



Four Reliances

H.H. the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



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By the merit of this work, may Their Holinesses the Sakya Trichen and Sakya Trizin enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

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Four Reliances

Buddha Shakyamuni performed innumerable noble activities. His turning the wheel of Dharma is the greatest of all his activities. In other words, Buddha gave teachings to lead disciples from suffering and dissatisfaction to temporary and ultimate happiness. But one type of teaching cannot lead all sentient beings or disciples to happiness. To suit their different mentalities, Buddha gave an enormous amount of teachings. Currently, in the Tibetan language, we have more than one hundred volumes of Buddha's teachings. Of these, in a Mahāyāna sūtra called the *Teaching of Akṣayamati* (Tib. འཕགས་པ་སློབ་མི་ཟད་པས་བསྟན་པའི་མདོ། Phakpa Lodrö Mizehpe Tenpe Dho), Buddha taught the four reliances.

These four reliances are very important because—without knowing them—we will have difficulty understanding the actual meaning of teachings. We will have difficulty understanding what to do in terms of what we must accept or adopt. Therefore, it is important to know these four reliances.

The four reliances are:

Rely on the meaning, not on the words.

Rely on dharma, not on the individual.

Rely on wisdom, not on ordinary mind.

Rely on the definitive meaning, not on the provisional or interpretative meaning.^[1]

Here, the term reliance (Tib. རྟོན་པ་ *tönpa*) refers to what we should rely on, accept, believe, or trust—as opposed to what we should not.

Buddha’s four lines of advice are very important. These four have been explained by many great scholars like Jayānanda, who also wrote a commentary on Candrakīrti’s treatise *Introduction to the Middle Way* (Skt. *Madhyamakāvātāra*). Many great Indian and Tibetan masters have also explained the four reliances.

The first reliance says to rely on the meaning, not on the words. This means we must check what is reality. To depend, trust, and believe in what is true, we must rely on facts—not on words alone. Sometimes, people might say pleasant and nice words, or people can use very nice expressions. But what they say may not be true. A nice expression is not a basis for our reliance. We should not base our trust on a nice expression, because it is not necessarily a fact or true. Especially in this world nowadays, there are many people who can express themselves so nicely, yet they present false or incorrect information. So, we should not

base our reliance on words alone. Also, a person might be able to write well, but the writing may not be true. We should not depend on just how they write or how they express themselves. Rather, we must check if what they say comports with reality or if it is true or not. If it is true, then we should believe, accept, and trust what they say—regardless of whether the words are presented nicely or not. To further explain, sometimes a nice expression may not be true, but I am not saying that all nice expressions are untrue. Some are true; some are false. Therefore, it is for us to judge what is true or not. But as to true facts, then of course we should believe, accept, and trust them. This is the meaning of the first reliance.



The second reliance says to rely on dharma, not on the individual. Here, *dharma* means logical reasons.^[2] If there is a logical reason behind a statement, then it is true, and we should accept it. It does not matter who said it; what matters is what is said. We should not judge the truth of a statement based simply on who said it. Rather, we should base our judgment on what is said—whether the statement is logical or not. We cannot determine the truth of a statement based on whether it is said by a poor or homeless person. If we judge like this, then we are relying on the person, not on dharma or logical reasons. Even if someone is poor or homeless, what they say could be true—it could be something we should accept, trust, and believe. On the other hand, there are many powerful, famous, and rich people in this world, but what they say sometimes may be true, yet other times what they say may be untrue. So likewise, we cannot determine the truth of a statement based on whether it is said by a powerful, famous, or rich person. If we do, we are relying on the person, not on dharma or logical reasons. We must depend on dharma or logical reasons to ascertain what is said, not just on the person or who said it. A poor person's statement may be true or false; likewise, a rich person's statement may be true or false. We cannot just think that whatever a particular person says is always true or always false; we cannot judge like this. We should judge by logical reasons.

The third reliance says to rely on wisdom, not on ordinary mind. In this world, people make many decisions without thinking or analyzing properly. People make hasty decisions, or they make decisions that they later regret after realizing they made a mistake. These decisions are made by an ordinary mind, not by wisdom. Through meditation and experience, wisdom is gained. That is the meaning of wisdom. Through this proper wisdom, we can make good and right decisions. Our ordinary mind can make false decisions, but wisdom cannot make false decisions; it will always make a good and right decision. In our lives, it is important to make the right decision all the time. In our own experience, we sometimes see or hear that someone made a wrong decision and faced grave consequences. We also see or hear that by making the right decision, someone gained great results. Not only in worldly matters, but in our approach to Dharma as well, if we make the right decision, we will have great success in our spiritual practice and activities. So, it is important for us to make the right decision always. Our mind or consciousness has two aspects—positive and negative. Usually, our negative mind is stronger than our positive mind. As a result, we make many mistakes and commit many negative actions. Due to this, we experience great suffering, face many problems, and experience many difficulties. Therefore, it is important to depend on wisdom always.

The fourth reliance says to rely on the definitive meaning, not on the provisional or interpretative meaning. Buddha's words or teachings can be classified in many ways. One way is to classify them into two categories: those of definitive meaning, and those of provisional meaning. Sometimes, Buddha's words or teachings are of provisional meaning, which means that we cannot understand them based on just the literal meaning. If we do that, then we will not understand the real meaning. And it can cause us to have great misunderstanding. Therefore, it is important to learn the difference between those of definitive meaning, and those of provisional meaning. For example, in English, we say the phrase "the icing on the cake" when something good happened and, on top of that, another good thing happened. This phrase has provisional or interpretative meaning; we cannot take it literally. Similarly, in Buddha's teachings, there are many words of provisional meaning. So, we should know that even in Buddha's teachings, there are some words that we cannot take literally. These words indicate another meaning.

It is important to know the difference between what we should and should not rely on. With this knowledge, then it will help us to better understand Buddha's teachings. It also will help us make better decisions in our daily life, and it will help us know what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned. If we know these points, then this understanding will greatly help us to improve ourselves, to move forward on the right path,

and to avoid the wrong path. Then we will have happiness and good results in our present life and in all our future lives. Hence, it is very important to know and understand these four reliances.

I hope each of you understands the meaning of these four reliances—and not just understands them but also implements them in your daily life and in your studies. I wish that all the blessings of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha be with you—now and always.

Notes:

[1] In some texts, these four might be presented in a different order.

[2] Dharma is a Sanskrit term with many meanings; often, it is used to reference Buddha ' s teachings, but that is not its sole meaning.



Questions and Answers

Question 1: As to the first reliance, what methods can we use to verify whether someone's words or the words of a particular teaching are the true or actual meaning, especially so we can avoid misunderstanding or avoid being misled?

Answer: First, to verify the words or a statement by a person, we must look into that person's background and check the context in which the statement is made. So, we must use these ways to check. Otherwise, in this world, there are many who can deceive others' minds through their expressions that are not the actual meaning or the truth. Second, to verify or understand the words of a teaching, we must check the context in which the words are used. Especially in teachings, one word can have different meanings depending on different contexts. So, we must check what is said before a word or phrase and what is said afterwards. For example, if there is a word on page five of a text, we sometimes must check the first four pages and the next four or more pages, to understand the particular meaning of this word. And depending on different contexts, words can have a different meaning as well, so we should check based on various methods.

Question 2: As to the second reliance, how do we reconcile the idea of not relying on individuals with the Vajrayāna principle that the guru is the source of all blessing?

Answer: Generally, for the second reliance, individuals are not as important as logical reasons. But as to our guru, we should have clear, unshakable faith—and a pure view of the guru’s activities. Sometimes though, depending on different situations, if a guru says something very wrong or against Buddha’s teachings, then we must check. The guru could have done this for us to purify our negative thoughts or to strengthen our faith. But, it could be against Buddha’s teachings without any genuine reason. If it is against Buddha’s teachings without any reason, then we should leave it in equanimity. If it is to strengthen our faith or to make our faith unshakable, then whatever the guru does, we should not lose our faith but always rely on the guru. We cannot discard someone as our guru once we rely on that person as our guru. But sometimes, a guru does something different to strength our faith. If, however, it against Buddha’s teachings, then we can leave it in equanimity.

Question 3: As to the third reliance, for ordinary practitioners who have not yet gained wisdom through meditation and experience, how do we avoid falling into the trap of relying on our ordinary mind—or at least how can we try to reduce this tendency so we rely more on the wisdom aspect?

Answer: There are different levels of wisdom. Ordinary people like us have wisdom, although our wisdom is not the wisdom of the noble beings like the bodhisattvas. But since we have ordinary wisdom, so we should try to rely on that wisdom and try to defeat our own ordinary thoughts.

Question 4: As to the fourth reliance, is there a methodology that can guide us in ascertaining which level of meaning applies to which teaching, so we don't become mixed up?

Answer: In the Buddhist tradition, the teacher is very important, as the teacher can guide us in ascertaining which words or teachings are of interpretative meaning, and which are of definitive meaning. We need a guru to show us the path, guide us, and explain the teachings to us. So, in the Buddhist tradition, we do not encourage others to practice Dharma without any teacher. We need a guide and teacher. Especially in the Vajrayāna, practicing Vajrayāna teachings without a teacher means that one is practicing without receiving empowerment from a guru. That is a great fault because doing that is the cause of being reborn in the hell realm in the future.

Generally, however, we should learn the difference between the relative and ultimate truth. And as to relative truth, we should learn the difference between outer appearances and the actual or true meaning.

-The End-



■ His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, is the eldest son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). Renowned for his erudition and the clarity of his teachings, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin is regarded as one of the most highly qualified lineage holders in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

Since his youth, His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin has received an ocean of sutra and tantra teachings, empowerments, transmissions, and pith instructions from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen, as well as many other learned and accomplished masters. After years of rigorous philosophy studies at Sakya College in India, he was awarded the kachupa degree. And starting from the age of twelve, he has completed numerous meditation retreats, including the Hevajra retreat. With utmost humility, he travels extensively to bestow teachings and empowerments at the request of students across the globe.



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