

# Trust and Taking Refuge in the Sangha

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I am writing this article to address the reasons we seek spiritual counseling. The most common reason people come to talk with a senior priest is to have some help with a problem or with something that is troubling. It can be a difficulty with the teaching or with their training. These are good reasons to seek guidance. If something in the teaching or in your training bothers you, it is good to discuss it and receive some direction. If something does not seem to be working in your practice or if you seem to keep coming up against the same difficulty again and again, it is good to talk about it and see if there is a different or better way to approach the problem.

However, there is a more basic and fundamental reason to take refuge in the senior members of the Buddhist Sangha. One of the most basic obstacles in spiritual life is our unwillingness to face, accept, and trust ourselves. Part of the human dilemma is that we generally do not fully accept who we are. We can spend our whole lives wishing, hoping and pretending that we are someone different. We dislike aspects of ourselves. We try to keep parts of our personality and life hidden, dark inner secrets that we are scared to allow anyone else to see. We can have the belief that a deeply spiritual life is the most worthwhile goal but still feel it is not for us. We feel there is something fundamentally wrong in who we are that precludes us from purifying our heart and making significant spiritual progress. We are embarrassed of whom we perceive ourselves to be. We think that before we can be open and expose our deep flaws to the sight of someone else, we must first correct some of these deeply troubling problems. Some-time in the unspecified future, when we feel we are doing better and sincerely training and are no longer in such a mess, only then can we let go of our compulsive need to hide and protect this self. Thus we wait until we feel we are sufficiently pure to open our hearts and take deep refuge in the Sangha.

An important aspect of trust in Buddhism Is the trust that we are

fundamentally pure. Our own seemingly unclean heart and the Buddha heart are the same heart. Yet if we are unwilling to see and accept our impurity and if we are afraid and ashamed of who we are, how do we expect to experience our own immaculacy? To open our hearts to true trust, we begin by trying our best to view ourselves without judgment, without criticism and without revulsion. Faith in our own immaculacy means we must learn to trust ourselves. It logically follows that there are people more spiritually advanced than ourselves, and that we can trust them. True trust in Buddhism is not real if we limit our trusting to just ourselves. We must be willing to open and expose our true thoughts, feelings and mistakes. It takes deep trust to be that open with someone else and trust their spiritual maturity that will not look at us and say "yuk." If we always feel that the only possible response anyone can give us is "yuk," then we bind ourselves by the hardness of our judgmental hearts rather than learning to see ourselves from that nonjudgmental place that knows that everything is pure. True spiritual trust blossoms not just with acceptance of ourselves but opens our hearts so that we can find and experience the immaculacy that enfolds the whole of existence.

Real help in spiritual counseling comes when we present ourselves to the senior members of the Sangha for guidance and we do not put up any walls between us and the senior. We openly offer how we are doing, what problems and difficulties we are facing, what is giving us faith and working well in our spiritual life and what is giving us doubts and appearing as an obstacle. I know that when I talk with someone, the better I understand their approach to life, what is causing them suffering, and their difficulties in practicing Buddhism, the better my advice can be. However, trust is necessary for this process to unfold and for us to stop our habitual and deeply-held desire to hide personal blemishes and secret difficulties. Sometimes people feel deeply stuck in their training yet they are unable to ask for help or drop their hard conviction that has convinced them that they know what they really need to do and they do not need to ask for help and guidance. Taking refuge in the Sangha means opening your heart so that whatever difficulties you are having, they will be discussed. It is having the trust that this process will direct you towards a purer heart and the Buddha. Feeling stuck in training

comes from not really trusting either ourselves or the Dharma. Trust is the ground of our spiritual life and we must trust our own hearts if we are ever to find the Buddha within. We must learn to trust the Sangha or the hard protective shell in which we enclosed ourselves will not soften and we will view others through the harsh filter of a judgmental mind. We must learn to trust the unfolding of our karma and the world's karma or we will not ever find true peace or joy , because we will always be wishing for a different life and a different world.

It is hard to trust, so what do we do when we seem to be full of doubt? Learning to trust is like learning to meditate. When we first begin to meditate, we sit down and our mind runs busily about. We must accept it and still bring it back. We have faith that eventually our heart and mind will learn to let go of all obsessive patterns of thought and desire. Then we can awaken to true peace, love, and joy. When we go to spiritual counseling, we are trying to trust; we are trying to ask for help. We have to accept our doubts and mistrust, and try to soften them by acting with trust. By learning to trust ourselves and to open our hearts and trust the Sangha, we can awaken a trust that embraces all of existence and knows that there is nothing we need to fear. Spiritual counseling helps direct us that we may stop feeling we need to defend who we are. When we stop cutting the world into pieces with our judgmental mind, everything within us and within the world can then be experienced as Buddha.