

The Importance of the Three Jewels

The Primary Components of Tibetan Buddhism

Roger Cantu

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There are three jewels in Buddhism. Meaning that there are three primary components that form the basis of our educational process as students of Buddhism.

What is Buddhism? Is it a religion? No, Buddhism is not a religion, but rather a system of education and a way of life. Originally, Buddhism was based on the 49 years of teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni. Since then, Buddhism has expanded to include the teachings of other great enlightened teachers, such as Padmasambhava, Bodhidharma, and others.

Buddhism is the study of continuation. Buddhism has taken many forms, and it has adapted to fit in within the time and culture of each location where it has taken form.

The main objective of Buddhism is help sentient beings to understand the truth of the dharma. The dharma is defined as the teachings of the Buddha.

The highest goal in Buddhism is complete enlightenment, whoever obtains it will be able to intuitively know and sense every aspect of the true reality of life and the Universe. Obtaining this wisdom and ability is the ultimate goal of all the Buddhist students.

The Buddha teaches us that the ultimate perfect wisdom is innate. The Buddha said, “Every being possesses the same wisdom and virtuous capabilities as Buddhas.”

Why don't we have this wisdom now? It's because of wandering thoughts and attachments. These are the two causes of why we have temporarily lost our original capabilities. Wandering thoughts and attachments are not part of our basic nature. Therefore they can be discarded.

According to the Buddhist teacher Dr. Frederick Lenz, “Meditating is like looking at the sky. Your mind is the sky, but then you get all these noisy birds flying around. The birds are your thoughts. You have to get rid of the birds. But then, you see a beautiful bird, and you start looking at the bird. You start playing with it, and then you get attached to the bird... You need to get rid off all the birds, and just look at the sky and let the sunshine in.”

By removing your wandering thoughts and attachments, you begin to restore your Buddha nature, thus completely recovering your innate abilities.

How do we do that? Well, it's hard to do it all by yourself. That's why we have the three jewels in Buddhism. We need to have something that we can rely on. In Buddhism a person takes

refuge in the three jewels, that's the first step.

Taking refuge means to find a shelter that we can return to and rely on.

What do we return to or rely on? In the first step we return and rely on the Buddha. Buddha is a Sanskrit word that means awareness and understanding. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we are returning from our diluted state of mind and relying upon an awakened understanding.

A Buddha is a person who has awakened from the dream of life, and has come to the understanding of unlimited awareness. The Buddha has loving kindness and compassion for all sentient beings and teaches them in order to liberate them from suffering.

In Zen, they do not use the words, Buddha, dharma, and sangha. They don't use them because they don't want people to have misconceptions about the three jewels. When you say Buddha, dharma, and sangha, people think of a statue of the Buddha, a sutra, and a group of Buddhist monks. However, that's a very basic understanding of the three jewels. There is a deeper understanding.

When we take refuge or rely on the Buddha, we are not talking about worshipping some kind of god. The Buddha was not looking for disciples. He was not interested in forming a religion where people would bow at his feet. The Buddha was looking for colleagues upon the pathway to Enlightenment.

When we take refuge on the Buddha we are actually taking refuge or relying on our own self-nature. We have to rely on our own Buddha-nature. The Buddha Shakyamuni said, "I have shown you the methods that lead to liberation, but you should know that liberation depends upon you." (From Journey to Enlightenment - The Life and World of Khyentse Rinpoche, Spiritual Teacher from Tibet).

Dr. Frederick Lenz used to say us, "Just be yourself. Everything is within you. You have your own Buddha-nature."

So the first step is knowing that someone was able to reach enlightenment, and then realizing that you have the same potential. We all have the potential to be enlightened.



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The second jewel is the dharma. The dharma has two aspects. One is the teachings of the Buddha. In traditional Buddhism, the sutras are records of the Buddhist teachings that describe the truth of the Universe. These teachings are used as a guideline. If our thinking coincides with them, then our comprehension is correct.

The second aspect of dharma is the Dharma of realization, which is classified into three kinds of training: the training of discipline, the training of meditation and the training of wisdom. We are not relying on just the teachings of the Buddha, but we are also relying on our daily practice. The Buddha Shakyamuni said, “You should only believe in what you can perceive.”

If you see that your daily practice is working, then you know that your practice is something that you can rely on.

The third jewel is the sangha. Sometimes sangha is explained as those practitioners who have already reached levels of liberation, very high level Lamas or Monks. But our friends whom we work with at our Buddhist centers are also very important for our path.

How can we develop without friends on the path? We need to get together and practice. This is very valuable. We can work together, learn from each other, and in this way we can train our qualities and learn something about our selves or non-selves.

Now, sangha also refers to harmony in living. In other words, sangha is not just a small spiritual community, but society as a whole. Every person you meet, you should treat as a spiritual partner who is also on the pathway to enlightenment. Every person in your life is your sangha, because you can learn from every person in life - provided that you are in the right state of mind.

In Tantric Buddhism there is an inner level of refuge, we call it the secret refuge. If you are accepted by a teacher of Tantric Buddhism, he will give you his blessing.

What does that blessing mean? It is the teacher's ability to give us moments of insight - moments where we can look through all the veils, which cover our mind and "see what cannot be seen." This is possible only because we all have Buddha nature, and because the teacher is channeling a lot of energy to bring us to a higher level.

The teacher does not show us anything new; neither is he presenting us with insight. It is rather through the coming together of our own openness and the teacher's blessing that we can grasp the true nature of our mind. The teacher opens the door and then we can be amazed.

Actually, the teacher promises a lot when he takes us on as students. He promises to guide us on the path and to use all his skills to liberate us from suffering.

You see, the secret meaning of refuge is the understanding that our teacher is the essence of the refuge. His mind is Buddha, his speech is dharma, and his body is sangha.

When we receive a blessing from our teacher, his/her mind melts with ours. In Buddhism this is called, "the transmission of the lamp."

Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye, the famous 19th century master, said, "If the teacher's blessing comes together with the openness of the student, you will meet your mind like an old friend" (from Cloudless Sky.)

In this context, we are taught to see the teacher as the Buddha. It is easy to claim being able to perceive our teacher as the Buddha, but it is difficult to really do it. Actually, the ability to do so is proportional to our inner development.

If we understand that we are not separate from the Buddha, from our teacher, this is the absolute meaning of refuge. When we see that we have a direct connection with the Buddha, with our own Buddha nature, with the dharma and the practice of the dharma, and with our sangha, then we realize that we are not alone. We are all part of the One Mind. Everything is mind. The absolute refuge is our mind itself.

As students of Buddhism, it is our responsibility to keep alive the teachings of our teachers. When we take refuge with a teacher, we take an outer refuge and an inner refuge. The outer refuge is the ceremony; the inner refuge is a powerful blessing that changes our inner being.

After taking refuge, it is up to us to continue learning and to make the blessings of our teacher count in our lives, and to dedicate ourselves to benefit all sentient beings. This is the true meaning and importance of the three jewels.

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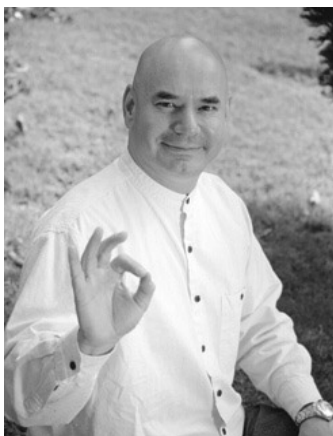
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