

Refuge

By Chamgon Kenting Tai Situpa

(a teaching given before Rinpoche performed a Refuge ceremony)

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For those of you who are taking refuge for the first time, this means that you are officially becoming Buddhists. The meaning of officially becoming Buddhist is simply a confirmation. Otherwise all sentient beings are already 'more than Buddhists'. They all have Buddha nature as their essence and by nature in terms of their potential, they are Buddha. Thus they are 'MORE THAN Buddhists'. But until they recognise this potential they will remain ordinary sentient beings that might wander in samsara almost forever. Ultimately, every sentient being will be enlightened so nobody will wander in samsara forever - but almost!

So our purpose in taking refuge is to acknowledge that our potential is Buddha and our destination is Buddha. Therefore, we follow the Lord Buddha who has already attained the liberation that is our destination. And we follow his teaching as our path and his disciples as our friends, guides and companions on the path to liberation. This is the reason we take refuge, and after taking refuge we officially become Buddhists. If somebody asks "what are you?" first of all you will say, "I am a human being." Then the other person will say, "I know. But still I want to know what you are." Then you can say "I'm a Buddhist" and the other person will be happy, because that person is really wondering who you are, so that question will be answered and the person will think, "well okay, now I know who he is, or now I know who she is" So that is one purpose.

Another purpose is this; in everyone there is the potential for great liberation. There is also the potential in everything to be 'ways and means' of attaining that liberation. Still, it makes a very big difference whether we have a lineage to transform our unenlightened manifestation into enlightenment potential and to reach an enlightened destination. Whether we can be sure that the things that we do, think and say—all the things we are involved in—are really meaningful. And whether we follow the lineage, because we know very well that Lord Buddha is not just a professor, not just a scientist or a mathematician or a historian, definitely not a politician! The teachings given by lord Buddha are a manifestation of his realisation and his liberation. It is not the result of his homework or research. Therefore, it is not subject to any limitation whatsoever. For this reason the lineage makes the

difference. Good intentions are good but the lineage is holy and profound. The blessing is there in the lineage. So that is another reason we take refuge.

After lord Buddha attained enlightenment, all of his disciples took refuge from him. Ever since then, his disciples have given refuge to their disciples, and this has continued up to today. I received my first refuge from His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa when I was 18 months old. Since then I have been a Buddhist, and today you are participating in and receiving this transmission which I have received. So, through this, you will have the transmission and you will become a lineage holder of the refuge. You will hold and possess and play host to the transmission of the refuge. This makes another purpose of taking refuge very clear.

Now as far as the particular details of taking refuge are concerned, as you know, it means taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha. The Buddha is the lord Buddha who attained enlightenment in India over two thousand five hundred years ago. The dharma is his teaching, his advice and his command. And the sangha are those who receive the transmission of his teaching and his blessing, and who obey his command—those who practise this instruction and follow in his footsteps.

We take refuge in the Buddha as our ultimate aim; some people don't like to say aim because they think it is too dualistic. Then lets call it destination if that makes it better. But it is just a difference in wording g. As long as we are not enlightened we will be dualistic whether we say it or not. Anyway that is our refuge in the Buddha.

Refuge in the dharma means to attain that liberation which the Buddha has attained. If we want to see oranges grow in our garden, we must plant orange trees. We can't plant cauliflower and expect to grow oranges in our garden. It will not happen. To attain liberation, we have to follow the path of liberation in order to accumulate the necessary merit and wisdom. By doing so, liberation will be the result of that path. So that which is shown by Buddha is the dharma and we take refuge in the dharma in order to attain enlightenment.

Thus, taking refuge in Buddha is our ultimate aim and Buddha is our ultimate master. At the same time taking refuge in Buddha also confirms our potential. If we don't have the potential to be free and liberated then trying to be liberated is useless, impossible and even foolish. But we are Buddha by nature. Every single one of us has liberation, freedom and enlightenment as our ultimate potential. That is quite clear. I don't think I have met anybody who is ultimately content and has nothing whatsoever to complain about. I haven't met one single person like that. I

don't know if you have met any or not. But that shows me that the ultimate potential of all of these people, and of all sentient beings, is freedom. Nothing is good enough for them except their ultimate, limitless liberation or, in other words, enlightenment. I am 100% convinced that they will not stop at any cost. They will wander endlessly in samsara, until they are fully enlightened. So, this shows very, very clearly that our ultimate potential has no limitations. That is why we don't like any kind of limitation. That is why we like to be free. And there is no limit on how free we want to be! If we don't have wings, we would like to have them. We might even draw people with wings because we don't have them. But if we had wings I'm sure we would find something else to add to them. Maybe a crown, you know. Anyway this is what I believe Buddha nature to be—the ultimate potential for freedom and liberation. That is what I was taught and this is how I see it. So that is the meaning of taking refuge in the Buddha and the dharma.

We take refuge in the sangha because, although we have the right intention and sincerity, that is not enough. Even if we are sincere, we will make mistakes. Even if we are honest, we will still make mistakes. Therefore, we follow the Lord Buddha's teachings, which are transmitted from person to person, so that is as close as possible to what he meant rather than to how somebody interprets it. Of course, every teaching is an interpretation, but when it comes from a teacher of the lineage then it is not very much of an interpretation. The lineage of transmission that comes from Lord Buddha has been physically and technically unbroken for the past two thousand five hundred years. So for this reason we take refuge in the sangha. We learn from the sangha, we follow their advice and we receive transmissions from them. This then, is the definition of taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha.

Once we receive the refuge, we have to be able to maintain this transmission; therefore we have the refuge vow, which is a very simple vow. Our ultimate aim should always be the liberation and enlightenment of our ultimate potential: the Buddha nature, Buddhahood. That is the commitment of taking refuge in Buddha. Taking refuge in dharma, we have to do our best to avoid anything that is harmful or negative for others or ourselves. We have to do our best. Of course we shouldn't be unrealistic. At the beginning we sometimes might be a little naïve and get confused because even to walk one step has consequences. Even to breathe has consequences. We might be breathing in some small sentient beings. We might be stepping on somebody's son and daughter, or father and mother, or grandfather and

grandmother, or their grandchildren, you know. This whole earth is full of living beings: big ones, small ones, visible ones, and invisible ones—all kinds of beings.

But we should not take relative truth as ultimate truth. We shouldn't worry too much but just try to do our best and not do things that are unnecessary for others and us. We should try our best to be mindful and aware about what we say, what we do and what we think. The thinking part is the hardest, so we have to leave that part a little bit open. But what we do, we can improve, and what we say we can also improve. So that is the commitment of taking refuge in the dharma.

Taking refuge in the sangha means that we try to be good friends and examples for everybody who is related to us in one way or another. We try to avoid those who are involved in heavy negativity until we think that we will be able to help them instead of being influenced by them. Until then, we pray for them but physically, we keep our distance. But once we are confident that they can't influence us and that we will be able to make a difference to them by being close to them, then we do that. This kind of mindfulness and awareness is our commitment when we take refuge in the sangha. All of this can be summarised into a simple principle: We try our hardest to make the best possible use we can of this precious human life, to make it as positive as possible and as meaningful as possible, to attain liberation, and to attain realisation. This is, I think, the simple way to acknowledge the refuge vow.

When I say to attain liberation and enlightenment, it could mean all different kinds of things. I would like to share with you how I myself regard enlightenment. If I manage to improve by 1% before the end of this life, then I am sure that in 100 lives I will be Buddha. For me, that is fantastic, because in 100 lives, I will be Buddha! But that 1% improvement is not only in one thing, it's in everything. I'm being quite ambitious though, but I do think it is possible. That is how I look at the possibility of improvement in my kind of life, and I think each one of you can see this very clearly, and can make clear, down-to-earth aspirations and inspirations about what kinds of improvements, developments and maturity you can attain in this lifetime. You should make a sincere, clear and definite commitment towards that.

But our prayers should be limitless. I will never say "May I only improve 1% in this lifetime" I will never say "may I attain enlightenment now before I get up. And may I attain enlightenment on this seat." I will never say that, because that is prayer, it is aspiration and inspiration. If there is the possibility then the actual enlightenment will not even take one second, then when it happens it happens and

we pray for that. We also say, "May I attain enlightenment and lead every single sentient being to liberation," We say that and we mean it, if that is what happens. But at the same time true maturity happens not by accident or by mistake. I don't think any sentient being has been enlightened by mistake. So in this way I think there are two sides to it. One is ultimate and the other is relative.

After taking refuge you have to be able to make the most of it. You have to make your refuge meaningful. You have to be able to cherish and uphold the refuge transmission that you are going to receive. So for that reason we make this kind of basic vow or commitment a firm, happy one. Sometimes when people hear about the commitment and vows something else happens, all of a sudden! But it shouldn't be like that. You should be happy and honoured and uplifted and always fresh about it. That is the definition of being positive, and that should definitely be there when you take refuge.

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