

~ *Taking Refuge* ~

Tsoknyi Rinpoche

Tim Olmsted: So Rinpoche, we were wondering if you would say a few words about refuge and its relationship to this teaching, the relationship to doing Ngondro, a little bit about what refuge means. It would be really helpful.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche: OK. They were asking me yesterday. I said, “You can ask during the teaching so that everyone can hear. Otherwise it becomes a private teaching for you.”

Refuge has a few levels and ways of understanding—now I am losing my English. I am tired. You understand that? I am joking. It is OK. I can push. I just drank Red Bull before coming here. [Laughter from audience.] No, I am joking.

There are a few levels of understanding refuge. The ultimate way of understanding is that you are taking refuge from... [Rinpoche pauses] We have a fear of existing. There are many kinds of fear, but the basic fear is fear of existing—existing in samsara, or existing in our five skandhas. So we have a healthy fear, I am not talking about a distorted fear, but a basic healthy fear connected with impermanence and with the klesha of ignorance. Under the power of that, we lose our freedom.

We want to protect against that, we want to be free from that. The only solution from the Buddhist point of view is to take practice under the Dharma. So Dharma is the solution to that fear, to purify unknown ignorance. And if you really realize the nature of mind, emptiness, egolessness—then that is the ultimate protection from existing unknown and unaware in a dualistic kind of fear. Do you understand that? Yes?

So another way is liberation. Another one is called becoming enlightened. Another one is called nirvana. In order to achieve that, now we are choosing the path. Now we are taking

refuge in the system of a Buddhist. In our minds, we want to be free from that [unknown ignorance]. If we can be free from that, all the other fear is easy—the fear of existing, the fear of samsara, the fear of change. All the other fears are connecting with that. In order to achieve that, in the relative, we have to depend on some system to actualize that awakening, which is free from the fear. So now that you look into a system, we are choosing the system of Buddhism, because Buddha is the full awakening of that, is a role model, and we like to become like a Buddha, and his path has become the method, the Dharma or technique that we actually want. But we also want to become like him, we take him as a role model and refuge object.

And the Sangha... Dharma is not only an intellectual book way. You have to have some kind of life transmission that needs to come from one being to another being. So we are taking Sangha as a support. Tomorrow, [while you take refuge], I can be Sangha. There are many levels of Sangha, arhat, bodhisattva, like a supreme Sangha and a common Sangha. So I am a common Sangha and maybe, in front of all of you, also a human, common Sangha. I am not sure, maybe you are supreme Sangha, I am sorry, I do not know. No one knows each other that well. So if you are an arhat, forgive me.

I know I'm not an arhat, so I can say that. I am a common Sangha to ensure [that you take] refuge, and choose the path of enlightenment as your way [in order] to achieve freedom. So this is our procedure. And then once you take refuge with Buddha as your spiritual mentor or teacher, Dharma as your path, and Sangha as your helper—that means you are choosing one path more or less. Finally you are buying a Mercedes. A BMW is good, but I cannot drive two cars at the same time. I admire the BMW, maybe from time to time I will just ask my friend to drive me here and there. But I think I would like to own a Mercedes. That does not mean that a BMW is bad, but I think for my constitution, my way of life and Buddha's life and the Dharma, I think it makes sense for me to buy a Mercedes. I could be happier faster, and with less destruction. Because a BMW is a young person's car in Asia, all the mistresses drive BMWs. Mercedes is more like after a midlife crisis. [Laughter from audience] I am joking.

Here the practical issue is that some of you like Christianity or Hinduism or Buddhism. Once you take refuge in the Buddhadharm, that does not mean that you are not allowed to do anything with your native religion. We have the Bon religion in Tibet. We celebrate, we do things, we use prayer flags, we do lots of small pujas, we give a lot of offerings to the land, and honor all things. But for enlightenment, for liberation, we never take refuge in that. We take refuge in the Dharma and the Buddha and the sublime Sangha.

So I think if you want to join culturally with a church ceremony, it's no problem. You can associate with your family gatherings, all this is no problem. But actually practicing both Dharmas at the same time—the systems are a little different. One leg is in the Mercedes, one leg is in the BMW, driving together. It could be difficult, no? You would need very long legs. But then there is no seat in between. [You're] sitting on space.

So once you feel more comfortable with this [taking refuge], and you respect Buddhism, if you say bad things about other religions, it is also part of what do you call it, [your downfall]? [Tsoknyi Rinpoche asks Tim Olmsted for the right English word, and Tim responds, 'downfall.'] You can be my translator, the next one that is. Sorry.

You can do that. The system of following both I think is very difficult. But what about Jesus? For me, Jesus is like a Bodhisattva. So you can put him into the category of Bodhisattva. Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, then Sublime Sangha, Bodhisattva, Jesus can be there, I think it is no problem. Whatever I've heard about Jesus, he is much like a Bodhisattva. And a Bodhisattva, of course, whether Jesus, a Hindu, a Buddhist or a Muslim, does not matter. A Bodhisattva is a Bodhisattva. Whatever name you give, you give. Yes?

What else? And the next question is about what? Empowerment.