

Refuge and Bodhicitta Vows

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Minya Rinpoche: Everybody has vows, then I don't have to worry about! Good, good, that is good.

Beginning prayers

Refuge

Today we are going to talk about the refuge, and we will see what the cause of refuge, the essence, the classifications, the definition and the advices are. So, let's first look at the cause. What is the cause of refuge? Well, we need faith. Faith means confidence in that there is something being greater than ourselves, that there is the Dharma and the Sangha, and we have this act of taking refuge, the idea of taking refuge is a commitment.

Let's talk about faith. There are three types of faith: admiring faith, desiring faith and confident faith. Let's take the first one, admiring faith. This is for example when we see a deity and immediately when we see that, it changes something in our mind, and we have this idea that this is something special and this is my refuge. And this admiring faith can also happen when we see a lama, or when we read the biography and we have this feeling coming through that this is really a special person. Also when we meet a lama we may feel great joy, this is also admiring faith. But the admiring faith is not the ultimate faith, not the best type of faith. Why? It is because it can change. We see something else and it does change.

The second faith, which is called desiring faith, what is it? It is when we hear about the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, for example, or we hear about samsara and its suffering, and about nirvana and the qualities of it, and about the ultimate happiness that we can find. And then the wish comes to our mind that I want to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This wish, this desire is the desiring faith. But this second faith is also not very stable and not the faith we really want.

The third type of faith is called confident faith. It also has another name irreversible faith. What is it? This type of faith is based on reasoning, on correct reasoning. How do we get this type of faith and confidence through reasoning? It is coming through listening, then through reflection and then through meditation. Then we get what we call the wisdom of listening, the wisdom of reflection and the wisdom of meditation. So, maybe not with the wisdom of meditation but with the best reasoning and best reflection we come to a point, where we have complete confidence that Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are reasonable, and this type of confidence doesn't change anymore. When we are completely sure based on reasoning, this is the confident faith and this is the one we want.

This is why I have been saying and I repeat, it is necessary to study. It is necessary to find out what the Buddha is and to find out how the Dharma is, it the teaching that he has taught, and who the Sangha are, they are the people who have entered the path of Dharma. It is necessary to understand what their real state is.

That was the cause of taking refuge. And if one does not have any of these three type of faith, it doesn't make sense to take refuge. The best situation is of course, if we have the confident faith, but we need at least one of the three to take refuge.

What is the essence of refuge? The essence is to take refuge to be free from fear, to take refuge in the Three Rare and Sublime, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, in order to be free from fear. So it's a commitment. What type of fear are we

talking about? On the temporary level most people take refuge because they are afraid of an inferior rebirth. And there are also some people who take refuge because they are afraid of sickness, problems or difficulties that may happen in this life. The sharavaka and pratyekabuddhas take refuge in order to be free from the three types of suffering of samsara. We have seen yesterday the three types of suffering. So they want to be free from the suffering of samsara and also to be free from the suffering of the six types of beings: the suffering of cold and heat of hell-beings; the suffering of hunger and thirst of pretas; the suffering of stupidity of the animals; the suffering of birth, sickness, old age and death of humans: the suffering of always fighting of the demigods and the suffering of death and changing of the situation of the gods. With the wish to be free from this type of suffering there is also the result that they can get, which is arhathood.

This type of motivation of the sharavaka and pratyekabuddhas to take refuge is mixed with self-benefit. They do abandon all harm to others, that's for sure, but they don't have the altruistic mind that they will do it for the benefit of others. There is a quote: "Don't do any negative action, do the excellent positive action, guard your own mind properly, this is the teaching of the Buddha." This is important for them and they use their own methods and they all practice together with contentment, this is their key practice, and then they go on with their path and get the result.

As the result attained by the shravaka and pratyekabuddhas is cessation. It is a state in which they remain one-pointedly in samadhi, and this can last for thousands and thousands of years. It is said that at some point the Buddha gives them a hint that this is not the ultimate result, and that they now need to apply the altruistic path. This is what is said, and then they continue their path.

How do the Mahayana practitioners take refuge? Their wish is of course to be free from suffering, but what does it mean to them? It means that not only do they not harm others, same as before, but also they have the altruistic mind. And it says: "Abandon all type of harm, and the smallest causes of harm that could harm others. Abandon all harm completely and also do the benefit of others in all your actions of body, speech and mind." In the Mahayana the motivation of taking refuge is to liberate oneself and all sentient beings from the suffering of samsara.

This commitment – the vow of refuge that we take – for how long do we take it? That is different in the case of Hinayana and Mahayana. In the case of Hinayana we take it until one's own death, for that period of time. And in the context of Mahayana, because of this motivation of taking refuge for the benefit of all beings, in order to be able to free them all from samsara, one takes refuge for a period of time until one attains buddhahood or is capable of doing it.

In what object do we take refuge in? We take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, so it is necessary to understand clearly what we mean by them. Now let's look at what Buddha means. There is a different understanding in the Hinayana and the Mahayana. In the Hinayana there has been only one Buddha on Earth and this is Buddha Shakyatubpa. He was accumulating merits for three kalpa, and then he was born as the son of a king in the Shakra family. His name was Shönnu (youthful) Dondrup.

In the Hinayana the Dharma is understood as the Truth of Cessation, it is understood to be free from desire. And in the Hinayana system Sangha is understood to mean the noble arhats of different categories, the non-returners, the once returners and so on. This is what is meant by the Precious and Sublime Sangha. What they mean by the Precious and Sublime Buddha is the Truth of the Path, which they have in their mind stream. They say that they take refuge in the wisdom which is in the mind stream of the Buddha, but they do not take refuge in the physical body. They consider that the physical body is the aggregates of suffering. They consider that what is called the Rare and Precious Buddha is this Truth of the Path, the wisdom which is in the mind of the Buddha, and this is what they take refuge in. They do not take refuge in the physical body of the Buddha, which is considered as aggregates of suffering.

It is said that this type of refuge is good for beginners who cannot understand what emptiness is and who cannot think of the benefit of all beings. In the Mahayana taking refuge in Buddha is taking refuge in all enlightened body, speech and

mind, and taking refuge in Dharma is about the dharma of scripture and dharma of realization. Taking refuge in Sangha is the Noble Sangha: the Bodhisattvas, in their body, speech and mind. So there is no idea that the body of the Buddha would be the aggregate of suffering.

Also their vision is very large. They take refuge for the sake of all sentient beings, to bring them to the state of liberation. There is this motivation that I will bring all sentient beings to the state of liberation. What does the Mahayana understand by Buddha? Buddha is someone who has abandoned completely the two obscurations. What does obscuration mean? Obscuration is in our mind stream. It is what is called the disturbing or afflicting emotions like attachment, anger, ignorance, pride and jealousy; these five poisons and also the karma made through the disturbing emotions. This type of situation is called the obscuration of the disturbing emotions.

The second type of the obscurations is called the obscuration of the knowable. What is it? It is the clinging to "this is a pillar," for example. "This is a vase, this is a sentient being," this clinging. This is called also clinging to the self of the phenomena. This is known as the obscuration of the knowable. What do we need to do in order to abandon these two types of obscurations? We need what is called the no-self of the individual and the no-self of the phenomena. Thanks to the no-self of the individual we can abandon the obscuration of the disturbing emotions and thanks to the no-self of the phenomena we can abandon the obscuration of the knowable.

The Buddha is someone who has abandoned these two obscurations and through that he has developed the two wisdoms. What are the two wisdoms? There is the wisdom or knowledge of things as they are, and the wisdom or knowledge of things as many as they are. So, the first one, the wisdom of things as they are is to know what the Svabhavikakaya is, and the wisdom of things as many as they are is to know all the infinity of phenomena. These two wisdoms have the same essence; they are just different aspects of wisdom.

In this way one who has realized these two wisdoms is Buddha and the Buddha has taught the three wheels of teachings. The first one was mainly for the shravaka practitioners and the main topic was the Four Noble Truths. The second wheel of teachings was mainly for the bodhisattvas, and he taught the Sutrayana with characteristics. And the third wheel of teaching was mainly for the Vajrayana practitioners and the topic was the buddhanature. These teachings of the Buddha are contained in Tripitaka, and what is taught, the content, is the Three Trainings.

What are the Three Trainings, how do we train in them? The first training is the training in discipline. For that we need to guard our three doors of body, speech and mind. This is like putting a fence or limitation to what we do with our body, speech and mind. The second training is the training in samadhi. This is like having many flowers and fruits inside the fence we have put up. The goal of training in samadhi is to make our mind peaceful. The third training, the training in wisdom is like within the fence around our fruit trees and flowers we know which flower and fruit to pick up and which one not to pick up, we know which fruit we can eat and which one we cannot eat. This is done through wisdom.

What is the use of the Three Trainings? The training of discipline will guard our mind stream, the training in samadhi will make our mind peaceful and the training in wisdom will make us free from suffering and the causes of suffering. That which explains is the Tripitaka and that which is explained is the Three Trainings, together these are the Dharma. The practitioners and among them those who have attained noble states are the Rare and Sublime Sangha.

Whether we are in the Hinayana or Mahayana anyway first we need to take refuge. Then in the Mahayana we also take the bodhisattva vow. That makes us an individual belonging to the Mahayana, part of Mahayana sangha, but we do not become just by the vow Rare and Sublime Sangha.

What kind of training does one with the bodhicitta vow need to do? There is training for both vows, bodhicitta in aspiration and bodhicitta in application. What is the training of bodhicitta in aspiration? As we have explained yesterday,

there are two possibilities: it is either the practice of the Four Immeasurables, which are equanimity, love, compassion and joy; or it can also be put as the training in these three: seeing others equal to oneself, second, exchanging oneself with others and third, cherishing oneself more than oneself.

And what is the training in application? Then we have to go to the Six Paramitas, the Paramitas of generosity, discipline, patience, discipline, meditative concentration and wisdom. We have to train in them again and again. Then we train in bodhicitta in aspiration or in bodhicitta in application in this way. We need to meditate every day. So it can be the whole day making sessions or it can be for example in the morning. If we do so, one day our mind will transform into the essence of the Four Immeasurables or the Six Paramitas. When this happens, when we really have transformed our mind in this way, this is when we can say that we have real bodhicitta born in our mind.

When we have this, in our mind there really is the commitment, the motivation that I will bring all sentient beings into the state of buddhahood, this constitutes the first instant on the Path of Accumulation. And it is not just about taking the vow. At some point it becomes natural to us, uncontrived. At that time when it becomes uncontrived we have real bodhicitta. So, what do we need before we start on the Path of Accumulation? We need both method and wisdom. Method is this training as we have seen, and wisdom is the understanding of emptiness. As Dharmakirti has said: we need compassion, we need non-dual mind – it is the mind that realizes emptiness – and we need bodhicitta. We need to develop these three before we can actually be on the Path of Accumulation.

So, then we start on the Path of Accumulation and we need to continue to train. We can go on the Path of Accumulation, Junction, Vision (Insight), Habituation and No More Training. It is said the duration of the training is one immeasurable kalpa to go from the Path of Accumulation to the Path of Junction. On the Path of Junction we also need to train one immeasurable kalpa, and then there is also one immeasurable kalpa of training during the Path of Habituation, which has in it nine stages. And here we are talking about someone who is really very intelligent. But then, if someone has middle intelligence it takes seven kalpas. And if you are not intelligent, then it will take 33 immeasurable kalpas. But it is said that if we have a very, very strong commitment of bodhicitta to take all sentient beings to liberation, then it can take much less time. Sometimes we even talk about one or seven lives. Okay? Easy now!

In the Hinayana it is said that the refuge vow is taken only one time. There is one recitation, which is done, and that's it. We don't take refuge several times, just only in one's life. But in the Mahayana we take vows again and again. This is also done in the practice of Sojong, which is the restoration of the vows. Because it's a fact that we have a lot of negativities and we do things we would prefer not to, this is why we take the vow again and again and we do the restoration. So today we are going through brief ceremony for the refuge vow and one for the bodhicitta vow, and this will be for us like a restoration of the vows. We can imagine that we are restoring or purifying whatever negativities that we have accumulated through all our previous lifetimes and in this life, and also today, whatever of the ten non-virtuous actions that we might have done or other non-virtuous actions.

Stand up, please, do three prostrations. Don't worry that you become Buddhist. Just think about your life, previous lives, if you did something like negative things, think that everything gets purified. If you took refuge before, it doesn't matter.

[Sojong Ceremony, not on video]

We have taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. There are three things that we need to do, three things that we need to avoid and three miscellaneous items. So, what are the things that we need to do? In relation to the Buddha, once we have taken refuge to the Buddha not only do we need to show respect to the Buddha himself, but also to the representations of the Buddha.

When we have taken refuge in the Dharma, not only do we show respect for the dharma of scripture and realization, but also we show respect to the texts which contain and represent the Dharma, even to just a few letters of the text. When we have taken refuge in the Sangha not only do we show respect to the Rare and Sublime sangha, but also we show respect to the Dharma clothes that the Sangha wears. These are the Three Trainings which we have to do, once we have taken refuge.

What are the three things which we have to avoid? First once we have taken refuge in Buddha we should not take refuge in worldly deities considering that they are the ultimate refuge. But temporarily we can do so, we can take refuge for example if this will help to improve our health when we are sick, or if that will help to increase our business, or something like this.

What we need to abandon when we have taken refuge in the Dharma, we need to completely abandon harming beings. And then when we have taken refuge in the Sangha, what we need to abandon is hanging around with bad people who harm others, people who have completely wrong views. These three are the advice on what is to be avoided, abandoned.

The third category is the three miscellaneous, literally similar things. Our Lama represents the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Once we have taken refuge we do show respect to the Lama considering him/her as the Buddha, we show respect to his/her speech considering it Dharma and we show respect to his/her entourage considering it as the Sangha.

Bodhisattva Vow

Now the second phase. Thinking that we are going to take the bodhicitta vow let's do three prostrations again. And if someone does not feel like taking the vow of bodhicitta, one can imagine that this is just a repetition, restoration of the Sojong vow, purification of the negativities. Take a position on your knees. And if somebody already has the vow of bodhicitta, we can take it every day, it is considered like a purification or restoration practice. In the Mahayana it is said that if we take everyday the refuge and bodhicitta vows it is good, it is like restoration every time.

When one takes the vow for the first time it is good if one can do it with a spiritual teacher who will give at that time all the explanation of the training, what it means and so on. But then when we take it later alone, it's alright and at that time we can do it in front of a support: a representation of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, or if we don't even have a representation, we can also visualize it and take the vow in front of the visualization.

For both refuge and bodhicitta vow we can take refuge in front of the refuge tree. For the kagyu lineage Dorje Chang is the principal deity, but for the nyingma there is slightly different refuge tree, the field of accumulation. There is also one for sakya and one for geluk, so, according to the tradition we visualize the refuge tree. I think here this is a kagyu center; maybe most of you are kagyus, so Dorje Chang.

From today on until we attain Buddhahood we take the vow of bodhicitta, both aspiration and application. And if one just wants to see it as the restoration of the vow, we can do that, or if one just wants to consider it as a purification, that's okay too. This recitation that we will use for the vow of bodhicitta is taken directly from the text of Shantideva, Bodhicharyavatara. We can place both knees on the floor or just the right knee, with left knee up.

[Taking the vow]

Okay, sit. What is the commitment or vow we have taken? It is that in the same way as in the past the Bodhisattvas, the nobles like Chenrezig, Avalokiteshvara or Manjushri or Vajrapani etc., the great Bodhisattvas in the same way as they have done, me too I will do. Yes? You commit like that, think about it.

After that there is the section of rejoicing oneself and asking others to rejoice. We are rejoicing of this bodhicitta vow that we have taken. I rejoice because today I became a son / daughter of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. And the Buddha has three types of sons. There is the son of his body, which is Rahula, there was only one, that was his physical son. Then there are the sons and daughters of his speech, which are the shravaka and pratyekabuddhas, because they practice on phases of the speech of Buddha. Then there are the sons and daughters of the mind of the Buddha, which are the Bodhisattvas. Even though we have not become by the vow a real Bodhisattva, because of this vow we can be called already bodhisattvas. So, since today I have right now become the son or daughter of the Buddha, I rejoice.

That was the rejoicing for oneself and now there is the rejoicing of others, and these are all sentient beings, for which we have now taken the commitment, so all the sentient beings are my guests today and we tell them: please rejoice of this commitment, which I have taken. And also all the gods and demigods, please rejoice. Yes? You invited all sentient beings.

And now about the bodhisattva training. There is really a lot to say, but in brief this is what I have explained just before. So there is the training in aspiration, which is the Four Immeasurables, or the practice of seeing oneself equal with others, exchanging oneself with others and cherishing others more than oneself, and the training in bodhisattva in application which is training in the Six Paramitas. What is it that could be a complete loss of our vow of bodhicitta? This is in the case if we get so angry at a specific being that we decide: "You, I will never help you." If we have this kind of idea of one being, that I will never help you, at that time we have completely lost our vow of bodhicitta.

There is so much about the bodhisattva vow, but I thought I would tell you about the eighteen root downfalls, which are the five root downfalls of a king, five root downfalls of a minister and eight root downfalls of an ordinary person. What are the five downfalls of a king? The first one is that one steals from the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. A king is in a high position, he has that possibility, so, if a king does steal from the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, he is losing his vow. The second root downfall is to abandon the Dharma. The third one is to beat or punish the Sangha. The fourth one would be to do any of the five acts of immediate retribution and the fifth one is to hold on to wrong views.

These are the five downfalls of a king. In case of a king they are really harming very badly, but it also is a problem if we do them, albeit not as big as for a king. It's also not good for us. And what are the five root downfalls of a minister? The first one would be to destroy a village, a place. The second one would be to destroy something bigger than a village, and the third one would be to destroy something even bigger, like a city. The fourth one is even bigger than a city and the fifth one is to destroy the whole country. All these are the downfalls for a minister specifically.

Now the eight vows for ordinary beings. The first one is like me not looking if it is an appropriate time to teach about emptiness, even if it is not suitable to teach at that point. The second one would be if there is someone who is on the Mahayana path making lots of effort for the benefit of beings and telling them: "Why do you do that? Why don't you just take the vows of the Hinayana, where it's much more relaxed and you don't have to worry about all beings?" And the third one would be when somebody has taken the vow of individual liberation, to that person say: "Why did you do that, you are so selfish. You'd better come on the Mahayana path," and making them to abandon their path. This is also a downfall.

The fourth one is talking to shravaka practitioners and telling them that not only are they not going to be able to abandon the obscuration of the knowable but also not even the obscuration of disturbing emotions. And the fifth one is if there is somebody who is ready to offer money to Lama or to monastery and tell them: "Why do you do that, you'd better give to

me!" The sixth one is if there is a good practitioner, to go to the king or a person with power and say: "This is not a good practitioner, you should punish him." The seventh one is to a practitioner, who is practicing shine, calm abiding, and there are a lot of them in the West actually, to tell such a practitioner that the shine practice is completely useless. If you say such things you are breaking your vows. The eighth one is to change the mind of a sponsor. For example if a sponsor wants to give food to somebody who is practicing, telling them: "No, don't give rather to the other one who is studying." or the other way round, just trying to make the sponsor change his/her mind.

These are the five downfalls of a king, the five downfalls of a minister and the eight downfalls of an ordinary being. So, altogether they are the Eighteen Root Downfalls. The five for a king they are root downfalls. For us they are also downfalls but not as bad. So these eighteen, if we do them, they will harm us, they will be downfalls.

Dedication prayers.