

THE THREE TREASURES PRECEPTS

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Once there was a man, who liked to think of himself as mature and intelligent, as most of us do. He decided to build himself a cabin, and did so. It was a nice cabin, with a door and a window, a ceiling and sturdy roof. He moved in his bed and was happy. Then, a wood rat moved in also, and began to work on the walls and play in the attic space. Understandably, our friend was upset and banged on the walls to chase the rat away. The rat was not impressed, and in fact, brought in a friend and pretty soon there was a family of rats making noise. One night, the frustration became so bad, that our friend took out his gun and fired a few rounds at the rats—through his ceiling. He missed the rats, but his ceiling fell down on his bed. Angrily, our friend shot again, this time through his roof. After a while it began to rain....

The next day our friend kicked at the soggy mess on his bed, and said: "It was a lousy cabin to begin with"; then he left. The wood rats came back and made their home in the ruins.

When we go for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we make for ourselves a shelter where we can find protection in all the various difficulties of life. To this shelter we return over and over again in the course of training, and we rely on it for our spiritual safety.

When we take the Precepts and formally become part of the family of Buddha, the Three Refuges are the first, also known as the Three Treasures. Then come the Three Pure Precepts and the Ten Great Precepts. The last one of these is: 'Do not debase the Three Treasures', thus making the circle complete. This last one is different from the preceding nine, because if it is broken, all the other Precepts lose their home. If we break a Precept and then, in realizing our error, experience contrition, we can turn this karma around at any time by returning to the Three Refuges and renewing our reliance on them. If we have allowed the rats of doubt and self-pity, selfish anger and justification to eat away at our Refuge, it may be harder to do this, but they, too, are slowly converted if we have the faith and courage to keep returning to that Refuge.

The Precept that warns us against debasing the Three Treasures stands apart from all the others in that breaking it affects our own spiritual wellbeing immediately. It points to the serious damage we do to ourselves when we shoot ourselves in the Faith, so to speak, by venting our frustration over one thing or another in our practice and the people we practice with.

Faith, once damaged, is hard to restore. Anger destroys in a moment a relationship that took years to develop. Anyone who has ever had to rebuild their spiritual practice after suffering from the loneliness and despair of having given it up, will tell you they would give something precious if they could undo that break. It can be mended, with patience and perseverance, and the generous help of the Three Treasures, which is always available when we ask. The Buddha sits in stillness and waits for us to turn our hearts around.