

THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE THREE TREASURES

Understanding these three interpretations of the three treasures, we see that each one supports the others and makes our understanding complete.



There are three ways of understanding these three treasures we take refuge in, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

The original understanding is called the “manifested three treasures,” or *genzen sanbo*. In this understanding, Buddha is the person who attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and became a teacher of all the teachers, Dharma is the teaching that was taught by Buddha, and Sangha is the group who studied under Buddha.

Genzen means “to appear” or “to manifest,” and *sanbo* means “three treasures.” Of course there would still be the original truth even if the Buddha had never appeared, but if there is no one who realizes it, then that truth means nothing to us. So in this sense we talk about the “manifested” truth. The truth that is manifested is called Dharma. People who join the practice with harmony and unity are called Sangha.

Another way of understanding the three treasures is called “one body three treasures,” or *ittai sanbo*. *Ittai* is made up of two characters: *ichi*, “one,” and *tai*, “body.” In this understanding, Buddha means the truth which is not divided into various forms, Dharma means the truth itself, and Sangha means not only Buddha’s group but also the state of harmony or unity. In this interpretation, although there are three treasures, they are each an interpretation or expression of the one reality. That is why they are called the “one body three treasures.”

Another understanding of the three treasures is called “cultural three treasures,” or *juji sanbo*. *Juji sanbo* means “existing three treasures” or “maintained three treasures,” which is the way that the three treasures exist within our society or cultural framework. So *juji sanbo* means “cultural three treasures,” the three treasures that exist and are maintained in society.

Within the larger society, we have Buddhist culture. That culture consists of Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist priests and lay followers. These “cultural three treasures” are the three treasures that exist in society. For example,

beautiful buildings and Buddhist art are, perhaps, an expression of Buddha. Scriptures that are beautiful literature are Dharma. The Buddhist organization—priests in robes, as well as lay followers—are Sangha.

To summarize the three understandings, the first is the “manifested three treasures.” The next is the “one body three treasures,” or a philosophical understanding of the oneness of the three treasures. It is necessary to be concentrated on one thing. If we have three objects of worship, it is difficult to be concentrated, so we have to have some philosophical or intellectual understanding of their oneness. The third is the understanding of our daily activities in a Zen temple. This is the “traditional three treasures” or “cultural three treasures.” The cultural three treasures are supported by philosophy, and Buddha’s teaching and character, so the cultural three treasures cannot be separated from the other two.

Understanding these three interpretations of the three treasures, we see that each one supports the others and makes our understanding complete. This is the Soto Zen way of understanding the three treasures. We have the three treasures and we practice zazen—that is our way. Our understanding of practice is very different from that of the other Buddhist schools.


Each school has its own particular understanding of the three treasures. If you study each school’s understanding, you will have perfect understanding; you will find that even though there are many schools, actually the meaning is the same. It must be so because religious life is the expression of our inmost

nature, which is universal to everybody. So, just as Buddha attained enlightenment, we will attain enlightenment. What Buddha was striving for is the same thing we are striving for, because we as human beings all have the same inmost nature.

We project our inmost nature onto the objective world as Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. This is nothing but our inmost desire to want to have something we can accept; we strive to have something acceptable in its true sense. You create God, and you strive for God, so this means that you are striving for yourself. As we all have the same human nature, this must be the same for all of us.

THE THREE COLLECTIVE PURE PRECEPTS

That is our vow as Buddhists: to take care of ourselves, to take care of our desires and instincts, and to take care of others' life.



The usual understanding is that worldly life is based on instincts and desires, and that religious life is based on some pure mind that is completely different from those worldly desires. Because of this understanding, at the time of Buddha, people in India practiced asceticism to limit their physical needs and to attain the liberation brought about by this pure mind or pure spirit. That was their idea of religion, but Buddhism is completely different from that.

Buddhism, our way, is not the extreme of an asceticism that limits our physical needs in order to attain spiritual power or the freedom of our pure

mind. Our way does not fall into that extreme, and it does not fall into some other extreme either.

In Buddhism we accept the instincts and desires that we actually have. We cannot deny that we have various desires. Whether they are good or bad, anyway we have them! As long as we actually have them, we have to accept them; they are part of the truth that we should accept. To say they are bad is a self-centered idea. If we see “things as it is,” we have to accept our desires as part of that. That is our way.

We have and accept our various desires whether they are good or bad, but we cannot leave them just to go as they go. It is necessary to work on them so that we can appreciate our original nature. If we do not take care of those desires, eventually we will become disgusted with our instincts and desires, and also with our true nature. As ascetic religions say, if we do not take care of those desires, sooner or later we will be left with depravity or destruction. Nothing good will result from it. But this does not mean that our original nature is bad. It is good. That we do not take care of it is our fault and our lack of consideration.

This is why we have the three collective pure precepts. Along with the original instincts and desires that we have, we should also have the desire to take care of the desires, to take care of ourselves, and to take care of others. That is our vow as Buddhists: to take care of ourselves, to take care of our desires and instincts, and to take care of others' life. This is the fundamental meaning of the three collective pure precepts: the embracing of good behavior, the embracing of good deeds, and the embracing of all beings and saving them.