attachment is very strong. Then, because of that attachment, we lose the opportunity to practise Dharma. On the one hand, we see the Dharma as very valuable, very important. But what stops us giving time to practising Dharma is

our attachment to all our endless commitments in samsara: 'I have to do this. I don't have time to practise'. And when we are in samsara, samsara is very smart in entertaining or distracting us. But life is not forever. Life is impermanent. Death is definite, but the time of death is indefinite. So one day, your hair is grey, your skin is wrinkled, and you think, 'Oh, almost time to die. Do I have the Dharma?' And then you are panicking.

I always say, there is no need to sacrifice your everyday work or activities. You can practise the Dharma while you are working. Your mind needs to be a virtuous mind, and you need to practise this in everyday activities. If you do everyday work with a virtuous mind, then you are not missing everyday activities, and neither are you missing the Dharma!

Anyway, the first obstacle is the afflictive mind. If you feel attachment or anger, even just a small bit, don't underestimate it. I usually say, 'One small spark of the fire, don't underestimate it in the dry bush. It is enough to burn everything'. So we need to see every single outbreak of the afflictive mind as dangerous.

## Wrong friends

Secondly, wrong friends can be obstacles to realising buddha nature. 'Wrong friends' does not necessarily mean someone who harms you. Actually, they may be kind to you, but if you don't want to part from them, if you spend all your time with them, there is no time to practise Dharma. From this perspective, they are taking this precious opportunity (though only because you are giving it to them). Even just looking after your loved ones too devotedly may mean you don't have time to practise the Dharma.

Of course, from a social point of view, from a samsaric point of view, they are extremely important. But from a dharmic point of view, if you spend that much time on your friends and loved ones, you have to ask, 'Is it truly helping them? Is it worthwhile?' There is not really any long-term benefit to be gained from it, if you really think about it. So instead, if you can spend time with them dharmically, it is much more helpful to them and to you. So, in this way, wrong friends may be obstacles to the Dharma.

## Wrong spiritual teacher

The third obstacle is if you meet the wrong spiritual teacher, as Angulimala did. If you meet the wrong spiritual teacher, teaching in the wrong way, that prevents you coming into the Dharma. That is also a possibility. Then you are not following the right path, you are following the wrong path.

In this modern world, we do not lack spiritual organisations. A simple search of the internet will show hundreds of different spirituality groups. I'm not being discriminating, saying 'We are right, they are wrong.' I'm not talking about that. But spiritually, the only person who can talk about the perfect path is the Buddha. So, any spirituality that is aware of the Buddha's teaching, and where that is emphasised, that is the correct path. Any spirituality that is against that, even though it is spirituality, the teachings don't lead you on the right path.

It's the same as with a pharmacy. They sell medicine, but not every medicine is necessarily the right medicine. There are so many fake medicines. They look the same in the box, with similar labels, but the content is different. One has the right substance, that has been scientifically proven to help you overcome your disease. Others are not scientifically proven; they just make up the substance and put in a fake box that then causes you more sickness. Similarly, with spirituality. The Buddha is the greatest scientist. He carefully emphasised what is the Path, and that very Path has the power to overcome our afflictive mind. So, wrong teachers may firstly discourage you from entering into the Dharma, and secondly, even if they do encourage you, it is not in the right Dharma but the wrong Dharma.

Spiritual teachers can also be wrong friends. For example, you go to a teaching from a good teacher of the right path, but your current teacher is not happy about it. This makes your current teacher a wrong friend, because your current teacher has not a genuine interest in you taking the Path to reach full enlightenment. Of course, every teacher has a responsibility to look after their students, and students may unintentionally go to a teacher of the wrong path. So, it is good to take your teacher's advice, 'Be careful'. But if you find a teacher of the right Path, you should be encouraged to go. Even though



they may not be part of your school, if that teacher is a really well-qualified teacher, then it should be encouraged. But if your current teacher always discourages you from going to any other teachers, regardless of whether that other teacher is good or bad, just because your current teacher doesn't want to lose you as a student, then that teacher is a wrong friend. Because then some students, for the sake of pleasing their teacher, don't go to receive the right teaching from the right teacher.

## Poverty

Now the fourth obstacle is lack of material wealth. I always tell people, 'Being a Dharma practitioner doesn't mean you need to be poor'. You must have enough wealth to support yourself. If you have enough to support yourself, then your mind is freer to learn Dharma, to meditate, to do retreats. But if you are mentally worried about your lack of wealth, then that can become an obstacle 'Oh, I don't have money to buy food, I don't have money to pay rent'. Then it distracts your mind. For this reason, some material wealth is important.

But if you think material wealth is the cause of happiness, and for the sake of that, you put all your effort into accumulating material wealth, that it is the wrong thing. Because materialism is not the right object; it is not going to protect you. But if the material wealth you seek is necessary to practise Dharma, and you think, 'I am creating material wealth to support my Dharma practice', then you are not being materialistic if you are truly doing this to support your Dharma practice. In this way, poverty is an obstacle. So, you should have a comfortable wealth to support your Dharma practice.

## Lack of freedom

The fifth obstacle is having your life always controlled by others, where there is not much freedom for yourself. One of the sutras says, when we are very young, as a baby, we are controlled by our parents. They love us very much, but they control us. Then, when you are an adult, you are controlled by your

## BUDDHA NATURE

partners. And when you grow old, your children control you. So, as foolish human beings, we never have freedom, it says in the sutra. If you are under that kind of control, then there is no freedom to practise the Dharma, so it is necessary to be free from that.

In summary, these are the five obstacles to awakening your buddha nature – affliction mind, wrong friends, wrong spiritual teacher, poverty, and lack of freedom. In order to awaken your buddha nature, you need to recognise and avoid these five.

# Taking Refuge

Taking refuge is really important. It is not just a topic in *The Sage's Intent*, refuge is required in every Mahayana and Vajrayana practice. At the beginning of every sadhana, we take refuge. Once we know refuge very well, then we can see that the refuge in all sadhanas is the same thing.

The meaning of refuge is that you take refuge in someone or something that is able to protect you. If someone or something is unable to protect you, then it is not worth taking refuge. Taking refuge means seeking protection from someone who is stronger or better than you. These are general aspects of refuge.

Specific aspects of refuge are that Buddhists take refuge in the triple gem: the Buddha (the enlightened one), the Dharma (the teachings of Buddha) and the sangha (the community of Dharma practitioners). In Sanskrit, it says *saranam gachami*, which means protecting us. There is a Sanskrit chant: *Buddham saranam gachami, dharmam saranam gachami, Sangham saranam gachami*. This means, 'Take refuge in Buddha, take refuge in Dharma, take refuge in Sangha'.

## The benefits of Taking Refuge

Refuge protects us from all sorts of harmful things. The supreme object of refuge is to protect us from five types of harmful things: (1) harmful mind, body, speech and emotions; (2) grasping of self and phenomena; (3) low activities; (4) wrong method; and (5) wrong cause to be reborn. So, any of these five ways to protect us we call supreme objects of refuge.

### *Protection from harmful mind, body, speech and emotion*

There are four basic types of harmful things that we need protection from, that is, mentally harmful things, vocally harmful things, physically harmful things and emotionally harmful things. Mentally harmful things mean states like anger mind. Vocally harmful things mean harsh words. Emotionally harmful things mean feelings like sadness, unhappiness. Physically harmful things mean things like killing or stealing. So, there are countless harmful things that come from our mind, speech, body and emotions. The first protection provided by refuge, taught by Buddha, is to protect our mind, body, speech and emotion. Using that refuge protects us.

How does refuge protect us? Our mind, such as anger mind, turns into patience; this is protecting our mind. Speech protection is saying the right words. Truthfulness is the protector of speech. Emotion protection is cultivating love and compassion, which frees us from sadness and unhappiness. Physical protection is saving lives, respecting others. So, everything is protected, we are protected from everything that is harmful.

### *Protection against self-grasping*

The second protection provided by refuge is to protect against self-grasping. The root of samsara is the grasping of self. So, grasping of self is the mastermind of all the problems that every sentient being faces. The self which we are grasping, if it existed, would be worth grasping, but the reality is that the self has never existed. But, although non-existent, we still see it as existent, which means that every mind is an ignorance mind. As long as we have ignorance mind, we are going to have this grasping of self, which in turn creates fear, and much suffering.

Taking refuge means recognising, 'There is no such self, so why are you grasping?' The moment you are aware of the true nature of self, then grasping won't be there. For instance, when you see a piece of rope, if you think it is a snake, then you are frightened. But the moment you realise it is a piece of rope, not a snake, then the fear is not there. Once you see the reality of

that object, then ignorance perceiving the rope as a snake is no longer there. The result is that the fear of a snake will not be there. Similarly, the moment you realise selflessness, then fear of all this will not be there. Just think about how every one of us, how much we are stressed mentally, and how much we are distressed emotionally. All this comes back to the self-grasping mind. 'I'm having this problem; I'm having that problem ...' Everything is 'I'. So this refuge depends on understanding the nature of self; then eventually we lose that fear. That is the second protection.

### *Protection from the wrong path*

Many of us think we are supreme. But being supreme doesn't come from the place where you were born or where you work, it comes from your quality of mind, the quality of your personality. If we really look into ourselves, what we think, what we say, what we do – most of these are inferior, not superior things. They are mundane things. So, actually we are not supreme, we are very inferior beings.

I'm not saying this to disrespect ourselves, but just for us to think about. We think samsara is very important, but samsara is not important because it brings us so much suffering. We always take the wrong path or the low path. Refuge protects us from continuing on that wrong path. Entering a higher path, such as practising Dharma, compassion and wisdom, protects us from a lower path and promotes us onto the higher path. That is the third protection, taking refuge from continuing on the wrong path.

### *Protection from the wrong methods*

The fourth protection is from using the wrong methods to gain happiness. Many of us wish to be happy, to be peaceful, but we use the wrong methods to try to achieve this. For example, in some religions they are harsh on the body in order to gain liberation, through practices such as burning the skin, sleeping on thorns, and so forth. This is the wrong method to gain happiness. If we are constantly using the wrong method, we are not going

to get what we are looking for. This refuge takes us to the right method to achieve our happiness. It is teaching us the right method. The right methods are performing virtuous speech, thoughts and actions, and practising loving kindness, compassion and respect. These are the right methods to achieve happiness.

And if you wish to achieve peacefulness, the right method is shamatha meditation. This is because the best medicine for mental issues is the right object of focus. As long as you have the right object of focus, that really gives you the mental healing that you need. Because all mental problems come from using the wrong object of focus, this damages your mental system, and you develop mental issues. The best medicine for the mind is to use the right object of focus for your mind. That is why shamatha meditation is very important. This involves focusing on watching your breath and focusing on a physical object. Because when you watch your breathing and focus on a physical object – any object – for that moment your mind is distanced from the three poison minds – ignorance, attachment and aversion. But when you have no object of focus, your mind is dominated by these three poisons. The nature of the three poisons creates a very unpleasant mind. So, your mind is only going to get more unpleasant if it focuses on these poisons. We want one thing, peacefulness, but we lack awareness of the method to achieve it. We use the wrong method, and then we become victims of that. Refuge helps us to avoid the wrong method. That's the fourth protection.

### *Protection from rebirth in lower realms*

The fifth protection is against being reborn in the lower realms, such as the hungry ghost, hell and animal realms. These are not realms we accidentally end up in. In fact, right now, we are creating the causes that will result in rebirth in a lower realm. For instance, rebirth in the hell realm is a result of anger mind; rebirth as a hungry ghost is a result of desirous or stinginess mind; rebirth as an animal is due to ignorance mind. Anger, stinginess and ignorance are the seeds of these three unfortunate realms, but refuge discourages these states from entering your mind, and that protects us from

being reborn in the lower realms.

## Four components of refuge

When we take refuge, there are four components: (1) the reason for taking refuge, (2) the length of refuge, (3) the purpose of taking refuge, and (4) the objects of refuge.

*Reasons for taking refuge* – Primarily there are three causes or three reasons for taking refuge. The first causal reason is fear. We feel fear, then we take refuge. Fear is not just of one type. There are many types of fear. The second cause is devotion and faith. The third cause is compassion. Out of compassion we take refuge. I will go through this in more detail.

“First is fear. We say that out of fear we take refuge. With this reason, I don’t see any difference between Buddhists and non-Buddhists. All have the same reason. The objects of refuge are different, but the reasons are not different. Both are worldly beings who have simple concerns, and therefore take refuge to protect themselves. So, fear is the reason worldly beings (samsaric beings) take refuge.

“Second is faith. Faith is a causal reason for Theravada followers of the Shravakayana and Pratyekabuddhayana paths. They see samsara as full of suffering, and that the only way to free themselves from this suffering is to follow the guidance of the Buddha and to practise the Dharma with the companions of the sangha. They see very clearly that if they follow these instructions, take this refuge, they will be free from samsara and free from suffering. So, they have a clear faith. This the second reason.

“Third is the Mahayana. This reason is neither fear for oneself nor to obtain one’s own liberation, but to see all beings as mother sentient beings who are experiencing tremendous difficulties, and for the sake of them, take refuge to attain buddhahood. So, the reason is out of compassion.

These are the three reasons: fear, faith and compassion. If you don’t have any of these three reasons, then you don’t have any reason to take refuge. So, whenever we take refuge, if we consider ourselves, we are going to see one of these three reasons. A bodhisattva has all three reasons – fear, faith and

compassion.

### *The length of refuge*

There's a story, it's a real story set in the Himalayan region in Nepal. A tribe of Buddhist practitioners had a good business. They would go to Thailand to buy lots of clothes to bring back to Nepal. But they wanted to avoid customs duties. So, when they arrived back in Nepal, their family invited monks to do puja in their home for the sake of the safe release of all the goods they had brought from Thailand. One day, these people came in at Kathmandu airport and they were arrested. Then the families thought there was no need to do puja in their homes anymore, because their wish was to be free of customs duties and that was no longer relevant.

So, this kind of taking refuge is only a short-term refuge. Once you accomplish what you want, you stop. When you suffer, you say, 'Oh, I want to meditate. I want to do this'. But once you feel good, you forget all about the Dharma and taking refuge. So, worldly samsaric reasons for taking refuge last for just for a short time. With worldly reasons, it's very unsure how long you will take refuge. You might do it until you are successful, then you forget about refuge, or you are unsuccessful, and you give up on refuge.

So, that's the worldly, short-term approach to taking refuge. Another approach is of someone who is in samsaric suffering and wants to achieve liberation from suffering. These people take refuge until they die, and in the next life they renew that vow. But this is still a relatively short time.

Long-term or ultimate refuge is when the intention in taking refuge is to achieve buddhahood and free oneself from the cycle of samsara. This is Mahayana refuge, which is not only for a short time, or until you die, but until you reach full buddhahood. Whereas, if you do not wish to attain permanent liberation from samsara, nor to attain buddhahood, then that is only a short-term refuge – so that's the time difference.



### *Purpose of taking refuge*

As mentioned, worldly beings primarily take refuge for short-term benefit. Worldly beings take refuge to reduce their fear, then after that, they forget about taking refuge. So, even though it may last until they die, relatively speaking, it's for a very short time. In Theravada Buddhism, a Shravakabuddha and a Pratyekabuddha primarily take refuge to attain liberation from samsara – but just their own liberation, to achieve arhatship not buddhahood. Mahayana Buddhists primarily take refuge to attain buddhahood, for the sake of all sentient beings. So, the purpose is different, and time is also different.

### *The objects of refuge*

There are also different objects of refuge. For worldly beings (that is, samsaric beings) there are two objects: impure objects of refuge and supreme objects of refuge. In other words, there are ordinary objects of refuge and extraordinary objects of refuge.

Ordinary objects are when someone takes refuge in, for instance, Brahma, Indra, Vishnu – this is not meant to be discriminatory – of course, these are powerful beings. But they are not free from samsara, and someone who is not free from samsara cannot give protection to overcome samsara. So, in this respect, they are inferior objects of refuge. Then some others take refuge in, for instance, their beliefs that some tree is a spirit, some rock is a spirit, some water or river is a spirit. But these objects are unable to protect themselves, so how could they protect others? So, these are ordinary or inferior objects of refuge.

Supreme or extraordinary objects of refuge are those that can free us from the cycle of samsara. This is only the Triple Gem of Buddha, Dharma and sangha. These are superior objects of refuge.

But worldly beings, for the sake of their own good health, for the sake of their own samsaric gain, for the sake of their own ordinary temporary benefit, may take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and sangha. But here, whilst the object is an extraordinary object of refuge, the intention of refuge is ordinary,

because the intention is only for a short-term benefit, not for the ultimate benefit.

Also, when different schools of Buddhist practitioners– the shravakabuddha, pratyekabuddha and Mahayana – take refuge in the Triple Gem, they have different emphases. For a shravakabuddha, the main object of refuge is the sangha; for a pratyekabuddha, the main object is the Dharma; and for a Mahayana, the main object is Buddha. So, for these three different schools, the main objects of refuge are slightly different – sangha, Dharma and Buddha.

The reason Buddha is the ultimate object of refuge in Mahayana is because Dharma and sangha are only temporary, impermanent. So, they cannot be an ultimate object of refuge. Let me explain. When we talk about Dharma, there are two parts: the path aspect of Dharma and the teaching aspect of Dharma. These are two things. The teaching aspect of Dharma is only about explaining the path. It helps us to gain realisations, but it's not the ultimate solution. The path aspect of Dharma is what we call the bodhisattva path of truth, that is the Four Noble Truths, or Truths of the Path. In these truths, wisdom (or primordial wisdom) are separate from the dharmadhatu. They are dualistic. This means primordial wisdom is a compounded phenomenon, meaning it is impermanent. (This is explained further in Asanga's *Uttaratantra* by the bodhisattva Maitreya.) Similarly, the sangha also is not an ultimate object of refuge because it, too, is only temporary.

So, the only ultimate object of refuge is the Buddha. Buddha is the ultimate because when you reach buddhahood, your primordial mind and dharmadhatu are non-separable, non-dualistic. Being non-separable, non-compounded, this state of primordial wisdom and dharmadhatu is unchangeable, so not impermanent. This state is thus the ultimate object of refuge. This is why the Mahayana ultimate object of refuge is the Buddha.

However, according to Mahayana Buddhism, there are three bodies, or kayas, of Buddha: the *nirmāṇakāya* aspect of Buddha, sambhogakāya aspect of Buddha and *dharmakāya* aspect of Buddha. These three kayas represent different manifestations of enlightened mind. Sambhogakāya or the divine incarnation of Buddha is the body of enjoyment. It is the real Buddha, because

Sambogha Buddha always resides with the bodhisattva, the tenth-bhumi bodhisattva where bodhisattvas are freed from conceptual obscurations. *Dharmakāya* is the body of truth, the mind purity or ultimate reality of the Buddha. *Nirmāṇakāya*, the body of emanation, is just the physical manifestation or incarnation of the Buddha in different forms for sentient beings. The real Buddha is sambhogakāya. So, when Mahayana take refuge in the Triple Gem, the main object of refuge is the sambhogakāya Buddha – not the *nirmāṇakāya* nor the *dharmakāya* Buddha.

However, in Theravada Buddhism, when the shravakayana and pratyek-abuddhayana take refuge, they do not see the three buddhas I just mentioned, they see just one buddha, sambhogakāya Buddha. So, in Theravada, they do not accept *dharmakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*, just the one buddha, sambhogakāya. They say that when Buddha was meditating in Bodhgaya in the evening before he reached full enlightenment, that evening he was only a being – he had not yet attained buddhahood. Then he meditated and at dawn he reached full enlightenment. So, from the Theravada point of view, only the first buddha reached enlightenment, sambhogakāya, so that's the only buddha, there are no other buddhas.

The point here is not that different Buddhists have different opinions, that is not the point. The point is about different stages of the mind, how far they can see. So, the Theravada just see that ordinary beings meditate and reach enlightenment. They see that much. Therefore, they don't accept different manifestations of Buddha. So, when they take refuge, that's just in the one manifestation of Buddha. And then, when they say they take refuge in the Dharma, they don't mean Vajrayana and Mahayana, they only take refuge in the Theravada teaching as the object of Dharma. And when they take refuge in sangha, they don't mean the bodhisattva, only the Theravada meaning of sangha. And in terms of time, they don't take refuge until they reach enlightenment, they take refuge only until they die. So, when they die, their objects of refuge expire. There's a difference in the length of the time of refuge as well.

So, there are four differences in Mahayana Buddhism which are important. The first difference is the object of refuge: that the Buddha has three kayas,

that the Dharma is not the Theravada but the Mahayana teachings, and that the sangha are the first to tenth bhumi bodhisattvas. The second difference is that the reason for refuge is compassion. Third is the length of refuge – when you die, it does not expire. You take refuge until you attain buddhahood. Fourth is the purpose for refuge, to attain buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. So, these are where Mahayana differs from other schools of Buddhism.

Now you can see that, when taking refuge, the reasons are different, the objects are different, the length is different and the purpose is different. The reason we talk about this is that, when we take refuge, it is good to know which category your refuge belongs to. If you don't know that, then you just think they are all the same. But you may be doing a lesser one. There may be room to improve, but you may not be aware of that. But if you know these things, then you know which category your refuge belongs to. If it's a lesser one, you can upgrade. So, for this reason it is so important to be aware of the different stages of taking refuge.