

Refuge Teachings by HE Asanga Rinpoche

Refuge (part I)

All sentient beings have the essence of the Tathagata within them but it is not sufficient to just have the essence of the Buddha nature. We have to actually follow the path of the Buddha and practice the teachings of the Buddha. Unless you follow through and practice the path of the Dharma, there is no easy path to attaining enlightenment. So therefore, we have to practice. The first step in the practicing of the Buddha dharma is taking refuge. Refuge is the common foundation for all practices and so it is a very important first step. What does taking refuge mean?

We take refuge because we have this great fear and since we are not ourselves able to eliminate this fear, we rely on someone else who has the power to remove this fear within us. This is the general meaning of taking refuge.

The fear I speak of, is the fear of the limitless sufferings of Samsara from beginningless time. Seeing no end to the sufferings of Samsara, we experience this great fear. In order to overcome this fear, we take refuge in the three precious jewels – the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

There are three main motivating factors that cause us to seek refuge.

They are fear, faith and compassion.

We seek refuge as a result of fear because we understand the nature of cause and effect as explained by the Buddha to be true.

If we commit negative deeds it will create resultant sufferings. Therefore, if we were to die today, although we all desire a good rebirth, there is however, a higher probability of our being born in the three lower realms (Animal Realm, Hungry Ghost Realm and the Realm of Hell) because we have committed more negative acts and accumulated more negative karma to be born in a lower birth.

So if you honestly think about it, from our experiences in life so far, we have committed more negative actions than positive. Whether it is mental, verbal or through physical actions, we have definitely engaged in more negative deeds than positive. So if we were to suddenly die, there is 90 percent chance that we will be born in the lower realms and so we should naturally fear the outcome of all our misdeeds.

When you have this kind of fear and think about how you can overcome this fear, the best solution is to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to liberate oneself from this fear.

With this realization, if you take refuge, this taking of refuge is based on fear as a causal factor.

The second cause of taking refuge, is faith. Realizing the qualities of the three precious jewels, you take refuge in them motivated by faith.

There are four different kinds of faith. There is Clear Faith, Longing Faith, Confident Faith and Irreversible Faith.

Clear Faith is experienced when you realize the extraordinary qualities of the three precious jewels and you naturally experience joyfulness and clarity in your faith.

Longing Faith is experienced when based upon clear faith, you long for the perfect qualities of the three precious jewels for yourself so that you may benefit all sentient beings. This kind of faith is called Longing Faith.

Confident Faith is experienced when you realize and have complete confidence in the powers and qualities of the three precious jewels as described in the sutras. As soon as you hear or read about them, if you have faith with great confidence in the qualities of the three precious jewels, then you have Confident Faith.

The fourth kind of faith is Irreversible Faith which means that your faith has become such an integral part of yourself that even at the cost of your life, you would never renounce it. This kind of faith is inseparable from oneself and becomes an intrinsic part of you. To illustrate this point, there is the example of Lord Atisha, the great Indian Pandita.

While in Tibet, Lord Atisha was in the habit of asking people around him "Any news from India?" So one time, he happened to ask this question to a person who had just come from India. In response, the person said "there is not much news but recently a Buddhist lay person was caught by some Hindu heretics and put into jail. He was given a choice if either renouncing his faith in the three precious jewels or facing execution. Even after repeated threats, the Buddhist lay person held firm in his reply that he would not renounce his faith in the three precious jewels. He said "even if I were to please you by verbally renouncing my faith, in my heart I will never give up the three precious jewels". So he was finally executed when they could not convert his faith". Upon hearing this story, with great admiration, Lord Atisha said "that is how a Buddhist lay person should be". Even when it comes to your precious life, if you are firm in your faith then such faith is Irreversible Faith.

The third main cause of taking refuge is compassion which is very important especially to Mahayana practitioners.

In the worldly sense, people take refuge mainly out of fear and also at times a desire to attain short term benefits like long life, prosperity etc. The Hinayana practitioners may also take refuge due to fear but mainly out of faith. Mahayana practitioners may take refuge as a result of fear and faith but mainly due to compassion.

As Mahayana practitioners, we seek to liberate all sentient beings from the sufferings of Samsara. In order to do so, we have to first overcome the sufferings of Samsara ourselves by attaining enlightenment. If you are yourself helpless, you cannot help another. The first step towards liberating oneself, is to take refuge in the three precious jewels. As a result of taking refuge, one is able to help other sentient beings and so with great compassion for all sentient beings, one must take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Compassion as a motivating cause in taking refuge is a special quality of the Mahayana tradition.

Next time, I will continue with this topic and elaborate upon the three objects of refuge. In the meantime, it is important that we understand and think about why we take refuge and the three main causes that motivate us to take refuge.

--H.E. Khöndung Asanga Vajra Rinpoche, March, 2018.

Refuge (part II)

So now that we have established the causes for taking refuge, we must now think of the object of refuge.

Who or what are we taking refuge in?

We take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha.

According to the Mahayana tradition, the Buddha consists of three Buddha bodies.

When we say three Buddha bodies, it does not mean that there are three different individual Buddhas or three separate entities of the Buddha. Rather, it is the three forms that the Buddha or all Buddhas have.

When we attain enlightenment, we attain the three Buddha bodies which are Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya.

Dharmakaya means the Buddha's mind.

Sambhogakaya (enjoyment body) is the Buddha body that resides in the Buddha realm of Akanistha and gives only Mahayana teachings only in that pure realm. The recipients of these teachings are also only Bodhisattvas of the tenth level. We ordinary humans are not able to see the Sambhogakaya form of Buddha. Only those Bodhisattvas residing on the tenth level are able to see and hear the Buddha in Sambhogakaya form. The Sambhogakaya form is clearly endowed with the 32 major signs and 80 minor signs of a great being. The five certainties or the five definite features of a Sambhogakaya Buddha are:

- 1) Certainty of Place; Sambhogakaya Buddha only resides in the Buddha realm of Akanistha.
- 2) Certainty of Body; Sambhogakaya Buddha is always adorned with the thirty two major and 80 minor signs of a great being.
- 3) Certainty of Teachings; Sambhogakaya Buddha will always teach the Mahayana doctrine.
- 4) Certainty of Disciples; Sambhogakaya Buddha will always teach to a sangha of Arya Bodhisattvas of the tenth level and
- 5) Certainty of Time; the Buddha in Sambhogakaya will remain for as long as samsara exists.

Sambhogakaya is the base for the generation of Nirmanakaya (emanation body) of the Buddha. There are many kinds of Nirmanakaya. The Supreme Nirmanakaya are endowed with the 32 major signs and the 80 minor signs of a great being like the Buddha Shakyamuni and they are visible to ordinary human eyes.

Nirmanakaya can also manifest in kings, queens and even ordinary people like teachers, artists, craftsmen etc. Sometimes Nirmanakaya can manifest even in animals like a rabbit as well as in inanimate objects like a bridge, boat etc. So the Buddha through the Nirmanakaya form can benefit a vast number of sentient beings in these various forms. Nirmanakaya is manifested to benefit sentient beings in whatever way that is most beneficial or helpful to them in a particular situation.

So we take refuge in the Buddha in all his forms.

Second, we take refuge in the Dharma.

There are two kinds of Dharma: The Dharma of oral transmission of scriptures and the Dharma of realization.

The Dharma of oral transmission of scriptures can be received from the Buddha, from the Bodhisattvas and from teacher to student. The Dharma of oral transmission is spoken by the giver and heard by the receiver.

The Dharma of Realization is not something that is heard but realized internally as the Truth of Path and the Truth of Cessation. As sentient beings, we are obscured by defilements. Only the Arya Bodhisattvas through their practice have the ability to realize true selflessness that is free of defilements according to the Mahayana teachings. This realization of true selflessness is known as Truth of Path. Based upon this realization of true selflessness and the renunciation of all defilements, the Arya Bodhisattvas attain the Truth of Cessation or realization that is free of stain and free of faults. This realization which is the fruit of their practice is known as the Truth of Cessation.

The third object of refuge is the Sangha.

According to the Mahayana tradition, Sangha refers to the Bodhisattvas of the tenth level.

So the objects of our refuge are the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. There is a great need for us to take refuge. For example, if we are prisoners in this existence of Samsara, we must seek the help of someone who has the capability of freeing us from this prison. It would be pointless to seek help from someone who does not have the capability to free us. Since we ourselves do not have that capability, we have no one to turn to other than the three precious jewels. Worldly deities nor worship of nature (worshipping trees, mountains etc.) can help free us and so it is of no use to seek refuge in them. Thus it is important to realize the necessity for seeking refuge. When you seek refuge and make verbal recitations of "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma and I take refuge in the Sangha", do so with whole hearted sincerity. If your mind has faith in the power of the three precious jewels and you sincerely take refuge in them, then that belief is most powerful. Your mind is in control of your verbal and physical activities and so whatever you do will be more meaningful and fruitful if your mind is whole heartedly trusting in the three jewels. Please always keep this in mind as this is very important.

--Khöndung Asanga Vajra Rinpoche, April, 2018

Refuge (part III)

The precepts of refuge states that once you take refuge in the Buddha, you must never take refuge in worldly gods or beings and you must never accept them as your spiritual guide.

Once you take refuge in the Dharma you must never hurt sentient beings and you must never accept what is not the Dharma as the path.

Once you take refuge in the Sangha you must never accept non-Buddhists as your teachers or fellow practitioners on the path.

Although there are many precepts that one must observe after having taken refuge, these are the main rules that you must conform to as a Buddhist.

Regarding the question as to whether it is acceptable to make offerings to worldly gods or not, it is said that it would not hurt one's refuge vows by just making offerings or showing respect but if one takes refuge in them, then one's refuge vows are broken or destroyed.

I wanted to share the following excerpt from Sakya Pandita's teachings in his own words. Though spoken centuries ago, these words are relevant and applicable even in this time and age.

Some also say that to commit disrespectful acts toward the scriptures such as to walk over them, buy and sell them, or use them as a pledge for loans – is to abandon the Dharma and therefore amounts to losing your refuge in the Dharma.

Yet the same people also say, "Do not engage in studying and teaching", thinking that to obstruct the study and teaching of the Dharma does not damage the taking of refuge. In general, it is indeed a great fault to engage in the business of buying and selling a sacred book. Yet because the book will continue to be used for recitation and so forth when it is in the hands of the new owner, this cannot cause a decline in the doctrine in general, though the seller himself will be worse off. But if you put an end to studying and teaching, the lineage of wise ones will be broken. Even if many volumes of scriptures remain, if there is no one who can understand the teachings, the doctrine of the Buddha will have been destroyed. Therefore those who are afraid of lesser faults, such as trafficking in religious books, but commit the major fault of obstructing religious study and teaching do not understand the root of taking refuge in the Dharma.

I have also seen some who, while saying that to walk over some yellow cloth destroys your refuge in the Sangha, commit acts of harm and irreverence to noble, energetic upholders of the monastic vows and to great adherents of the basic Buddhist scriptures. To walk over yellow cloth is the subsidiary fault of irreverence, but it does not cause the actual refuge itself to be lost.

However, disrespecting or injuring the noble and energetic upholders of the monastic vows and great adherents of the scriptures does impair your refuge in the Sangha.

All distinctions of these sorts should be carefully differentiated and understood.

--Khöndung Asanga Vajra, May, 2018.