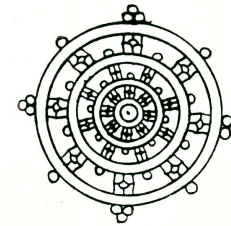


TAKING REFUGE

The Foundation of all Practices and Paths of Buddhism



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- i *NKL Three Visions*, introduction, page x
- ii <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism> accessed 01-30-2016
- iii *HHST Interview*, page 41
- iv *HHST Path*
- v *HHST Teaching2*, page 20
- vi *HHST Interview*, page 54
- vii *Saint*, pages 490-491
- viii <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/religious-harmony> accessed 01-30-16
- ix *DR Three Levels*, page 48
- x *KAR Faith*, page 91
- xi *HHST Teaching1*, page 13
- xii *HHST Interview*, page 44
- xiii *HHST Interview*, pages 44-45
- xiv *Gampopa Ornament*, page 200
- xv *Gampopa Ornament*, page 203
- xvi *KAR Buddhadharma*, page 10
- xvii *HHJDR Chenrezig*, page 1-2
- xviii *NKL Three Visions*, page 9
- xix *HHST Interview*, pages 44-45
- xx *KAR Buddhadharma*, page 7

“The Production of Faith,” by Khenpo Appey Rinpoche, in Migmar Tseten, *Treasures of the Sakya Lineage: Teachings from the Masters* (Boston: Shambala, 2008) [*KAR Faith*]

Note: “Khenchen” means great Khenpo; his books and other citations may use “Khenpo”.

Gampopa, *Ornament of Precious Liberation*, trans. Ken Holmes, ed. Thupten Jinpa, in *Stages of the Buddha's Teachings: Three Key Texts* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2015) [*Gampopa Ornament*]

Khenpo Appey Rinpoche, *The Importance of Studying the Buddhadharmā* (Kathmandu: International Buddhist Academy, 2006) [*KAR Buddhadharmā*]

His Holiness Jigdal Dagchen Sakya, “Chenrezig Teaching (09-17-04)”, http://www.sakya.org/pdf/HHJD_Sakya_Chenrezi_Teaching_09-17-04.pdf accessed 12-16-2016 [*HHJDR Chenrezig*]

FURTHER RESOURCES

<http://www.yowangdu.com/tibetan-buddhism/refuge-prayer.html>
[pronunciation videos & discussion]

David Jackson, *A Saint in Seattle: The Life of the Tibetan Mystic Dezhung Rinpoche* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003)

In Deshung Rinpoche's *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception* [cited above], see especially Chapter 5 The Umbrella of Refuge, and Chapter 6 Holding Fast Until Enlightenment is Won

In Khenpo Migmar Tseten's *Treasures of the Sakya Lineage* [cited above], see especially Chapter 5 The Production of Faith by Khenpo Appey Rinpoche

Introduction

Many people attend teachings and practices at the Nalanda Institute because they want to learn more about mindfulness, or they are curious about Buddhism and how to apply Buddhist perspectives to the problems of everyday life. For those who have developed affinities with Buddhist thought and practices, eventually the question arises: “Am I a Buddhist?” For those of us raised in a Western religious tradition, this can bring up issues about our personal history and concept of self identity. What is a Buddhist? How does one become Buddhist?

These questions are worthy of serious examination and reflection. To aid us, this guide provides background information for students of the Nalanda Institute as they consider the idea and meaning of “taking refuge”. It relies heavily on direct quotations from respected Tibetan Buddhist teachers. Some quotations are long, to provide better context if one does not have ready access to the sources [see References].

Classical teachings about refuge always address five topics:

- 1) our motive in taking refuge (cause)
- 2) the object of refuge (object)
- 3) the manner of taking refuge (procedure)
- 4) the benefits of taking refuge (benefit)
- 5) instructions for practice that attend the taking of refuge (precepts)

These same classical topics are all covered in this guide, organized and supplemented in a question and answer format to address common concerns of Western students.

Compiled for the Nalanda Institute by Jan Vleck
December 2016

HOMAGE

The teachings presented here include those of important sages and teachers of Nalanda's founder, Loppon Jamyang Tsultrim, who provided guidance during preparation of the text, and commentary. All gratitude and homage to the teachers who have inspired this guide.

Gampopa (1079-1153) trained in the Kadam tradition, became a main disciple of Milarepa, and founded the first Kagyü monastery in Tibet.

Ngorchen Konchog Lhundrub (1497-1557) was the tenth abbot of Ngor Monastery. HH the Sakya Trizin has called him “the master and lord of scholars....unequaled in authentically explaining the extraordinary tradition of the 'foremost father-son gurus' of Sakya....”ⁱ

Venerable Deshung Rinpoche (1906-1987) was among the last few Tibetan Buddhist masters who studied, practiced, and taught in Tibet until full maturity. He received teachings from renowned masters of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and was equally respected as teacher in both the Sakya and Rime (“nonsectarian”) traditions.

Khenchen Appey Rinpoche (1927-2010) was a tutor of HH the Sakya Trizin and a principal teacher of Loppon Jamyang, among many others. He was the primary founder of both Sakya College, for the monastic community in India, and the International Buddhist Academy in Kathmandu, for lay students and practitioners.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (1935-) is widely regarded as the spiritual leader of Tibet.

His Holiness the Sakya Trizin (1945-) is the 41st Throne Holder of the Sakya Order of Tibetan Buddhism, and a well-respected teacher among all Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

His Holiness Jigdal Dagchen Sakya (1929-2016) was the Head of the Sakya Phuntsok lineage, who lived in Seattle from 1960 until his death. He co-founded Sakya Monastery, and appointed Loppon Jamyang to be the resident teacher in Olympia.

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“The Buddhist Essence Teaching: An Interview with His Holiness Sakya Trizin,” in Migmar Tseten, *Treasures of the Sakya Lineage: Teachings from the Masters* (Boston: Shambala, 2008) [*HHST Interview*]
Also available at http://www.hhthesakyatrizin.org/teach_interview1.html and http://www.hhthesakyatrizin.org/teach_interview2.html

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His Holiness the Sakya Trizin, “An Introductory Teaching on Taking Refuge (Part 1),” *Melody of Dharma*, no. 2 (2010). [*HHST Teaching1*] and “Taking Refuge (Part 2),” *Melody of Dharma*, no. 3 (2010). [*HHST Teaching2*]

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His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “Religious Harmony: the Biased Mind Cannot Grasp Reality”, <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/religious-harmony> accessed 01-30-2016

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DEDICATION

Regardless of whether one chooses to take a formal refuge vow or not, simply hearing, reading, and contemplating these teachings is a beneficial Dharma activity that generates merit. May this guide increase non-harming, and inspire countless additional Dharma activities for the benefit of students of the Nalanda Institute, their families, and all beings.

Dedication of Merit

[in Tibetan language]

**Jam pal pa wo jee tar kyen pa dang
Kun tu zang po dey yang dey shin dey
Dey dak kün kee jey su dak lob cheer
Gey wa dee dak tam jay rab tu no**

**Du sum shek pay gyal wa tam jay kee
No wa kang la chok tu nak pa dey
Dak kee gey way tsa wa dee kün kyang
Zang po chö cheer rab tu no war kee.**

Just as heroic Jampal (Manjushri) is wise, so also is Kuntu Zangpo (Samantabhadra); and thus to follow their example, I dedicate all of these virtues.

All the Enlightened Ones of the three times praise any dedication as most excellent; so also shall I dedicate all this merit towards beneficial practice.

TAKING REFUGE

PREPARATION

What is Buddhism?

This lifetime may be too short for you to learn enough answers to this question! Wikipedia says, “Buddhism is a nontheistic religion or philosophy that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs, and spiritual practices largely based on teachings attributed to Gautama Buddha, commonly known as the Buddha (“the awakened one”).”ⁱⁱ Historically, Buddhism originated in the 5th century BCE. Tibetan Buddhism began in the 7th or 8th century. There are about 350 million Buddhists altogether, about 6-8% of the world's population, and about 1% of the North American population.

The principal foundation of Buddhist ethical behavior is non-harming, by which we mean the practice of compassion and lovingkindness. The idea of non-harming is fairly universal—it is common to many religions and secular institutions such as medicine.

Awakening is a central concept in Buddhism. The emphasis is on understanding and transforming one's afflictive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to reach individual liberation [Theravadan view] or to beneficially serve and connect with a larger community [Mahayana view]. This taming and guiding of our minds benefits not only ourselves, but those around us and ultimately all beings. As you can see, this emphasis on self-awakening and self-transformation aligns Buddhism more with autonomy than authoritarianism.

What is a Buddhist?

Buddhist tradition emphasizes individual transformation. Even the very word Buddha (“Awakened One”) expresses this: the awakened one is one who has achieved the internal quality of having realized ultimate reality or truth, and transformed afflictive thoughts and emotions into complete enlightenment.

“At the beginning of all Buddhist practice come two very important things: meditation of the four recollections and taking refuge. The four recollections are of the difficulty of attaining human birth; of the impermanence of all samsaric things; of the sufferings of worldly existence; and of the law of karma, or cause and effect.”ⁱⁱⁱ – HH the Sakya Trizin

“The special characteristic of a Buddhist is that he assents to these four basic teachings: 1. Everything is impermanent. 2. Everything is suffering. 3. Everything is selfless. 4. Nirvana is peace.”^{iv} – HH the Sakya Trizin

Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?

The implied dualism of this question doesn't mesh well with Buddhist philosophy, but it's a common question in the West. Of course the answer depends on your definitions of religion and philosophy, and on your understanding of Buddhism. Maybe it's neither a religion nor a philosophy, but the art of life! His Holiness the Dalai Lama has spoken of three views of Buddhism in recent years.

- 1) Buddhism as a religion: it has sacred texts, devotions, faith, rituals, people who wear robes, and many other aspects that would be recognized by someone of a formal religious background.
- 2) Buddhism as a philosophy: it is a way of seeking the truth and understanding through structured analysis.
- 3) Buddhism as a science: it is a systematic study of the mind and consciousness, with a testable theory of knowledge (epistemology).

REFUGE PRAYERS

[in ancient Pali language]

**Buddham saranam gaccami.
Dhammam saranam gaccami.
Sangham saranam gaccami.**

I go to the Buddha for refuge. I go to the Dharma for refuge. I go to the Sangha for refuge.

[in Tibetan language]

༄༅། སངས་རྒྱལ་ཚེས་དང་ཚོགས་ཀྱི་མཚོག་རྣམས་ལ།

།བྱང་ཆུབ་བར་དུ་བདག་ནི་སྐྱབས་སུ་མཚེ།

།བདག་གིས་སྨྱོན་སོགས་བགྱིས་པའི་བསོད་ནམས་ཀྱིས།།

།འགྲོ་ལ་ཡན་མྱེར་སངས་རྒྱལ་འགྲུབ་པར་ཤོག། །།

***Sang gye Chö dang Tsog kyi Chog nam la
Jang chub Bar du Dag ni Kyab su chi
Dag gi Jin sog Gyi pei So nam kyi
Dro la Phen chir Sang gye Drub par shog.***

In the Buddha, Dharma, and the Sangha I take refuge until enlightenment is reached. Through the merit of giving and other virtuous deeds, may I attain Buddhahood for the sake of all beings.

COMPLETION

What should I do after taking refuge?

Those who have taken refuge should continue doing so, for example by reciting a refuge prayer, as the preparatory phase of all meditation practices. In general they should keep company with virtuous people such as Dharma teachers and Sangha members. They should study the Dharma--not just browse without thinking--and rely on Dharma that was taught by the Buddha himself. Finally, they should actually practice Buddhism in daily life. More specifically, one should abandon harming sentient beings. One should not abandon refuge in the Buddha or Three Jewels by taking primary refuge elsewhere. One should always respect the Buddha and all Dharma teachers, as well as respect the Sangha. There are many ways of showing this respect, and these can be the subject of further cultural learning.

“Meditation, preceded by hearing and contemplation, and having the base of morality, is the Buddhist tradition.”^{xx} --Khenchen Appey Rinpoche

The first view is of most interest to “religionists”, while the second and third views are accessible to everyone. In fact, H.H. the Dalai Lama jokes that all scientists are Buddhists whether they accept the Buddha's teachings or not, because the methods are the same.

I grew up in another religious tradition. How does taking refuge relate to other faiths?

The refuge prayer and Buddhist practice are basically positive commitments, not negations. However, the intention of taking refuge is to take the Buddha or Triple Gem as one's paramount guide all the way through life to death (and ideally beyond) or to enlightenment. This guide is not to be abandoned either casually or at times of great suffering or joy.

In Sakya Trizin's teaching about taking refuge, he specifies that “We cannot take refuge in worldly deities. 'Worldly deities' refers to deities who are not free from the defilements, who are still tied to samsara.”^v While this proscription may have arisen in a particular historical cultural setting, it may help us to understand the contemporary relevance if we consider famous modern-day business people or entertainers. Their deeds or abilities may bring them wealth and fame, but these accomplishments are related only to the present life. Contrast this with an inspirational figure of deity who benefits us both now in the present life, and also helps us achieve enlightenment.

Also, according to Sakya Trizin, “Buddhism does not believe in a God as the creator of the world, and in that sense, you might say it is atheistic. If, however, God is something else, a divine compassion or a divine wisdom, manifest in the form of a deity, you might say that Buddhism is not atheistic but polytheistic.”^{vi}

“...One who despises another Buddhist school despises the Buddha. He impairs the transmission of the Dharma.... If one rejects Dharma one breaks one's refuge vow....”

“Therefore, the Buddha taught that one should also not despise the Dharma of non-Buddhists for it is their source of happiness and benefit. One should not despise or harbour contempt for the doctrines of the Hindus, Christians, or other non-Buddhist religions because this attitude of attachment to one's own side while rejecting the possibility of differences is harmful to one's own spiritual career.”^{vii} – Venerable Deshung Rinpoche

In speaking to an interfaith group in Ladakh, HH the Dalai Lama said, “I always say that every person on this earth has the freedom to practice or not practice religion. It is all right to do either. But once you accept religion, it is extremely important to be able to focus your mind on it and sincerely practice the teachings in your daily life....”

“I want to emphasise that it is extremely important for practitioners to sincerely believe in their respective religions. Usually, I say that it is very important to distinguish between 'belief in one religion' and 'belief in many religions'. The former directly contradicts the latter. Therefore, we should resolutely resolve these contradictions. This is possible only by thinking in contextual terms. A contradiction in one context might not be the same in the other. In the context of one person, a single truth is closely associated with a single source of refuge. This is of extreme necessity. However, in the context of society or more than one person it is necessary to have different sources of refuge, religions and truths.”

“As far as the Muslims are concerned it is appropriate for them to have complete devotion to Allah while praying in the mosques. This is also the same with Buddhists who are completely devoted to the Buddha when they pray in Buddhist temples. A society, which has many religions should also have many prophets and sources of refuge. In such a society it is very important to have harmony and respect amongst the different religions and their practitioners. We must distinguish between belief and respect. Belief refers to total faith, which you must have in your own religion. At the same time you should have respect for all other religions.”^{viii}

ACTUAL PRACTICE

How does one take refuge?

Commonly, a refuge ceremony takes place in front of a spiritual teacher and perhaps supportive spiritual friends. One is not committing to follow solely this teacher as a personal spiritual guide, but of course that teacher becomes an important figure along one's Dharma path. During the ceremony there may be a ritual cutting of hair, and the bestowal of a Dharma name, but the central point is making a heartfelt vow to maintain steady, unswerving direction along the path that leads to enlightenment or liberation.

“The actual practice is the recitation of the prayer of refuge....But mere recitation of the prayer with the voice is not sufficient; it must be recited from the heart.”^{xix} --HH the Sakya Trizin.

This means having the earnest intention and full belief that we will always take refuge in the Triple Gem. There is also the implication that we will take action in our daily lives that align with our Buddhist intentions of non-harming, self-transformation, etc. This point is classically made by reminding us that if we want to take refuge from the rain, it won't help to merely say 'house, house' or 'umbrella, umbrella'. We also have to take action.

The refuge prayers most commonly used at Nalanda are fairly short, and are included later in this guide.

There are three kinds of faith: a) *voluntary faith* based on perception of advantages of a teaching and the wish to accept it, b) *clear faith* in which the mind is clear and certain in the presence of the qualities of the teacher or teaching, and c) *faith of confidence* based on study and analysis producing acceptance of the correctness and validity of the teaching.

- 3) Compassion: some realize that not only oneself but all beings desire to have happiness, and freedom from suffering. They recognize that through countless cycles of rebirth from beginningless time, all sentient being have been at one time or another our mother or father, so they wish for all these countless beings to be removed from suffering.

What are the benefits of taking refuge?

There is no shortage of benefits discussed in classical teachings on refuge. Briefly, here are some of the important benefits. Through taking refuge diligently, we can avoid or relieve the suffering and harm that arise from our attachment or negative emotions (obscurations). We not only gain protection from those sources of suffering, but we also gain happiness and confidence in our daily lives because we have a consistent source for morality and beneficial actions that help ourselves and others. Ultimately, we will also gain Buddhahood for ourselves and others.

Further, taking refuge creates a stable structure in our own spiritual practice and is an antidote to the problems arising from lack of a refined focus. It helps us recall what is important, and establishes a clear identity (if we want to use this term)

Also, taking refuge has the immediate effect of making the world a better place, because you have given up harming and embarked on a path to fully connect with the goodness within you (Buddha Nature).

What is taking refuge?

In this guide, taking refuge refers mainly to the conscious act of becoming a Buddhist. However, taking refuge is actually ongoing—most practitioners take refuge daily and as part of every meditation session. “Taking refuge” is the common translation of the Tibetan word “kyapdro”, which more accurately means “to go to refuge”. This means we sincerely resolve to rely on the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as our primary objects of refuge, or guides on the path to enlightenment. Ven. Deshung Rinpoche explains, “We consider the Buddha to be our teacher or guide; his teachings as the instructions we will follow, the experience we hope for, and the realization we aspire to attain through right practice; and the Sangha as those spiritual friends who can help us move forward on the path.”^{ix}

Khenchen Appey Rinpoche writes, “The practical manner for producing faith in the Buddhist teachings is to take refuge. When refuge is taken, one promises to hold as one's guide the shrine or the object that one trusts and accepts to be extraordinary and excellent.... The nature of refuge is actually the idea of accepting the shrine or object of refuge to be perfect.”^x Strictly speaking, the Sangha that is an object of refuge is those who have reached enlightenment, not the everyday Sangha of those still on the path.

“...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.”^{xi} --HH the Sakya Trizin

“Taking refuge marks the difference between Buddhists and non-Buddhists; it means that we have surrendered, taken asylum.”^{xii} – HH the Sakya Trizin

“We wish to be free from [suffering] but we don't have full knowledge or full power to do this....So when we want to be saved from the sufferings of worldly existence, we have to take refuge in the Triple Gem.... The Triple Gem consists of the Buddha, who is the guide; the Dharma (or religion) which is our Path; and the Sangha, which comprises our spiritual companions.”

“The Dharma has two parts: the teaching and the realization. The teaching is the Tripitaka (Sutra, Abhidharma, and Vinaya discourses), but this is like a boat you use to cross a river: when you get to the other side, you simply leave it behind. The realization also has two parts: the truth of cessation and the truth of the Path. The first of these is void (shunyata) so it cannot be a final refuge, while the Path, being itself impermanent, also cannot be the final refuge. As for the Sangha, even its very highest members are still on the Path, so they cannot be a final refuge. The refuge is only in the Buddha, but we always take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.”^{xiii} --HH the Sakya Trizin

Sakya Trizin here is making a further distinction among the three objects of refuge, with the Buddha as the “final refuge”. Gampopa's writings further explain this concept. After listing various candidates for “true refuge” such as worldly deities, parents, friends, etc., he continues, “Why are none of these able to provide refuge? Because to constitute a refuge, there must be no fear [of samsara] and there must be liberation from its sufferings. None of the above has transcended fear, and they are still subject to suffering. Other than buddhas, no one is definitively liberated from suffering. Other than Dharma, there is no way to achieve buddhahood. Other than the Sangha, there are none who can help us practice Dharma.”^{xiv} He provides a similar analysis of why the Dharma and Sangha in and of themselves are not lasting sources of refuge—the Dharma is only a vehicle to be abandoned at the end of the journey, and the Sangha themselves take refuge partly through fear. This leaves only the Buddha as the inexhaustible refuge. Gampopa concludes this analysis citing the Great Liberation Sutra: “In brief, the refuge is one, but in terms of method [it] is three.”^{xv}

According to Khenchen Appey, “If one does not take refuge in the Triple Gem one cannot bring an end to the suffering of samsara. However, taking

the refuge vow cannot, by itself, accomplish the goal; the precepts of the refuge also need to be protected and observed.”^{xvi} Khenchen Appey describes these essential precepts as associating with Noble Beings, listening to the Holy Teachings, and practicing in accordance to the Dharma: [Teachers, Teaching, and Doing].

Loppon Jamyang emphasizes there are two ways of becoming Buddhist. After studying Buddhist teachings, one could formally become a Buddhist through taking refuge in a ceremony with a teacher. If one does not prefer a ceremony, then one could simply observe and practice four principle Buddhist philosophical views (the “Four Seals of Dharma”):

1. All afflictive conditions are distressful [Dukkha]
2. All conditions are impermanent
3. All conditions are selfless and insubstantial
4. Liberation from distress and its sources is True Peace.

[Refer back to page 2 for the Sakya Trizin's formulation of the “Four Seals”.]

H.H. Dagchen Rinpoche taught, “Whether or not we go to refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is our choice. It is not something we must do. It's a choice that we have. We do this according to our own wish. If we do it according to our own wish then it's possible for us to do the practice and have good results. But if we do not do this according to our own wish it is very difficult to do the practice. So it's really our own choice to take refuge.”^{xvii}

What motivates people to take refuge?

There are three basic causes why people take refuge.

- 1) Fear: some are motivated by fear of suffering for themselves, and want to attain a higher rebirth where there might be less suffering and more happiness. “Seeking refuge through fear means that, being alarmed by the miseries of worldly existence experienced by others or oneself, one seeks refuge from them.”^{xviii}
- 2) Faith: some understand that any worldly existence, no matter the specific circumstances, inevitably involves suffering, and want to attain nirvana, the state that is entirely away from suffering.