



Taking Refuge

From a refuge ceremony given by Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

The idea of taking refuge, or going for refuge, is based on the understanding that throughout beginningless time we have been immersed in a state that is called cyclic existence, or *samsara*. This is a state, in which we have very little freedom, or control over what happens to us. The purpose, therefore, of seeking refuge is to achieve a state of freedom from cyclic existence.

It is fairly obvious that the only being who can provide authentic refuge is someone who him- or herself is already free from the cyclic existence. Therefore the first and primary source of refuge is the Buddha, the Awakened One. Although the Buddha began as a person exactly like us, through his practice of the Dharma, he relinquished all that is to be relinquished – all obscurations – and he perfectly realized everything that is to be realized. Because of his perfect purification, or relinquishment, and perfect realization, the Buddha can actually protect us from cyclic existence. Therefore we take refuge in the Buddha.

Having gone for refuge to the Buddha, you cannot simply sit around and expect the protection to happen by itself because the point of going for refuge to the Buddha is to become just like the Buddha. You, therefore, have to do what he did, which is practice Dharma. That is why having gone for refuge to the Buddha, we also go for refuge to his teachings, the Dharma.

You might ask, “How can we learn the teachings of the Buddha – he passed away more than twenty-five hundred years ago?” Since the time of the Buddha, his teachings have been passed down through an unbroken succession of individuals who have practiced and transmitted these teachings. This succession is what we call the Sangha, or community. In order to have access to the Dharma, the Buddha’s teachings, we go for refuge to the Sangha or community. The function of the Sangha is to serve as guides and friends who give us access to the Buddha’s teachings. In summary, the sources of refuge are these three: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

The intention with which you go for refuge could be either one of these two: a lesser intention, characteristic of a lesser vehicle, or a vaster intention, characteristic of what we call the greater vehicle. If you think, “I am taking refuge so I can free myself alone from cyclic existence,” this is an acceptable motivation for the vow of refuge, but it is inferior to the motivation recommended in the greater vehicle, the Mahayana. With the wish to liberate only yourself, you may achieve liberation, but you cannot achieve perfect awakening, or buddhahood. Therefore it is recommended, in the context of the greater vehicle, that you take the vow of refuge with the greater intention of bringing about the liberation not only for yourself, but also for all other beings. In fact, it is this vast intention, which characterizes and gives its name to what we call the Mahayana, or the greater vehicle.

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It is important to reflect upon the fact that you are not alone. There are innumerable beings in much the same plight as you are. Therefore, when you take the vow of refuge, think that you take it not simply for your own good, but in order to bring all beings without exception to a state of perfect awakening, a state of buddhahood. Furthermore, when you take the vow of refuge, remember that the protection that you are requesting from the sources of refuge is not merely temporary protection from temporary sufferings, or adversities. It is the final and ultimate protection, which will lead you to the achievement of buddhahood. Therefore, according to the Mahayana, when you take the vow of refuge, you take it with a vast intention and for a tremendous duration. The vast intention is your intention to bring about the buddhahood for all beings. The duration, for which you take refuge is not merely for this life, but from now until you achieve the state of perfect awakening.

The way that the actual vow of refuge is transmitted is through your repeating the vow three times after me, the preceptor. At the end of the third repetition you will have received the vow of refuge.

Although you will be repeating essentially the same thing three times, you will be thinking of something slightly different each time. During the first repetition, when you repeat the vow of refuge, you are essentially repeating it as a request addressed to all buddhas and bodhisattvas represented by the Sangha assembled here, a request that the Mahayana vow of refuge be transmitted to you. During this first repetition you will at a certain point be asked to state your names. At that time you may all say your names simultaneously.

During the second repetition, which will be done in the same way, you should think that although buddhas and bodhisattvas have consented to bestow the vow of refuge, if you lack the merit to be receptive to it, somehow it will not be fully transmitted. Therefore, during the second repetition of the vow of refuge, simply think that you offer to all buddhas and bodhisattvas your entire being—your body, speech, and mind. By offering this to them, you accumulate so much merit that you become fully receptive to the vow of refuge.

At that point, before the third repetition, you will be asked to approach me and I will ask you a question. The question is, “Are you happy to have your hair cut?” Assuming that you are, you will respond, “TRO LA”, which means “I am indeed happy!” The meaning of this is that I am requesting your permission to bestow the vow of refuge on you. So the real meaning of the question is, “Are you sure you want to take the vow of refuge?” Then, when I cut a small amount of hair of the top of your head, think that along with the hair, your karma, your mental afflictions and all other impediments to your practice of Dharma are removed. Finally, I will hand you a booklet, on the second to last page of which is your refuge name.

The giving of a name at this time has much the significance it has when a newborn child is named. The child receives the name on the day of their birth and then uses that name for the rest of their life. In much the same way, your being given this name on the day you take refuge signifies your completion of the entire path and your attainment of its final result, awakening.

All of the names given here begin with the prefix Karma. In this case “Karma” refers to His Holiness, the Gyalwa Karmapa, who is the founder and the head of this lineage. The name Karma is given in the manner of a family name and it transmits some of the blessings of the Karmapa to you. What follows after that is your personal refuge name.

The third and final repetition of the vow differs from the first and second in two ways. During the third repetition, when asked to state your name, please use your refuge name that you have just received. The other difference is that it is at the end of the third repetition that you will actually receive the vow.

The actual medium of transmission of the vow is the coordination of intention, that is to say, my intention to bestow the authentic vow of refuge on you and your intention to receive it. This is how it was transmitted from the Buddha to his disciples and over time through the noble Sangha down to the present day. In order that this coordination of intention properly occurs, there needs to be some kind of signal alerting you to the exact moment at which the vow is being transmitted. Therefore, at the end of this third repetition of the vow, I will snap my fingers. I will do this simply to indicate to you the exact moment, at which I will be thinking “I am transmitting the authentic vow of refuge to these people.” At that same moment you should think, “I am receiving the authentic vow of refuge from this preceptor.”

It is my responsibility to inform you of how to make use of the vow of refuge, what are the practices that ensue upon taking the vow. Having gone for refuge to the Buddha, try to regard any image of the Buddha, of whatever size, material, or artistic quality, as a permanent source of refuge and treat it with respect. Having gone for refuge to the Dharma, try to abstain as much as possible from all activities that are directly or indirectly harmful to other beings, and generate the intention never to harm others. Having gone for refuge to the Sangha, try to view all followers of any Buddhist tradition regardless of culture, nationality, dress, appearance, and so forth, as fellow travelers on the path to awakening. Also, remember that there are many different religious traditions in this world. Each of them has a distinct appearance, different beliefs and practices, and so forth. Since you never know who is and who is not an emanation of a buddha, or bodhisattva, try to respect all religious traditions equally. If you can't do that, at least abstain from denigrating any of them.

As for daily practice, you should retain in your home some kind of representation of the Buddha. In the morning, after you have washed, set out whatever offerings you wish in front of it, perform three prostrations and then recite the vow of refuge in order to keep the vow fresh in your mind. It is recommended to recite it as many times as you can. This is not the elaborate form of the vow used in the ceremony, but the concise form found in the booklet that you have been given. You can recite it twenty-one, seven or three times. In any case, by reciting it every day, the benefits of taking refuge will continue to accrue.

You can also mentally offer anything you newly acquire before you actually use it. For example, when you are about to eat a meal, before you eat the food, if you mentally offer it by thinking, “I offer this to the Buddha, Dharma and Shanga,” you will accumulate the same merit that you would have accumulated by actually physically offering it to them. When you are about to begin a major undertaking, or your daily work, if you pray to the Buddha, Dharma and Shanga for their blessing and protection that the work be successful, beneficial to yourself and others and harm no one, it will actually make a big difference. And when you travel, pray for protection and blessing from the Three Jewels, and so on. In the evening, before you go to sleep, dispose of that day's offerings and prepare those for the next day. Again, perform three prostrations and then go to sleep with the confidence in the Three Jewels' omniscient protection, like a small child who goes to sleep in his or her mother's lap. If you have confidence in the protection or blessing of the Buddha, Dharma and Shanga, you will receive that protection and that blessing. If you forget about them, you will not notice any benefit. For example, although the sun is shining brightly outdoors, if we squeeze our eyes tightly shut, we will not benefit from its light.

Having taken the vow of refuge, you are now authorized, according to the Buddhist tradition, to receive empowerments, and to engage in the various practices of Buddhadharma.

