

The four refuges

One of the most significant problems concerning Buddhism today, ironically, is that we know too much about it, but we have actually no true experience of it at all. It is very easy to collect information about Buddhism from the many teachers who give talks, the books on Buddhism, Buddhist software, and the Internet. Knowledge gives us an idea about something, say, we know about cooking and food, but it is the proper practice and realization of Buddhism that really matters, that is, we have to consume the food and enjoy good health.

We often hear of the three trainings in moral virtue, meditation and insight wisdom, and also the three stages of study, practice and realization. Another important set of guidelines for a Dharma practitioner, not often heard of, is known as the “four refuges” (*paṭisaraṇa*) or “four reliances” (*nissaya*). The four refuges are listed in the Buddhist texts as follows:

Rely on the teaching,	not the teacher.
Rely on the meaning,	not the letter.
Rely on the explicit meaning,	not the implicit meaning.
Rely on insight,	not on sense-consciousness. ¹

Rely on the teaching, not the teacher

Consciously or unconsciously, we tend to look for someone, especially a famous, successful or charismatic teacher, to endorse our views. Or, when we claim that a teacher is “good” or even “awakened,” we mean that they agree with our mindset. It is as if everyone wants to be a teacher, but no one wants to learn. The point is that we do not learn from a teacher; we learn from a teaching.

Some of us tend to be drawn to a teacher on account of his looks (religious uniform, skin colour, or attractiveness), or voice (language, nice voice, sweet talk, or jokes). Such people are “overcome by desire and passion” and do not really know the teacher.²

Whenever we listen to a Dharma teacher, we should ask ourselves. “What do I learn from all this?” “How can I better myself from what I have heard?”

Rely on the meaning, not the letter

To listen only to the teacher’s “words” means only wanting to hear “new things,” but not wanting to change our lives for the better. It is like reading today’s newspapers. Having read them we discard them. We should not treat the teacher’s words or the Dharma like old newspapers.

The Dharma comprises living words of truth. We may keep hearing the same words or teachings over time. We may even think we understand them, but as we mature, we see new dimensions of the same teaching, and link them more together into a meaningful wholesome vision -- if we keep an open mind.

¹ See <http://santifm1.0.googlepages.com/fourreliancesutra>.

² Tha 469-472 = A 2:71. See **The teacher of the teaching?** = SD 3.14.

The four refuges by Piya Tan

The word “meaning” also means “purpose.” Our purpose in learning or listening to the Dharma should be to better ourselves, that is, to work towards the goal of streamwinning, that is, overcoming self-view, superstition and spiritual doubt.

At the mention of “streamwinning,” some people might at once think, “How can I ever attain that goal?” and think of all the negative things about themselves. Or worse, they think they do not need to better themselves, and continue to hurt and mislead others with their pride and knowledge.

Rely on the explicit meaning, not the implicit meaning

The Suttas, which record the teachings of the Buddha and the saints, speak on two levels: the indirect teachings (using images and stories) and the direct teachings (such as about impermanence, suffering and not-self). The former tries to make the latter more interesting and clear. We might say that the indirect teachings are like packaging, but the real product is the direct teachings.

The indirect teaching is to make us feel happy and positive, so that our minds are ready for the direct teachings. The direct teachings, especially those of impermanence, direct us towards a deeper understanding of our minds and habits. We are reminded to be true to ourselves and not be blinded by knowledge or drowned in words, no matter how clever.

Rely on insight, not on sense-consciousness

Our knowledge is not always reliable because they are sense-based. We know through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, especially the first two. We are often mistaken by what we know. For, when we know something, we cancel out everything else, as it were -- this is often a fatal mistake. It reinforces our self-delusion.

Our sense-consciousness, in other words, is relative to what is in our minds and the sense-objects we experience. Our minds and sense-objects change all the time. If we regard what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch as being permanent or the absolute truth, then we would be badly and painfully mistaken.

A common mistake is to think people cannot change, that we are “what we are” or so-and-so is like “that.” We all change, like it or not. But we can direct that change in a wholesome manner if we know the Dharma. We need insight to do this. Insight means looking beyond the surface, “into” true reality, that is, understanding how our mind works and what is truly real (not just virtually real).

We begin to see patterns of conduct, habits and reactions that cause pain in us and to others. These have to be given up. We go on to cultivate lovingkindness, to accept ourselves happily and to do the same with others.

Buddhism is not about what we know or how much we know. It is about changing our lives for the better, about being a kinder and wiser person, more inclusive of others in our love and life.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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