

# An Introductory Teaching on Taking Refuge by His Holiness the Sakya Trizin

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*(An excerpt from a teaching on Ngon Dro at Dolma Phodrang, 26th April 2000)*



The preliminary practice of taking refuge has two foundations: the common and the uncommon.

The common foundation I believe you are all familiar with: in order to overcome the suffering of samsara, we need to practice Dharma. And in order to practice Dharma, we must have a precious human life. Although every living being possesses Buddha nature, and every living being has the possibility of becoming a Buddha, a human being has the best opportunity to do so. To obtain a human life is extremely precious, particularly one endowed with the eighteen prerequisites and the ten favourable conditions, and which is free from the eight unfavourable places. This human life is more precious than the wish-fulfilling jewel, as the wish-fulfilling jewel can bestow all our material needs, but it cannot bestow higher rebirth or personal liberation. The reason why this human life is so precious is that, if it is used to practice the Dharma, it can free us from rebirth in the lower realms, it can help us to obtain a higher rebirth, and it can lead us to personal liberation, and eventually to ultimate enlightenment. But at the same time, a human life is very difficult to obtain.

Everything is impermanent. The Lord Buddha taught that all compound things are impermanent. ‘Compound’ means anything that is created from causes and conditions. Human life is impermanent. It does not have a definite duration, and it depends on many outer and inner conditions. There are many

factors that can cut it short at any time, whereas there is very little that can prolong it. There is complete uncertainty as to when death will occur. And, of course, there is only one thing that is certain in this life, which is that anyone who is born in this universe will eventually die, even the fully enlightened Buddhas. Even though the fully enlightened Buddhas are completely free from the suffering of birth and death, in order to show impermanence to human eyes, They appear to die and enter Paranirvana. So we, as ordinary people, can disappear just like a bubble in boiling water, we can lose this life at any moment.

So, while we have obtained a very precious human life, so difficult to obtain, everything is impermanent, everything is changing momentarily, and we never know when we will lose this opportunity. It is therefore very important to utilize the life span that we have, to use it in the most beneficial way, in a way that is beneficial to oneself and to others. And the most beneficial way to spend our life is to follow the law of Karma.

One of the Lord Buddha's special teachings is that He explained the law of Karma. All the lives that we go through do not happen accidentally, nor are they created by an outside force, nor are they acquired without cause. Each and every thing must have its own cause, and everything that we experience now, whether pleasant or painful, is created through our own Karma. All the sufferings that we go through in this life, such as death, illness, poverty, and so forth, are created through our own previous negative actions. And all the good things, such as long life, good health, prosperity and the fulfillment of one's wishes,

are also not created by an outside force, but rather by positive actions that we performed in the past.

Believer or non-believer, everyone wishes to be free from suffering, and everyone wishes to experience happiness. But whether we experience one or the other lies in our own hands. So therefore, we must follow the law of Karma. We must not commit any negative deeds. Negative deeds are physical, verbal and mental actions that are committed out of desire,





hatred and ignorance. It is those non-virtuous deeds which create suffering, and if we do not wish to experience suffering, then we must abstain from committing them. If we wish to experience happiness, then we must create its cause. Without creating its cause, we cannot expect to experience it. We cannot expect the result without the cause. And the cause of happiness is to perform virtuous deeds, that is to say, actions that are based on generosity, love and compassion, that are beneficial to other beings. So we must practice very carefully.

We are in samsara, and all samsara is suffering. The word 'samsara' is Sanskrit, and in English, we call it 'The Circle of Existence'. We call it so because it has no end. When this life ends, we begin another one. And so it goes on and on, like a wheel, the 'Wheel of Life'. And as long as we are in samsara, we experience suffering.

In general terms, there are three types of suffering. The suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the suffering of the conditional nature of all phenomena.

The suffering of suffering refers to the suffering that we experience as suffering, such as physical pain and mental anguish. The suffering of change, however, is more subtle. We experience as happiness the absence of great suffering, but it is not real happiness. It is actually suffering, the suffering of change. And then, the suffering of conditional nature means that our very existence in this samsara is suffering, in the sense that wherever we go, whatever we do, whoever we associate with, there is no satisfaction to be found. Even if we are in the most advanced country, with all its luxuries, we find no satisfaction. So, whatever our circumstances are, as long as we're in samsara, we find no satisfaction, and that is the suffering of conditional nature.

So these are the common foundations, concerning which we need more than intellectual understanding. We need to analyze them, contemplate and meditate on them, until



we have a real kind of inner feeling regarding their nature. It is important to reflect on the different types of suffering, the hell realm, the hungry ghosts realm, the animal realm, the human realm, the demi-god realm, and the god realm, so we realize that wherever we are, as long as it is within samsara, it is suffering. For example, if a poison is mixed with food, whether it is good food or bad food, it is harmful. So similarly, as long as we're in samsara, whether it is in a lower realm or in a higher realm, it is still suffering.

So it is very important to practice Dharma. To help us practice Dharma, the Lord Buddha, who possessed infinite wisdom, compassion and skillful means, bestowed an enormous amount of teachings in order to suit every level of mentality, propensity and situation. But the most advanced, the highest form of teaching, is the Vajrayana teaching. In order to practice Vajrayana, we need to practice the uncommon foundations.

Now, of the uncommon foundations, the very first one is taking refuge, because taking refuge is the root of the entire Dharma, the preliminary practice of the entire path, and the foundation of all the vows. Also, whether one has taken refuge or not is what differentiates a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist. If one has taken refuge, then one is a Buddhist. Even though one is born in a Buddhist family, it does not mean that automatically one becomes a Buddhist. Until one takes refuge in the Triple Gem, one is not a Buddhist. When one has taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, then one becomes a Buddhist. It is through taking refuge that we leave behind the worldly path and embark on the path of liberation. So taking

refuge is very, very important.

Normally we explain refuge in five aspects. These are: the cause of taking refuge, the object of refuge, the way we take refuge, the benefits of taking refuge, and the rules of taking refuge.

The first aspect is the cause of taking refuge. We take refuge out of three causes: fear, faith and compassion.

There are three types of fear. Fear of the suffering of samsara, fear of self-clinging, and fear of impure vision. Because we are in samsara, we experience suffering. Nobody wishes to have suffering, neither in this life nor in future ones. But at the moment, we are very ordinary persons, we have no choice. We are completely bound to our own karma and defilements, and we find ourselves wherever the wind of Karma takes us. We are fearful of suffering, but we are unable to overcome it through our own efforts. We need to rely on someone who is wise, who is powerful, and who also has compassion. So we take refuge out of fear, fear of the suffering of being in samsara.

Why we experience suffering in samsara is because we continually cling to self. We cling to self, without any logical reason. There

is no way to prove that there is a self, such a thing as self but because, from beginningless time, we have had a very strong propensity to cling to self, we keep doing it. This is based on ignorance, ignorance of the true nature of reality. In fact, reality is selflessness. But we do not realize this, and instead we see ourselves as a separate self, and we cling to this notion of a separate self. And due to this, we create the notion of other, and then we feel attachment to ourselves, and aversion to others. And then, defilements such as jealousy, stinginess, and pride, increase. And it is due to these defilements that we create Karma, by performing negative actions, physical, verbal and mental, thus creating suffering for ourselves. If we cling to self, then we are bound to experience suffering, hence the fear of self-clinging.

And also, according to Vajrayana, there is the fear of clinging to the impure vision. Impure vision means our normal life as we experience it, from a point of view of ignorance. We are now totally in samsara, experiencing different sufferings. The present life that we are going through is the impure vision. It's not real, it's all illusion, but we cling to it as real. It is because of our impure vision that we experience suffering, so we feel fear of clinging to the impure vision. So fear is the number one cause of taking refuge, and

fear has three aspects. Fear of the suffering of samsara, fear of self-clinging, and fear of clinging to the impure vision.

And then the second cause of taking refuge is faith. There are three types of faith. Clear faith, desiring faith, and believing faith.

Clear faith means that when we see very clearly the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, it somewhat refreshes our mind. It also gives us hope, or relief in the midst of this suffering of samsara, so it's called clear faith.

Desiring faith means that when we see the very great qualities of the Buddha, we wish to obtain such qualities for ourselves.

And believing faith means that we don't just blindly believe the teachings of the Buddha, but that we scrutinize them, we analyze what the Buddha said, what the Buddha taught, and realize that it expresses the genuine truth in our lives. We are convinced that what the Buddha said is the genuine truth, not merely because somebody has asked us to believe it. It is after careful examination and analysis that we have become convinced that it is a genuine truth, so we believe in it. This is called believing faith, and it is very, very important. Buddha Himself said that His followers should only believe in His teachings after careful examination, and not just out of faith.

And then the third cause, the main cause



according to Mahayana, is compassion. Just as we ourselves wish to be free from suffering, every sentient being, both visible and invisible, from germs and insects right up to the highest devas, everybody wishes to be free from suffering, nobody wishes to experience suffering. But since beginningless time, we are caught up in this circle of existence, we are reborn over and over again. And, in one life or another, every sentient being has actually been our own father, mother, relative or friend, and every time that they have become our parent, they have given us as much love and as much care as our present parents have given us. So, in this way, it's not right to think only of our own welfare. We have to think of all the other sentient beings, each of whom is actually our own very dear father, mother and dear one. But due to the change of life, we do not recognize each other. We see some beings as enemies, and we hate them. We see some as our friends and relatives, and we have a very close and strong attachment to them. We see some as indifferent, and we don't feel anything for them. But in reality, not only our present relatives and friends, but even our fiercest enemy, every single being in this samsara, is our very dear one. And in order to rescue them, we must feel for every single one of them. Of course, we all

have some kind of feeling. When we see either an animal or a human being who is suffering, of course, whether we are practitioners or not, we all have some kind of feeling, pity, some kind of compassion. If our friend or relative or even just someone we know is suffering, we feel compassion. But that kind of compassion is limited compassion. Real compassion should be felt for everybody on the same basis, with the same intensity. And if we feel compassion for someone, we wish to save them from suffering, from the suffering of samsara. So if we have real compassion, we want to save all sentient beings from samsara, and the way to do this, the very first step, is to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Without taking refuge, we can't proceed any further.

So the very first step in practicing the Dharma is to take refuge. The three main causes of taking refuge are fear, faith and compassion. And in Vajrayana, which is the extraordinary Mahayana, compassion is the main cause of taking refuge.

*To be continued in the next issue...*

