

## [The Meaning of Taking Refuge](#) - *Choje Akong Tulku Rinpoche*

**In order to become a Buddhist formally, you have to "Take Refuge. " What does "Taking refuge" involve? Do you have to take any vows or make any commitments?**

"Taking Refuge" in itself is a serious commitment. It is not something you should do casually because you are in a certain place or certain mood. In order to carry out a trust connected with anything in your life, you need some sort of commitment. Therefore if you want to take Buddhism as your path and base your life on Buddhist principles, then of course you have to make some kind or form of commitment.

The commitment to Buddhism does not mean that you have to shut yourself away from society. The commitment to Buddhism is the opposite. It is about learning how you can lead a more useful life and how you can help to create a more positive society. You make a commitment to Buddhism in order to develop your own spiritual path so that you may be better able to help other people. You enter the path for both your own self-development and, at the same time, to learn how to help others. The "commitment" is more like a resolution to study, to learn an understanding of how things are seen through the principles of Buddhism.

On the question of vows, the Lord Buddha did not impose "vows" as rules; the Lord Buddha gave advice. "If you do this or this it would be good..."; or "...it would be wiser not to kill, not to steal, not to tell lies or to do anything that is harmful to other people or yourself." You could take this as a vow but it is not a rigid vow imposed by the Buddha upon you. It is more like, "If you want to follow my (the Buddha's) path then these are my suggestions and by doing it this way you will be a better and happier person".

There are strict vows in the Buddhist religion. There are the five or the eight precepts and there are vows at different levels for monks and nuns, but the greatest sense of commitment is to learn to tame your mind, to develop loving-kindness and to help other people when people need your help. When you have developed your mind properly then you will be willing to give help when people need it, and not just when you feel in the right mood. That commitment is the main vow.

**I try to live with loving-kindness and compassion already so is it necessary to become a Buddhist In a formal ceremony?**

It is not essential but I think it can be useful because Buddhism teaches us how to develop loving-kindness and compassion. Without this training, when you are in a good mood you will try to develop loving-kindness and compassion. But when you are having a hard time you may not be interested; you may be too involved in your own problems to give or feel compassion for others. It is part of the commitment of being Buddhist that you try to develop

loving-kindness and compassion so that no matter what kind of experience you personally are having, you will still be able to give to others, and you will also keep on trying to learn. So I think it is necessary.

The ceremony makes you clear in your mind that you have made a commitment or bond otherwise it is just like having good intentions. The vows you take will work on you as a positive influence at an inner level and will help you to do what is right when you are having difficult times.

### **How might I benefit personally from taking Refuge?**

I think it has great benefit because then you cannot be lazy; you cannot change your ideas all the time, "Today I like everything and everybody", and you go round like a ray of sunshine! The next day you think, "Today I am fed up with everything and everybody and cannot be bothered"! I think the fact that you have taken Refuge guides you and protects you from negative emotions, from feeling negative about experiences. I cannot promise that you will always be able to achieve it - but taking Refuge will channel your energy towards feeling positive, and I think that it will always be useful.

### **I know you say that becoming Buddhist is not necessarily the right path for everyone. How can I know that taking Refuge and becoming Buddhist is right for me?**

I think first of all, whatever the path, you should read, study and try to experience it. There is no need to rush anything or immediately Jump into it. Look at it carefully and see whether it is something that is suitable for you.

Look very carefully at what Buddhism does or what Buddhism says is "good" and "bad", in the context of your life. If you look at all this, then I think you will see not find anything that is wrong or that is going to cause you harm. Buddhism does not create tensions or conflicts; it does not tell you to harm or despise other ways; it does not say that it is wrong to have other faiths or to believe in other things. Buddhism does not make you in any sense narrow minded. It does the opposite; it encourages you to broaden your outlook.

So I cannot see any harm coming to anyone by becoming involved In Buddhism. You may wish to take Buddhism as your path but if you feel unsure then I think it would be wise to study a little more - all the religions if you wish. The important thing is not which path you take but to choose the path that will help you to become a better, more useful human being.

### **When you take Refuge, you take Refuge not only with the Buddha but also with the Lama or Rinpoche who conducts the ceremony. What is your commitment to this person? How strong is it?**

When you take Refuge, the commitment is not between you and that teacher; the commitment is to do with you and Buddhism. If you take Refuge with a highly spiritual person I am sure that will be very good, but the actual commitment depends on you yourself - the person taking Refuge. It is entirely up to you how you want to deal with it.

The words "Lama" and "Guru" have the same meaning; "Lama" is Tibetan and "Guru" is Sanskrit, both mean "teacher" in a strong spiritual sense - not like a school "teacher" who marks your homework. "Rinpoche" is a title given to a "Tulku" who is a certain type of highly respected Lama.

The most Important thing is that the person, he or she, who gives you Refuge should:

- carry the correct transmission of the lineage
- have taken Refuge themselves
- have full faith and belief in the teachings of Lord Buddha
- be following the teachings and trying to live by them
- be able to inspire your trust and faith.

It is important that the person who gives you Refuge has faith and belief in the path of Buddhism and that their personal commitment has not been broken. Even if someone has taken Refuge but no longer has faith or belief then that person no longer carries the transmission of lineage.

The person who gives you Refuge, is called your "Refuge Lama" but he or she does not necessarily have to be your personal "guru". "Guru" or "Tsawe Lama" has much deeper meaning than that. Your "Refuge Lama" Is one of your spiritual teachers but as long as you have some respect for that person there is no need to have a deeper commitment.

The Lama with whom you take Refuge is like the person who opens the door into Buddhism for you. Your "Refuge Lama" shows you the first steps like a mother showing her child how to walk, or your primary teacher who introduces you to the A, B, C, and then before long you find you are able to read a book.

I think you should have a feeling of respect and trust for your Refuge Lama but you should not trouble yourself too much about who is the right Refuge Lama for you. There is no need to lose any sleep about whether this is the right one, or the wrong one or how many commitments you should take or what kind of commitments - this is not necessary.

**You said that the person who gives Refuge to you should have the 'lineage'. Could you explain this please?**

Lineage means that you have to have the lineage of transmission. Lineage of transmission means that the transmission of the ceremony does not pass through tape recorders, nor through radio or television but from human to human, person to person. When the teacher who gives you Refuge does so in the lineage, then you can trace your own receiving of Refuge, from teacher to student, right back over two and a half thousand years, from this country to Tibet, from Tibet to India, unbroken, right back to the Lord Buddha himself,

**How do you know if someone truly has the lineage? There are so many people teaching Buddhism nowadays.**

If you are unsure you should just ask, "Who did you take Refuge with?" There is no harm in asking that. I hear many things said here which seem a little strange. For example, many things done in the west people say that they come from the Tibetan tradition, particular lessons, particular prayers, particular healing techniques but we who come from Tibet have never heard of them. We do not know them ourselves, but that does not necessarily mean that they do not come from Tibet - it is just that we have not heard of them.

However, we are sure of some traditions and practices and we are very clear about the Refuge ceremony. We know that the tradition of the lineage of the transmission of giving Refuge to a student who requests it does exist and should be respected. I think that if you have doubts you should ask for more information. You can always ask questions and if the person is genuine they will understand,

**So what you are saying is that anyone, at any time can always question what their teacher has said?**

Sure, of course you can. That teacher is still a human being! The teacher carries a message, but the teacher may not necessarily be enlightened and therefore he or she is still in a human existence. They will still be affected by a sense of inner superiority or ego and emotions and will sometimes make mistakes. What you have to learn from that teacher is the message not always the behaviour. You should not think, "He did this, therefore I must copy him because he is my Buddhist teacher".

You must not close your eyes and follow your teacher blindly. Every one of you has the same capability of achievement as the teacher, the same potential. If you continue to do the right thing you may even be better than your teacher! The teacher gives the message and you act on it. It would be wiser to separate the teachings from the behaviour of the teacher. Then if some action of the teacher should disappoint you, you will not lose interest in Buddhism because of the behaviour of one person.

**What are the main principles of being a Buddhist and how can someone put these into practice in their dally life?**

The main principles, I think, are not to do any harm to anybody, and to pay attention to your own mind, your own actions and not those of other people. You should test yourself all the time asking, "Am I doing something useful or am I doing something not useful? How am I affecting others?" If you see that you are doing something not particularly useful for others then you should try to improve.

Being a Buddhist should mean that you are always looking to improve yourself so that you will be more useful to other people. You can never say that you have finished all improvement; that you don't need to do any more. Being a Buddhist is a commitment to a process of constant improvement and spiritual development. It means that you should be constantly trying to purify yourself, cleaning up your own thoughts or emotions. While you are working with yourself you should also try to help other people when they need you and you should appreciate everything that is good around you. These are the main principles of Buddhism.