

counsels from my heart

the three jewels

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was an influential Buddhist
tulku who traveled widely
through southern Asia, the Far
East, Europe, and North America
after escaping from Tibet. He
founded a teaching
and meditation center in the
Dordogne, France, in 1980,
where he lived till his death.
His introduction to the Three
Jewels – Buddha, Dharma, and
Sangha – is taken from a new
book of his teachings, Counsels
From My Heart, published by
Shambhala Publications.*

Photo Ven. Roger Kunsang



[What] differentiates Buddhists from non-Buddhists is taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Those who take refuge are Buddhists; those who do not are non-Buddhists.

Of the Three Jewels, the Buddha revealed the sunlight of the sacred teachings in the dark abyss of this world. He set forth inconceivable teachings of the supreme Dharma in order to lead us to the buddhfields and to liberation. The Dharma is our path. Those who uphold the Dharma by listening to it, teaching it, and practicing it are called the Sangha.

These Three Jewels possess extraordinary qualities, and it is thanks to them that liberation from the suffering of samsara and the lower destinies, and the attainment of the everlasting joy of buddhahood are possible. We must recognize what the Three Jewels are and take refuge in them.



Taken as a whole, this world is a place where the doctrine of the Buddha Shakyamuni has appeared, together with the Secret Mantra teachings, the Vajrayana. Especially in the snowy land of Tibet, thanks to the compassion of all the buddhas and the cooperative merit of beings, the teachings of both the sutras and tantras appeared together, like the sun rising in the sky. Since we [Tibetans] are by temperament drawn to the Mahayana, we understand that there is not one of the infinite multitude of beings throughout the vast reaches of space that has not been our father or mother. And we acknowledge that at one moment or another, they have all taken great care of us, just like our parents in this present life. We therefore feel responsible for them all – these parents of ours – and when we recite even a single *mani*, we do it for their sake. When we perform even a single prostration, we do it for them. This is the attitude and motivation of the Mahayana.



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We become Buddhists by taking refuge. Now the root, the factor that brings us to take refuge, is faith, and this, therefore, is the very foundation of Dharma. At the outset, faith and devotion are what impel us to take refuge; they enable us to assimilate it and make it part of ourselves. If there is no faith, there is no refuge, and without refuge, we cannot absorb the blessings of the Three Jewels. Therefore, with sincere trust in the Three Jewels, and with confidence that they are our unfailing and constant guardians, we should seek their protection, relying on them totally. This is what taking refuge means. Our faith should be as solid and unwavering as a mountain, as unfathomable and boundless as the sea. It should be constant. If it is unstable and we have only the appearance of faith, if we “take refuge” only when everything is going well and we feel fine, it will be hard for the blessings of the Three Jewels to penetrate our being.

We may understand that we have fallen into the mire of samsara and the lower realms. But if our wish is to gain liberation only for ourselves, if we lack this altruistic attitude of wanting to bring happiness to others, our orientation will be that of the Hinayana, not the Mahayana. Even if we take refuge wishing to gain liberation, our limited attitude will result only in the ability to traverse the paths of the shravakas and pratyekabuddhas.

Taking refuge and cultivating bodhichitta – the decision to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings – are the preliminary groundwork for all practices. Whatever practice we do derives from the Buddha’s teaching, the union of the sutras and tantras.

Thanks to our stock of merit, the Buddhadharma came to Tibet. Appearing first during the reign of the religious king

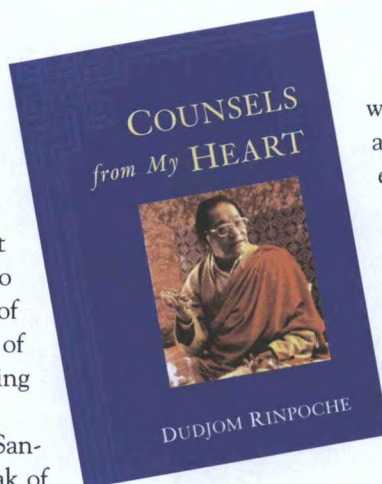
Songtsen Gampo, it was definitively established at the time of the abbot Shantarakshita, the master Padmasambhava, and the religious king Trisong Detsen. And it has remained until the present day without degeneration or decline. As a result, and also because the Dharma contains a wealth of instructions suited to the various needs of beings, a whole range of doctrinal teaching appeared in our country.

Because the texts were rendered from Sanskrit into Tibetan at different times, we speak of the old translations and the new translations. Within these two categories, there are many sub-schools, but they are all essentially the same. They are all the teachings of the Buddha. They are all the immaculate words of Buddha himself. Therefore, all the different schools, whether they derive from the earlier or later periods of translation, such as the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, or Gelug, are really different only in name. In their essence they are all a single doctrine: the word of the Buddha. This means that although we should follow the tradition to which we feel drawn, we should never presume to criticize other schools. If we train in our own tradition with faith and devotion, it is certain that we are following the unmissable path of the Buddhadharma. If, by contrast, we practice with partiality and a sense of sectarian difference, believing that our own practice is the only right one, and if we denigrate the other teachings, we are committing a very serious fault. The Buddha said that only he and those on his level could be the judge of others. No one else. Therefore, since emanations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas are everywhere, do not criticize others. Instead, train in pure perception and practice the teachings to which you aspire.

So the question is how to condense all these teachings and practices into one. Lord Buddha has said abandon every evil deed, practice virtue well, perfectly subdue your mind. This is Buddha's teaching.

What is evil? What is negativity? Evil is action that harms others. Moreover, it is said that not only should we refrain from harming others in the present, we should refrain from doing things to harm ourselves in the future (as the result of evil karma).

Again, what is virtue? It is the good heart, the wish to benefit others. This is what we call bodhichitta. If we have a good heart, wishing the welfare of others, and if we bring benefit to others and to ourselves, we are practicing virtue. Virtue depends exclusively on a good heart. We may well recite the refuge prayer, but if we harbor evil thoughts, it is meaningless. As the saying goes, "With good motivation, all the grounds and paths are excellent. With evil motivation, all the grounds and paths are ruined." A good motivation, a good heart – this is



what we must have at all times. This is the Dharma and nothing else. It is not something grandiose or elaborate.

To illustrate this truth, there is a story about three men who all attained buddhahood thanks to a single clay tsa-tsa (small image of Buddha). One man made the tsa-tsa with great devotion and faith in the Three Jewels. Later, another man found it by the roadside. He reasoned that if it were left there unprotected, the rain would damage it. Since he had nothing better to cover it with, he took off his own boot and placed it over the tsa-tsa. A third man found the tsa-tsa covered thus, and was shocked, thinking that to put a shoe on a tsa-tsa was disrespectful and the wrong thing to do. He therefore removed the boot. Of course, it is not right to cover a tsa-tsa with a shoe, but since the intention of the second man was sincere and good, and since he had perfect confidence in the Three Jewels, his act was positive. All three men are said to have attained enlightenment.

Our teacher should be our own mindfulness. We must examine what is positive and what is negative with mindfulness. If positive thoughts arise, we should go along with them. If non-virtuous thoughts arise, we should put a stop to them. A virtuous mind is the source of happiness. An unvirtuous mind is the source of pain. It's as simple as that – as we can see from our own experience. When the Buddha spoke about the hell realms and the *pretas* [famished spirits], he wasn't making it up. He was simply talking about how things are.

Furthermore, all objects to which we show respect and make offerings [representations of the Three Jewels, the lama, sacred images, books, and so forth] are simply supports with which we practice Dharma. But the Dharma itself is in our own minds. It is not something outside. It depends entirely on our good or evil intentions. So it's very important always to have a good heart. If we practice virtue properly, if we reject evil, if we have confidence in the karmic law of cause and effect, and if we have real trust in the Three Jewels, we will never do anything to be ashamed of. It is important not to do things that we will regret in the future. ☸

From *Counsels From My Heart*
by Dudjom Rinpoche © 2001.
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Boston, www.shambhala.com



Dudjom Rinpoche, London 1979