

Handout for Class 6 A Teaching on Refuge

Taken from a transcript of a teaching given by Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche in April 1990 at KTD.

The purpose of taking refuge is to experience enlightenment, because we would all like to be rid of our confusion, neuroses, and errors. There is not a single being who actually wants to be in confusion.

Since experiencing enlightenment is our goal, the first source of refuge is the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Buddha means that our purpose is to achieve the experience of perfect enlightenment, just as he did. We should understand that the Buddha did not achieve enlightenment overnight—he had to follow the path. He was originally an ordinary being, yet by following the path with diligence and enthusiasm and a sense of tremendous joy, he attained what is called SANGYE in Tibetan: Buddhahood.



In order to achieve enlightenment, we have to follow the path. The path toward enlightenment is called Dharma, so the second source of refuge is the Dharma. Dharma redirects us from what is negative to that which is positive, from the mistaken to the correct. Dharma is also healing—it heals the wounds of the mind. It heals our physical senses. Since Dharma is the path, we need to take refuge in Dharma to accomplish Buddhahood.

As much as we would all like to correct ourselves and to be free from all confusion and suffering and to experience enlightenment, without the Sangha, which means community, such a method as the path of Dharma might not be available in our time. It is because of the devotion of the Sangha that the path taught by Buddha has been passed down from teacher to student, and is still available in our time. Although we want to achieve the perfection of enlightenment, we will have no idea how to begin if we do not first depend on the Sangha.

Sangha members consist of those who are trained in the Dharma and have practiced and perfected some realization of the Dharma. Having that realization, they are in a position to guide the new student on the path with their knowledge of Dharma. Since the realized Sangha assists in our path toward the perfection of our goal, this is our third source of refuge. As beginners, we need to depend on the Sangha.



Understanding the three objects of refuge — Buddha, Dharma and Sangha — we also need to know that there are three ways of taking refuge, which are based on our intentions. The first way is taking refuge with a mundane or worldly aspiration. It is very common all over the world for people to take refuge with the intention of experiencing happiness, success, fame in this lifetime, or a better birth in the next lifetime. Because of lack of information or knowledge of the Dharma, these people do not know how to direct themselves toward enlightenment itself. Not knowing this, they set the goal of temporary happiness in this life and a better life in their next birth. The objects of refuge are the same: the Buddha,

the Dharma, and the Sangha, and it is possible that these sorts of temporary goals for this and the next life could be fulfilled. However, these people will not be separated from the cause of suffering, since they have not aspired to go beyond samsara. They have aimed for success, good things in this life, and a better birth, but they are still within samsara, which is a condition to experience great suffering.

An example of the importance of our goal is this: An arrow or a bullet has the power to go a long distance, but if we aim the bow or gun at the ground right in front of us, it will only go a short distance. It is not the fault of the bullet or arrow, but of our aim. When there is the preoccupation with personal well-being in this life and a better birth in the next life, these benefits may be obtained, but enlightenment will not. It is essential that we take refuge with such knowledge of the importance of intention, because obtaining refuge, as well as following the path to the accomplishment of enlightenment, is based on our state of mind.



In the second way of taking refuge, we have a sense of the nature of samsara. We understand that samsara is a choiceless state and that everything in the relative world, including our physical bodies, our friends, and our possessions is subject to impermanence. Although we would like to see everything as permanent, including the youthfulness of our physical bodies, impermanence creeps up on us gradually. As much as we try to avoid it, we cannot totally separate ourselves from this. Similarly, as much as we would like to be friends with those who are close to us, sometimes friendships end. Everything on the earth is impermanent. Seeing this impermanence, we see that what impermanence leaves us with is more suffering. We feel suffering when we see the deterioration of our bodies, things around us, and things everywhere in the universe.

Knowing the nature of samsara and with a sense of the possibility of the state of nirvana, the second form of taking refuge is to do so with the intention of liberating ourselves from impermanence and suffering. The objects of refuge are again the same: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Compared to the first way of taking refuge, this goal is much superior because at least there is the knowledge of working toward enlightenment. Still, it is not the best goal, because it is quite selfish. The practitioner has seen suffering and experienced impermanence, and therefore wants liberation for his or her self alone. This is known as the lesser vehicle tradition of taking refuge. It is called the lesser vehicle because the intention to reach liberation is only for the individual taking refuge. Taking refuge in this way has to do with the influence of the attitudes of those we associate with on the path. Friends—those with whom we associate—are very important, since they have a great deal of influence on our motivation.



The third attitude in receiving refuge is considered the proper way of receiving refuge in accordance with the particular tradition we are following, the mahayana (“maha” means greater). With this attitude, we need to learn to overcome the selfish motive of achieving enlightenment for ourselves alone and become quite courageous.

If we associate with the mahayana Sangha and are surrounded by the mahayana outlook, we may develop this courage. Those with the mahayana outlook are more courageous because they do not strive toward enlightenment for themselves alone, but toward the enlightenment of all living beings. Therefore, we also learn to accept others and all living beings on the path toward liberation.



The qualities that make us a proper recipient and practitioner of the mahayana teachings are, first, self-confidence or courage and second, wisdom. The courage or self-confidence is based on understanding that every living being is experiencing suffering. Whatever suffering we have gone through in the past, tolerable or intolerable, and whatever suffering we are going through now, all living beings suffer in the same way. They may not be experiencing exactly the same kind of pain, but they are always experiencing suffering and unfavorable conditions. All beings, indulging ourselves, try to avoid such pain and its causes but, since we are lacking in wisdom and are subject to confusion, we still always end up experiencing suffering. This is proof that whatever approach we and other beings have used in the past is not the ultimate or proper method.

Knowing that, we should include all living beings in our aspiration toward liberation, not just ourselves. Contemplate that all these living beings, through their confusion, believe they are in the proper path to happiness but, as a result of the confusion, they are not. By really understanding that everyone has suffering and confusion and is trying to overcome those problems, but that all the methods they have used have not brought them liberation, we develop the experience of limitless compassion. From this compassion comes the possibility of having the courage to guide all beings — not one or two, but all — to enlightenment. We should work to develop this compassion and courage.



Having developed that strong compassion, the next aspect is the cultivation of wisdom. Wisdom involves the awareness that giving living beings temporary happiness is not really the solution to their problem. Although it is very important to provide whatever happiness we can for beings, including ourselves, working toward just a temporary benefit is not really a solution. Therefore we must develop aspiration for the enlightenment of all living beings, which is the union of compassion and wisdom. This union of compassion and wisdom makes us mahayana practitioners.

The union of compassion and wisdom enables us to experience the burning away of our own confusion and obscuration much faster. In the absence of such confusion, realization or development takes birth. This relates to the second syllable of SANGYE (the Tibetan word for Buddhahood), GYE, which refers to development of wisdom. The reason the union of compassion and wisdom leads more rapidly to enlightenment is similar to the way a bird flies. It can fly with two wings, but not with one. Similarly, the union of compassion and wisdom enables us to “fly” toward enlightenment. Since we have motivated ourselves to reach enlightenment to benefit and liberate beings, we continue to bring about this benefit in accordance with our goal, and our capacity to benefit beings unfolds immeasurably.



The possibility of working in the proper way toward enlightenment—motivating ourselves in accordance with the mahayana view—is taught to us by our mahayana spiritual friend. As I said, the influence, or association, is important, and spiritual friends are quite helpful. There are also those who, without having to be taught, are naturally filled with compassion—not for themselves, but compassion toward all living beings. That is an evidence that this particular individual has practiced in the previous life. His or her obscurations or delusion of mind are less thick. It does not mean there are no obscurations, but there are fewer. As a result of this, these people experience natural compassion toward all beings without being taught. Therefore, we must genuinely rejoice if we have natural compassion toward all living beings.

All the countless enlightened beings of the past achieved enlightenment through this union of compassion and wisdom. All the countless enlightened beings of the present achieved that level through the union of compassion and wisdom. All future enlightenment must be achieved through the union of compassion and wisdom. Compassion and wisdom are also referred to as skillful means and primordial wisdom in the Dharma teachings. The skillfulness involved is the union of compassion and wisdom as we have discussed. That union is very important in our lives for the possibility of future enlightenment.



Instructions concerning taking refuge are given before the ceremony itself, since having the proper mental attitude during the ceremony is essential for obtaining the refuge transmission. At the time of the ceremony, there is really not much to do. You simply sit, repeat the Tibetan words, and you receive the refuge. If you do not know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what state of mind you should have, then you are simply sitting and repeating an unknown language. Since it is important not only to repeat the words but to know what you are repeating and what state of mind you should have, I have given this instruction.

If someone participates in the refuge ceremony without any knowledge of refuge, and without even knowing the words they are repeating, it would be like a bucket with holes in it. No matter what you put in, it runs out through the holes. If a person has some knowledge of refuge but is not aspiring toward enlightenment, and if they take refuge with a goal of happiness and prosperity of this and the next life, then they will have refuge, but they will be unable to reach enlightenment because they have not aspired to enlightenment. To enable you to be a perfect recipient of the refuge vow, I have given a complete explanation of the objects of refuge, and what state of mind you need to have. Particularly, it is important to take the attitude of including all living beings with a sense of compassion, and wanting to guide them to liberation. This makes you a very proper vessel, one without any holes at all. When you are a proper vessel, even if what you are putting in is a small amount, adding it to the container drop by drop every day, it is possible eventually to fill it up. You are not lacking a goal. Therefore, I have given these instructions. In order to become a proper vessel to move toward enlightenment, refuge is essential.



It is the nature of every living being, whether big or small, important or unimportant, to strive for happiness. We strive, not only a temporary happiness, but a permanent well-being of body and mind. That is not just the goal of human beings; it is very much the goal of every sentient being. We must understand the fact that we all aim toward this one particular purpose.

As I have explained, although the aim of beings is to have happiness, because of their confusion, they do not know how to obtain that happiness and how to avoid the cause of suffering. With that blindness or confusion, although every one of us (including humans, animals, birds, and so forth) has the aim of happiness, we end up with suffering.

In the hope of that happiness, we are so preoccupied for our personal well-being that we fail to see the needs of other sentient beings. As a result of this preoccupation, no matter how hard we work to provide happiness for ourselves, we always run into suffering. We are so confused that we really do not know the proper ways of obtaining happiness, and it seems that whatever we do to obtain happiness actually leads us further into the depths of suffering, pain, or frustration. The question is, what led us into such a confused state of mind?



There are two explanations for why we experience this confusion that leads us into suffering. The first is that the habitual patterns of confusion we have built up in the previous life continue in this life, because habitual patterns are very strong. These patterns we have built are very difficult to overcome unless we go through a particular training. Not having overcome them, we experience the continuation of the confusion of habitual patterns, which leads us further into the depths of confusion.

The second reason we experience so much confusion and fail to see the truth is that our associates, the influences around us, are also confused beings. When we are dealing with all the confused beings, along with having our own confused patterns from the past life, these factors in combination strongly influence us to engage in confusion rather than to come out of confusion.



A further example of how we have been confused in these ways may be given by speaking about past habitual patterns. With the confusion in the past life, we have engaged in all sorts of harmful activities which lead to the accumulation of negative karma. As a result of that negative karmic accumulation, we experience inferior birth. There are many inferior births, but the one with which we are most familiar (although there are some that are even more inferior) is the animal realm. An animal's knowledge and human knowledge are very different. An animal's capacity to learn is very limited. I am not saying that an animal cannot learn, but their capacity to learn is very limited in comparison to that of human beings. That is one example of the outcome of engaging in negative activities with the confused state of mind.

A second example concerns our friends and associates. We all know that the United States is a very civilized country and well developed in technology. People here are well educated in technical matters.

But no one is born fully informed about technology, so why are Americans so well informed about this? It is because your environment is filled with technology. Since your environment is filled with technology, technology becomes quite familiar to you, and you learn about it without much effort. Similarly, all the world knows that America is well civilized, but it is very rare to hear of enlightened beings coming from this country. Why have we not heard of American enlightened beings? It is not that you do not have the potential for enlightenment, but rather that you have not had the friends or environment of enlightened beings where you might learn and become familiar with the path. Because of the lack of such enlightened society, so to speak, until now America is not well known for enlightenment.

Despite the fact that America is not well known for enlightened beings, you might ask why so many people here are currently interested in the path to enlightenment. It is very obvious that all of you, and all people who are interested in such a path, were connected to that path in a previous life. As a result of that connection in a previous life, there is still a warmth, an interest, drawing you toward a particular subject in this lifetime. Therefore, although the subject of Buddhism has not been widespread in the United States, you are intrigued with it and are interested in taking the refuge vow. I feel it is very certain that you are completing a journey that you have connected with in a past life. It is very fortunate to be able to connect with whatever you began in a previous life, in order to continue it in this life and hopefully to fulfill it. Because it is a very fortunate event, I thank you all very sincerely for your interest.



The actual process of refuge is based on your state of mind or mental attitude. When you are receiving the refuge vow, the feeling of joy and acceptance must be there in your mind as a participant. If you lack that feeling of joy and acceptance of the refuge, then the vow cannot be fully obtained, because there is blockage or rejection. You also need to realize the reason you must have the feeling of joy is that such an opportunity to have a refuge vow—the unbroken transmission of this vow—is very rare, and that this very rare, precious thing that enables you to continue your past connection in this present life is being made available to you. When you find something that is very rare and precious, naturally you are happy and joyous. You are not only happy and joyous, but with the transmission that you are getting, you try to be more accepting and appreciative. That feeling or attitude is essential while taking the refuge vow.

The proper attitude in taking refuge can be explained in three parts. I am giving such classifications based on knowing that many of you are not completely new in the Dharma, and you are not yet enlightened beings either. Because you are in between, so to speak, you are well prepared to understand these three points.



The first point is acceptance—you must have trust. This trust also has three classifications. The first is clear, open trust. Clear, open trust is based on the knowledge that the possibility of receiving the vow in an unbroken transmission is very rare. Because it is an unbroken transmission, it is very precious as well. Therefore, you have gratitude toward the master who is providing this refuge and feel very fortunate. That feeling of being fortunate is the open trust, or clear trust.

The second aspect is the trust of desire, or longing trust. Longing trust is based on knowing that not only do you want to obtain the refuge, but your goal is to practice. You want to accomplish and perfect the path. That whole aim in obtaining the refuge is longing, or desire to perfect yourself. You have a desire to eliminate all your confusion, mistakes, and obscurations and develop the qualities of wisdom and enlightenment; this is longing trust.

Finally, there is believing trust. Believing trust is defined in this way: you want to perfect enlightenment, eliminating the obscuration or confusion of the mind, but to do so, you have to have knowledge to trust the tradition. To trust that tradition, you learn and understand that all the enlightened beings in the past in India and in Tibet have practiced this particular tradition. Practicing this tradition, they reached what is known as the mahasiddha level, the accomplishment of enlightenment. The point here is that all the uncountable enlightened beings that we talk about (of India or Tibet) have practiced this particular path and reached its goal. Therefore, you have a trust in the path, a trust in the practice itself. It has not only been given to you—it has been widely practiced. Therefore, the last type or trust is believing in the path, the practice itself. Developing these three kinds of trust is essential.



The second main point is understanding that enlightenment belongs to no particular culture, kind of individual, or gender. Therefore, it is quite a mistaken view to think that enlightenment is only possible for Asian people. It is also a mistaken view to think that enlightenment is only possible for men. As long as an individual has the capacity to understand, that individual, whether from the West or East, male or female, has the capacity for enlightenment. Every individual, regardless of which culture they belong to, has different levels or strengths of neurosis depending upon their individual personality, so some of us have very strong neuroses and while others are weaker in a particular neurotic pattern. Similarly, based on individual effort, some people can achieve enlightenment faster with proper effort, and some of us may not progress so quickly, because we are not putting our effort properly into the path. The goal of those on the path is to attain enlightenment. To actually accomplish this, the first thing we need to do is to lay the proper foundation, and taking refuge is indeed the step that lays the foundation.

To further cultivate the path of enlightenment, we need to meet all the proper conditions, such as having the proper spiritual master who guides us in the proper way of practicing.

Seeking refuge is not new. Beings have often sought refuge in the past as well as at present, but they sought refuge in various unenlightened objects, such as mountains, trees, rocks, rivers, or oceans. Many people have looked to these objects for a refuge, thinking that these things could provide it. As part of nature, they could provide natural energy, but because they are simply part of nature, they could not provide enlightenment. It takes an enlightened being to provide enlightenment, and since the proper guidance with a spiritual master who is fully trained in the path of enlightenment is necessary, meeting such a person is essential to further cultivate the aspiration of walking the path and reaching its goal.



Then you might ask, from who should we seek refuge? The answer is: seek refuge in Buddha, the enlightened being. You may or may not have heard the definition of Buddhahood. In English, the notion of enlightenment sometimes means simply understanding something you have not understood before. We might say, “I was enlightened by this or that explanation or information.” This does not convey the meaning of the Tibetan term SANGYE, which means both Buddhahood and Buddha. The two syllables of SANGYE each have a meaning. SANG means elimination or absence. What is being eliminated, or what is absent here, is every neurosis, mental affliction, confusion—all the negative patterns. The second syllable, GYE, means “blossomed” or “fully developed.” In the absence of all confusion and mental obscuration, what develops is the mind’s potentials and qualities, such as wisdom and knowledge.

Is the development of these qualities temporary? No, it is permanent. Once you have eliminated all obscuration and fully experienced or realized your own mind’s qualities, you are a fully enlightened being. That is what is meant by SANGYE. It does not just mean the historical Buddha of our time (Shakyamuni). SANGYE means the elimination of faults, confusion, and the full development of wisdom qualities—which is to say, Buddhahood.



The refuge vow lays the foundation for all of our spiritual growth as we progress toward enlightenment. That foundation is made possible through the proper mental state or attitude coinciding with the transmission. Also, a gesture of devotion toward that possibility is an important factor in taking refuge. Traditionally, people make offerings such as butter lamps, incense, or a flower as a gesture of devotion and joy in receiving the vow. It is good to make such offerings, because it brings about the accumulation of merit, and is an expression of devotion, which is necessary in receiving refuge. However, if you do not want to do this, there is no obligation at all.

Despite the obligations and demands on our time that we all have, you have taken the time and developed the intention to learn about and understand the process of taking refuge. Developing the intention to take refuge is a very virtuous action, so I would like to thank all of you from the bottom of my heart for your interest.