

## On Taking Refuge

*By Chamgon Kenting Tai Situpa*

Conducting the ceremony of Refuge is the transmission of the formal procedure by which individual people confirm that they are Buddhists. We make this commitment at the beginning of our life as Buddhists. We also constantly renew the commitment by taking Refuge again and again, throughout our lives until we truly become Buddha by reaching enlightenment.

We begin with Refuge, we live with Refuge and, appropriately, end with Refuge. Refuge is an on-going commitment for all of us. Some of you may have been Buddhists for a long time and have said the Refuge prayer many hundreds of times. But however long we have been Buddhists, provided that we have true understanding, we shall learn something about Refuge every time we repeat the Refuge prayer. This way it is quite wonderful. But if we do not understand Refuge clearly, then just repeating these words so many times can become nonsense. No matter how often we say it we must always try to mean every single word of this prayer.

We only really understand Refuge when we truly realize what a Buddha is. It is a very deep experience. 'Taking Refuge' is not just some kind of ceremony to 'Join the club' where you get some sort of club card and a club name—it is not like that. We begin each session of prayer, meditation or practice, with the Refuge prayer. If the practice has four sessions in a day, we say the Refuge prayer four times; if the practice has six sessions a day then we say the Refuge prayer six times, and every time we repeat the prayer, we should try to do so with deeper meaning than the time before. Sometimes we manage to achieve this, sometimes we do not. If we have three sessions a day, by the time we reach the third session we will have said the Refuge prayer three times that day; whether the quality is better or worse at the third time, only you can tell.

There is the Hinayana way of understanding Refuge in Buddha, dharma and sangha; there is the Mahayana way and there is the Vajrayana way. I am speaking here today as a Vajrayana practitioner and a Vajrayana practitioner of the Mahamudra lineage. I shall be saying how we define Buddha, dharma, and sangha and how we define taking Refuge in what we call these 'Three Jewels'.

Taking Refuge is normally done using the Refuge text according to the Hinayana aspect of Refuge. As we are Vajrayana practitioners, we say the words according to the Hinayana tradition but the meaning we have in our mind is according to the Vajrayana tradition. Ultimately the meaning is the same; all traditions take Refuge in Buddha, dharma and sangha. But for Vajrayana practitioners a transformation takes place in the mind. When we say "I take Refuge as long as I live..." that makes it Hinayana Refuge as the phrase "...as long as I live..." means "until I die" which is only this life. The Mahayana Refuge prayer, which acts as a base for the Vajrayana prayer, says, "I take Refuge until I become enlightened..."

In the Refuge ceremony that we perform, where the text says "I take Refuge as long as I live..." we transform the phrase "...as long as I live..." in our mind so that it becomes, "...as long as I live as a sentient being...". This implies "...until become enlightened, until I become a Buddha...." which is probably many, many life-times

away.

If we choose to, we can make a great issue out of these differences—some scholars have endless debates! But scholar or not, the inner transformation takes place regardless. What is more, if we become too concerned with what the words really mean, then perhaps the inner transformation takes a little longer. We have to forget the intellectual approach and say the words from our heart.

Sometimes I drift into the intellectual approach myself. It is quite interesting how you can become tied up in words! You have been saying the same words over and over again and then suddenly you try to define them, making a great, complicated issue out of what you really meant! The intellectual aspect of anything, including Buddhism, works this way. We can write volumes of books, we can re-define and argue the old belief systems, we can create new belief systems and so on—but for what purpose?

We could, if we wished, have endless debates over the phrases "...until I become Buddha..." or "...as long as I live..." but as a Vajrayana practitioner it will somehow just happen. Moreover, sometime in the future you may take the Bodhisattva vow. In this you will renew your Refuge commitment and say, "...until I attain Buddhahood ... I take Refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha... " The only really important point is that 'Taking Refuge' means that we are like refugees running for shelter, a place of safety, from the storms of life.

Taking Refuge in Buddha is the first and most important of the 'three refuges'. It is why we call ourselves 'Buddhists'. "I take Refuge in the Buddha" means that we have complete trust and total faith in the Buddha. It means that we consider the Lord Buddha our ultimate master. From the Vajrayana approach we believe that our essence, our true nature, is Buddha and pray that this seed of Buddha-nature which is deep inside all of us, will develop and grow until it takes over completely.

We wish to become a Buddha and we have trust in the Buddha—that is good but how do we do it? How do we truly take Refuge in Buddha? We do this by learning and by practicing the dharma. According to the Vajrayana approach, the dharma is an inseparable aspect of the Buddha; a manifestation of the Buddha. Before Prince Siddhartha became enlightened he was not the Buddha and whatever he said was not drama. But after his enlightenment, his revelations, his words to the people and to other beings present were those of the Buddha and this is what we call dharma. The dharma is the demonstration of the Buddha's limitless realization, presented as verbal instructions and passed down the centuries to us today. By taking Refuge in the dharma, by learning and practicing the dharma, we are also confirming our Refuge in the Buddha.

The third form of Refuge is taking Refuge in the sangha. There are many levels of sangha. The highest, the most sacred level of sangha is the enlightened disciples of the Buddha, such as the eight major bodhisattvas, which include Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara. Not all these bodhisattvas were monks or nuns, but they were all enlightened and we go to them for Refuge.

We take Refuge with our teacher as part of the sangha whether that teacher is ordained or not or already enlightened or not. We take Refuge in the ordained sangha and in the lay followers of the Buddha—everyone who has taken Refuge.

How do we take Refuge in the sangha? We do this through the teachings, the revelations of the Buddha's enlightenment which are contained in the sangha in several ways. Firstly, the words, the dharma. The lineage of the intellectual explanations of the Buddha's teaching, the scholarly understanding, is held by the sangha. Secondly, and more important, the practice of the instructions. When the sangha actually put the teachings into practice, they will acquire a realization of the meaning that is above an intellectual understanding.

'I understand' and 'I realize' are two different things. The 'understanding' aspect is intellectual; the 'realization' aspect is the living experience and is superior to the intellectual understanding. Understanding is necessary, but the realization, the putting-into-practice of what you have understood is the living lineage.

There are many different practices for different occasions—too many to discuss here. There are transmissions of ritual, and transmissions of initiations to be absorbed on the physical, the mental and the oral level and even contained within the sound of the ceremony. The *lung* is a reading transmission where you absorb the inner meaning from the sound of the words. These are all part of the lineage contained by the sangha.

The most important transmissions are the Bodhisattva vows, the Tantric vows, the ordination vows for monks and nuns, and the precepts for lay people. Ordination or Vinaya vows and precepts are contained on a physical level and should not be broken. Vows like the Bodhisattva vow are on both the mental and physical level.

In this way the lineage of the Buddha is maintained and living not in one member of the sangha or in one particular group, but in all members of the sangha. Some members of the sangha may be great monks and nuns but not necessarily enlightened or realized. Others may not be ordained, but may be great practitioners and have great realization, so the lineage is maintained there also. Others may not be realized but may have a very profound understanding of the lineage of the intellectual aspect of Lord Buddha's teaching and thus maintain this aspect of the dharma. The correct understanding of Buddhism is also a lineage in itself. In Tibetan we call it *She Ju*. *She* means 'talking' and *Ju* means 'lineage'—the lineage of teaching, the intellectual aspect.

However you must be a little cautious of listening to someone who has only an intellectual understanding of the teachings. When someone knows a great deal they may think they understand everything very clearly, but if they do not have realization they can misinterpret the true meaning.

All these aspects are contained within the sangha. So when we say, "I take Refuge in the sangha" it means, "I learn and receive from these teachers the transmission of the living lineages of Lord Buddha's teachings." These teachings are the dharma which is an inseparable part of the Buddha. The dharma is the manifestation in words of the enlightenment of the Lord Buddha. This is what we have to understand when we take Refuge. This is what we wish to receive and this is what we wish to practice.

Soon after the Buddha attained enlightenment, five disciples took Refuge with him. These first five were the beginning of the Refuge lineage; they gave Refuge to their own disciples who in turn gave Refuge to theirs. So it continued until today, passed

down through the centuries from teacher to disciple in an unbroken transmission. And when we take Refuge we participate in the same initiation, the same blessing, the same commitment, that the Lord Buddha gave to his first five disciples.

The person who gives Refuge must have received Refuge themselves. I first took Refuge as a young boy, with His Holiness XVI Gyalwa Karmapa, the head of the Kagyu Lineage. After that, every time I received an empowerment, every time I received a transmission, I received Refuge again. So I have received Refuge from many masters but my first one, my main one, was with my supreme Master, my Tsawe-lama, His Holiness, the Karmapa.

When you understand the significance of taking Refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha then I think you will understand the importance of the lineage. It is of the greatest importance. Why? For example, if I had not taken Refuge myself and if I had no awareness of the importance of the lineage, I might just go to a library and find a book with the text of the Refuge ceremony. I could then perform a sort of Refuge ceremony reading the words from the library book and finding a nice name for you—very easy! No problem! It would look as if you had received Refuge, but it would be a 'stage-show'. A true Refuge ceremony would not have taken place because there was no trace of lineage. We have only truly taken Refuge if we have received it from an authorized teacher who holds the transmission of the lineage coming down from the Buddha.

The lineage and its transmission enter everything connected with the dharma. It is important technically and spiritually. It is the essential quality that distinguishes the true, the authentic dharma. True Buddhism is Buddhism according to the continuation of the lineage and none other. The lineage has to be protected. For example, in Tibet one of the main activities of Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, known as Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, was to revive the dying lineages. He travelled to far corners of the country sometimes to find a relatively insignificant person with no rank or position, but who was the lineage holder of a particular transmission. This way he received transmissions from over two hundred masters to ensure that the lineages in danger of disappearing, would be revived through him. Because of his activity all the major lineages of Vajrayana Buddhism are still with us to learn, to practice and to implement.

There are a few Tibetan Buddhist texts for which the lineage has been lost. In these cases the texts cannot be practiced but we keep the texts on the shrine and just read them for study and academic research. It is absolutely crucial that all practitioners understand the importance of lineage. The Buddha himself predicted that Buddhism will eventually become 'imitation' Buddhism. By that he meant that the texts, forms, names, images and such like will survive but the real essence contained in the lineage, will vanish. This will not happen tomorrow, but some time in the future, the genuine, true Buddhism will have disappeared and an imitation version will be there in its place. There will be institutions and courses; there will be books, there could be all kinds of new groups and new activities—they could be good, but they will not be true Buddhism because the lineage will have died out or been ignored. I do not remember the precise time for this prediction but we have to have a sense of responsibility and take care that we do not contribute to this corruption. For all these reasons the lineage is essential. The lineage is contained by the sangha. The 'sangha' is all of us—everyone who has taken Refuge, monks, nuns and lay people.

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