

Taking Refuge

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The first step in practicing Buddhism, according to the three traditions of Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana, is to take refuge. The seed or cause for taking refuge is a feeling of interest and closeness to the three objects of refuge: the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha.

On the outer level, the **Buddha** is the person who gave the teachings; he is the guide. The **Dharma** is the teachings; it is a guidebook that describes where to go. The **sangha** are the beings who follow the path described by the dharma. There are different levels of the sangha: some members of the sangha are highly realized beings and some are beginners, but anyone who follows the Buddhist path is a member of the sangha. This is the outer meaning of taking refuge.

The three refuges also have an inner meaning related to the mind. The mind's primordial nature is totally pure, clear, and enlightened from beginningless time. One's own pure awareness is the primordial buddha. "Buddha" actually means the perfect understanding that is free from all deluded and dualistic thinking. This is the absolute buddha.

Maintaining the qualities of the primordial nature and radiating them to all sentient beings is the inner meaning of taking refuge in the absolute dharma. "Dharma" is a Sanskrit word that can be translated as "protection." Practicing the dharma protects the mind from delusion and duality. The mind contains

tremendous, vast qualities that cannot be put into words. The primordial nature of the mind includes a completely nonviolent attitude of infinite loving kindness and infinite compassion toward all beings, and these qualities are known as the dharma.

The inner sangha is also contained within the mind. "Sangha" is a Sanskrit word meaning "inseparable." This refers to the inseparability of clarity and emptiness as the true nature of the mind. These qualities are always present as the unity of skillful means and wisdom. Clarity and emptiness are always present, and that is the meaning of the absolute sangha.

Anyone can take refuge; it is open to everyone who has joyful interest and devotion toward the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. As a Buddhist, you continue to take refuge on both outer and inner levels until you come to a full realization of primordial awareness. When you have achieved enlightenment, then you do not have to take refuge any longer; instead you become an object of refuge.

The refuge ceremony conveys the lineage blessings of Buddha Shakyamuni, the dharma and the sangha. When taking the refuge vow, a person should have the pure motivation of doing it for the sake of all sentient beings. During the ceremony, the participants meditate on the historical buddha, Buddha Shakyamuni, as the representation of enlightenment. They visualize him in

the sky in front of them as a real, living buddha who is radiating wisdom light in every direction. He is surrounded by many realized beings, such as bodhisattvas and arhats and the buddhas of the three times. All of them are smiling and radiating rainbow light of wisdom and blessings.

The aim of taking refuge is to remove the dark ignorance of sentient beings and to reveal their true awareness. To affirm this, the teacher and students chant three times: "I take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha until I become enlightened. I am doing this for the benefit of all sentient beings." When the chant is repeated for the third time, the students visualize wisdom light radiating from the objects of refuge and entering their hearts. At that moment the teacher snaps his fingers and the students receive the lineage blessings.

Then, each student receives a dharma name, and a little piece of their hair is cut off. The piece of hair is an offering to the Buddha, the dharma, the sangha and the teacher. This indicates the change from being an ordinary person to being a member of the Buddhist sangha.

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Note: Refuge ceremony will be held Sunday after teachings. Please sign up in the bookstore by Saturday afternoon so Rinpoches will have time to make the certificate for your dharma name. You may also ask the Lamas for a beginning practice, especially to get started with Ngondro accumulations; ask at the bookstore.

