

## **Garchen Rinpoche's History of Giving Refuge**

Narratives by H.E. Garchen Rinpoche

Om Ah Hung. Today I have an excellent opportunity to share some words about the refuge vows. For most of my life—ever since I was released from prison—I have been giving the refuge vows. It started in 1981, when it was illegal to give the vows in China. There were also no texts to confer the vows, nor were there any lamas to give them. One could get arrested for giving the refuge vows to a child under the age of eighteen. It was very dangerous.

At that time, many of my friends had children to whom they wanted the refuge vows given. They would come visit me late in the evening, and I would have to give them the vows in the middle of the night. There were no representatives of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind for the vows at that time, but I started keeping the hair I clipped during the ceremony. This is because Lama Chime Dorje had told me: "You must never forget about anyone you have given the refuge vows to. Whenever you recite just a single refuge or dedication prayer, first and foremost you have to consider those to whom you gave the refuge vows, and then you bring to mind all other sentient beings." This is why I cannot simply throw out the hair clippings of people I give the refuge vows to. It is because of love. This is why I collect all the hair clippings.

The first time I gave the refuge vows in Tibet was when I was attending a meeting with other lamas in Yushu. During the day we held the meeting, and at night, farmers would travel to Yushu with their children to pick me up by tractor so I could give them the vows. Saturday night we went to a remote place, and gave them the vows there during the middle of the night. Before day broke, I returned to Yushu again for the meeting; it was under such difficult circumstances that I gave the refuge vows. At that time I had nothing to give to people taking the vows besides a name and a small blessed object. But from that time onward until now, giving the refuge vows has been one of my most important responsibilities.

Later when the rules about religious practice became more relaxed in China, and religious practice was permitted to a certain extent, people came to me to receive them. Whichever place and lineage they came from—whether Sakya, Gelug, Nyingma, or Kagyu—after I gave them the refuge vows I would tell them to return to their home place and lineage. I told them to meet any lama from whichever lineage they wished. Later I received a little old refuge vow book which I used to confer the vows.

Eventually I went to foreign countries. The people there are very intelligent and very interested in the Dharma, so I thought that if I could teach them the qualities and the benefits of the Dharma, they would understand. There are different kinds of refuge vows and refuge precepts, and Lord Buddha said that one should conform with the customs of each particular place and

time. For example, a place like Tibet has its own system of moral conduct, rules, and so on. When I came to the West, I found that people here show a lot of interest in the Dharma, which is why I made this new refuge card.

In the past when I was in Tibet, once, when my pouch of hair clippings filled up, I sent it with a monk who was travelling to Lhasa to offer it on a wooden board before the Jowo Statue. Later we were able to reinstate the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel at Gar Monastery and resume the centuries-old tradition of turning the wheel continuously. At that time only thirty monks were allowed to stay at the monastery.

Gar Monastery traces back to the minister Gar Tongtsen. When Gar Tongtsen escorted the Chinese princess Wencheng to Tibet, she brought along some dowries for her future husband, the King Songtsen Gampo. As a symbol of enlightened form, she brought the Jowo Wish-fulfilling Gem Statue; as a symbol of enlightened speech, the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel; and as a symbol of enlightened mind she brought the Auspicious Stupa Shining with Light. King Songtsen Gampo in turn gave the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel to Gar Tongtsen, while the Jowo Wish-fulfilling Gem Statue remained in Lhasa. The Auspicious Stupa Shining with Light was brought to Atok Tashi Gar Monastery, which is a small Gar Monastery in Atok. This stupa was destroyed by the Communists during the revolution. It contained many relics of the Buddha, of which only a few still exist.

The Gyanagma Prayer Wheel remains undamaged, spinning at the main seat of our monastery; the deities and protectors are watching over it. According to the *White Annals* by Gendün Chöphel, when the prayer wheel was first brought to Tibet, Gar Tongtsen hid it as a terma at Draksum Lake in Mönsha Öltakgo. After King Songtsen Gampo passed away, Princess Wencheng lived at Gar Tongtsen's residence for fifteen years. Gar Tongtsen and his family lineage then acted as the king's regent for five generations, at which time Gar Tongtsen's family line was destroyed, which led to division and conflict in Tibet. Gar Chödingpa, the later incarnation of Gar Tongtsen who revealed the hidden prayer wheel, is a descendent of Gar Tongtsen. It is due to the connection between Princess Wencheng and Gar Tongtsen that the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel now remains at the monastery, and now I send the refuge vow ceremony hair clippings to this holy object.

This refuge card was made so that in the future people will understand the meaning of the refuge vows. Everyone knows about the outer sources of refuge—the Three Jewels—and therefore it seems that the places of refuge exist outside of ourselves. However, the Buddha only showed us the method to attain enlightenment. He said that in fact you must awaken your own mind. “The mind from which nothing needs to be added or removed, is the Buddha. The unchanging

stainlessness is the Dharma. The spontaneously accomplished quality is the Sangha.” Thus, one’s own mind has to reach buddhahood. The Buddha taught the method for attaining it.

In order to clarify the nature of the outer and inner Three Jewels, I have created this refuge card. In making it I consulted with many scholars and asked them questions. Most people have liked the card, as it has helped them to understand the meaning of refuge. Someone told me that although he had taken the refuge vows five times, he never really understood anything about it. Through this refuge card, however, he said that he finally came to understand what refuge meant. So, people like this card. In this way I believe that conferring the refuge vows has actually benefited sentient beings. So far we have printed forty thousand refuge cards. Most have already been passed out.

Some people think that they cannot take the refuge vows from me if I, this old monk, am not present with them. But the Buddha’s teachings are always present, and therefore one can always receive the refuge vows. Even if one wants to receive the vows directly from me, what is actually important is the meaning contained within the refuge card. My mind of love and compassion is in this card. We will continue printing them so that in the future you can receive the vows from any Dharma center that has this card.

The actual places of refuge are the Three Jewels. The Three Jewels transcend arising and cessation and are ever-unchanging. The dharmakaya is like space, the sambhogakayas are like rainbows, and the nirmanakayas act for the benefit of sentient beings in myriads of ways, appearing in the particular forms of the beings in the six realms. In Tibet countless incarnated nirmanakayas have manifested in bodily form, such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is even greater than the Buddha himself. He is a great saint upholding the Buddha’s teachings. The most powerful upholder of the Buddha’s teachings in Tibet is Khenpo Jigme Phüntsook. In the West there is Sogyal Rinpoche, who has started around two-hundred Dharma centers. These beings have been extremely kind. All of the spiritual teachers uphold, preserve, and spread the Buddha’s teachings by performing their individual activities in order to tame beings. Thus it is like the sun has arisen in this world. This is also the purpose of me giving the refuge vows. Therefore I want my centers to be able to give the refuge vows to anyone who wants to receive them.

When conferring the refuge vows to someone, I clip a single tuft of hair from them. Later the hair clippings from the ceremony are all placed at the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel, which is being turned in shifts by two monks at Gar Monastery, uninterruptedly, day and night. The practice of the Great Compassionate One, Avalokiteshvara, is also chanted uninterruptedly, so there are always some monks doing this practice as well. Ever since 1981 I have collected the hair clippings of the refuge vow recipients, and these have all been placed at the prayer wheel.

Why am I placing the hair clippings at the prayer wheel? Because later, after these beings have died, their consciousness comes back to their tuft of hair. In fact, it goes everywhere one has been, even to the places one has peed. So it comes back to the tuft of hair, like a feather blown by the wind. Also, when someone has died and is lying in the charnel grounds, they cannot reach a holy place. However, someone else can bring their hair and fingernails to a holy place, and since the consciousness follows them, it can become liberated in that way. This is why the hair clippings are extremely significant. If the hair clippings are left at these holy places, these beings will benefit when they die.

Throughout the six periods of day and night, in this life, the next life, and in the bardo it will benefit them as well. It clears away obstacles in this life, and in future lives it helps one to progress along the stages and paths. This is why the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel is turning day and night. When someone dies and their consciousness comes back to the hair at the wheel, it will be like an exhausted person arriving at a nice hotel—there will be someone there to receive them. This is why the hair clippings are left at the Gyanagma Prayer Wheel, and if someone receives the refuge vows in the future it is important that a piece of their hair clipping is kept. The Dharma centers must then send these hair clippings to Gar Monastery. If that happens, my physical presence makes no difference.

The refuge vows are very important, and the refuge card itself is like the airplane ticket to Dewachen. If seeing the form of a Buddha is of inconceivable benefit, then there is hardly a need to mention the benefits of taking the refuge vows even just once. But to give an example, in the *Benefits of Receiving Empowerment* it says that if one receives an empowerment in this life, even if one doesn't understand its meaning at all, the results from having received this empowerment will ripen after seven lifetimes. In fact, the moment you give rise to the wish to receive the refuge vows, you plant the seed of liberation. Such are the qualities of the Buddha and the Dharma.

Once when the Buddha was teaching the Dharma to his monks, they saw a hawk chasing a pigeon in the sky. The pigeon landed outside the Buddha's window, and later after it flew away it was caught and killed by the hawk. The Buddha, viewing this with his clairvoyant mind, said to his monks, "Did you see this? The pigeon landed here, it heard the Dharma, and in the end, due to karma, it was killed by the hawk. However, the moment it died its consciousness took birth in the God Realm of the Thirty-Three." Those with miraculous abilities can see when a being takes birth in the god realms. Thus, even an animal benefits from hearing the words of the Buddha.

What is truly important in one's life is taking refuge and cultivating bodhichitta. For this reason, in the future, even after I have died, anyone can take the refuge vows and receive these refuge

cards. It is my hope that the Dharma centers will give them to people. Also, in the Dharma centers of places that I cannot visit they are now giving the refuge vows and keeping the hair clippings of vow recipients. There is something about this in the film on my life story. In my life story you can find both good qualities and faults. Due to having some of these good qualities, people like me, an old man. And even though I do not see these good qualities in myself, I love all beings from the bottom of my heart.

What are some further benefits of the refuge vows? If one receives the refuge vows in the morning it will already benefit one in the evening. Why is that? And as for this term “refuge,” what are we seeking protection from?

We want to be protected from suffering. Even though we want to be protected from suffering, the karmic suffering we experience right now will not just disappear. But through the suffering we experience now, we can understand the causes of suffering. If you understand the causes of suffering you will be able to accept whatever difficulties you are now going through. Then in the future you will gain the freedom to avoid creating the causes of suffering—self-grasping, anger, jealousy, and the other afflictions—and you will be able to create the cause of happiness, which is love and compassion. If you do not exercise conscious discernment as to what should be adopted and what should be abandoned, you will be lost. The Buddha said that you have to protect yourself, and to do that you must practice virtue. For this reason the refuge vows are very important.

Buddhas act to liberate all sentient beings from samsara by helping them to see, hear, remember, or come into contact with the Buddha and the Dharma. Therefore when giving the refuge vows to someone, I offer them the refuge card and a pin containing the liberation-by-seeing mantra, which is like a badge or a sign of being a member of the Sangha. Even though there are many refuge precepts for the Sangha, what do we really need? What makes the Sangha “noble”? For example, what makes me more noble than an ordinary sentient being?

Even though ordinary sentient beings have love, they only love you if you also love them. If you do not love them, they will not love you. In that case love can come to an end, because there is attachment. It is biased. But the noble Sangha loves all sentient beings. If an ordinary sentient being is harmed they will get angry, whereas a member of the noble Sangha practices patience. “I am a part of the noble Sangha. I am noble, I am Sangha. These sentient beings are ignorant. In order to accomplish the purpose of others and myself I must sustain bodhichitta.”

If you do not separate from the places of refuge—the Three Jewels and bodhichitta—even at the cost of your life, then with bodhichitta you will practice generosity, ethical discipline, and patience. These three will lead to the temporary experience of happiness in the higher realms.

Then through the practices of meditation and wisdom you can attain the ultimate accomplishment—the state of buddhahood. However, for all of these you need diligence; you have to be diligent in all the trainings. You must make an effort in cultivating bodhichitta, and you have to cultivate patience. Then you will achieve temporary benefit and ultimate happiness. The temporary benefit is that you will not revert from taking birth in the three higher realms, and the ultimate happiness is the attainment of buddhahood. Fulfilling your own aim is the attainment of the royal seat of the dharmakaya, and for the sake of others your activities will become equal to the activities of all the buddhas. Manifesting the twofold rupakaya, you will be able to benefit sentient beings. These are the benefits of the refuge vows.

In the future, people will be able to receive the refuge vows from our Dharma centers. And whoever takes the refuge vows, I am together with their mind. Even if my own body perishes, my mind will always remain. What is my mind? It is love; it is mindfulness. Love is my mind. This is *the* quality I have. I truly possess a boundless mind of love for all, without any bias between enemies and friends. This love that I have is the one thing that I fully believe in. And from this love arises natural compassion, joy, and equanimity. If one doesn't have immeasurable love, then compassion, joy, and equanimity are just words. If there is no trunk, there can be no branches or flowers. This is my own experience. Therefore I tell everyone who has taken the refuge vows from me to cultivate immeasurable love. When a real feeling of immeasurable love arises, this is virtue. This is my wish for everyone. This is important. And I hope that in the future everyone will be able to take the refuge vows.

The *37 Practices of the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* is the heart essence of all the Buddha's teachings. It is like your passport to Dewachen, to the higher realms, and the refuge card is your plane ticket. The airport gate to get there is at your crown, which is why the hair clipping has to be taken from the crown. In this way the gate is opened and you have an awareness of "This is where I have to leave from. The Buddha Amitabha is there, Tara is there. This is my path to liberation." This is the exit gate.

The refuge vows are extremely important. I came to this stupa today to make this announcement with prayers. For the future, you should know there is no difference between receiving the refuge vows from a Dharma center or from me personally.

Recently in Tibet, His Eminence Mingyur Rinpoche passed away. I wasn't able to meet him again in Tibet, though the people there wanted me to come. A batch of wristbands with the liberation-by-seeing mantra was produced in his honor. The benefits of this wristband and the refuge vows are more or less the same. Inside the wristband is the liberation-by-touch mantra, and on the outside is the liberation-by-seeing mantra. I myself started this activity of distributing the liberation-by-seeing mantra when I received an image of it many years ago. This image has

lots of benefits, and from that time until now I have been distributing it around the world; it is one of my main activities. Lord Buddha said that seeing this mantra just once purifies the misdeeds accumulated in three hundred million eons. If only one person in a home of ten family members wears this, everyone who sees or touches that person will naturally purify negative karma. If only one person of a hundred wears this, everyone who sees that person will benefit. These wristbands are one of my newer activities. The mantra comes in the form of wristbands, the pin, or the sticker to be placed above a doorway.

I do not have a lot of good qualities, but I also want to attain liberation. If you have no advantage, then I also have no advantage. This is “Dharma trade.” One has to know how to increase merit. Milarepa said, “If you do not know how to increase merit, you should not take the wealth of others.” How do we increase merit? Let’s say someone gives me a dollar. How many liberation-by-seeing mantra wristbands can I make with that dollar? How many people are going to wear it? If only one liberation-by-seeing mantra is placed above a doorway, each and every day it purifies the negative karma of three hundred million eons for every single person who walks beneath it. Think about just this benefit alone. In this way I do not suffer a loss, and neither do the disciples. Everyone benefits. You certainly are allowed to engage in this activity of producing these wristbands. It doesn’t matter who distributes them; anyone can do it. Also, it is not necessary to bless these wristbands. This is the benefit of mantra: they are already blessed by the Buddha.

The liberation mantra is also a protection. It is said, “The most supreme protection sphere is bodhichitta.” Due to past karma and momentary conditions, you might be faced with hostility from gods, spirits, and humans. This mantra pacifies their angry minds, and they become your friends. It also benefits them. Therefore this is very important. If you understand the benefits of these wristbands, of taking the refuge vows, of the liberation-by-seeing pins and so forth, you will consider them to be very precious.

In my own life, liberation-by-touch, liberation-by-seeing, and liberation-by-hearing (such as the *37 Practices of the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*) have become a purification of negative karma and an encouragement to virtue for others. This is my activity. I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to record this here in the stupa.

Inside this pouch containing the hair-clippings is an image of Tara. She is like a servant. If you supplicate to Tara, it is like supplicating to all the deities. She is the “Mother of the Enlightened Activities of all the Buddhas of the Three Times.” Thus, Tara is the servant of all the buddhas. Tara and Chenrezig are the ones who are actually looking after us.

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