Taking Refuge

Driven only by fear, men go for refuge to many places - to hills, woods, groves, trees and shrines. Such, indeed, is no safe refuge; such is not the supreme refuge. Not by resorting to such a refuge is one released from all suffering. He who has gone for refuge to the Buddha, the Teaching and his Order, penetrates with transcendental wisdom the Four Noble Truths - suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering. This indeed is the safe refuge, this is the supreme refuge. Having gone to such a refuge, one is released from all suffering.

- The Dhammapada

What does it mean to take refuge?

To take refuge in something means to go to it for protection. Generally, when things go wrong in our lives we seek help and solace from our parents, family or friends. But as we mature in our spiritual understanding, we begin to realise that the mind is the real source of our difficulties. Consequently, family, friends or even external objects are not effective refuges because there is no way they can protect us from all the possible problems we may face, and no way that they can change our thoughts and feelings for us.

On this basis, we turn to a teacher who has achieved a complete understanding of his mind and the nature of reality - the Buddha - not as a saviour, but as an example of someone we can emulate. The Buddha is an example of an ordinary human being who saw through the deceptions of life, both on the ordinary and spiritual levels. By following his teachings, carefully designed over twenty-five hundred years ago and systematised by his followers, we have a defined structure and path. We no longer have to shop around for the best advice or worry about whether some new approach works or not. The Buddha’s teachings – the Dharma – have led countless students to liberation. It is a proven method. We can rely on it to work.

Having confidence in the teacher and the teachings, we accept them as refuges – guides that we turn to - in order to overcome suffering and achieve our own liberation. Because the teachings provide a way to transform our minds, they allow us to face all life’s troubles with equanimity. They are, therefore, true and lasting refuges.

Following this Buddhist path involves acknowledging that no one else can transform our minds for us. There is no one able to wash away our past, change our habits or give us their insight into reality. We have to do the work ourselves. But we are not alone in practicing the methods the Buddha taught. There are many others that who are working with the same guidelines as we are - simultaneously struggling with their own discipline, trying to work out their own liberation. This community of
practitioners – the Sangha – can act as a reminder and a source of feedback. It can provide encouragement when times are difficult and a sense of direction when we have lost track of where we are. It is a reference point and a source of companionship.

In taking refuge in these three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha – we acknowledge that we have the responsibility for our own happiness, and have developed the complete confidence that the Buddhist teachings, as laid out by the Buddha and supported by the community of practitioners, is the way to attain freedom and lasting happiness.

Taking refuge usually involves committing ourselves to following one or more of the five genyen or lay precepts (vows). These are to refrain from: killing (this includes mosquitoes etc.), stealing (taking what has not been given), sexual misconduct (this includes not cheating on your partner or someone else’s), lying, and taking intoxicants. These vows are the basis of ethical conduct in the Buddhist tradition, and are the foundation of the path to liberation from suffering.

For most Buddhists, taking refuge is part of their daily practice and serves as a reminder of their commitment to the spiritual path. During this practice, it is traditional for the practitioner to visualise their teacher as the Buddha. In many cases, students have not yet met with their main teacher, and some may never do so. Instead they visualise an inspirational figure like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, His Holiness the Karmapa or Lama Zopa Rinpoche. In rare cases, students meet with a teacher that they have an intensely strong emotional and spiritual connection to. In these cases, the student might consider taking refuge with the teacher in a formal refuge ceremony. Taking refuge in a formal ceremony is not a trivial decision. It involves a serious commitment to practice, and produces a student-teacher relationship with the teacher who is your refuge master. It is also a public recognition of that student-teacher relationship, and should therefore be carefully and seriously considered beforehand.

After going through a refuge ceremony with a teacher, the student should then strive to follow the advice of their teacher to the best of their abilities, and train their mind in seeing them as being like a Buddha.

What should I do if I wish to formally take refuge with Geshe Jamyang?

The first thing is that you should be very clear that you wish to be a student of Geshe Jamyang, and should be prepared to follow his advice. You should also be prepared to uphold whichever of the lay precepts you take to the best of your ability.

Please let Reception know of your decision during the retreat so that we can formally request the refuge ceremony on your behalf. Refuge is offered by Geshe-la at least twice a year, if you decide to take Refuge later, let Reception know and you will be notified when Geshe Jamyang offers Refuge.
The actual refuge ceremony

Taking refuge is something very special. So it is good to spend some time beforehand in quiet reflection so that when you enter into the ceremony you are calm and able to take refuge in the most pure and powerful way possible. On the day of the Ceremony it is good to wash well and wear clean clothes. You may like to bring an offering of flowers, fruit or something special for Geshe-la. You are welcome to bring a white offering scarf (khatag) to make the offering with, if you like. Khatags will be provided in the ceremony if you don’t bring one.

Once you are inside the Gompa, it is beneficial to show respect by making three prostrations to the Geshe who is giving the refuge. If you cannot prostrate then don’t worry - it is what you are doing with your mind that is important. The ceremony is divided into two sections. In the first section you will take refuge in the three Jewels. In the second part you will be given the choice of taking one or more of the five lay vows. It is good to have decided in advance which of these vows you would like to take. At the conclusion of the ceremony you will be given a chance to make an offering to the Geshe and you will receive a refuge book which will include the precepts of refuge, your refuge name, a picture of the refuge master and some helpful advice on how to avoid breaking refuge and the vows.

After taking refuge

After you take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha you should avoid harming any being at all, be it yourself or another, and you should also avoid ‘negative friends'. This does not mean turning your back on friends who engage in harmful behaviour, but refers to not putting yourself into a situation where these friends could influence you to break your refuge vows or commitments. You should always have a mind of respect and behave respectfully towards the three Jewels. This includes showing respect towards statues and texts as well as members of the Sangha. You should guard the vows that you have taken to the best of your ability, as they are what afford you protection. Although not ideal, if you do subsequently break one of the vows, it is possible (and advisable) to purify them and restore them by taking them again.

Can I listen to the teaching and not take part in the refuge ceremony?

Yes. Deciding to take refuge and choosing who to take refuge from are very personal decisions. It is best to make your own decision about whether or not to take vows and not be swayed by others, or commit to anything you are not comfortable with.

I’m really not sure whether I’m ready to formally take refuge

If you have doubts, it would help to do some more study and gain a better understanding of the objects of refuge and the training in the precepts of refuge. These topics are all outlined in the lam-rim texts, such as Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, and Practicing the Path.