

An Essential Instruction on Refuge and Bodhichitta

by Patrul Rinpoche

In the Buddha, the Dharma and the Supreme Assembly

I take refuge until I attain enlightenment.

Through the merit of practising generosity and so on,

May I attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.

Here I shall explain taking refuge, which is the foundation of the path to liberation, the basis of all vows, the source of all enlightened qualities and the point of differentiation between buddhists and non-buddhists, together with generating the mind of bodhichitta, which is the foundation for accomplishing the level of complete enlightenment and the source of all that is positive in existence and peace.

1. Taking Refuge

This has three sections: (i) the objects in which we take refuge, (ii) the duration of refuge and (iii) the actual practice of taking refuge.

i. The Objects of Refuge

There are three objects: the perfect Buddha who is the unsurpassable teacher, the sacred Dharma which is the unsurpassable protection and the supreme assembly of the noble sangha, who are the unsurpassable guides.

Buddha

The Buddha is the one endowed with the four kayas and five wisdoms.

The four kayas are:

1. The svabhavikakaya, which is the nature of phenomenal reality devoid of any obscurations.
2. The dharmakaya, which is the unceasing aspect of wisdom.
3. The sambhogakaya, which is the self-appearing rupakaya adorned with major and minor marks.
4. The nirmanakaya, which appears in order to tame disciples who are to be tamed.

The five wisdoms are:

1. The wisdom of dharmadhatu, which is the inherent purity of absolute space.
2. The mirror-like wisdom, which is wisdom's unceasing clarity aspect.
3. The equalizing wisdom, which is the absence of attachment and aversion towards anyone or anything, near or far.
4. The wisdom of discernment, which knows objects without confusing or conflating them.
5. The all-accomplishing wisdom, which effortlessly brings about the welfare of others.

Dharma

The Dharma is identified as scripture and realization.

The Dharma of scripture consists of the three collections (pitakas):

1. The Vinaya collection, which tames ('*dul ba*) the disturbing emotions in one's mindstream.
2. The Sutra collection of summarizing (*mdo*) texts in which points are arranged in categories.
3. The Abhidharma collection for generating the wisdom that clearly (*mngon par*) realizes the way things are.

The Dharma of realization is the threefold higher training:

1. The training in higher discipline, which is the subject matter of the vinaya collection.
2. The training in higher meditation, which is the subject matter of the sutra collection.
3. The training in higher wisdom, which is the subject matter of the abhidharma collection.

The two truths [of cessation and the path] come from taking these three trainings into one's experience, as abandonment and realization develop on the five paths and ten bhumis. The truth of cessation is the perfect abandonment and the truth of the path is the perfect realization.

Sangha

The sangha is the irreversible sangha of bodhisattvas. These are the bodhisattvas on the ten bhumis, who can not revert to samsara, because they have realized emptiness directly through their wisdom, and who do not fall into the extreme of quiescence, because in their compassion they care for beings with the love of a mother for her only child.

ii. The Duration of Taking Refuge

The verse says "...until I attain enlightenment." In this context, the mahayana level of taking refuge is distinguished by three features.

Difference in terms of Objects

The followers of the hinayana take as their refuge the supreme nirmanakaya Shakyamuni, who is "The Buddha, the supreme of all humans (literally 'those on two legs')." They do not accept the dharmakaya and sambhogakaya, and they believe that even the nirmanakaya stops benefitting beings once it has passed beyond this world. They believe that the Dharma jewel refers only to the state of nirvana, which is the truth of cessation. They refer to this as "peace and supreme freedom from passions." For them, the "sangha, which is the supreme of all assemblies" consists of the noble shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, the stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners and arhats.

In the mahayana, on the other hand, it is as I have explained above.

Difference in terms of Duration

The followers of the hinayana take refuge temporarily for as long as they live, and ultimately until they attain their own particular fruition.

Difference in terms of Attitude

The followers of the hinayana take refuge with an attitude of renunciation, wishing to find freedom from all the sufferings of samsara for themselves alone. The followers of the mahayana take refuge with bodhichitta, in the wish that all sentient beings might attain buddhahood.

iii. The Actual Practice of Taking Refuge

When taking refuge with the words “I take refuge...” and so on, consider that in every atom appear buddhas as numerous as all the atoms in existence, each surrounded by an assembly of their bodhisattva heirs, reaching to the very limits of phenomenal reality. Consider that the enlightened minds of all these victorious buddhas and their bodhisattva sons and daughters are filled with the sacred Dharma of scripture and realization, and they all remain before you as great leaders, ready to care for and guide you and all sentient beings with their vast qualities of wisdom, love and power. As you remain before them, together with all other sentient beings, all clasping your palms together, you think the following, “From this moment on, until the essence of enlightenment is reached, we rely on you, Three Jewels, as our objects of refuge. We make offerings to you. You are our only practice. We have no other refuge or hope but you.” Then with total trust and heartfelt conviction, take refuge.

The Precepts of Taking Refuge

In this, there are six specific precepts and five general ones.

Six Specific Precepts

In the specific precepts, there are three things to avoid and three things to do.

Three Things to Avoid

1. Having taken refuge in the Buddha, you should not worship any gods who are still bound within the cycle of samsara.
2. Having taken refuge in the Dharma, you should not inflict harm upon any sentient being.
3. Having taken refuge in the Sangha, you should not associate with friends who hold extreme views.

Three Things to Do

1. Practise according to the words of the Buddha and then, without forgetting them, generate faith and devotion. Show respect even for broken fragments of statues and images of the Buddha.
2. Exert yourself in studying, reflecting and meditating on the sacred Dharma. Show respect even for torn scriptures that represent the Dharma.
3. Respect the sangha who are followers of the Buddha, associate with virtuous friends, and treat even tiny pieces of yellow cloth as objects worthy of reverence.

Five General Precepts

1. Do not forsake the Three Jewels, even at the cost of your life.
2. Even in important ventures, do not seek other methods.
3. Do not interrupt your regular practice.
4. Encourage yourself and others to take refuge.
5. Pay homage to the buddha of whichever direction you travel.

2. Generating Bodhichitta

Generally there are said to be two levels to bodhichitta, the relative and the ultimate. Relative bodhichitta is the mind that is intent upon attaining perfect enlightenment for the sake of others, and ultimate bodhichitta is the wisdom that directly realizes emptiness.

Relative bodhichitta itself can be further divided into aspirational bodhichitta, which is like the wish to go somewhere, and the bodhichitta of application, which is like actually making the journey. In both cases, bodhichitta is generated through formal practice, and so it is known as 'coarse bodhichitta arising from signs.'

Ultimate bodhichitta only arises through the power of meditating on the path, and is therefore known as 'subtle bodhichitta, which is gained through reality itself.'

Relative bodhichitta has two points or aspects: compassion, which is focused on sentient beings, and wisdom, which is directed towards perfect enlightenment. If either of these two aspects is lacking, then it will not be the bodhichitta of the Mahayana, so it is important that they are both complete.

Here in the present context, the generation of aspirational bodhichitta alone has two aspects: focusing on merit which is the cause and aspiring towards perfect enlightenment which is the result.

The first of these is covered in the phrase "practising generosity and so on." When all sources of virtue are categorized, they may be included within what are called 'the three bases for creating merit'. These are the creation of merit through generosity, the creation of merit through discipline and the creation of merit through meditation. When we relate these to the six paramitas, the first two relate to the paramitas of the same name, and the creation of merit through meditation relates to patience, concentration and wisdom. Diligence assists them all.

These six paramitas are also based on specific states of mind:

1. Generosity is an attitude of giving.
2. Discipline is an attitude of renunciation.
3. Patience is an attitude of imperturbability.
4. Diligence is an attitude of enthusiasm.
5. Concentration is non-distraction.
6. Wisdom is the precise discernment of phenomena.

The second aspect of aspiring towards the result of perfect enlightenment is covered in the phrase, "May I attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings." This is the actual bodhichitta endowed with the two points or aspects. "For the benefit of all beings" is the thought of who we are practising for, and is focusing on sentient beings with compassion. "May I attain buddhahood" is longing for what we are practising towards, and is wisdom directed towards complete enlightenment. It is therefore the aspirational bodhichitta, which is to think, "Through all these sources of virtue of mine, may I attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings who are as infinite as space!"

The Precepts of Aspirational Bodhichitta

In addition, there are the five precepts of aspirational bodhichitta, which are as follows:

1. Never giving up on sentient beings.
2. Continually reflecting on the benefits of bodhichitta.

3. Exerting yourself in the methods for accumulating merit and wisdom.
4. Applying yourself to the training in bodhichitta.
5. Adopting and abandoning the eight wholesome and unwholesome dharmas.

Giving up on just a single sentient being causes you to lose your bodhichitta of aspiration completely, so develop a wish to benefit all beings.

Reflecting on its benefits causes you to develop enthusiasm and apply yourself to arousing bodhichitta, so reflect continually on the benefits to be gained from the generation of bodhichitta.

Gathering the accumulations increases the strength of your bodhichitta, so accumulate merit and wisdom in various ways, such as the seven branch practice.

The training in bodhichitta has three elements:

1. training in the cause by meditating on the four immeasurables,
2. the actual training, which is to practise taking the vow of bodhichitta three times during the day and three times at night,
3. and the training in the precepts, the meditations on equalizing and exchanging yourself and others, and consider others as more important than yourself.

The four immeasurables are as follows:

1. Love, which is the wish that all beings who are unhappy may find happiness.
2. Compassion, which is the wish that all who are suffering may be freed from suffering.
3. Sympathetic joy, which is the wish that those who are happy and free from suffering may never be separated from their happiness.
4. Equanimity, which is the wish that those who feel attachment and aversion towards anyone, close or distant, may pacify their attachment and aversion.

The actual training in bodhichitta is to take the vow of bodhichitta by means of any formal practice—whether elaborate, medium or short—at the six times of the day and night, i.e., at dawn, mid-morning, midday, afternoon, dusk and midnight.

- 'Equalizing self and others' means recognizing the equality of yourself and others in wishing to find happiness and wishing to avoid suffering.
- 'Exchanging self and others' means giving your own happiness to other sentient beings, and taking their suffering upon yourself.
- 'Considering others as more important than yourself' means setting aside your own benefit and accomplishing the benefit of others.

The eight wholesome and unwholesome dharmas consist of four wholesome dharmas to be adopted and four unwholesome dharmas to be abandoned.

The four unwholesome dharmas are as follows:

1. Deceiving anyone worthy of veneration.
2. Feeling misplaced regret.
3. Abusing a holy person.
4. Cheating others.

The four wholesome dharmas are as follows:

1. Being careful never to lie, even at the cost of your life.
2. Setting everyone on the path to enlightenment.

3. Showing similar respect to bodhisattvas as you would to the Buddha.

4. Being honest to all beings.

If you apply yourself to these practices, then you will never forget the mind of bodhichitta in all your future lives, and all the qualities of the bhumis and paths will develop and increase like the waxing moon.

Virtue!

| Translated by Adam Pearcey, 2004