

Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem and the 5 Lay Vows – Geshe Tenzin Zopa

Why take Refuge?

If one wishes to optimise this human life, there is much benefit to taking Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Holding Refuge vows is crucial to those inspired to follow the path of the Buddha. Whether one becomes a child of the Buddha and under the protection of the Buddha or not, is determined at the time when one receives the blessing of Refuge from Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Even though one's family may follow the Buddha's path and call themselves Buddhists, if one has not taken Refuge with the full understanding of what Refuge means and involves, one is not yet a Buddhist.

Firstly, we need to know that we have obtained this precious human rebirth which has the 8 freedoms and the 10 Endowments which enable us to practice the Path. The Buddha has taught us that with such a precious human rebirth, we are able to embark on the 3 higher trainings namely, morality, concentration and cultivation of wisdom realising emptiness. These are critical if we wish to eradicate samsaric suffering, including that of birth, aging and death. In order to actualise the wisdom realising emptiness, one requires realisations in concentration; in order to gain realisations in concentration, one needs to live in and gain realisations of morality. Without these 3, there can be no antidote to samsara, let alone attaining enlightenment.

In relation to the practice of morality, Refuge Vows forms the basis. Refuge Vows are also the foundation of all other vows such as individual liberation / pratimoksha vows, ordination vows, bodhisattva vows, tantric vows. Refuge vows are like the mother to all other vows and the basis of gaining all positive qualities.

The Buddha's teachings are to tame and transform one's mind and are not mere information to be collected by the mind. Every samsaric being – no matter how rich, powerful or high in status one may be - is subject to decay and death. This rebirth is not permanent. Whether one gains a higher or lower rebirth is dependent on the karma (action) one has committed. There is white (virtuous) karma, black (negative) karma and neutral karma. The nature of the results follow the nature of our deeds. If we carry out action based on negative emotion or intent, will bring about the result of suffering. The results of the karma also affects type of rebirth. Positive karma brings about rebirth in the human, demi god or god realms; non virtuous karma brings about animal, hungry ghost and hell being rebirths. In the case of neutral karma, rebirth would be in the 4 stages of concentration in the form/formless realm.

If we examine how we currently live our lives, if we investigate how we apply our body, speech and mind, we would probably find that most of the time, we create negative action; this is followed by neutral karma and least of all, do we perform virtuous karma. As today is such a holy and auspicious day, we should put effort into having the most positive mind and doing positive deeds. If instead, we find ourselves having angry thoughts, attachment thoughts, we doubt Dharma and the like, no good results are going to arise from these. The Buddha stated that karma is definite (i.e. a result from an action is certain). Hence, if we keep committing negative deeds, it is quite likely that we will be born in extremely suffering

lower realms. As it is, we already find that some of our human suffering is unbearable. Yet suffering in the lower realms is far more intense. Therefore, do you think you can afford to be born there? No.

The Buddha has given us guidance and protection so that we do not have to incur suffering and for this, he gave teachings on karma and Refuge through the teachings on the 4 Noble Truths: The Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, the Truth of Cessation and the Truth of the Path. The last two (Cessation and Path) are to comfort us and convince us that we can be fully protected.

Buddha gave teachings on Refuge as a form of insurance, in case we are unable to strictly abide by the laws of karma and in case we are unable to follow the 4 Noble Truth teachings thoroughly. By taking Refuge, there is at least one chance - for one's immediate next rebirth - to be spared from a lower rebirth. When death comes, with a mind of Refuge in your heart, one will not be born into lower realms in one's next rebirth.

Death is certain, time of death is uncertain. Just look back into history, even Shakyamuni Buddha manifested death. Similarly, we can conclude that our aggregates will be exhausted at some stage. Death can suddenly come. It could be tomorrow. It could be 50 years later. The moment of death is totally unknown and by taking Refuge, having this insurance of not being born in the lower realms and possibly coming back as a human and hopefully, meet the right spiritual path, meet the Dharma. Look at our past and present mental attitudes. We are completely directed by delusions – mainly the ignorant mind which blindly accepts the egoistic, self-identity. This ignorant mind brings about other two main delusions of anger and attachment. These two act like Ministers to the King (ignorance) which further bring about the 20 secondary afflictive emotions. With so many afflictions being activated in our mind, there is not much space nor opportunity for us to control our minds. Thus we need to change the system. We need to change our “King” of ignorance and de-construct its negative kingdom. We should then appoint the new king of wisdom realising emptiness, which will follow ethics and karmic law and cherish others; we need to appoint the “Ministers” of mindfulness and introspection to help to guard our actions of body, speech and mind. By being mindful one is able to determine what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned and not allow negative emotions any entry. In this way, we can gain total peace and happiness, virtue and Dharma.

How to have stable Refuge in the Triple Gem

There are 2 causes for Refuge to be firmly established in our mental continuum: One of the causes is irreversible faith due to knowing about the qualities of the Buddha, such as his great compassion and wisdom. However, Buddha advised us not to blindly follow him but to reflect and analyse his teachings before adopting them. The second cause for Refuge to be well grounded in us, requires us to genuinely understand that there is an existence of the 3 lower realms (which are the results of negative karma) and these 3 lower realms are to be avoided; If we think about it, we are already having experiences like those in the 3 lower realms- they come about from our anger, attachment and ignorance. We should think. *“If I don't stop getting angry or fail to purify the karma of being angry, I will suffer the experience of the hell realms. If I have boiling jealousy in my heart, it will create the intense karma to*

throw me in the lower realms and it would be just a matter of time. Right now, I can't even bear a small cut. Imagine how it will be if I am born in the suffering lower realms".

We have committed negative actions many times and gained rebirth in the lower realms such as crocodiles and killer-animals which constantly take many lives; we have been world destroyers many times. Hence, we very much need the insurance of Refuge.

However, this does not mean that one can conveniently take Refuge as insurance from being born in the lower realms and not care about living ethically. Living life according to the law of karma is the other form of insurance. Remember however, that taking Refuge provides coverage for only one life and that life/one's consciousness continues on and on and does not just finish in 2 lifetimes. The kind of rebirth and the kind of life we have now and will have, is all determined by one's own karma. Therefore we need to prevent rebirth in lower realms and for this, we need to engage in 3 higher trainings which begins with morality, which in turn starts with Refuge.

What are the objects of refuge?

Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (known as the Triple Gem). Having taken Refuge in the Triple Gem, we should not take refuge in spirits, ancestors, worldly gods etc... These may be able to grant some form of temporary support but these beings themselves are stuck in samsara, so how can they truly help us? These can be objects of our respect but not objects of Refuge. As Buddhist practitioners, every object can be an object of respect but not an object of Refuge. Our Refuge lies solely in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This we need to differentiate and be clear about.

Having taken refuge, one needs to respect all images of the Buddha as a real, living Buddha, including a small picture of the Buddha. By having this attitude, when we pray and seek help, the effect will be great. Without irreversible faith in the Triple Gem and when our mind & reliance on the Triple Gem is very shaky, we will not be a sturdy container to hold the blessings of Refuge. The Buddha is always there to bless and help, always holding out a ring to us but if we do not throw our hook to connect to him, how are we to receive blessings?

Sometimes our prayers and wishes are self-centred or have an intent to harm others. The Buddhas blessings cannot be used in this way. So how does one ask for Buddha's help? By thinking this way, "May I actualise fully enlightenment for not only myself but for every single living being. For that, I need to have my material needs taken care of so that I will not be distracted in practising dharma to benefit others". Then one should do one's best to be helpful at all times but if upon gaining success, we forget about practising Dharma, about helping others or we forget about the Buddha – then we create the causes to face suffering and troubles will start to surface in our lives. Even if the Buddha is front of us holding a wish-fulfilling jewel, we cannot receive that help because we have not created the causes to receive it. Also, we should not ask for things that we cannot handle. Example, one may be able to manage RM100 but can one responsibly manage RM1million? So there is no point asking for RM1 million. Boudha Stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal has a reputation of being able to fulfil one's wishes. I always make prayers there but I never pray for things like being

transformed into a rainbow-body by 2010 nor for RM1million. Instead, I always pray for a greater inspiration to practice Dharma and that wish has always been fulfilled.

How should we view the Refuge Objects namely the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha?

Buddha is like a qualified doctor, who through his analysis, discovered that we are suffering from (karma and delusion) and formulated the Path to be free from karma and delusion.

Dharma is like the medicine which will heal us of all delusions and suffering. Dharma is selflessness/emptiness. Conventionally, Dharma refers to the scriptures, including one syllable of Dharma or mantra. Sangha are like the doctor's assistants to help practitioners on the Path. The main thing to remember is that we should not allow ourselves to be influenced by the 8 worldly concerns (wanting gain and not loss; wanting praise and not criticism; wanting comfort and not discomfort; wanting good reputation and not bad reputation).

Sangha – the actual Sangha Refuge refers to Arya Beings, like the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin, Manjushri, Maiteya, the Pandits etc.. those who possess the direct realisation of emptiness. The conventional aspect of the Sangha Refuge are the ordained monks and nuns. We should avoid negative friends who distract us from Dharma and those who encourage us to engage in negative behaviour.

The 5 Lay Vows

In addition to the Refuge Ceremony, there is the taking of the 5 lay vows. One can all the 5 vows or only some of them. It is important to know that the 3 causes to gain the precious human rebirth is (1) practising vows; (2) engaging in 6 Perfections; (3) having the wish to obtain higher rebirth.

5 lay vows:

1. Not intentionally killing a human or any living beings including animals. For “intentional killing” to arise, there needs to be the intention to kill, identifying of the object to be killed, the act of killing and the feeling of satisfaction at the result of killing. If after taking this vow, one *accidentally* causes death, the full karma of killing does not happen (although there is still some negative karma accumulated). By avoiding killing, we are able to purify past karma of killing and will find ourselves having better health, for instance.
2. Not stealing – this includes taking anything that belongs to others without permission (even a stalk of flower from a garden). Why is there the urgency in taking this vow? Because in our lives, we experience loss and failure in our jobs/projects or we get wealth but cannot retain it. This is not due to one's lack of skill or the world economy. It is due to one's karma of being miserly and stingy; or even when we give, it is given with difficulty or is made conditional upon receiving acknowledgment or having

expectations in return, including merit. We can see that even during a period of economic crisis, some people are very successful. Why is this so? This clearly shows how karma works. If one has been generous in the past, the result is having abundance. Generosity refers to 3 kinds of generosity - the generosity of giving material possessions, the generosity of granting protection and the generosity of sharing Dharma.

Our Guru, Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche practices pure giving – he has no idea of counting – sometimes he receives Rp 1 from you to give a beggar but returns you Rp 1000 and sometimes, it's the other way around! Rinpoche has huge projects worldwide and many of them have materialised because he practices pure generosity.

3. Not lying – Sometimes we find that people do not listen to us, misinterpret us, doubt our words or accuse us of saying things we did not. We cannot blame others for do so. This is the result of our previous karma of lying which has weakened the power of our speech. By avoiding lying, we gain people's trust and respect.
4. No sexual misconduct – If one has sexual relations (this includes physical action, thoughts, verbal chats – all with intention to activate desire) with someone other than one's partner who is conventionally accepted by law/community as a partner, one then commits sexual misconduct. Other actions which bring about sexual misconduct include having such relations at the wrong place, the wrong time, the use of the wrong organ. This is why are there so many problems in relationships these days. Even a husband and a wife who previously expressed love to each other, can gradually encounter doubt and unhappiness with each other. To overcome all this, one should avoid sexual misconduct. Some people are attractive but that attractiveness generates desire and trouble; whereas some others are attractive or even ugly but when people look at them, they feel that the person has merit and offer respect to such a person.
5. No intoxicants – this refers to alcohol, drugs, smoking. Buddha said, "If you want to follow thoroughly the Path, not even a drop of alcohol from a straw is to be consumed". This is because alcohol hallucinates one's mind. The severity of consuming alcohol is shown in the story of a good monk who met a woman who was naked who insisted on him doing one of actions – drink alcohol, kill the goat she had brought with her or go into union with her and disrobe. He thought the first choice was the least harmful, so he chose to drink alcohol. After drinking alcohol, he committed the other 2 acts. So you can see how harmful taking intoxicants is. Further, intoxicants will harm our mind at the time of death because in order to experience the clear-light mind (the most subtle aspect of one's consciousness) peacefully and with minimal distractions, our nerves and chakras must not be made numb such as by intoxication because that will affect our mental stability. As a minimum, one should resolve "I will not take alcohol to the point of getting drunk and losing control over oneself".

When a person receives the Refuge Vows, one should regard the Lama granting Refuge either as a Guru or as a Loben. Both will give rise to a Guru-Disciple relationship which will require the disciple to always view the Guru as inseparable from the Buddha. If one is unsure about whether one is ready to accept the Lama as a Guru or as a Loben, then it is advisable to regard the Lama merely as a Dharma mentor, a Dharma friend.

Remember always the motivation for taking Refuge namely, wishing to attain enlightenment not just for oneself but for all living beings, and the 2 causes of stable Refuge in the Triple Gem (irreversible faith and wishing to avoid rebirth in the lower realms).