



Chapter 4

BUDDHIST PRACTICE

REFUGE

REFUGE REFERS TO TAKING refuge in the Buddha, dharma and Sangha. Our Master, the Buddha, is our ultimate refuge because our ultimate aim is to reach Buddhahood. We take refuge in the Buddha because we believe in his teachings, and we wish to follow him.

We take refuge in the dharma as the path. The dharma is the Buddha's teaching, the path that he has shown us. The Buddha taught in order to help all sentient beings become free from the suffering of samsara, just as he had. He taught so that we could also attain enlightenment and become free of the effects of conditioned existence, just as he had.

Taking refuge in the dharma means taking refuge in the Lord Buddha's teaching. It means learning the Lord Buddha's teachings, contemplating their meaning and, after we have understood them, implementing them. It means applying them in our day-to-day lives, over and over again, until we become Buddhas. The dharma is relevant

right up until Buddhahood. Only then has the purpose of learning the dharma been completed. Until then we should continue to learn the dharma.

The sangha by definition – or more specifically the holy, extraordinary sangha – are the bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and so on. Of course we take refuge in them, but the sangha is also the community of fully ordained monks and nuns and those lay teachers who guide us. We take refuge in the sangha as our guides and friends.

It is from them that we receive the dharma's unbroken lineage transmission, and through this lineage that we receive the dharma. So only through them will we truly understand the Lord Buddha's teachings. First the Buddha taught the dharma himself and his disciples heard, understood and practiced it. Then these disciples taught the dharma, and their disciples heard, understood and practiced it. This process of passing dharma from master to disciple – uninterrupted, uncorrupted, unchanged – has continued for the past twenty-five centuries of Buddhist history. What Lord Buddha taught has been re-taught again and again by all the masters of the past to all the disciples of the past until the masters of the present and is now being passed on to the disciples of the present. It has not been changed or corrupted – it is the pure teachings of the Buddha. This purity is only possible through the continuation of an unbroken lineage of transmission, the lineage the sangha passes down.

When we wish to receive the teachings of the Buddha the sangha become our teachers. We depend upon the sangha because until we become enlightened they will help, protect and assist us. When we have doubts they are there to answer our questions. In times of distress they help us dissolve our confusion, encourage and bless us. This is taking refuge in the sangha, and we need to do this until we attain Buddhahood also.

Our gurus represent all three: the Buddha, dharma and sangha. They themselves are the sangha, the teachings they transmit to us are the dharma and as the origin of these teachings is the Lord Buddha and their lineage is unbroken, they speak the words of the Buddha. The dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya are all represented

through these teachings. In a practical manner, this means our gurus represent the Buddha, dharma and sangha.

In this way we take refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha and with this understanding we formalize our Buddhist beliefs by participating in the refuge ceremony. In this refuge ceremony, we first make three prostrations towards the altar that represents the Buddha, dharma and sangha, then we sit on our right knee and hold our hands together. This is the same physical posture the Buddha's first five disciples adopted during the first turning of the wheel of dharma. To remember the Buddha, to remember his first turning of the wheel, we sit in this posture. After his enlightenment the Buddha Shakyamuni gave refuge to five ascetics, and through this they became his first disciples. Later, of course, the Buddha had countless disciples and beings continue to become his disciples up till this day, 2500 years later. By taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha we confirm we are one of these disciples.

The refuge ceremony consists of recitations, but its most important part is the act of confirmation. In the ceremony we make very clear that our refuge is in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. Merely reciting things after the preceptor is not enough; we have to confirm that we take refuge truly and whole-heartedly under the Buddha, dharma and sangha. This perception is extremely important, it is the basis for refuge.

The text for the refuge ceremony begins, "I take refuge from today onwards, as long as I live, in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha." This is the essence of the recitation. After this we request the lineage, through the preceptor, to grant us refuge. The most important thing to remember during these recitations is that you are receiving refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha because you wish to become a follower of the Buddha.

The lineage of refuge, which began when Lord Buddha gave refuge to those first five disciples, has continued for the past 2500 years uncontaminated, unbroken and uninterrupted. I first received it from my supreme master His Holiness the 16th Karmapa. Since then I have continued to renew my refuge with many masters. I last renewed my refuge with His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, when I visited

his monastery while he was in Tibet. This is my refuge lineage and when I conduct the refuge ceremony the participants become part of it. They join the ocean of countless beings who are the Lord Buddha's followers and receive his blessings. This is what it means to receive the transmission of refuge.

So when I give refuge, I am continuing the lineage that the Buddha started, that is all. I am able to give refuge because my master gave me refuge. It is not as if I am giving it on my own behalf. Those taking refuge are like the light bulb on the ceiling and I am like its switch, but the light does not really come from the switch, it comes from the powerhouse, and Buddha Shakyamuni is the powerhouse. The reason the light comes on is because there is an unbroken line from the powerhouse to the switch and then to the bulb. Likewise the lineage of the Buddha continues unbroken through to those taking refuge.

This lineage continues because of two things: devotion and compassion. Masters should have compassion for their disciples and disciples should have devotion to their masters. If this is the case, the line will not break. When these are missing, the line breaks and no matter how intensely you push the switch the light will not come on, it will not shine. You can beg the switch as hard as you like, and you can change the light-bulb a hundred times, but the light will not come on. There may be nothing wrong with the switch or the bulb, but if the line is broken the light will not come on. Fortunately for us the line is unbroken and we can still receive refuge. Still I do not want people to misunderstand and think that I can give refuge myself. I can only give refuge because of my lineage.

When we take refuge for the first time we also have a small lock of our hair cut from the crown of our head and offered to the altar of the Buddha. After this, blessed water is poured on us. This symbolizes that we are sacrificing our body, speech and mind to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings. This is not a bodhisattva vow, but our refuge vows also involve this concept. This ritual also symbolizes that our taking refuge is serious because our head is without question the most important part of our body and the crown is the highest, most sacred part of our head. We call this

the *dra-pul*: *dra* means hair, and *pul* means “the highest offering” – it is a symbolic gesture. At this stage you also usually receive a dharma name if you don’t have one, and this somehow symbolizes that you are a follower of Lord Buddha in this particular lineage.

When taking refuge we also say prayers for bodhichitta to develop. It is appropriate for us to add these prayers of aspiration because even though refuge is fundamental for Buddhists, as followers of Vajrayana Buddhism we also need bodhichitta. In order to receive the transmission of bodhichitta you need to take the bodhisattva vow, but when taking refuge with a preceptor it is very positive to have the bodhisattva attitude. This is why we say, “I am taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha because I wish to help all sentient beings become free from samsara. To do this I wish to become a Buddha and to do that I wish to become a follower of the Buddha.” To add this kindness, this compassion, this bodhichitta, to our motivation is very beneficial. We should be clear that this, in itself, is not the bodhisattva vow though.

After we say our final recitation of the refuge precepts we should try to make it very clear to ourselves that we have taken refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha and that we are followers of the Lord Buddha. We should also think that we will do our best to be a sincere, happy, positive and helpful Buddhist and respect all other religions and ideas, because they are all derived from the primordial wisdom of others. We should think that we are Buddhists and as Buddhists we will respect everyone.

At the end of the refuge ceremony the preceptor says *tab yin no*, which means something like, “It is complete,” but is very hard to translate. Those taking the vows reply, “*Lek so*.” This literally means “good.”

Having performed this refuge ceremony we officially become Buddhists. In my opinion it does not mean we have changed anything, though. According to our teachings each and every one of us is already more than Buddhists – essentially we are Buddhas. Still, in taking these refuge precepts we have decided to follow the path the Buddha taught in order to fully develop our destiny, the ultimate potential we all have. For this reason we participate in the living lineage of the

Lord Buddha's teaching and this begins with taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha.

Of course, many of us may have been born into a Buddhist family; our parents are Buddhists, so we become Buddhists through birth. We may have been born into Buddhist families but we don't personally become Buddhists until we take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. This is our way of confirming that we are truly Buddhist individually.

PRECEPTS

By taking refuge we commit ourselves to the Buddhist path. In order to progress on the path we need to conduct ourselves accordingly. For this purpose we take precepts. The five precepts for laypeople are not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie and not to take anything that intoxicates you. When you take these precepts you can take one, two, three, four or all five of them. The person giving the vows says a prayer that includes all of them and you mentally take the ones you want to take. When taking these precepts it is better not to bite off more than you can chew. Only take the precepts you think you can keep for the rest of your life. There is no point taking precepts that you don't think you can keep, just make a wish to be able to take them in the future.

We need to be very clear about what the vows are. "Not killing," in the context of the vow, only means not knowingly, intentionally killing something. Otherwise drinking a glass of water would be breaking this vow, squashing lots of bugs every step we take would be breaking this vow, breathing in germs would be breaking this vow, and taking medicine to make our stomachs okay would also be breaking this vow. We shouldn't pretend that these things don't count, but we have to be very clear in our mind that our vow is to not go out there and kill something intentionally. We still have to take medicine, we still have to eat food, and we still have to drink water. We just have to face the reality that the things we do to survive, even drinking a glass of water, are not one hundred percent okay. Even if

we grew our own vegetables we would need to spray them and therefore harm insects, otherwise insects would eat them and there would be nothing left for us.

We have to do these things to maintain our body but they are not one hundred percent okay. This is why the Buddha called our bodies *Sakche dugden che pungbo*, “A stained heap of the truth of suffering.” To maintain this heap of flesh and bones, we have to feed, water and protect it. By maintaining it in this way we are creating karma; there is no way to avoid that. When we take life beyond this maintenance though, this is “killing” as described in this vow. So we need to be very clear about what we are actually saying when we vow not to kill.

When we say we are not going to steal, we again run into similar problems. Everything in this world belongs to everybody, everything. Birds, gods, asuras, ghosts, animals, human beings, everybody owns everything, but we push everybody else aside and make out as if things are really ours. Take a tree, for example: it is a home and food for birds and insects, it shelters monkeys and apes, but we cut it down and turn it into nice tables. My house, for example, is full of wooden furniture. I like wooden furniture. We need to recognize that this is also stealing because it is taking something that belongs to everyone.

This is also true for milk. Cows do not voluntarily give us milk; they make it for baby cows. Taking milk is actually stealing – we tie the baby cow somewhere and the mother cow somewhere else so we can milk her. This is not what we are vowing not to do, though, and we have to be very clear about these things. When we say “I am not going to steal” this only means that we are not going to knowingly take somebody else’s money or property when it has not been intentionally given to us. It does not mean we are not going to eat cheese or vegetables or drink milk.

The next vow is not to lie. Every morning when we meet our friends they ask us how we are and we say, “I am fine, thank you.” This is a lie. Nobody is fine, everybody has problems. There is nobody on this Earth who does not have any problems whatsoever, but we don’t talk about these things; we just say, “I am fine.” When we take

this vow we are not promising to refrain from this kind of lie, we are talking about intentionally lying to gain something for ourselves, regardless of the consequences to others. We are talking about twisting things so that we fool others and get what we want.

There are also good lies. Say for example there were three big macho men teasing one little thin guy and they have hammers, chains and everything but the thin guy manages to get away from them because being smaller means he can run faster. Say then that this thin guy was hiding in a big dust bin next to us, and the three big macho men, with all their weapons, were to ask us where the thin guy was, should we tell them the truth? Would that be a good idea? I think it would be better to lie. I think it would be better to tell them he went somewhere else. Then, after the three macho men have left I think it would be a good idea to tell the thin guy in the dustbin that they have gone and he should run the other way. We shouldn't be naive about the truth or telling lies. We say we are not going to lie, but we do not mean this literally, we mean that we are not going to tell lies for our own purpose with no consideration for others. The worst from among these types of lies is the spiritual lie, to lie about your spiritual accomplishments, but I don't think you have to worry about that. This is something I need to worry about as someone teaching the dharma.

To refrain from sexual misconduct is the next precept. There are many details within this vow but what it really boils down to, if you are not celibate, is that you will only have sex with your partner. Anything outside of this relationship is sexual misconduct.

The last precept is not to take anything intoxicating, except as medicine. It is not okay to take intoxicants for entertainment, or any other reason apart from medicinal ones. If your doctor tells you that you should take a drug, you should take it, even if it is intoxicating. For example, the medicine I am taking at the moment to get rid of my running nose makes my pupils a little bigger than usual. Still it is okay for me to take it because I am ill. If you are sick, take medicine, the Buddha permitted this. This doesn't mean we can use this exception as an excuse though. It doesn't mean we can have a little glass of wine to go to sleep just because our doctor suggested we do

so. It is only if we are suffering from a genuine illness and have medicine prescribed by a doctor, that it is okay if that medicine intoxicates us.

As I said, you can take one, two, three, four or five of these precepts. Taking these precepts benefits us more than simply not engaging in these actions. By taking these precepts we are intentionally not engaging in these activities, and this is much, much more beneficial than not engaging in them by accident. If you already behave as if you have these vows, then taking them makes your behavior more meaningful. These vows come from a lineage and taking them means you have the opportunity to make your natural behavior more noble and sacred.