

A Guide to the Refuge Ceremony

Nowadays, more and more Westerners are becoming interested in meditation and through that come into contact with Buddhism. Many develop faith and conviction and wish to take the formal step of becoming a Buddhist: taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. There are many books that describe the Refuge Vow and also many lamas and senior students who can help you understand what the vow means and the precepts that are involved. However, the teachings available about the Refuge Vow usually cover the meaning of the vow, but do not tell you what to do during the ceremony. They do not say when or how to prostrate, how to kneel, what you will say, how to make offerings, and so forth. Most Westerners who take the Refuge Vow have never done or seen anything like it before, and as a result, many people get distracted by unfamiliar ritual and confused during the ceremony. The lama will tell you what to do during the ceremony, but if you know what to expect beforehand, you will feel more comfortable during the ceremony and be better able to concentrate on the meaning of what you are doing.

The traditions of how to take the Refuge Vow developed during the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni, and have been passed down from teacher to student in an unbroken lineage for two thousand five hundred years. This lineage originated in the Noble Land of India and then spread to many other lands, including Tibet. In the Kagyu tradition, the vow was described in the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* by Lord Gampopa as well as many other treatises by later masters. As you take the vow, you should have confidence that the words you say and the rituals that are performed have been passed down in an unbroken lineage from the Lord Buddha himself to the lama who is giving you the vow, and therefore has all the blessing of this entire lineage: it has as much blessing as if you took the vow from the Lord Buddha himself.

Before the ceremony, you should prepare yourself. As a sign of respect for the lama, the Buddha, dharma, and sangha, wear nice, modest clothes. There is no need to be fancy, just respectful. You will need a khata (the traditional white offering scarf) and an envelope with an offering inside. You should not be stingy, but on the other hand it is more important to give with a pure motivation than to give a large sum. On the outside of the envelope, you can write, "As a token of connection, I make this offering of \$XX." (Writing the amount you are offering is customary!) Get a monk, nun or friend to show you how to fold your khata and wrap the envelope with it.

Most refuge ceremonies begin with a talk about the meaning of the vows. Sometimes the talk is long and thorough; sometimes, especially when the vow is given in conjunction with another ceremony, the talk is quite brief. In either case, please listen carefully and with a pure motivation of love and kindness. Think that you are taking this vow in order to bring benefit to all the sentient beings who are suffering in samsara.

Then the lama will ask you to make three prostrations. There are two types of prostration: *full prostrations* where you extend your entire body on the floor, such as are done during the preliminary (*ngondro*) practices, and *half prostrations* where you touch your knees, hands and forehead to the floor. When you enter a temple, meet a lama, or take vows, do these half prostrations, not full prostrations.

When you are asked to do the prostrations, stand up. Put your palms together and hold them to the crown of your head to indicate that you are prostrating with your body. Then hold them to your throat to indicate that you are prostrating with your speech. Then hold them at your heart to indicate that you are prostrating with your mind. Then bend forward, place your hands on the ground in front of your body. Bend your knees and bring them simultaneously to the ground. Then bend and touch your forehead to the ground. At this point, five points are touching the ground: two knees, two hands, and your forehead. Then stand back up. Keep your legs together during prostration: when descending, drop both knees together, and when getting back up, keep the two knees together.

Repeat the prostration two more times, for a total of three prostrations. After the last prostration, stand up, join your hands in prayer position, and touch them one more time to the crown of your head, your throat and then your heart.

Next the lama will ask you to kneel. Place your right knee on the ground next to your left foot. Sit back on your right heel with your left knee raised. Do not half stand up with one leg on the ground; make sure to sit down on your right heel. Join your hands in prayer position at your heart. This is the posture that the Buddha's disciples knelt in out of respect when they asked him questions. It may seem uncomfortable at first, but the ceremony is really not that long, so just let your body relax into this posture.

Next comes the actual recitation of the vow. You will recite the vow in Tibetan three times after the lama. Do not be self-conscious about pronouncing unfamiliar words: your faith and devotion is what is most important. The actual translation of the vow is as follows. Study this before the ceremony so that you can contemplate the meaning of the vow as you recite it after the lama.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas who abide in all ten directions, please think of me.
Master, please think of me. From now until the end of this life, I go refuge in
the supreme among all with two feet, the Buddha. I go for refuge in the
supreme among all without desire, the dharma. I go for refuge in the supreme
among all assemblies, the sangha. From now until the end of this life, I hold
this master to be my spiritual friend.

“Supreme among all with two feet” means the best of all the gods and humans. “Spiritual friend” is a way of saying teacher—the lama is a true friend who will show you the path of virtue.

At the end of the third repetition, the lama will snap their fingers. At this point, think from the bottom of your heart, “I have actually taken the vow.”

Now that you have taken the vow, you are actually a Buddhist. As a sign of this, the lama will cut a small bit of hair from the top of your head and give you a new dharma name. This is the point in the ceremony where you make your offering. Pick up your khata and envelope, and come forward one at a time. Unroll the khata and drape it in your two hands to offer it to the lama. Place the envelope on the lama's table, and offer the khata to the lama—sometimes the lama takes the khata, and sometimes they put it around your neck. The lama will then cut some hair and give you a card with your new name. Then go back to your place.

Next, the lama will recite a prayer that all your Buddhist practice will go well, that you will encounter no obstacles, and that you will progress swiftly down the path of Dharma. As you listen to the prayer, make the same aspirations yourselves. Have confidence in yourself: you have just taken the first step down the path towards the perfect, ultimate state of Buddhahood. As a result of this vow, you will attain this state that is utterly free from suffering, and you will develop all the qualities that will allow you to bring all sentient beings to this state.

This is the end of the formal Refuge Vow ceremony, but just the beginning of taking refuge. From now on, you should try to remember to take refuge in all situations. When things are bad or frightening, remember that the Three Jewels can give you protection. Remembering the Three Jewels helps to pacify the confusion and negative emotions that often make bad situations worse, and can sometimes even bring material benefit. The Jataka tales (stories of the Buddha's lives) include many stories about people who were saved from physical danger by praying to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

When things are good, sometimes it is harder to remember to go for refuge—you might not feel like you need protection at that moment. But in these times, too, going for refuge is important. First, it creates habits that make it easier to remember to go for refuge in bad times. Secondly, it will help you develop all your good qualities. Also, it will help you avoid bad rebirths and unfortunate circumstances in the future.

In order to help you remember to continually go for refuge, there are several precepts that you should follow. There are three prohibitions, three prescriptions, and five common precepts. If you avoid the prohibitions and practice the prescriptions and common precepts, you will have no trouble maintaining your refuge vow.

The three prohibitions are actions that you should avoid. The first prohibition is: *Having gone for refuge in the Buddha, do not go for refuge in Brahma or any other worldly god.* Brahma, Indra, or any other worldly god cannot offer you true protection, nor can your parents or friends, because they are not truly free themselves—they are still bound by samsara. The Buddha is the only Teacher who can show you the true path to complete freedom.

The second prohibition: *Having gone for refuge in the Dharma, abandon harming sentient beings.* The essence of dharma is love and compassion, so you should abandon any action of body, speech or mind that is contradictory to that. In particular, try not to harm any living being, whether large or small.

The third prohibition: *Having gone for refuge in the Sangha, do not rely upon non-Buddhist friends.* Of course, at this time the Dharma is new in the West, so you probably have quite a few non-Buddhist friends. This does not mean that you cannot be friends with them, but that you do not rely on them for guidance down the path because they do not know the true path. In particular, you should avoid people who denigrate the dharma and encourage you to do non-virtuous actions.

The three prescriptions are actions that you should take up. The first prescription is: *Treat with respect all supports for the Buddha, even the small fragments of a satsa.* Supports of the Buddha are statues, paintings, photographs, clay figurines called *satsas* and so forth. You should treat even the broken pieces of one of these with great respect.

The second prescription is: *Treat with respect all supports for the Dharma, even just a single letter of a dharma text.* Supports for the Dharma means the sutras, tantras, treatises, and all the commentaries and teachings that have been passed down through the centuries or given by contemporary lamas. Since these texts teach you how to practice dharma, you should treat even a single syllable from one of them with great respect. Nowadays with photocopy machines and cheap paper it is easy to forget how valuable these texts are; you should value them as highly as if they had been written by hand on palm leaves as they were in ancient times. In particular, do not place dharma texts on the floor or seats, and try to keep them in nice cloths.

The third prescription is: *Treat with respect anyone who wears the saffron robes of a fully renounced individual.* The monks and nuns who have abandoned worldly life in order to practice the dharma are like the root of the teachings. You should treat them all with deference and respect: sit behind them during teachings and ceremonies, do not walk in front of them, make sure they are served first at meals, and so forth.

Then there are five common precepts. First, do not abandon the Three Jewels even at the cost of your life or for great material rewards. Second, the Three Jewels are just as important for your mind as food and drink are for your physical body, so do not cast them aside and look for another worldly method. Third, always remembering the Three Jewels, offer the first portion of your food to them. Fourth, since you know the benefits of going for refuge in the three jewels, always keep them in mind and encourage others to go for refuge. Fifth, whatever direction you go, remember the Buddha of that direction and prostrate or pay homage to that Buddha. For instance, if you are in the west, you should try to remember Amitabha, the Buddha of the western pure land called the Blissful Realm (Dewachen).

Altogether there are eleven precepts, which might seem like a lot. Maybe you are wondering how you can keep them all. But these precepts are really not that difficult: the main point is to always remember that the Three Jewels are the best source of protection and guidance, and so you should try to treat them with respect and remember them in all situations.

The scriptures list eight benefits of taking the vow: First, now that you have taken the Refuge Vow, you are officially a Buddhist. Second, this vow is the basis for all other vows—without refuge, you cannot take the Vows of Individual Liberation, the Bodhisattva Vow, empowerments, or any Vajrayana vows. Third, this vow will protect you from harm. Fourth, it purifies your past misdeeds. Fifth, when you do virtuous actions, you will accumulate greater merit. Sixth, when you die, you will not be reborn in the lower realms. Seventh, you are embarking upon an excellent path—the path of Dharma. Eighth, ultimately you will pass beyond all suffering and attain the complete state of Buddhahood.

Most of all, you should remember how fortunate you are to be able to take the Refuge Vow. Of all the limitless sentient beings who are wandering in samsara, so many are confused and frightened, without any protection. They have no reliable guide to lead them out of the morass of pain, hunger, strife, birth, aging, sickness and death that appear to us confused beings. Even if someone finds temporary respite, that will change and eventually they will again find themselves helpless in some awful situation—in a future life if not in this one.

But you have found protection; you have a reliable guide in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. You have embarked upon a wonderful journey down an excellent path. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels will not immediately lift you out of samsara, but if you put efforts into your dharma practice, you will gradually see some improvements in your daily life, and you will eventually pass utterly beyond any sort of misery. This is absolutely wonderful, and you should rejoice for your good fortune.

*Through prostrating and offering, confessing,
Rejoicing and exhorting, supplicating,
Whatever little merit I have gathered,
I dedicate to all beings' enlightenment.*

Written by David Karma Choephel in Sarnath, India, February, 2005.