



Understanding Buddhism: Refuge and Bodhicitta

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche



"The Sakya Tradition" Publications

Published by “The Sakya Tradition”

<https://sakyatradition.org>

Email : info@sakyatradition.org

Wechat ID : sakyatradition

Weibo : sakyatradition

IG: the_sakya_tradition

Facebook: TheSakya

Soundcloud: the-sakya-tradition

<https://www.youtube.com/@TheSakyaTradition>

Twitter: Sakya_Tradition

Strictly Not for Sale, Free Distribution Only



2026 © All Rights Reserved

This work is provided under the protection of a Creative Commons
CC—BYNC—ND (Attribution—Non—commercial—No—derivatives)
4.0 copyright. It may be copied or printed for fair
use, but only with full attributions, and not for commercial
advantage or personal compensation.
For full details, see the Creative Commons license.

Acknowledgement

His Holiness the 42nd Sakya Trizin, Ratna Vajra Rinpoche, bestowed this teaching in Mandarin on March 12, 2023, in Butterworth, Malaysia, at the request of the Butterworth Lay Buddhist Society.

In 2026, the Chinese text was prepared, edited, and published by The Sakya Tradition, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and making the precious Dharma teachings of the glorious Sakya lineage widely available. The Sakya Tradition team also translated the text into English.

This publication was made possible by the generous donations of Eri Iwanaka, Mak Rui Bin, Zeng Zipeng, and Sue Strong. We also want to thank all volunteers for their dedication and effort in putting this teaching together.

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



What makes an action truly virtuous? What does it mean to genuinely practice the Dharma?

Dharma practice is not merely about reciting prayers, meditating, or completing formal practices. It is about putting the Dharma into practice in every part of our lives.

What matters is not only what we do, but the motivation behind it.

As you read this teaching, consider what refuge and bodhicitta truly mean, and how they can be put into practice in daily life.

*Editorial
Preface*

Understanding Buddhism: Refuge and Bodhicitta

Practicing the Dharma Begins with Right Motivation

Whether or not our Dharma practice becomes a source of great merit depends primarily on one thing: our motivation.

Outward actions performed through body and speech alone do not determine the amount of merit we accumulate. What truly determines their value is the state of our mind.

Even if we perform virtuous actions through body and speech, without the right motivation we cannot accumulate genuine merit. In fact, such actions can hardly be regarded as genuine virtuous deeds.

For this reason, the mind is of utmost importance. We must first cultivate the right motivation. When our actions of body and speech are grounded in that motivation, they become a source of vast merit.

The foundation of right motivation is renunciation.

Out of compassion for all sentient beings, the Buddha taught many different methods of practice. No single teaching is suitable for every being.

Consider the example of a physician. No matter how skilled the doctor may be, if only one medicine were prescribed for every illness, the treatment would never succeed. Different illnesses require different medicines. In the same way, the Buddha taught many different Dharma methods to suit the varying dispositions and needs of sentient beings.

As Dharma practitioners, we should cultivate five correct perspectives: we regard the Buddha as the physician, the Dharma as the medicine, ourselves as the patient, our afflictive emotions—such as attachment and anger—as the illness, and the practice of the Dharma as the means of healing. We should approach our Dharma practice with these five perspectives in mind.

The Buddha did not teach the Dharma so that we might obtain wealth, longevity, good health, or other worldly benefits in this life. His teachings were given to free sentient beings from

saṃsāra and lead them to liberation. It is for this purpose that the Buddha taught the many paths of the Dharma.

As followers of the Buddha and practitioners of the Dharma, our purpose should accord with the purpose for which the Buddha taught. If our aim is contrary to the Buddha's intention, then we are not truly practicing the Dharma.

We must therefore understand the genuine meaning and purpose of the Dharma and cultivate the proper motivation.

Seeing Saṃsāra Clearly and Developing Renunciation Thought

We must first develop renunciation thought. Renunciation is extremely important.

Without genuine renunciation, we cannot truly be regarded as Dharma practitioners or as followers of the Buddha. If we have no wish to attain liberation, then we lack the very aspiration that lies at the heart of the Buddhist path.

The Buddha did not give teachings merely so that we could obtain worldly results or benefits within saṃsāra. His teachings were not given for the sake of worldly gain.

We must therefore develop renunciation thought.

When we examine saṃsāra, we come to understand that its nature is suffering.

There are many different countries and places in the world, some more developed and some less developed. There are different peoples, cultures, and languages. Yet wherever we go, we will not find a place entirely free from suffering, nor will we find anyone who has never experienced suffering.

Even if we live in the finest house, we will still encounter illness, worry, and many other forms of suffering. External conditions such as houses and possessions are therefore not the true causes of happiness.

The nature of this world is suffering. All of us experience the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. In the same way, the nature of saṃsāra as a whole is suffering.

Once we understand this, we should no longer cling to the things of saṃsāra. When we recognize the suffering nature of saṃsāra, it becomes easier to develop the wish to be free from it. That wish is renunciation.

From Loving-Kindness and Compassion to Bodhicitta

On the basis of renunciation, we cultivate immeasurable loving-kindness, or great loving-kindness.

Why is it called immeasurable loving-kindness? Because its objects are the limitless and immeasurable number of sentient beings. For that reason, it is called immeasurable or great loving-kindness.

Loving-kindness is the wish:

May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

We then cultivate immeasurable compassion, or great compassion:

May all sentient beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

This is compassion.

On the basis of loving-kindness and compassion, we cultivate bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is of two kinds: ultimate bodhicitta and relative bodhicitta. Here, we are cultivating relative bodhicitta.

Relative bodhicitta is also divided into two: aspirational bodhicitta and engaging bodhicitta.

Aspirational Bodhicitta

First, we cultivate aspirational bodhicitta.

Aspirational bodhicitta is the wish to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Why should we wish to benefit all sentient beings?

From beginningless time until now, we have taken birth in saṃsāra countless times. In each lifetime, our parents and loved ones have been different. Whenever we are reborn, we have different fathers, mothers, relatives, and companions.

We can therefore say that all sentient beings have, at one time or another, been our fathers and mothers.

When they were our parents, they cared for us just as our parents in this life have cared for us. They helped us, protected

us, and rescued us from danger. We should therefore repay their kindness.

Now that we have obtained a precious human life, we have the best possible opportunity to repay that kindness.

We do so by cultivating loving-kindness and compassion, by helping sentient beings become free from suffering, and by helping them attain happiness.

We should therefore give rise to the following aspiration:

For the benefit of all sentient beings, may I attain the genuine state of buddhahood.

Engaging Bodhicitta

Every phenomenon arises from its own causes, and the attainment of buddhahood is no exception.

The wish to attain buddhahood is aspirational bodhicitta. Putting that aspiration into practice is engaging bodhicitta.

In order to attain buddhahood, we must practice the Dharma and engage in virtuous actions.

The proper motivation, therefore, is to cultivate renunciation, great compassion, aspirational bodhicitta, and engaging bodhicitta, and with this motivation to receive the refuge vows and bodhicitta vows.

What It Truly Means to Take Refuge

Refuge is extremely important. It is the foundation of all vows, the root of all Dharma, and the preliminary to every path of practice.

Let us first consider why we take refuge.

Even someone who is otherwise a good practitioner cannot be regarded as a follower of the Buddha without taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Simply having faith in the Three Jewels, or merely being born into a Buddhist family, does not automatically make us Buddhists.

Faith is certainly important. Learning the Buddha's teachings, cultivating loving-kindness that seeks to help others, and developing compassion that wishes to free others from suffering are all virtuous practices.

However, these virtuous actions alone do not make us followers of the Buddha or practitioners of the Dharma.

In order to become a follower of the Buddha, we must take refuge in the Three Jewels with genuine intention and become true refuge practitioners. It is therefore very important to understand why we take refuge and then to take refuge on that basis.

Without a cause, there can be no result. Every result arises from its own causes.

We must also understand the difference between genuine and nongenuine refuge.

Not every act of taking refuge is genuine. Refuge can be genuine or nongenuine.

If we take refuge in the Three Jewels only in order to obtain benefits in this life, such as longevity, wealth, or property, this cannot be regarded as genuine refuge. Since our purpose is not the true purpose of refuge, such refuge may be called nongenuine.

Genuine refuge has two aspects: first, the cause of genuine refuge, and second, the actual practice of refuge itself.

The cause of genuine refuge is renunciation.

We have already discussed why renunciation must be cultivated. Here, from the perspective of refuge, we need to consider its importance once again.

Buddha Śākyamuni gave innumerable teachings because sentient beings have innumerable dispositions and ways of thinking. The purpose of all these teachings is to liberate sentient beings from the suffering of saṃsāra and lead them to liberation and, ultimately, buddhahood.

It was for this purpose that the Buddha gave so many different teachings.

The Buddha did not teach the Dharma merely so that we could obtain worldly benefits within saṃsāra, such as relief from illness or harm in this life, greater longevity, prosperity, influence, or a more favorable human rebirth in the future.

Leaving one's homeland and travelling to another city or country is incompatible with remaining at home.

When we remain at home, we have not left it and cannot at the same time be somewhere else. When we travel to another country, we are no longer in our homeland.

Remaining in one's homeland and going elsewhere are mutually incompatible.

In the same way, attaining liberation from saṃsāra and continuing to remain attached to saṃsāra are incompatible. As long as we remain bound to saṃsāra, we cannot attain liberation.

Anyone who wishes to attain liberation and buddhahood must therefore have renunciation within their mindstream.

If we do not wish to attain liberation, we will not make a sincere effort to attain it. The aspiration must come first. On the basis of that aspiration, we practice earnestly in order to reach the result of liberation.

This is why renunciation must be cultivated.

We should now consider what genuine renunciation means.

Sakya Paṇḍita, one of the five founding masters of the Sakya tradition, was a great teacher and an emanation of Mañjuśrī. In his brief teaching known as *Parting from the Four Attachments*, saṃsāra is compared to a delicious but poisonous fruit.

At first, the fruit tastes sweet and pleasant. After it has been eaten, however, it causes illness and suffering and may even cost us our precious life.

In the same way, attachment to power, wealth, reputation, people, possessions, clothing, land, houses, and other things within saṃsāra may bring temporary pleasure at first, but in the end it can lead us to the three lower realms.

Attachment to samsaric phenomena may bring temporary happiness, but it cannot give us ultimate or genuine happiness. Such attachment can also lead us to the lower realms.

We must understand that the nature of all saṃsāra is suffering and, on that basis, cultivate genuine renunciation.

The wish to be liberated from saṃsāra is genuine renunciation.

When refuge is taken on the basis of genuine renunciation, it belongs to the vows of individual liberation.

There are three main categories of vows in Buddhism: the vows of individual liberation, the bodhisattva vows, and the tantric vows.

Only refuge taken on the basis of renunciation can be regarded as genuine refuge. Genuine refuge belongs to the discipline of individual liberation; nongenuine refuge does not.

Refuge has five aspects:

1. the causes of refuge;
2. the objects of refuge;
3. the method of taking refuge;
4. the benefits of refuge;
5. the precepts of refuge.

The Causes, Objects, and Method of Taking Refuge

We begin with the causes of refuge.

There are three causes: fear, faith, and great compassion.

Fear and faith are common causes, shared by all Buddhist traditions. Great compassion is an uncommon cause and belongs specifically to the Mahāyāna approach to refuge.

First, fear. Suppose we suddenly see a snake in our room. We immediately become frightened, and because of that fear, we look for a way to leave the dangerous place.

In the same way, when we fear the suffering of saṃsāra, we seek a way to become free from it. This leads us to take refuge in the Three Jewels.

Second, faith. We take refuge because we have faith. If we had no faith, why would we take refuge in the Three Jewels?

It is because we have genuine faith in the Three Jewels that we take refuge in them.

Third, great compassion. Great compassion is the wish that sentient beings be free from suffering.

Cultivating great compassion is certainly virtuous. However, if we merely feel compassion but never put it into action, it has limited effect.

If we do not engage in virtue or accumulate merit, we will not be able to attain liberation or buddhahood.

Because we have great compassion, we first take refuge in the Three Jewels.

For our refuge practice to be genuine, we need not only the correct causes, but also the correct objects of refuge and the correct purpose.

The proper objects of refuge are the Three Jewels.

The purpose of taking refuge is not merely our own benefit, nor the benefit of only a few people, nor even the benefit of Buddhists alone.

We take refuge for the sake of all beings in this world—human beings, animals, and all sentient beings of the six realms.

Without the correct purpose, our refuge cannot be regarded as genuine.

To take refuge genuinely, we therefore need the correct purpose, the correct causes, the correct objects, and the correct duration.

The correct duration is not merely this lifetime. We take refuge from now until we ourselves attain buddhahood.

We must therefore possess all these conditions: the correct objects, causes, purpose, and duration.

When these conditions are complete, our refuge practice can be called genuine.

Because we possess the three causes described above, we take refuge in the Guru and the Three Jewels.

The objects of refuge are the Guru and the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha.

The Guru: The Guru is the complete embodiment of the Three Jewels—the embodiment of all the Three Jewels in their entirety.

The Buddha Jewel: The Buddha is one who has completely purified all afflictions and cognitive obscurations and has perfected all ultimate qualities. The Buddha possesses perfect wisdom, perfect loving-kindness, perfect compassion, and every other enlightened quality.

The Dharma Jewel: The Dharma is of two kinds: the Dharma of scripture and the Dharma of realization.

The Saṅgha Jewel: The Saṅgha refers to the noble beings who no longer fall back from the path.

The third aspect is the method of taking refuge.

Visualize in the space before you a throne supported by eight lions. Upon the throne are a lotus and moon disc, and upon the moon disc is Buddha Śākyamuni.

When you visualize Buddha Śākyamuni, do not think of him only as the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. Visualize him also as the embodiment of all the buddhas of the ten directions.

If you visualize in this way, you will accumulate greater merit.

With this visualization, make prostrations and cultivate faith. In this way, you can accumulate vast merit.

Visualize Buddha Śākyamuni as a form of light. Behind him, visualize a mountain of sacred scriptures.

Those who have already taken refuge should continually strengthen the refuge precepts within their mindstream.

The next aspect is the benefit of refuge.

The sūtras say that if the merit of taking the refuge vows were to assume a visible form, even the whole of space would be unable to contain it.

The benefits of receiving the refuge vows are therefore immeasurable.

Upholding the Precepts and Dedicating the Merit

The fifth aspect is the precepts of refuge.

The five aspects discussed above are:

1. the causes of refuge;
2. the objects of refuge;
3. the method of taking refuge;
4. the benefits of refuge;
5. the precepts of refuge.

The refuge precepts may be divided into common and uncommon precepts.

Common Precepts

The common precepts include observing the five precepts:

- not killing;
- not stealing;
- not engaging in sexual misconduct;

- not lying;
- consuming intoxicants.

A sixth point is that, whatever circumstances we face, we should never abandon our faith.

We should maintain faith at all times.

It is not right to forget the Three Jewels when things are going well, only to remember them when difficulties arise or when we become worried.

Whatever circumstances we encounter, we should retain steady faith.

We should take refuge in the Three Jewels with stable and unwavering faith.

Uncommon Precepts

The uncommon precepts are as follows:

After taking refuge in the Buddha, we should not take refuge in worldly gods.

After taking refuge in the Dharma, we should not harm any sentient being.

After taking refuge in the Saṅgha, we should not rely on non-Buddhist teachers as spiritual companions.

We then receive the bodhicitta vows.

The essential point is to cultivate the following aspiration:

For the benefit of all sentient beings, may I attain buddhahood.

On the basis of this aspiration, we should practice the Dharma and engage in virtuous conduct to the best of our ability.

There are many different precepts associated with refuge and bodhicitta, but those explained here are among the most important.

The refuge and bodhicitta vows are now complete.

Finally, we dedicate all the merit accumulated today for the benefit of all sentient beings.

In particular, we dedicate this merit to our root guru, His Holiness Sakya Gongma Trichen. May His Holiness enjoy

excellent health and long life, continue to turn the wheel of dharma, and may his enlightened activities extend boundlessly and proceed without obstacles.



■ 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.



**"The Sakya Tradition"—Delivering the
Precious Sakya Teachings Accurately
and Entirely in Your Native Languages**

<https://sakyatradition.org>

2026 ©All Rights Reserved