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Buddhism:
One Teacher, Many Traditions

VEN. THUBTEN CHODRON

Lesson 3:
The Three Jewels Across Traditions

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BUDDHISM

One Teacher, Many Traditions

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existence and thus recognizes all phenomena as sharing the one taste of emptiness. He also does not treat sentient beings with bias.

6. He abides in perfect equanimity, knowing the individual characteristics of each phenomenon.

Six unshared realizations

1. Due to his all-encompassing love and compassion, a buddha never experiences any decline of his aspiration and intention to benefit all sentient beings and to increase their virtuous qualities.
2. He never loses joyous effort to lead others to awakening. A buddha experiences no physical, verbal, or mental fatigue and continuously cares for the welfare of sentient beings without getting tired, lazy, or despondent.
3. A buddha's mindfulness effortlessly remains constant and uninterrupted. He is mindful also of the situations each sentient being encounters in the past, present, and future and the methods to subdue and help them.
4. He continuously remains in samādhi, free from all obscurations and focused on the ultimate reality.
5. His wisdom is inexhaustible and never declines. He perfectly knows the 84,000 Dharma teachings and the doctrines of the three vehicles, as well as how and when to express them to sentient beings.
6. It is impossible for him to lose the state of full awakening free from all obscurations. He knows the mind to be naturally luminous, and he lacks any dualistic appearance or grasping at duality.

Three unshared awakening activities

1. Imbued with exalted wisdom, a buddha's physical actions are always done for the benefit of others. He emanates many bodies that appear wherever sentient beings have the karma to be led on the path to awakening. Whatever a buddha does has a positive effect on sentient beings, subduing their minds.
2. Knowing the dispositions and interests of each sentient being, he teaches the Dharma in a manner appropriate for that person. His speech flows smoothly, is accurate and lovely to listen to. It does not deceive or lead others astray but is clear, knowledgeable, and kind.
3. Filled with undeclining love and compassion, his mind encompasses all beings with the intention to do only what is of the highest benefit. He is effortlessly and continuously cognizant of all phenomena.

Three unshared exalted wisdoms

A buddha's exalted wisdom knows everything in the three times—past, present, and future—without any obscuration or error. His knowledge of the future does not mean that things are predetermined. Rather, a buddha knows that if a sentient being does a particular action, this particular result will follow, and if another course of action is taken, a different result will come. He knows all buddhafiels and realms of sentient beings as well as all the beings and their activities there.

Reading such passages from the sūtras gives us an idea of a buddha's exceptional qualities. Contemplating them brings joy and expands our mental horizons. These passages also give us an idea of the qualities we will attain if we practice the Dharma as the Buddha instructed.

While the descriptions of the four fearlessnesses and ten powers in the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions do not differ considerably, the Sanskrit tradition emphasizes how these abilities benefit sentient beings.

THREE JEWELS: PĀLI TRADITION

All Buddhists take refuge in the Three Jewels and not in a particular Buddhist tradition, lineage, or individual teacher. Our refuge is in general the Three Jewels. The Pāli tradition's and the Sanskrit tradition's descriptions of the Three Jewels contain many common points as well as points unique to each tradition. First we'll examine the Pāli tradition.

The *Buddha Jewel* is the historical Buddha who lived approximately 2,600 years ago and turned the Dhamma wheel for the benefit of sentient beings. To refer to himself the Buddha frequently used the term *Tathāgata*, the "one thus gone," because he has gone to nibbāna, the unconditioned state, by perfecting serenity and insight, the paths and the fruits. *Tathāgata* also means the "one thus come": the Buddha has come to nibbāna in the same way all the previous buddhas have, by perfecting the thirty-seven aids to awakening, completing the ten perfections; giving away his body and possessions in charity to others, and acting for the welfare of the world.

A Tathāgata has fully awakened to the nature of this world, its origin, its cessation, and the way to its cessation. He has fully understood and can directly perceive all things that can be seen, heard, sensed, known, cognized, and thought about, knowing them just as they are. Everything a Tathāgata

says is true and correct. His words and actions accord with each other; he is free from hypocrisy. He has conquered the foes of the afflictions and is not conquered by them. Thereby, he possesses great power to benefit the world.

The Tathāgata has realized two great principles: dependent arising and nibbāna. Dependent arising applies to the entirety of the conditioned world of saṃsāra of true dukkha and true origins. All worldly things arise dependent on their specific conditions (*idappaccayatā*, *idampratyaayatā*) and are impermanent. Nibbāna is the unconditioned—true cessation—which is realized by true paths. Together dependent arising and nibbāna include all existents, so understanding them is understanding all existents.

The Buddha is praised as the one who actualized the Dhamma and taught it to others. A famous passage in the Pāli canon describes the relationship of the Dhamma and the Buddha. When speaking to the monk Vakkali, who was gravely ill and regretted not having been able to see the Buddha sooner, the Buddha replied (SN 22:87):

Enough, Vakkali! Why do you want to see this foul body?
One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the
Dhamma.

Seeing and knowing the Buddha is not done physically but through mental development. Being close to the Buddha means actualizing the same true paths and true cessations he has. The extent to which our minds have been transformed into the Dhamma is the extent to which we see the Buddha. Regarding this quotation, in his commentary the *Sāratthappakāsinī*, Buddhaghosa explains:

Here the Blessed One shows [himself as] the Dhamma body (*dhammakāya*), as stated in the passage “The Tathāgata, great king, is the Dhamma body.” For the ninefold supramundane Dhamma [the four ariya paths, their fruits, and nibbāna] is called the Tathāgata’s body.

The *Dhamma Jewel* consists of true cessation and true path. *True cessation* is the ultimate aim of spiritual practice. It is the unconditioned, nibbāna, the deathless state. Nibbāna is not produced by causes and conditions; it is not impermanent and does not change in each moment. Four synonyms

of nibbāna describe it from different angles: (1) It is *destruction*—of ignorance, attachment, anger, and especially of craving. (2) It is *dispassion*, the absence of attachment, desire, greed, and lust. (3) It is the *deathless*, free from saṃsāric birth, aging, sickness, and death. (4) It is *excellence*—supreme, never-ending, and inexhaustible.

True path refers to the supramundane noble eightfold path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga, āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) that leads to nibbāna. To develop this, we first cultivate the ordinary eightfold path by practicing ethical conduct, the four establishments of mindfulness, and mundane right concentration. As our concentration increases and our understanding of the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not self deepens, we will reach a point where the breakthrough by wisdom (*paññāya abhisamaya*) arises and realizes nibbāna. While the mind dwells in concentration, wisdom penetrates the ultimate truth. Certain defilements are extinguished, and when one emerges from that concentration, one is an ariya and a stream-enterer. This concentration is praised beyond all other samādhis because it leads to lasting beneficial results, while worldly samādhis lead to rebirths in the material (form) and immaterial (formless) realms.

The *Saṅgha Jewel* is the community of ariyas—those who have realized nibbāna, thus becoming “noble”—which consists of eight types of persons subsumed in four pairs—those approaching and those abiding in the states of stream-enterer (*sotāpanna, srotāpanna*), once-returner (*sakadagami, sakṛtāgāmi*), nonreturner (*anāgāmi*), and arahant (arhat). During the approach phase of each pair, a practitioner is in the process of developing the *path* that will culminate in its corresponding *fruit*, or result. Each path is marked by a breakthrough in which one sees nibbāna ever more clearly and thus subdues or eradicates a certain portion of defilements. The four pairs of persons are called *sāvakas (śrāvaka)*, literally “disciples” or “hearers,” and due to their spiritual realizations they are worthy of offerings. Those who make offerings to the ariya sāvakas accumulate great merit that brings them upper rebirths and circumstances conducive to practicing Dhamma.

Realization of the four truths is the essence of the ariya path. Until people are spiritually mature, the Buddha teaches them other Dhamma topics. Full penetration of the four truths comes about through practicing the thirty-seven aids to awakening and cultivating serenity and insight. The moment one becomes a stream-enterer, one experiences a breakthrough

called the *arising of the eye of the Dhamma*, because for the first time one directly sees the Dhamma, the truth of the Buddha's teaching, nibbāna. One now changes lineage from being an ordinary person to being an ariya.

Through directly realizing nibbāna, stream-enterers completely abandon three fetters (*samyojana*, *saṃyojana*): (1) They no longer have the *view of a personal identity* (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, *satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*) that grasps a real self existing in relation to the five aggregates. Such a self could be a self that is identical to one of the aggregates, possesses the aggregates, is possessed by the aggregates, is inside the aggregates (like a jewel in a box), or contains the aggregates (like a box containing five jewels). (2) *Doubt* (*vicikicchā*, *vicikitsā*) in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha being reliable sources of refuge vanishes due to having direct experience of the Dhamma taught by the Buddha. (3) They eliminate the view of rules and practices (*śīlabbataparāmāsa*, *śīlavrata-parāmarśa*). Stream-enterers maintain precepts and perform various ceremonies but do not cling to rules or to the idea that correct performance of ceremonies has special power in and of itself to bring liberation.

Stream-enterers may be monastics or lay practitioners. The former keep their monastic precepts very well, and the latter keep the five precepts. While stream-enterers may still commit minor transgressions such as speaking harshly due to anger, they never conceal offenses and immediately confess them and make a strong determination to restrain themselves thereafter. Due to the power of their realization, it is impossible for stream-enterers to commit six great wrongs: the five heinous actions (killing one's mother, father, or an arahant, causing schism in the Saṅgha, and maliciously injuring the Buddha) and regarding anyone other than the Buddha as the supreme spiritual master. Attaining the stage of stream-entry is highly praised for these reasons.

Stream-enterers will never again be born as hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, or asuras and will take at most seven more rebirths in saṃsāra before attaining arahantship. Stream-enterers with sharp faculties take only one more rebirth; those with middle faculties take two to six rebirths; and those with dull faculties take seven more rebirths.

While they have profound spiritual insight and are firmly on the path to liberation, stream-enterers have overcome only three of the ten fetters, and their minds are not immune to the *eight worldly concerns*—delight with material gain, praise, good reputation, and sensual pleasure and dejection with material loss, blame, notoriety, and unpleasant sensory experiences.

They may still create destructive kamma, although it is not strong enough to bring unfortunate rebirths. In some cases, their external behavior may even resemble that of ordinary beings. They may be attached to their family, enjoy being praised, or compete with others. Sometimes they may even be heedless. Nevertheless, their faith in the Three Jewels is unshakable, and they will definitely continue on the path to arahantship.

Compared to stream-enterers, once-returners have significantly reduced their sensual desire and malice, although they have not yet fully eliminated them. They will be reborn in the desire realm only once more. Nonreturners have abandoned the fetters of sensual desire and malice and will never again take rebirth in the desire realm. If they don't attain nibbāna in that life, they will be reborn in the material (form) realm, often in a pure land, a special group of realms inhabited only by nonreturners or arahants. They will attain nibbāna there.

In the path phase, approachers to arahantship practice the Buddha's teachings with effort and diligence. In the fruit phase, they actualize their goal, become arahants, and are no longer bound by craving. All remaining fetters of desire for existence in the material and immaterial realms, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance are abandoned, and they attain the deathless—the state free from saṃsāra's repeated birth and death—and enjoy the peace of genuine freedom.

THREE JEWELS: SANSKRIT TRADITION

Most of what appeared in the foregoing Pāli section is shared by the Sanskrit tradition. The Sanskrit tradition also relies on such treatises as the *Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra Śāstra)* as sources for understanding the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels and their ultimate and conventional aspects. Learning and contemplating these inspires our confidence in them and shows us the direction to take in our spiritual practice so that we can become the Three Jewels.

Each of the Three Jewels has ultimate and conventional aspects that encompass the four bodies (*kāya*)⁶ of a buddha:

The *ultimate Buddha Jewel* is the dharmakāya, having the nature of perfect abandonment and perfect realization. This is of two types:

1. The *wisdom dharmakāya (jñāna dharmakāya)* has three principal qualities: Due to their omniscient *knowledge*, buddhas effortlessly

and perfectly understand the entire variety of phenomena, including the dispositions and capabilities of sentient beings. Due to their *compassionate love* and *abilities*, without any hesitation or self-doubt, they teach appropriate paths according to the different inclinations of sentient beings.

2. The *nature dharmakāya* (*svabhāvika dharmakāya*) is unconditioned and free from arising and disintegration. It is of two types:
 - The *natural stainless purity* is the emptiness of inherent existence of a buddha's mind.
 - The *purity from adventitious defilements* refers to a buddha's true cessation that is free from the afflictive obscurations (*kilesāvaraṇa*, *klesāvaraṇa*) binding us in saṃsāra and the cognitive obscurations (*ñeyyāvaraṇa*, *jñeyāvaraṇa*) hindering knowledge of all phenomena and effortless work for the welfare of sentient beings.

The *conventional Buddha Jewel* is the form bodies (*rūpakāya*) of a buddha, which are of two types:

1. An *enjoyment body* (*sambhogakāya*) abides in a pure land and teaches ārya bodhisattvas.
2. *Emanation bodies* (*nirmāṇakāya*) are the appearances of a buddha in a form perceivable by ordinary beings.

Contemplating the four buddha bodies gives us a deeper understanding of Buddha Śākyamuni. The Buddha's physical appearance as a human being such as Gautama Buddha is an emanation body, a form he assumed to suit the spiritual dispositions and needs of ordinary beings. An emanation body derives from a subtler body, an enjoyment body. An enjoyment body emerges from the omniscient mind of a buddha, the wisdom dharmakāya. A wisdom dharmakāya arises within the underlying nature of reality, a buddha's nature dharmakāya.

The *ultimate Dharma Jewel* is the true cessations and true paths in the mindstreams of āryas of all three vehicles—the Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha, and Bodhisattva vehicles.

1. *True paths* are consciousnesses informed by the wisdom directly and nonconceptually realizing the subtle selflessness of persons and phenomena. Among them, an *uninterrupted path* is a wisdom directly realizing emptiness that is in the process of eliminating some degree

of defilements. When those particular defilements have been completely abandoned, that wisdom becomes a *liberated path*.

2. A *true cessation* is the purified aspect of the emptiness of a mind that has abandoned a particular degree of obscurations. True cessations have two factors: natural purity and the purity of adventitious defilements, as described above. True cessations are known by oneself in meditative equipoise on emptiness in which all dualistic appearances have vanished.

The *conventional Dharma Jewel* refers to the transmitted Dharma, the 84,000 teachings, the twelve branches of scripture—the Buddha’s word taught from his own experience with compassion and skill.

The *ultimate Saṅgha Jewel* is the knowledge (true paths) and liberation (true cessations) in the mindstream of an ārya. True cessations and true paths are both the ultimate Dharma Jewel and the ultimate Saṅgha Jewel.

The *conventional Saṅgha Jewel* is an individual ārya or an assembly of āryas of any of the three vehicles. It includes the eight śrāvaka āryas and bodhisattvas.

The Saṅgha Jewel has inner wisdom that correctly knows reality and knows some portion of the diversity of phenomena. The ārya saṅgha is free from some portion of afflictive obscurations—ignorance, afflictions, their seeds, and polluted karma. Some āryas are also free from some portion of the wish for only personal nirvāṇa that prevents generating bodhicitta. Some ārya bodhisattvas are free from a portion of the cognitive obscurations—the latencies of ignorance and the appearance of inherent existence.

The representation of the Saṅgha Jewel is a community of four or more fully ordained monastics.

Enumerating the excellent qualities of the Three Jewels illustrates why they are valuable and complete sources of refuge. Understanding this, we will repeatedly take refuge in them from the depth of our hearts and deepen our connection with them. In this way, we will always be able to call on their guidance no matter what situations we face in life or at the time of death.

This description of the Three Jewels emphasizes the inner experiential aspect of religion and spirituality. Our objects of refuge—those that we trust completely to lead us to liberation and full awakening—are distinct from religious institutions. While realized beings may be members of religious institutions, these institutions are often operated by ordinary beings.

When taking refuge, being aware of the difference between our actual objects of refuge and religious institutions is important.

BUDDHA'S AWAKENING, PARINIRVĀṆA, AND OMNISCIENCE

The Three Jewels are called “jewels” because they are rare and precious. Like the mythical wish-fulfilling jewel that grants all wishes and needs, they are continuously willing and capable of providing us refuge, protecting us from *saṃsāra*’s *duḥkha*, and showing us the way to attain lasting, pure, and blissful fulfillment. The Buddha Jewel is the source of sentient beings’ virtuous intentions, encouraging us to seek upper rebirth, liberation, and full awakening.

While followers of both the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions take refuge in the Buddha, they may have different perspectives on his awakening, *parinirvāṇa*, and omniscience. The Pāli tradition says he practiced as a *bodhisatta* for many previous lifetimes and attained full awakening under the bodhi tree in his life as Siddhattha Gotama. As a buddha, he had no mental pain but experienced physical pain due to having a body produced under the power of craving and *kamma*. Some say that when he passed away and attained *mahāparinibbāna*, all *saṃsāric* rebirth ceased, and his consciousness entered *nibbāna*, an everlasting, stable, unconditioned, peaceful reality that cannot be conceived in terms of time and space. Here *parinibbāna* is a reality that is the opposite of the polluted, impermanent aggregates. Others say that *parinibbāna* is the cessation of the defilements and the continuation of the aggregates. Here the complete cessation of the aggregates is considered peaceful.

In general, the Sanskrit tradition believes that Gautama Buddha practiced as a *bodhisattva* for many previous lifetimes and attained full awakening before his life as Siddhartha Gautama. However, by appearing as an unawakened being who attained full awakening in that lifetime, he illustrated the importance of exerting effort and working diligently to train the mind. Through his example, he gave others confidence that they could practice and attain the same awakening he did.

While the Sanskrit tradition agrees that the polluted aggregates do not continue after the causes for *saṃsāric* rebirth have been extinguished, it says there is no agent or antidote that can totally cease the continuum of the luminous and aware nature of the mind, which remains uninterrupted and