



Opening the Door to Dharma

Part I of II:

The Prerequisites including Refuge

H.H. the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin)



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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the Sakya Trichen enjoy perfect health and a very long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

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The Prerequisites to Opening the Door of Dharma

For us to truly benefit from receiving or listening to Dharma teachings, there are several prerequisites. When receiving or listening to teachings, we must have the right motivation, adopt the right conduct or attitude, and have faith. Moreover, the first step on the Buddhist path is going for refuge to the Triple Gem: the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha.

Motivation and Conduct

To begin, we must have the right motivation when receiving Dharma teachings. If one has the wrong motivation—such as desire, anger, or ignorance—then there will be more harm rather than benefit. If one has neither right nor wrong motivation but one is just a mere spectator, it is also useless. By having a good motivation, however, one will benefit immensely from receiving Dharma teachings.

There are different levels of good motivation. To receive a Mahāyāna teaching, one must have the highest motivation.

Just as space has no limit, sentient beings are also limitless. As Buddhists, we believe in rebirth. We have had countless past lives. Every sentient being has been our parent at some point among our many past lives. But, due to the change from one life to the next, we fail to recognize each other. We see some as enemies, some as friends, and some as indifferent. Everyone, however, has been our dear mother and father—not only once but many times. They have protected us from many harms. And they have benefited us immensely and countless times. Therefore, for the benefit of all mother sentient beings, one must attain perfect enlightenment. Attaining enlightenment is the only way to be able to help them completely.

So, the sole purpose of receiving Dharma teachings is not for the sake of this current life or future lives, but for the sake of liberating all sentient beings from the suffering of *samsāra* (cyclic existence) and leading them to the path of happiness. For this reason, one must attain perfect enlightenment. When one has this highest, noble motivation, all other aims—such as longevity, prosperity, and worldly success—will be accomplished naturally.

Also, we must have right conduct. Just like a patient receiving advice from a doctor, one should regard the teacher as like a doctor, the Dharma as like medicine, oneself as like a patient, one's defilements as like a severe illness, those who help us as like medical assistants, and receiving teachings as like receiving a doctor's treatment. One must adopt this attitude.

Moreover, we should be free from what are called the three faults of the container. First, if a container has holes, then whatever you pour in it will come out and not remain inside. Likewise, if one cannot remember the teachings even though one is listening to them, then those teachings will not remain in one's mind. Second, if a container is turned upside down, then nothing can go in it. Likewise, if one is not paying attention while attending teachings, then nothing will enter one's mind. Third, if a container is dirty, then whatever good things are poured in it will just become spoiled. Likewise, there will be no benefit if one has the wrong motivation while listening to teachings.

We should receive Dharma teachings with right motivation and conduct as described, and we should be free of these faults.

Faith

Faith is essential. Without faith, virtuous Dharma will not grow in us. Burnt seeds will not sprout; similarly, those who lack faith will not have a base for virtuous deeds. They will not be able to seek liberation and develop the qualities of noble beings—the buddhas and bodhisattvas. They will prevent themselves from receiving the blessings of the guru and the Triple Gem.

To practice the Dharma, faith is very important. Faith is like a mother. It helps us develop all noble qualities, and it eliminates doubts. Faith is everything.

There are three kinds of faith: confident or believing faith, eager or desiring faith, and vivid or clear faith. Confident faith arises when, through logical analysis, one believes in the law of karma, dependent origination, the four noble truths, and the Triple Gem. Eager faith arises when, seeing the immense and wondrous qualities of the Triple Gem, one wishes to attain those same qualities. Vivid faith arises when, seeing their qualities, one's mind is refreshed; moreover, confusions and doubts are removed.

Since faith is the basis or root to develop all noble qualities, these three kinds of faith must be stabilized—not lost due to desire, anger, fear, or ignorance.

Regarding desire: if one knows the severe consequences that will be experienced by indulging in desire, then one's faith in the Dharma will never wane no matter what, even if one can gain a kingdom, wealth, or power by leaving the Dharma.

Anger can cause us to go astray on the Dharma path. Anger causes us to engage in negative deeds. So, one must understand that indulging in anger brings great harm. There is no greater harm than anger. Thousands of eons of merit—accumulated through practicing generosity and making offerings to the Triple Gem—can be destroyed by one moment of anger. There is no misdeed more severe than anger. Although patience is the most difficult to practice among the six pāramitās, it is important to practice patience through various means to counteract anger. Forsaking the Dharma and harming one's enemy will bring harm to only oneself. By having a clear understanding of this, one's conduct will align with the Dharma, and one will never leave the Dharma—no matter the situation or how angry we might feel.

Regarding fear: if another person threatens to kill us unless we forsake the Dharma, we must consider that losing this life is a small suffering compared to the tremendous suffering that will be experienced in future lives. One must therefore cultivate unwavering faith in the Triple Gem, no matter what difficulties arise.

Even if every person in this world is one's foe, they cannot cause oneself to descend to the lower realms. Yet, defilements are our worst enemies; they can cause us to descend to the lowest hell realm.

Ignorance must also be confronted. If one does not recognize ignorance when it arises, there is a danger that one might lose faith in the Dharma. To discern right from wrong, we should study many Buddhist scriptures and the holy biographies of great masters.

We therefore should develop strong faith that is unwavering no matter what defilements or opposition we face.

In summary, to develop faith, we should pray to the gurus and the Triple Gem, read the holy biographies of great masters, study the authentic sūtras, associate with virtuous friends, and avoid non-virtuous friends. This will allow one's faith to mature.

We should cultivate faith in a conducive place. The place should satisfy several criteria: it should be a place where one can easily earn a livelihood or easily find food and shelter; it should be free from harmful people such as bandits or thieves; the earth and water should be free of disease; it should be free of harmful or non-virtuous friends who could intensify our defilements; and it should be a place where there are no human activities in the daytime and where it is quiet at night. We should endeavor to find this type of place to practice. There, one should not lie down.

One should set up a shrine with statues or paintings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and make offerings to them. During one's practice, remain in a proper meditation posture—such as the seven-point posture of Vairocana—or at least try to sit cross-legged or on a comfortable seat.



Refuge

The first step on the path is going for refuge to Triple Gem. Refuge is the root of all the Buddha Dharma, the preliminary practice of the entire path, the foundation of all vows, and what differentiates Buddhists from non-Buddhists. Refuge has five aspects, as described below.

The causes of going for refuge.

The first aspect describes the three causes or motivations for refuge: fear, faith, and compassion. The first cause is fear. One is afraid upon seeing the immense suffering in saṃsāra. To save oneself from this suffering, one goes for refuge. The second cause is faith. There are three types of faith, as already described. The third cause is compassion. Those inclined to the Mahāyāna have this motivation. They have natural compassion upon seeing the suffering of others and have immense feelings for them. To save them from this suffering completely, one goes for refuge to the Triple Gem. One must remember these causes; otherwise, one's refuge vow will not be very effective.

The objects of refuge.

The objects of refuge must be properly understood. On this topic, refuge can be classified as either worldly refuge or beyond-worldly refuge.

Worldly refuge has two aspects: refuge in worldly objects, and refuge with a worldly motive or a worldly mind. Refuge in worldly objects is when, out of desperation or ignorance, someone seeks spiritual refuge from trees, the sun, the moon, or worldly deities, all of whom lack the real power to save us from suffering. Refuge with a worldly mind is when, even if going for refuge in the Triple Gem, it is done for the sake of only this current life. But this life is like a water bubble and not worthy of attachment.

Beyond-worldly refuge includes Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna refuge.

The Buddha

Although both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna followers go for refuge in the Buddha, Hīnayāna refuge does not describe the Buddha as having three kāyas or bodies. According to Mahāyāna refuge, Buddha has three kāyas: the dharmakāya (body of reality), the saṃbhogakāya (body of enjoyment), and the nirmāṇakāya (body of emanations).

The dharmakāya has two purities: natural purity and purity from adventitious obscurations. The mind of every sentient

being has natural purity. There is no difference between the nature of mind of sentient beings and the nature of Buddha's transcendental wisdom. But there is a vast difference between sentient beings and Buddha because sentient beings lack the second purity. For sentient beings, the natural purity is not manifest; it is covered due to the two obscurations: the obscurations of afflictive emotions and cognitive obscurations. Having accumulated merit and wisdom for countless eons, the buddhas have cleared all obscurations, including their roots. Thus, they have attained the second purity.

The dharmakāya is not obtained from outside of us. Rather, it is within us always since beginningless time, but it is not manifest currently. The dharmakāya is attained when the obscurations are purified. It is also called the wisdom of dharmadhātu.

For one's own purpose, one attains the dharmakāya. Then, for the sake of others, one attains the rūpakāya, which refers to the two form bodies of the saṃbhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya.

The saṃbhogakāya, or the body of enjoyment, is attained from an immense accumulation of merit for countless eons. Through this accumulation, one's ordinary body becomes a buddha's body with thirty-two major and eighty minor marks. One's ordinary voice becomes the sixty aspects of Brahmā's melodious speech. One's ordinary mind becomes omniscient wisdom that realizes both the ultimate and relative truth. These qualities are newly gained upon achieving the saṃbhogakāya.

The saṃbhogakāya has five certainties: the certainty of place, the certainty of time, the certainty of form, the certainty of teachings, and the certainty of surroundings. As to the certainty of place, the saṃbhogakāya abides always in the highest buddha field known as Akaniṣṭha. The saṃbhogakāya will not appear anywhere else. Furthermore, the saṃbhogakāya does not appear in various forms, but only in the form of a perfect and fully enlightened buddha with thirty-two major and eighty minor marks. This form does not undergo birth and death; it remains in the highest buddha field permanently. The saṃbhogakāya does not bestow various teachings, but only the Mahāyāna teachings. The surroundings are the disciples. The saṃbhogakāya does not have ordinary disciples, but only the bodhisattvas who have reached the irreversible state.

The nirmāṇakāya is the body of emanations. Unlike the saṃbhogakāya, the nirmāṇakāya manifests in various forms to benefit sentient beings, wherever and in whatever form is required to help them. These forms include śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, universal kings, queens, ordinary masters, animals, bridges, boats, and so on. The nirmāṇakāya appears whenever there are worthy disciples, but a nirmāṇakāya buddha eventually passes away. An example of a supreme nirmāṇakāya is Buddha Shakyamuni. He was born as a prince but then renounced his palace life. According to the Mahāyāna, Buddha had already attained enlightenment long before he appeared in ancient India and Nepal. In other words, before he was conceived,

he was a fully enlightened buddha. He manifested in this world to show us the path. He set an example and showed us the entire process to attain enlightenment, and he demonstrated impermanence by passing into mahāparinirvāṇa. The nirmāṇakāya appears and disappears, manifesting various forms and imparting various teachings, such as Hīnayāna or Mahāyāna teachings. The nirmāṇakāya has both noble bodhisattvas and ordinary beings as disciples.

The Dharma

As an object of refuge, the Dharma has two aspects: the Dharma of transmission and the Dharma of realization. Both aspects are Mahāyāna Dharma.

The Dharma of transmission consists of the Buddha's teachings, which are classified into the tripiṭaka or three baskets: the vinaya, the sūtras, and the abhidharma. Buddha's purpose in bestowing teachings is to counteract defilements. To remedy desire, he taught the vinaya, which is concerned primarily with moral conduct. To remedy anger, he delivered many discourses known as the sūtras. To remedy ignorance, the abhidharma teachings expound on higher knowledge. In this way, there are three sets of teachings.

The Dharma of realization consists of the three higher trainings in the precepts of moral conduct, meditation, and wisdom. The

Dharma of realization can also be understood through the truth of the path, which come from these trainings. The truth of cessation is to recognize and abandon defilements. The truth of the path is the path that leads us to the truth of cessation.

The Saṅgha

The Saṅgha is the holy community. In the Mahāyāna, we go for refuge to the noble or true Saṅgha, which refers to the bodhisattvas who have reached the irreversible state, from which they cannot fall back from their attainments. But in common terms, Saṅgha also refers to ordinary Saṅgha members who are more senior than oneself, as we turn to them as companions on the path.

This explains the objects of refuge.

The way we go for refuge.

The third aspect describes the way we go for refuge.

Before a shrine, we begin by performing prostrations to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and by making offerings. Then, sitting on a comfortable cushion in meditation posture, imagine that—in the space in front of oneself—all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, śrāvakas, and pratyekabuddhas manifest as objects of refuge. Imagine that one is together with one's parents from this life and all

sentient beings of six realms (the hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, demigod, and god realms), all of whom appear in human form to create the auspicious condition to attain precious human birth.

Then, one goes for refuge with body, speech, and mind: physically, one's hands are folded in prayer; verbally, one respectfully recites the refuge verses; and mentally, one arouses strong faith and devotion. One pledges:

From beginningless time until now, I did not follow the advice of spiritual masters. Due to not seeking refuge in the Triple Gem, I am still caught up in saṃsāra and endure so much suffering. From now on, until I attain enlightenment, whatever happens to me—whether good or bad, success or failure—I will rely completely on the guru and the Triple Gem.

With this pledge, we go for refuge to the Buddha as our guide who shows us the path of liberation. To go somewhere, we first need a guide who can show us the correct path.

The Dharma is the actual path. Buddha said: “I have shown you the path of liberation, but liberation depends on yourself.” This means that we cannot get liberation as a gift from the Buddha. Rather, we rely on him and practice his teachings. So, the real savior from saṃsāra is the Dharma because we must practice to save ourselves. To give an analogy, when someone is sick, it is important for that person to have a good doctor. But if that person

fails to follow the doctor's advice, then they cannot be cured. Similarly, Buddha is like a doctor who gives us treatment. But to attain enlightenment, we must practice virtue and avoid misdeeds.

The Saṅgha members are our companions on the path. If one is going to an unknown destination, instead of traveling alone, it helps to have companions. So, we go for refuge in the Saṅgha as our companions.

In this manner, with our hands folded in prayer, we recite the four-line refuge verse as many times as possible.

I and all sentient beings, equal to the bounds of space, from this
forth until the essence of enlightenment is reached:

We go for refuge to the glorious, holy Gurus.

We go for refuge to the perfect Bhagavan Buddhas.

We go for refuge to the holy Dharma.

We go for refuge to the noble Saṅgha.

With that recitation, we have gone for refuge in the gurus and the Triple Gem.

Next, with hands folded, we ask for blessings to help us part from the four attachments.

First, we request: please bless us to turn our minds to the Dharma. If one has attachment to this life, one is not a Dharmic person. One must realize that this life is very short and without essence. Like water bubbles, it is not worthy of attachment. It is fragile like a water bubble, which will burst any moment. Thus, we should have no attachment to this life.

Second, we request: please bless us to practice Dharma successfully. If one has attachment to saṃsāra and just seeks a higher rebirth, then one will not have success in one's practice. Whether one is born in the lower realms or the higher realms, one will still be roaming around and stuck in saṃsāra. Having attachment to any aspect of saṃsāra is like craving sweet poison. Some poisons taste sweet, but they are fatal or harmful if ingested. Likewise, although sentient beings in the three higher realms experience joy and happiness sometimes, saṃsāra is not worthy of attachment because none of those experiences are permanent. Rather, if we are born in the higher realms, that experience will not last. Eventually, due to karmic ripening, we will descend to the three lower realms where we will suffer immensely. To practice Dharma successfully, we must renounce saṃsāra totally and seek liberation.

Third, we request: please bless us to clear away all confusion on the path. If one seeks liberation for oneself alone, it is a confusion; this motive lacks bodhicitta. It can be likened to raising an enemy's child. Although doing so might seem pleasing in the short term, we might be harmed eventually.

Fourth, we request: please bless us that illusory appearances arise as transcendental wisdom. If grasping arises, one does have the view. If we cling to phenomena as having some type of inherent existence, it is just like mistakenly craving a mirage as water, which cannot quench our thirst.

Next, we supplicate for blessings so that we do not generate non-virtuous thoughts for even a single moment; we seek blessings to give rise to loving-kindness, compassion, and bodhicitta, and to attain buddhahood swiftly.

Having recited these verses, we should know that all the buddhas and bodhisattvas behold us in their great compassion, and we will remain completely under their protection and blessings.

We then meditate on absolute bodhicitta. Everything is the mind. But our mind cannot be found. It is not in solid form, touchable with our hands, or perceivable with our eyes. But at the same time, the mind is powerful. Everything is done by the mind. Where is the mind? When we try to look for it, we cannot find anything—although there is a constantly clear, vivid mind. The clarity aspect of the mind is the Saṅgha. Yet, when we try to search for the mind, we cannot find it anywhere; there is nothing solid to be found. That is the emptiness aspect of the mind, which is the Dharma. Clarity and emptiness are indivisible, which is the Buddha. In this manner, remain in mediation. This is referred to as absolute refuge.

At the end, dedicate the merit. By going for refuge, one gains immense merit, which is dedicated to the liberation of all sentient beings.

The benefits of refuge.

As mentioned before, we are covering the five aspects of refuge. The fourth aspect describes the benefits of refuge. Refuge is the cause and foundation for receiving all the other Buddhist vows. Without refuge, one cannot receive any other vows.

Refuge has immense benefit. The sūtras explain that if the merit obtained by going for refuge had physical form, then all of space would be too small to accommodate it.

Having this unique, matchless refuge—from today onwards—we will have great enthusiasm by going for refuge in the Triple Gem and treasure them.

The rules to be followed.

The fifth aspect describes the rules to be followed. Even on a worldly level, we are bound by the laws of the countries in which we enter or reside. So, after taking the refuge vow, we are bound by the rules related to refuge.

There are general and specific rules.

There are five general rules. The first general rule is that we should never forsake the Triple Gem, even at the cost of our life. The second general rule is: even if we face a very desperate situation, we should not seek any other refuge or follow other methods. Rather, we should seek the guidance, blessing, and protection of the Triple Gem. The third general rule is to make offerings. Ideally, if one has a shrine, then make offerings daily to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. These offerings include water, flowers, incense, and so on. Otherwise, at least make offerings on special days, such as on the days commemorating the Buddha's birthday, enlightenment, turning the wheel of Dharma, and so on; and on the new-moon, full-moon, and half-moon days of each lunar month.

The fourth general rule is that we should practice refuge diligently from our heart. Merely reciting the refuge verses is not enough. To not get wet from the rain, we can seek shelter in a cave. But by just reciting "cave," we will not be protected from the rain. If we go into the cave, then we will be protected from the rain, without any doubt. Although reciting the refuge verses many times is beneficial, the key point is that from the depth of one's mind—whatever happens in life, whether good or bad, success or failure—one promises, with deep devotion, to totally submit oneself to the guidance, protection, and blessing of the Triple Gem. Then one will be truly protected. While reciting the refuge verses, one should go for refuge from the depth of one's mind. It is also good to then encourage others to go for refuge in Triple Gem.

The fifth general rule is that, wherever we go, we should try to remember the buddha of that direction. For example, when walking, facing, or traveling towards the east, remember Buddha Akṣobhya; the south, Buddha Ratnasambhava; the west, Buddha Amitābha; the north, Buddha Amoghasiddhi; and the center, Buddha Vairocana. If we cannot practice in this way, we should at least remember the Buddha wherever we go and whatever we do.

These are the five general rules.



Next, the specific rules explain what we should do and should not do.

Having gone for refuge in the Buddha, we should not take refuge in worldly deities such as Brahmā or Indra. We can pay respect or make offerings to them, but we must not take refuge in them. There is a vast difference between refuge and paying respect. What we should do, however, is develop strong devotion in the Buddha. Even a broken piece of a buddha statue should be treated with respect. We must treat all buddha representations with such respect. We must never step on them, never put them on the ground, and never walk over them.

Having gone for refuge in the Dharma, we should not harm any sentient being intentionally. According to one's individual capacity, one should listen to, contemplate, and meditate on the Dharma. Even a piece of paper with Dharma words should be treated with respect. We should never sit on, step on, or walk over any Dharma text. And we should not place it on the ground or under a seat. We should treat Dharma texts with respect by placing them on higher places and by making offerings. And when we go to take a Dharma text from a higher shelf or another place, for example, we should do so respectfully.

Having gone for refuge in the Saṅgha, we should not have non-believers as spiritual friends. Although we can have non-believers as ordinary friends, we should not share our spiritual

experiences and activities with them. We should, however, associate with members of the Saṅgha and respect even a piece of a yellow or red monastic robe.

For eating, it is taught that we should divide the food into four portions. The first should be offered to the Triple Gem; the second to the Dharma protectors; the third portion one should eat; and the remainder should be given to the spirits who follow the Buddha Dharma. At least, one should try to do this at home. To practice efficiently, one should eat enough to be sustained, giving the remainder to the needy.



Conclusion

Whatever one does, always rely on the Triple Gem. Otherwise, there will be no accomplishments.

We are still in saṃsāra because we have lacked conviction in the Triple Gem and have not followed the Buddha's teachings. That is why we experience suffering.

Since refuge is very important, one should endeavor to study and practice refuge until good signs arise. Counting the number of refuge recitations is important. But it is essential to practice until one experiences good signs, such as a happier and more comfortable mind that is assimilated with the Dharma, and one's surroundings are more conducive.

-The End-



■ His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is revered as the forty-first throne holder of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in Tibet in 1945, His Holiness is from the noble Khön family, whose predecessors date to the early days of Tibetan history and established the Sakya order in the eleventh century. In his youth, His Holiness received intensive training in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and ritual from eminent masters and scholars.

Widely regarded as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, His Holiness is the spiritual guide to many in the next generation of Buddhist teachers and practitioners, and has bestowed Sakya's core teaching cycle known as the Lamdre (the Path with the Result) in both eastern and western countries. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, tirelessly working to establish monasteries, nunneries, and educational institutions and to impart the Buddha's teachings to countless students around the world.



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