

Taking Refuge

From Chapter 5, *The Heart of the Buddha* by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Becoming a Refugee

In the Buddhist tradition, the purpose of taking refuge is to awaken from confusion and associate oneself with wakefulness. Taking refuge is a matter of commitment and acceptance and, at the same time, of openness and freedom. By taking the refuge vow we commit ourselves to freedom.

There is a general tendency to be involved in all kinds of fascinations and delusions, and nothing very much ever takes root in one's basic being. Everything in one's life experience, concerning spirituality or anything else, is purely a matter of shopping. Our lives consist of problems of pain, problems of pleasure, problems of points of view--problems about all kinds of alternatives--which make our existence complicated. We have allegiance to "that" and allegiance to "this." There are hundreds and millions of choices involved in our lives--particularly in regard to our sense of discipline, our ethics, and our spiritual path. People are very confused in this chaotic world about what is really the right thing to do. There are all kinds of rationales, taken from all kinds of traditions and philosophies. We may try to combine all of them together; sometimes they conflict, sometimes they work together harmoniously. But we are constantly shopping, and that is actually the basic problem.

It is not so much that there is something wrong with the traditions that exist around us; the difficulty is more our own personal conflict arising from wanting to have and to be the best. When we take refuge we give up some sense of seeing ourselves as the good citizen or as the hero of a success story. We might have to give up our past; we might have to give up our potential future. By taking this particular vow, we end our shopping in the spiritual supermarket. We decide to stick to a particular brand for the rest of our lives. We choose to stick to a particular staple diet and flourish on it.

When we take refuge we commit ourselves to the Buddhist path. This is not only a simple but also an extremely economical approach. Henceforth we will be on the particular path that was strategized, designed, and well thought-out twenty-five hundred years ago by the Buddha and the followers of his teaching. There is already a pattern and a tradition; there is already a discipline. We no longer have to run after that person or this person. We no longer have to compare our life-style with anybody else's. Once we take this step, we have no alternatives; there is no longer the entertainment of indulging in so-called freedom. We take a definite vow to enter a discipline of choicelessness--which saves us a lot of money, a lot of energy, and lots and lots of superfluous thinking.

Perhaps this approach may seem repressive, but it is really based on a sympathetic attitude toward our situation. To work on ourselves is really only possible when there are no sidetracks, no exits. Usually we tend to look for solutions from something new, something outside: a change in society or politics, a new diet, a new theory. Or else we are always finding new things

to blame our problems on, such as relationships, society, what have you. Working on oneself, without such exits or sidetracks, is the Buddhist path. We begin with the hinayana approach--the narrow path of simplicity and boredom.

By taking refuge, in some sense we become homeless refugees. Taking refuge does not mean saying that we are helpless and then handing all our problems over to somebody or something else. There will be no refugee rations, nor all kinds of security and dedicated help. The point of becoming a refugee is to give up our attachment to basic security. We have to give up our sense of home ground, which is illusory anyway. We might have a sense of home ground as where we were born and the way we look, but we don't actually have any home, fundamentally speaking. There is actually no solid basis for security in one's life. And because we don't have any home ground, we are lost souls, so to speak. Basically we are completely lost and confused and, in some sense, pathetic.

These are the particular problems that provide the reference point from which we build the sense of becoming a Buddhist. Relating to being lost and confused, we are more open. We begin to see that in seeking security we can't grasp onto anything; everything continually washes out and becomes shaky, constantly, all the time. And that is what is called life.

So becoming a refugee is acknowledging that we are homeless and groundless, and it is acknowledging that there is really no need for home, or ground. Taking refuge is an expression of freedom, because as refugees we are no longer bounded by the need for security. We are suspended in a no-man's land in which the only thing to do is to relate with the teachings and with ourselves.

The refuge ceremony represents a final decision. Acknowledging that the only real working basis is oneself and that there is no way around that, one takes refuge in the Buddha as an example, in the dharma as the path, and in the sangha as companionship. Nevertheless, it is a total commitment to oneself. The ceremony cuts the line that connects the ship to the anchor; it marks the beginning of an odyssey of loneliness. Still, it also includes the inspiration of the preceptor--in this case myself--and his lineage. The participation of the preceptor is a kind of guarantee that you will not be getting back into the question of security as such, that you will continue to acknowledge your aloneness and work on yourself without leaning on anyone. Finally you become a real person, standing on your own feet. At that point, everything starts with you.

This particular journey is like that of the first settlers. We have come to no-man's land and have not been provided with anything at all. Here we are, and we have to make everything with our own bare hands. We are, in our own way, pioneers: each is a historical person on his own journey. It is an individual pioneership of building spiritual ground. Everything has to be made and produced by us. Nobody is going to throw us little chocolate chips or console us with goodies. So we have to learn how to milk the cows. In fact, we have to find the cows first--they might be wild animals at this point--and we have to tame them, put them into a corral, milk them, and nurse their young. We have to learn how to make a sword: we have to melt the stone and make iron out of it. We have to make everything. We came here barefoot and naked, and we

even have to make our own clothes--our own shoes and hats, whatever we need. This is the starting point, right here at this point. It is necessary to make this beginning.

If we adopt a prefabricated religion that tells us exactly the best way to do everything, it is as though that religion provides a complete home with wall-to-wall carpeting. We get completely spoiled. We don't have to put out any effort or energy, so our dedication and devotion have no fiber. We wind up complaining because we didn't get the deluxe toilet tissue that we used to get. So at this point, rather than walking into a nicely prepared hotel or luxurious house, we are starting from the primitive level. We have to figure out how we are going to build our city and how we are going to relate with our comrades who are doing the same thing.

We have to work with the sense of sacredness and richness and the magical aspect of our experience. And this has to be done on the level of our everyday existence, which is a personal level, an extremely personal level. There are no scapegoats. When you take refuge you become responsible to yourself as a follower of the dharma. You are isolating yourself from the rest of your world in the sense that the world is not going to help you any more; it is no longer regarded as a source of salvation. It is just a mirage, *maya*. It might mock you, play music for you, and dance for you, but nevertheless the path and the inspiration of the path are up to *you*. You have to do it. And the meaning of taking refuge is that you are *going* to do it. You commit yourself as a refugee to yourself, no longer thinking that some divine principle that exists in the holy law or holy scriptures is going to save you. It is very personal. You experience a sense of loneliness, aloneness--a sense that there is no savior, no help. But at the same time there is a sense of belonging: you belong to a tradition of loneliness where people work together.

You might say: "I have been this way for a long time. Why does there have to be a ceremony?" The ceremony is important because then there will be a particular time and a date on which your commitment takes place. There will be one particular fraction of a second after which you are committed to yourself, and you will know that very precisely and clearly. It is the same as celebrating the New Year: when the clock strikes twelve, we finally say "Happy New Year." There is that particular moment. So we make sure that there are no fuzzy edges to your memory or commitment. You are a slippery fish, and you have to be provided with some kind of net. The net is the situation of taking refuge that you are caught in; and the fisherman, the person who fishes you out of the water, is the preceptor. At that point the fish has no choice but to surrender to the fisherman. Without the ceremony, somehow it doesn't work; the whole thing is left too much to your imagination and your slippery subjectifying process.

When you become a refugee, a follower of the Buddha's teaching, you get onto a train that is without reverse and without brakes. The train comes along and pulls up to a certain station at a certain time. You get onto the train, then the whistle toots and off you go.

So the refuge ceremony is a landmark of becoming a Buddhist, a nontheist. You no longer have to make sacrifices in somebody else's name, trying to get yourself saved or to earn redemption. You no longer have to push yourself overboard so that you will be smiled at by that guy who watches us, the old man with the beard. As far as Buddhists are concerned, the sky is blue and the grass is green--in the summer, of course. As far as Buddhists are concerned, human beings are very important and they have never been condemned--except by their own confusion, which

is understandable. If nobody shows you a path, any kind of path, you're going to be confused. That is not your fault. But now you are being shown the path and you are beginning to work with a particular teacher. And at this point nobody is confused. You are what you are, the teachings are what they are, and I am what I am--a preceptor to ordain you as Buddhist persons. This is a very joyous situation as far as I am concerned: we are going to work together from the beginning to the end.

Taking refuge in the Buddha as an example, taking refuge in the dharma as the path, and taking refuge in the sangha as companionship is very clean-cut, very definite, very precise, and very clear. People have done this for the past twenty-five hundred years of the Buddhist tradition. By taking refuge you receive that particular heritage into your own system; you join that particular wisdom that has existed for twenty-five hundred years without interruption and without corruption. It is very direct and very simple.

Taking Refuge in the Buddha

You take refuge in the Buddha not as a savior--not with the feeling that you have found something to make you secure--but as an example, as someone you can emulate. He is an example of an ordinary human being who saw through the deceptions of life, both on the ordinary and spiritual levels. The Buddha found the awakened state of mind by relating with the situations that existed around him: the confusion, chaos, and insanity. He was able to look at those situations very clearly and precisely. He disciplined himself by working on his own mind, which was the source of all the chaos and confusion. Instead of becoming an anarchist and blaming society, he worked on himself and he attained what is known as *bodhi*, or enlightenment. The final and ultimate breakthrough took place, and he was able to teach and work with sentient beings without any inhibition.

The example of the Buddha's life is applicable because he started out in basically the same kind of life that we lead, with the same confusion. But he renounced that life in order to find the truth. He went through a lot of religious "trips." He tried to work with the theistic world of the Hinduism of the time, and he realized there were a lot of problems with that. Then, instead of looking for an outside solution, he began working on himself. He began pulling up his own socks, so to speak, and he became a buddha. Until he did that he was just a wishy-washy spiritual tripper. So taking refuge in the Buddha as an example is realizing that our case history is in fact completely comparable with his, and then deciding that we are going to follow his example and do what he did.

By taking refuge you begin to realize that you can actually compete with the Buddha. You can do that. Twenty-five hundred years ago one person, who also had to deal with his daily living situation, managed to awaken himself and experience the pain of life. He was able to work through that and work along with it and finally attain buddhahood, enlightenment. That person was called Gautama, the chief of the Shakyas tribe. He was a prince who had all kinds of luxury and security and who felt alienated from his basic state of sanity. So he decided to question the whole thing. He escaped from his kingdom, and he practiced meditation in the jungles and the woods. The only friends or spiritual teachers he could find were all spiritual materialists: they were using meditation to fortify ego. He tried all kinds of physical gimmicks--holding his

breath, turning upside down, sitting in the middle of a campfire--and he found them all futile. Then he began to arouse himself, to make his own liberation by himself. So he won enlightenment single-handedly. He was such a smart person that he was able to get out of the psychological materialism of trying to shore up ego through ideas, and out of spiritual materialism as well. He was able to win a victory over both kinds of materialism. Henceforth he was known as the Buddha, the Awakened One.

We can do that as well. Thousands of people in the Buddha's tradition have done so. We have psychological materialism and spiritual materialism happening constantly in our lives, so we have the same material to work on. There is no doubt that we have plenty of that kind of food for our minds.

One of the big steps in the Buddha's development was his realization that there is no reason we should believe in or expect anything greater than the basic inspiration that exists in us already. This is a nontheistic tradition: the Buddha gave up relying on any kind of divine principle that would descend on him and solve his problems. So taking refuge in the Buddha in no way means regarding him as a god. He was simply a person who practiced, worked, studied, and experienced things personally. With that in mind, taking refuge in the Buddha amounts to renouncing misconceptions about divine existence. Since we possess what is known as *buddha-nature*, enlightened intelligence, we don't have to borrow somebody else's glory. We are not all that helpless. We have our own resources already. A hierarchy of divine principles is irrelevant. It is very much up to us. Our individuality has produced our own world. The whole situation is very personal.

Taking Refuge in the Dharma

Then we take refuge in the *teachings* of the Buddha, the dharma. We take refuge in the dharma as path. In this way we find that everything in our life situation is a constant process of learning and discovery. We do not regard some things as secular and some things as sacred, but everything is regarded as *truth*--which is the definition of dharma. Dharma is also *passionlessness*, which in this case means not grasping, holding on, or trying to possess--it means non-aggression.

Usually, the basic thread that runs through our experience is our desire to have a purely goal-oriented process: everything, we feel, should be done in relation to our ambition, our competitiveness, our one-upmanship. That is what usually drives us to become greater professors, greater mechanics, greater carpenters, greater poets. Dharma--passionlessness--cuts through this small, goal-oriented vision, so that everything becomes purely a learning process. This permits us to relate with our lives fully and properly. So, taking refuge in the dharma as path, we develop the sense that it is worthwhile to walk on this earth. Nothing is regarded as just a waste of time; nothing is seen as a punishment or as a cause of resentment and complaint.

This aspect of taking refuge is particularly applicable in America, where it is quite fashionable to blame everything on others and to feel that all kinds of elements in one's relationships or surroundings are unhealthy or polluted. We react with resentment. But once we begin to do that, there is no way. The world becomes divided into two sections: sacred and profane, or that

which is good and proper and that which is regarded as a bad job or a necessary evil. Taking refuge in the dharma, taking a passionless approach, means that all of life is regarded as a fertile situation and a learning situation, always. Whatever occurs--pain or pleasure, good or bad, justice or injustice--is part of the learning process. So there is nothing to blame; everything is the path, everything is dharma.

That passionless quality of dharma is an expression of *nirvana*--freedom, or openness. And once we have that approach, then any spiritual practice we might go through becomes a part of the learning situation, rather than merely ritualistic or spiritual, or a matter of religious obligation. The whole process becomes integral and natural.

We have always tried to make sense out of the looseness and unsatisfactoriness of life by trying to make things secure and trying to freeze that washed-out quality into some definite story line. But now we can no longer make very much sense out of it. Things constantly change, constantly move, constantly become something else. So now we begin to work with the basic premise that that flow, or fluctuation of ups and downs, in our lives can be seen as a mirror reflection, or as waves in the ocean. Things come close to us and we can almost hold onto them, but then they disappear. Things seem as if they are just about to make sense; then suddenly there is immense confusion and what was about to make sense seems quite remote, a million miles away. We are constantly trying to grasp something, and we lose it just as we think we have our fingertips on it. This is the source of frustration, suffering--or *dukkha*, as the Buddha called it. *Dukkha* is the First Noble Truth. Recognizing that, we begin to make sense out of nothing, so to speak. Transitoriness begins to become more meaningful than trying to freeze truth into a solid lump. That realization--understanding the fluctuation that goes on and working with it--is the meaning of taking refuge in the dharma.

This approach involves a quality of directness and absence of deception--or we might even say absence of politeness. It means that we actually face the facts of life directly, personally. We do not have to come up with any padding of politeness or ordinary cheapness, but we actually experience life. And it is very ordinary life: pain is pain and pleasure is pleasure. We don't have to use another word or innuendo. Pain and pleasure and confusion--everything takes place very nakedly. We are simply ordinary. But nakedness and absence of politeness don't necessarily mean being completely savage. We are naked just in going without the padding that we usually provide ourselves with. With our friends, with our relatives, in everything that goes on, we can afford to be very simple and direct and personal.

In that way all the things that go on in life--economic, domestic, and spiritual--are no longer regarded as belonging in separate compartments, but everything is combined into one situation. That is what it means to follow the path of the dharma. Neither hot, intense moments of complete claustrophobia nor cool, noncaring moments are regarded as either extraordinarily good or extraordinarily terrible. Those are just the fashions of life that we are involved in. It is a natural process taking place constantly. Taking refuge in the dharma means relating to everything that happens, from the splinter in your little finger to your granddad's committing suicide in your name, from the littlest to the biggest, as part of that natural process. There are all sorts of shapes of journeys taking place constantly. And all of them are just a trick; they are just interesting facets of life.

But still you can't just say, "Let's leave it alone. Let's just watch everything and become great poets." Oh no. You can't just write poems about it, play music about it, or dance to it. You have to get into all those facets of life completely. And getting into them is the meaning of *path*--they become the path. That is accompanied by the practice of meditation, which actually makes the whole thing very clear and precise. The clearer our minds become, the more real and vivid become all the little things that are promising and threatening: the hopes and fears, the pains and pleasures.

The dharma is traditionally divided into two aspects. The first is *what has been told*, which means the holy scriptures, the books of the teachings which have been written from the time of the Buddha until the present. Those sacred books, which have been handed down from generation to generation, contain the truth of *what has been experienced*, which is the second aspect of the dharma. Throughout the Buddhist lineage, individuals have experienced reality and truth within the teachings, and this can also be experienced by you. It is a discovery within your own life that happens both with your teacher and by yourself. It happens particularly through your experience of meditation, both in formal sitting practice and in meditation-in-action.

Taking refuge in the dharma means that the experiences that go through your life, pain and pleasure alike, are also sacred teachings. The teachings are not sacred because they were discovered in space or because they came from the sky and were given by divine principles. But the teachings were discovered in the heart, in human hearts--in buddha-nature. For example the Buddhist canon, the *Tripitaka*, is based on *somebody's* experience. It is all *somebody's* discourse. The one hundred and eight volumes of sutras are spoken words--communications from one human being to another. The Buddha, who was fully awakened, was communicating with other human beings who were not awakened, were half-awakened, or were in a somewhat-awakened state. The truth has never come from the sky; it has always come from the human condition. The Four Noble Truths of the Buddha describe the human experience of pain, the origin of pain, the possibilities of salvation, and the possibilities of the path. These are very literal truths; they are the direct truth, rather than something that was manufactured upstairs.

So in taking refuge in the dharma, the books of the teachings are not regarded as mystical writings that were created by the clouds and the sun meeting together and engraving script on a tablet. These books were written with ink and pen on pieces of paper. The memories of the seminars, talks, and discourses that Lord Buddha gave were recorded simply as a description of what an awakened man said, how an awakened person conducted himself in the living situation. So taking refuge in the dharma has nothing to do with unearthly influence; it has nothing to do with Martians, and it has nothing to do with Jehovah either--but it definitely has something to do with sanity. Taking refuge in the dharma means that human beings' experience can be heightened so much that, extraordinarily, we can actually awaken ourselves within ourselves.

Once again, whatever goes on in our minds is a learning situation: the love and hate relationships that evolve around us, the sense of misfortune, the sense of being lucky, the sense of defeat, the sense of arrogance and egohood, the sense of patriotism, the sense of smartness, the sense of being special, and the sense of confusion--all are included in our particular basic situation. That *is* the path. It is the only way; it is the only thing that we can work on. We

cannot just milk the cow of the guru all the time, whenever we are hungry or thirsty. But we can experience our life-style and our process of development according to the dharma or what has been told. Then we become in tune with the dharma of what has been experienced at the same time, as the followers of the dharma have done in the past--which is very powerful and very meaningful for all of us.

Taking Refuge in the Sangha

Having taken refuge in the Buddha as an example and the dharma as path, then we take refuge in the sangha as companionship. That means that we have a lot of friends, fellow refugees, who are also confused, and who are working with the same guidelines as we are. Everybody is simultaneously struggling with their own discipline. As the members of the sangha experience a sense of dignity, and their sense of taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha begins to evolve, they are able to act as a reminder and to provide feedback for each other. Your friends in the sangha provide a continual reference point which creates a continual learning process. They act as mirror reflections to remind you or warn you in living situations. That is the kind of companionship that is meant by *sangha*. We are all in the same boat; we share a sense of trust and a sense of larger-scale, organic friendship.

At the same time, you have to stand on your own two feet. A sense of individuality and a sense of comradeship are both involved. You are working together and helping each other, but you are not helping so much that you become addicted to each other's help. If you lean on somebody in a weak moment of your life, the person you lean on may seem strong, but he will also begin to catch your weakness. If he falls down, you will fall down too. If the principle were just to lean on one another, we could have thousands of people all leaning on each other, but then if one person fell down, everybody would fall down. The whole thing would collapse, like an old dilapidated building, and there would be great chaos. It would be a suicidal process, with thousands all collapsing at the same time--which would be very messy, very dusty.

So taking refuge in the sangha means being willing to work with your fellow students--your brothers and sisters in the dharma--while being independent at the same time. That's a very important point here, actually, in terms of taking the refuge vow. Nobody imposes his or her heavy notions on the rest of the sangha. If one particular person tries to act as a catalyst or spokesman for the whole sangha, that is regarded as frivolous. If someone is extremely timid, credulous, and dependent, that is also regarded as frivolous. Instead, each member of the sangha is an individual who is on the path in a different way from all the others. It is because of that that you get constant feedback of all kinds: negative and positive, encouraging and discouraging. These very rich resources become available to you when you take refuge in the sangha, the fellowship of students. It is as though yeast is put into a batch of hundreds of grains of barley. Each grain begins to fill up with yeast, until finally there is a huge, beautiful, gigantic vat of beer. Everything is yeasted completely; each one of the grains has become powerful individually--so the whole thing becomes a real world.

The sangha is the community of people who have the perfect right to cut through your trips and feed you with their wisdom, as well as the perfect right to demonstrate their own neurosis and be

seen through by you. The companionship within the sangha is a kind of clean friendship--without expectation, without demand, but at the same time, fulfilling.

The sangha are a source of learning as much as the spiritual friend or teacher. So there is a need for some trust in the sangha. But we have to make a very definite point here: we are speaking of the *organized* sangha, which is the sangha of practitioners who actually sit together, practice together, and also work on themselves. Without that sangha, we have no reference point; we are thrown back into the big samsaric soup, and we have no idea who or what we are. We are lost.

So we no longer regard ourselves as lone wolves who have such a good thing going on the side that we don't have to relate with anybody at all, whether the organization, the sitting practice, or the sangha at large. At the same time we must not simply go along with the crowd. Either extreme is too secure. The idea is one of constantly opening, giving up completely. There is a lot of need for giving up.

Joining the particular club of lonely people who call themselves the sangha is a very heroic thing to do. Conventionally, you don't join anything unless all the ground is secured. Normally you pay a certain amount of money to join a particular club, and that gives you the kind of service that makes you feel good and secure. But at this point it is a very impersonal approach; in a strange way it is also very personal. You are willing to work with your loneliness in a group. The sangha is made up of thousands of people who are alone together, working together with their own loneliness, their own aloneness. Together they make an orchestra; you are able to dance with its music, and that particular energy, which allows individuality and spontaneity as well as nonaggression.

The sense of trust and frankness in the sangha frightens a lot of people; nevertheless, genuine communication takes place. Also, the level of sophistication of the sangha naturally becomes heightened. We cannot regard the sangha as an in-group situation, like a cheap, greasy spoon household of brown-rice eaters. At this level the sangha is an immaculate household, with immaculate relationships, in which experiences with each other occur personally. The real sangha is made up of dedicated people who are actually working on themselves. They haven't developed any fantastic tricks, magic, extraordinary philosophy, or anything like that. From that point of view, such companionship might seem somewhat boring, too ordinary. Nevertheless, it is very real. Quite possibly, you might occasionally seek out extraordinary friends and pursuits, but somehow those pursuits turn out to be purely plastic, part of a dream world, so that you return to the real sangha, the real people who actually care about themselves, care about you as a friend, and relate with the whole situation completely, without any areas shielded through a consensus of weakness.

Having taken the refuge vow, there are three types of change that take place: change of attitude, change of mark, and change of name.

Change of Attitude

Change of attitude involves developing a sense of sympathy toward oneself, and therefore toward the world. One's attitude changes to that of nonaggression and passionlessness.

Aggression refers to a general sense of uptightness and unfriendliness--of regarding the world as an object to do battle with. And in passion, one is trying to win something over, engaging in continual one-upmanship. In either case one has a constant battle going on with the world--that is to say, with oneself.

When you change your attitude you develop an awareness that allows you to be friendly with yourself and thus with the rest of sentient beings. There is some sense of gentleness. This is connected with commitment to the practice of meditation, which creates an openness to your own ups and downs, and a willingness to go along with them and work on them. You develop such a thorough relationship with the teachings that they become part of you. The Three Jewels--the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha--become a part of your existence and you thrive on that, you work with that, you live on that. You do not become a religious person as such, but you become gentle, soft, and very amiable and workable. You don't create defense mechanisms all the time.

As a Buddhist, you are less greedy. If your breakfast isn't cooked just the way you want it, you give in and eat the crummy breakfast you don't like. There is a sense that you can give an inch in your demands--just a little inch, a fraction of a second. So trying to give in, which is the change of attitude, is very important. Usually we don't want to give in: "I want to have my own way. I want complete, one hundred percent hospitality; and if I don't get it, I'm going to fight for my rights," and so forth. This is problematic and anti-Buddhist in some sense.

Another aspect of the change of attitude is that when you become a full-fledged Buddhist you feel that your life is workable in any situation. You don't feel alienated from your problems, and you don't try to put yourself in some kind of special spiritual orbit. You can be very gentle and friendly to yourself and other people and relate with the world--which seems to be the basic point of the Buddhist teachings. But you don't have to conduct yourself with the superficial smile and gleaming, honey-smearing attitude of "love and light." This is a genuine experience: you enter the tradition of the nonaggressive state of mind, and you are capable of conducting yourself in that way without artifice.

Nonaggression in this context also means refraining from taking life; you refrain from the personal rejection of animals, enemies, human beings, or whatever. People sometimes take pride in killing flies; in that kind of little situation they become involved in some kind of "gotcha!" mentality. That's a very savage kind of behavior. Becoming a follower of the dharma means becoming more sophisticated in the fundamental sense. You begin to pay attention to the details of your daily life situation, which become more important, and in fact sacred.

Change of Mark

Change of mark is closely related to change of attitude. Once you begin to behave with nonaggression, you begin to show signs of the sanity that is already in you. You don't actually have to try to prove anything to your relatives, your parents, your friends. The words don't count; the people around you can simply and actually appreciate the development of gentleness and reasonableness taking place in you. It is not that you are trying to be polite and understanding in the cheap sense, but you are trying to be polite and understanding beyond

consideration of your own personal comfort. So some sense of gentleness and sympathy takes place and that is the mark of being Buddhist. You begin to turn into a different breed of man. You become a gentle, considerate person who is open and brave at the same time.

Change of Name

Traditionally, in Tibet and other Buddhist countries, the parents would give their child a nickname that was used during childhood. Then, when the child took the refuge vow, they would be given a Buddhist name. The nickname would be phased out, or maybe just used occasionally among one's close circle of relatives, and the Buddhist name would then be assumed. In this setting, that situation may be somewhat sticky, so I like to leave it up to each person whether or not they want to use their refuge name. The point is that when you are called by your Buddhist name, you should assume that particular attitude of gentleness. Your name should act as a reminder rather than as something that provides further identification for your ego or that is just purely a handle.

The meaning behind the name is connected with some kind of inspiration that you might develop. It is not necessarily a flattering name, nor is it condescending--but it is some kind of message. Your Buddhist name represents an encouragement for some kind of development in your personality which is connected with the practice of meditation--some sense of your individual style in approaching the dharma.

The Refuge Vow Ceremony

The main part of the refuge vow ceremony involves offering three prostrations then repeating the refuge formula three times: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the sangha." I should explain the purpose of prostrations. There are all kinds of self-made spiritual journeys that we might be able to take, but what is important and necessary is to surrender our ego trips. Such surrender makes us much more self-made and much more closely and personally related with reality. So the idea of the prostrations is to surrender your personal clings of all kinds so that you can begin to tune in to this particular path.

When you prostrate you hold your palms together successively at the level of your forehead, your throat, and your heart, which represents surrendering your body, speech, and mind to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha without expecting anything in return. Prostrating on the ground is very significant; it means surrendering finally. You are making a *real* commitment; you are willing to give in completely to the choiceless sanity of the earth and become a refugee in no-man's land. The past, present, and future lineage holders are represented by this earth. You may get pissed off at this earth; you may feel very good about this earth; you may feel very unconcerned about this earth--but still the earth remains here, and it remains solid. Bowing yourself down on this earth is surrendering yourself to this basic sanity.

You do the three prostrations to the shrine, which represents our heritage. More explicitly, it represents the lineage of those who transmit awakened mind, which exists in the past, present, and future. You are also prostrating to the preceptor, who is the inheritor of this lineage. The

method used in the past is no longer a myth, but is real and living. You have a living Buddhist in front of you.

Kneeling and repeating the refuge formula three times is the actual refuge-taking. It has three aspects: acknowledging oneself, acknowledging one's need for protection, and acknowledging the other. When you say, "I take refuge," you are requesting to be accepted as a refugee. And when you say, "in the Buddha, dharma, sangha," you are acknowledging the other, which is the example, the path, and the sense of community. In this situation you have to be very deliberate, precisely aware of all the processes you are going through.

You repeat the refuge formula three times. The first time is preparing the ground; the second time you are going further; and the third time you have actually gone completely.

The discipline of taking refuge is something more than a doctrinal or ritual thing: you are being physically infected with commitment to the buddhadharma; Buddhism is transmitted into your system. Something in the lineage which is very physical, almost at the level of chemistry, enters your heart as your commitment to openness takes place. The third time you say "I take refuge in the sangha," the preceptor snaps his fingers. That is the moment of real transmission. At that moment the sperm, so to speak, enters your system and you become part of the lineage. From that moment onward, you are a follower of the practicing lineage of the Kagyü. At that particular point, the energy, the power, and the blessing of basic sanity that has existed in the lineage for twenty-five hundred years, in an unbroken tradition and discipline from the time of Buddha, enters your system, and you finally become a full-fledged follower of buddhadharma. You are a living future buddha at that point.

[Taken from selected Refuge Vow Ceremonies, 1973-1978.]
[pages 85 to 107 in Heart of the Buddha]