

The Real Meaning of Taking Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

When Shifu imparts the Three Refuges to believers, he always explains it very clearly that the essence of Three Refuges is what *The Altar Sutra* states: To take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is to take refuge in enlightenment (Skt. *bodhi*), righteousness (Skt. *samyak*), and purity (Skt. *subha*).

Our Shifu specifically incorporates Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha into Sukhāvātī. “Take refuge in the Buddha” Shifu teaches us to take refuge in Amitabha. “Take refuge in the Dharma,” he teaches us to take refuge in *The Infinite Life Sutra* and instructs us to learn and practice based on *The Infinite Life Sutra*. “Take refuge in the Sangha,” he told us to take refuge in Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta as well as all bodhisattvas of Pure-Ocean-Like-Assembly.

This kind of refuge makes us feel assured because we have a very clear direction for our learning and practice. Not only does Amitabha have His everlasting Dharma Body (Skt. *dharmakāya*), but His Reward Body (Skt. *saṃbhogakāya*), and Transformation Body (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*) are everlasting as well. Plus Sukhāvātī is also everlasting, it offers all beings an eternal place to take refuge.

Since the infinite light and life are the innate virtues and manifestations of dharmakāya, the infinite light and life are dharmakāya. From this dharmakāya, the sea of Amitabha's Fundamental Vows flows out, the solemn circumstantial reward and personal reward of Sukhāvātī flows out, and boundless merits also flow out.

The personal reward of Sukhāvātī is Amitabha, Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and all bodhisattvas of Pure-Ocean-Like-Assembly. They all have infinite life. The environment of the circumstantial reward—the jeweled pond, the palaces, the flowing water, the jeweled trees, as well as the virtuous wind, flowers, and rain all flow out from the dharmakāya. They all have infinite light and life.

All things in Sukhāvātī have infinite life, they are everlasting and never cease. This is very different from general worlds. For instance, our Saha World does not flow out from the dharmakāya, it flows out from polluted seeds that are manifested from the seeds of our alaya consciousness. These seeds in our alaya consciousness are delusional seeds, they are polluted. Sukhāvātī is not manifested from all beings' alaya consciousness but from their pure dharmakāya.

The Demon of Death Is Horrifying

Many patriarchs who studied *The Infinite Life Sutra* all agreed that “infinite lifespan” is “the number one merit” of Pure Land Buddhism. Think about it, if the gold, agate, and seven

jewels of Sukhāvātī are all infinite, yet your lifespan is not infinite, that would not work either. Because you cannot take them with you when your life meets its end. Even if you are the richest man in the world, you can bring nothing with you when your time is up. Take a look at Apple's founder, one of the richest men in the world, who got cancer and had to go, didn't he take away nothing in the end? So, without infinite lifespan everything is illusory, it is not yours. That is why the infinite lifespan is the number one merit. Only if you have an infinite lifespan, will what you own be real.

For this reason, Amitabha vowed to let all beings who are born into His Land obtain an infinite lifespan. This infinite lifespan is incalculable kalpas. It is unable to be measured or named. Not only can we enjoy this immeasurable lifespan, most importantly we are guaranteed to attain Buddhahood in one life.

To cultivate in our world is particularly difficult. The fundamental problem is that we must die. This demon of death is most frightening. In general, ordinary people are all afraid of death. For practitioners, though they are not afraid of death, it also becomes a big obstacle for their practice. If you cultivate very well and attain samadhi yet have not revealed your innate wisdom, your skill will be interrupted once you die, because even a bodhisattva will forget their past lives.

When you transmigrate to a different body, no matter how well practiced you were in your past life, you have to start all over. And this "start all over" does not mean that you start to learn from your birth. You probably would grow up twenty years or more before encountering Buddhism and connecting to the skill of your past life. The interruption would have been twenty years. If there is a lot of contamination in your mind during these twenty years, you are doomed; you will regress greatly. No matter how hard you try, you probably will not catch up to the level of your past life.

Having the Skill of Controlling Birth and Death Yet Still Reincarnate to Be a Cowhand?!

We have seen the story of a Zen practitioner who had a very good skill of dhyana and could even control his own birth and death. One day, he and his friend went traveling. He wanted to take the land route while his friend insisted on taking the water route. In the end, they took the water route.

The second day when the boat neared the shore, they saw a woman washing clothes. This Zen practitioner was in tears when seeing this scene. His friend asked, "Why are you in tears upon seeing this woman?" The Zen practitioner said, "I did not want to take the water route because I did not want to see this woman. She is my future mother and has already been pregnant for three years, just waiting for my transmigration. I didn't want to go. Now I have no choice but to go since I have encountered her."

He told his friend, "Tomorrow I will be reborn. Please come to this woman's house to see me. I will smile at you, you will then know that it is me. Fifteen years later at such a place, you will see a fifteen year old cowhand who is playing a flute. That would be me." After they made the arrangements, the Zen practitioner entered dhyana and passed away.

The second day, the friend found this woman's house and he really saw a newborn baby who smiled at him. Fifteen years later, he went to the place as told and indeed saw a cowhand who was playing a bamboo flute. He sighed with great sentimentality. This Zen practitioner, with such great skill, had become a cowhand after reincarnation. His skill had regressed to worse than the skill of his past life.

In our current era, think about it, it really is the five turbidity of the evil world. The turbidity has reached an extreme, pollution is everywhere. Once the younger generation gets into the internet, it is almost impossible for them not to degenerate regardless of how well they cultivated in past lives. They definitely will degenerate and regress. How would one be able to resist contemporary temptation even if their practice in past lives was remarkable?

This is indeed an era of "weak Dharma, strong demons." If we are not reborn into Sukhāvātī in this life, our next life would no doubt be worse than that of the cowhand. Because we are worse than that Zen practitioner in this life due to being unable to control our birth and death. Even if we can control birth and death, we are still not better than him for being born into such a polluted era. Perhaps we may fall into the three evil paths. It is extremely possible.

Therefore, think it over, the only way out ([*to transcend](#)) is to be reborn into Sukhāvātī. If we are not reborn in this life, we will absolutely fall into the three evil paths; it is only a matter of sooner or later. In whichever life we do not encounter Buddha-Dharma, we definitely will degenerate and create karma. As we say, our perspective towards the value of life will be distorted, we will definitely be selfish and egoistic. Once being selfish and egoistic, we will definitely create karma by killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying. Once committed, we then fall into the evil paths.

Thanks for watching! Namō Amitābha!