

TAKING REFUGE IN THE BODHISATTVA WAY

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Participating in this ceremony is a matter of expressing your sense of coming home—to your own awakening, this way of practice, and your companions on the path. It is an aspiration to turn your individual life towards that which heals and encourages all of life.

If you want to take refuge, please speak with me about it. Refuge ceremonies are usually held during meditation retreats. Here are the things you'll do in preparation:

Sewing your rakusu The rakusu connects us to Shakyamuni Buddha and our ancestors by representing the robes they wore. You make your own, and this sewing is itself a form of extended meditation. Those taking refuge together often form sewing circles. You give it to me no later than the beginning of the retreat, and I write on the underside and return it to you during the ceremony. A sewing pattern is available; allow for at least 25 hours of work. If you absolutely can't sew your own rakusu, you can purchase one from [Four Gates](#) or [Zabu Zabu](#), which also has rakusu rings. Most people also sew a simple envelope for holding their rakusu.

Writing your vows During the ceremony, you read your understandings of each of the sixteen vows. These should be brief, personal, and expressive of the particular rather than the grand and abstract; they don't have to be statements for the ages but should be about how you are exploring each precept in your life right now. It's also important to consider the positive formulation of each precept, so that "not stealing" might become "encouraging generosity".

We hold a series of precepts seminars in the weeks leading up to the ceremony; if you live in the area, please plan to attend. If we have a few people coming from a distance, we'll arrange a telephone seminar as well. These discussions are open to everyone in the community who can commit to coming consistently, whether you're taking vows or not. They're usually conversations of depth, beauty, and honesty about living our lives as fully as we can, with all the challenges that entails.

Participants also commit to steady work in the room during this time, and to making a significant dana offering of time and energy to

the community in the year following the ceremony.

Choosing your dharma name During the ceremony you receive a dharma name, which is written on the back of the rakusu so that it rests next to your heart. You may ask me to just give you a name, but usually we collaborate on it. It's meant to express your aspirations for your practice—how you'd like to grow in the Way. The traditional form is two or three words, one of them something from the natural world (like Moon Gate). Sometimes a group taking refuge together will choose to have part of their name in common as a kind of clan name (Moon Gate, Mountain Gate, etc.). Everyone who takes refuge with Awakened Life receives the 'surname' Wayfarer.

The Three Refuge Vows

I take refuge in awakening
I take refuge in the way
I take refuge in my companions

The Three Pure Vows

I vow to do no harm
I vow to do good
I vow to do good for others

The Ten Bodhisattva Vows

- 1 I vow not to kill
- 2 I vow not to steal
- 3 I vow not to misuse sex
- 4 I vow not to lie
- 5 I vow not to misuse drugs
- 6 I vow not to gossip maliciously
- 7 I vow not to praise myself at the expense of others
- 8 I vow not to be stingy
- 9 I vow not to indulge in anger
- 10 I vow not to disparage awakening, the way, or my companions

REFUGE IN THE STORM

Deciding to participate in a ceremony of taking refuge in the bodhisattva way is a deeply personal matter: It's not required, so it's a request that rises from the heart, usually to acknowledge the sense of coming home one has found in the practice, and the desire to live a life that is more beneficial to oneself and others, a life of greater kindness.

The realm of the vows is not the world of our ordinary culture, with its emphasis on good boundaries and cost/benefit ratios. In taking refuge, we admit our own vulnerability and longing. And taking on the precepts is a beautifully reckless act, in which we make impossible promises and express our willingness to have life act upon us in ways we won't be able to control.

We offer ourselves to the world, asking nothing in return, but trusting that if we make this gesture of intention towards life, life will respond by lifting and carrying us along. To make this gesture is to declare our love of life, or maybe just whisper the possibility of it. Which is to move from the prison of our own small story into the fullness of things. Just this one gesture can make all the difference.

Zen asks us to take seriously what it means to save all beings, or to practice good. In other words, as usual it invites us into a mystery that has no rational answer, but which we must try to answer anyway for our practice to ripen. As we prepare for the ceremony by writing our own understanding of the vows, we discover, often with a certain panic, that while we have a powerful impulse towards the vows, we don't entirely know what they're about or what it means to take them on. Then we realize that we're embarking on a process of deepening and waiting—of being both curious and patient—learning to love the questions themselves, as Rilke would say. For the rest of our lives, these vows will be questions, and for the rest of our lives we will be living our way into the answers.

And so we invoke the spirit of inquiry, exploring deeply what each vow might mean to us, rather than signing on to a predetermined set of rules for living. In this way we follow Gandhi, who remarked that people want a lot of rules so they won't have to be good. We set aside any sense of recipe to go looking for the inherent goodness in ourselves and the world, and then promise to cultivate it.

One thing it's important to remember is that the precepts are for yourself, not a weapon to be wielded against someone else. The precepts aren't about trying to control others or judge them, but to help with our own wondering about how to live. If we allow the precepts to work on us in this way, then should we decide to act in response to something that's happened, we can be more certain that we're not acting out of our own wounds—our desire to “get” somebody or our need to be holier than thou—but with some degree of consciousness and empathy.

Of course, if we don't wield the precepts against others, neither should we wield them against ourselves. Taking the precepts is meant to enrich and enlarge our lives, not to narrow them. They aren't meant to serve a habit of feeling not-good-enough, or to monitor our every thought and intention. This is a practice of generosity, for ourselves and others.

The meaning of our vows arises from an exploration of our own sense of integrity, and of our shadow—and we understand that this is a lifetime practice. It's a process that's paradoxical, frustrating, magical, and sometimes messy. Just like life. We accept that we'll make mistakes along the way, but that doesn't stop us from trying. This is the lotus in the fire, and it's a process full of our sweat, our tears, our doubts, our generousities, and sometimes our remorse.

Luckily we have help, because we also take refuge in our practice and our companions. For some people, this happens the first time they walk into a meditation hall, when they feel they've come home. For others, the sense of homecoming grows slowly over time, with deepening practice, as they become more and more intimate with their own true nature, and the true nature of the world. For a zen person, this is the ultimate homecoming, the one no circumstance can ever take away.

What is this ultimate homecoming? The refuge ceremony contains a beautiful quote from Dogen: “The teisho of the actual body is the harbor and the weir. This is the most important thing in the world.” *Teisho* refers to a dharma talk and literally means “presentation of the shout”. The shout of eternity, the sound of the place we come home to. Our ancestor Prajnatara said, “I am always reciting millions and millions of sutras.” We recite with our words, our silences, our eating breakfast and our meditation. Everything is constantly presenting the shout of eternity in its own unique way: this redwood, that squirrel, the traffic in the distance. Listen, listen. The voice of the stars, the voice of the earthworms, right here. These are the actual bodies, and this is the refuge.