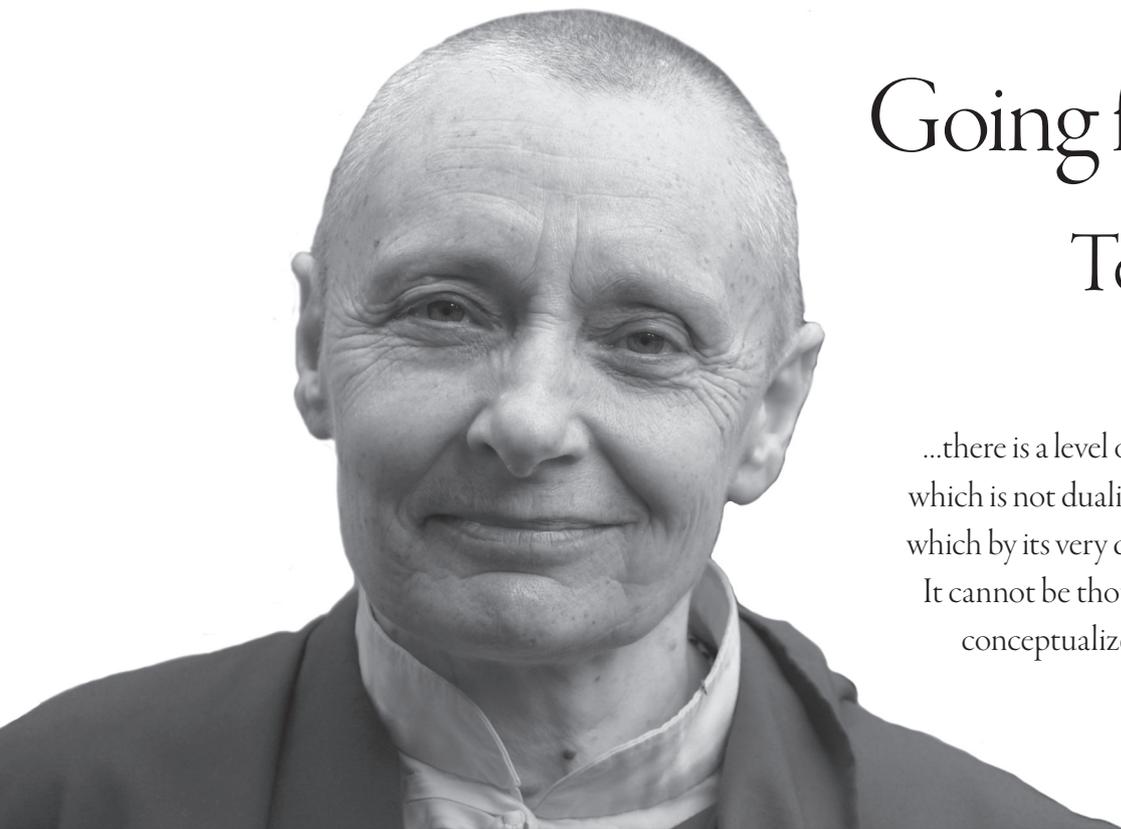




# GATSAL TEACHINGS



## Going for Refuge by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

...there is a level of mind, of conscious being, which is not dualistic, which is not conceptual, which by its very definition, is beyond thought. It cannot be thought about and it cannot be conceptualized, but it can be realized.

If we think of the Buddhist path as a temple, then in order to gain entry we have to go through the front portal. This front door is the commitment of taking Refuge. To take Refuge means we are fleeing from something. What are we escaping from? Nowadays, the world is full of refugees. Refugees are seeking refuge. They are fleeing from wars, enemies, and natural disasters that have occurred in their countries; they are escaping to some place which they hope will give safety and protection. So in Buddhism, we are all refugees. We are seeking to escape, if we have any sense, from the problems, conflicts and difficulties of this round of birth and death. In particular we are fleeing from conflicts which are created by our untamed, undisciplined minds, by the poisons of our delusion, greed, ill-will, pride and jealousy which cause so much disturbance to ourselves and to others. We are in flight from the problems of not getting what we want and getting what we don't want – old age, sickness, death. There are so many problems in this world.

Where can we find a refuge? We can find refuge only in ultimate truth. That's the only really firm ground. Nothing relative can ever be a true refuge. In the Buddhist tradition, we regard as a refuge the Buddha, his Teachings and the Community of those who have realized those teachings. Why? The Buddha was a prince 2500 years ago in Northern India, who had everything he wanted. He had three palaces for the three seasons of the year, he had doting parents, a beautiful wife, and he even had a son. He had everything. But during outings when he left the palace, he beheld the spectacle of a sick man, and a very old man and finally, a corpse. This was a great revelation for him, because these things had been hidden from him during his life of indulgence. Maybe they were not physically hidden from him, but he had not really thought about these things.

While we are young, we usually don't think of sickness, old age and death. These happen to those old fogies elsewhere. We don't think that these things are inevitably going to happen to us. There is sickness. Not just old people get terrible diseases; many young people also become very ill. And even if we avoid dying young, and avoid being sick, or if we are ill but we still keep on living, then we are going to get old and decrepit.

The Buddha said that the one thing certain about life is death. That is true- it doesn't matter how old or how young we are. I'm sure all of us have friends who were very young and who were in a car accident or in some other kind of accident or suddenly had some fatal disease, and died very young. Who would have expected them to die? But we don't know. Today we are here and tomorrow we're gone. We can't think "I'm going to live for three score years and ten and then I'll die." Who knows when we are going to die? Nobody knows. Just because we are young and healthy today doesn't mean we are not going to be dead tomorrow. We don't know; none of us knows.

The Buddha saw all this, and he saw how much suffering there was in the world because people want things but don't get what they want; instead, they often get what they don't want. And so, they are miserable. And he thought "what is the cause of this?" So he went away - he left his palace, he left his family, he left everything - and wandered out as a beggar, as a holy man in India. He went to look for the truth of the causes of suffering and how to overcome them.

After six years of various kinds of practice, he experienced a total awakening of his mind under the Bodhi tree in Bihar, in Northern India. His mind completely opened up and went back through aeons and aeons of time. What happened was that he realized his human potential- a potential that we all possess but which is normally closed to us. It wasn't that he was a God; it was just that as a human being, his mind reached its potential. It is said that we use something like 8% of our brain. What is the other 92% doing? Maybe it's keeping all these records. There is an account in the Sutras which says that once the Buddha was in the jungle where he picked up a handful of leaves and asked his disciples: "Which is more, the leaves in the jungle or the leaves in my hand?" And of course they said, "The leaves in your hand are so few. The leaves in the jungle are infinite". And the Buddha said, "Well that is like how much I know compared to how much I'm actually telling you. What I'm teaching you is like the leaves in my hand, what I've realized is like the leaves in the forest." But he added "What I'm telling you is enough for you to become liberated. That's all you need to know." So, someone like that with a totally liberated and omniscient mind is worthy of Refuge, because he set out the path very clearly.

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The second reason is that the word Buddha, which means "to be awake", is the culmination of ultimate wisdom, compassion and purity. We go for refuge to that. We go for refuge to our own inner potential for Buddhahood. We all possess what is called Buddha Nature. That means we all possess within ourselves the fullness of wisdom, compassion and purity. But it's covered over. Yet it is this which connects us with all beings - not just human beings, but animals, insects and everything sentient. Anything which has consciousness has this potential. It might take a long time to uncover it, or it might happen in a moment, but we have it there. So, we also go for refuge to that within ourselves- our own innate true nature.

When we go for refuge to the Dharma, first of all we go for refuge to the teachings of the Buddha. After the Buddha's enlightenment, he went around North-West India for 45 years talking to many different sorts of people- the rich and the poor, lay people and monks, males, females, the young and old - and much of this instruction was recorded. In the Tibetan canon, there are 108 volumes of the Buddha's teachings. But we also go for refuge to the Dharma in the sense of ultimate reality- of that which really is when the clouds of our confusion and our delusion part, and we see truth face-to-face: That ultimate reality is out there and in ourselves also. That is the true Dharma, the universal law.

We go for refuge to the Sangha because the Sangha are those who have realized the path - who have had genuine experiences and realizations of the unconditioned nature of their minds. It's as if we are all sick- we are all so very sick with the 5 poisons of delusion, greed, ill-will, pride and envy. The Buddha is like a physician who says, "You're sick but you can be cured" and then he prescribes the medicine. The medicine is the Dharma. And just as with ordinary medicine, it is no good just reading the label or knowing the ingredients: we have to take the medicine; we have to follow the cure. There is a cure. We can be healed. And those who help us and look after us are the Sangha. They are like nurses - they take care of us, they help us to take the medicine in the right doses and they look after us until we are completely healed. When we are healed we can then take their place and help others.

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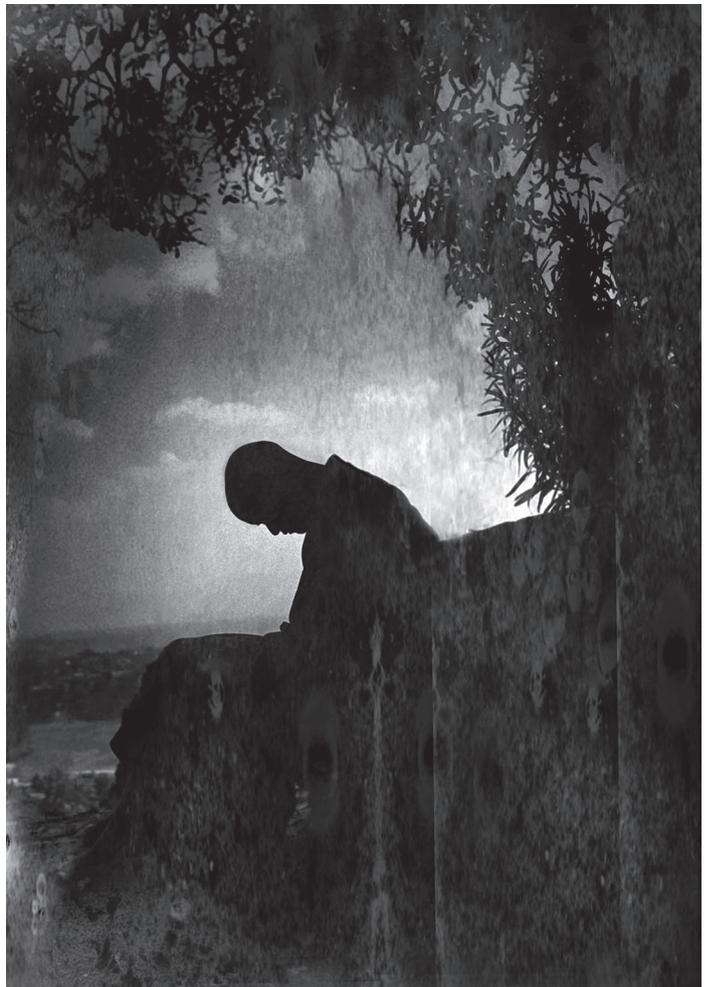
The ceremony of taking of Refuge came from the time of the Buddha himself. When the Buddha was wandering around in Northern India he met so many people seeking his advice. At the end of many of these discourses, the questioner states, "From now until life's end, I take Refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, in the Sangha." It is a very ancient tradition in all Buddhist countries. It is the commitment to put the spiritual path in the centre of our life instead of placing it just at the periphery. It's a commitment which says, "From now on, I will transform my life into something meaningful". Therefore, taking refuge is the beginning of the Buddhist path.

## Question and Answer Session

**Q:** My question is with regard to something I've heard expressed to me quite recently: that Buddhism hasn't been very kind to women and that it has been male-dominated. Can you say a little bit about that?

**A:** Quite frankly, until very recently - until the last 100 years - higher education was also denied to women in the West. Certainly, my grandmother would never have gone to university. The idea that women needed to be educated beyond a certain level was quite alien even in the Edwardian Age. It was in the 20th century that female education really got underway. So this lack of opportunity for women is not something which just belongs to the 'backward East', so to speak. When the Buddha's attendant Ananda asked him if women were capable of liberation, he said, "Yes, of course women are capable of liberation." A woman's ability to attain spiritual freedom has never been denied. However the opportunity to attain this has often been lacking.

However in the modern world few Buddhist teachers are going to say, "No we don't teach this to women". Here in the West, we are all educated; we have equal opportunities, we can read the books, we can meet the teachers. Many of the Buddhist centres nowadays are



actually run by women. There's not such a problem any more. In certain countries in the East, there is still resistance: unfortunately, there it is a fairly male-dominated society. But on the other hand, if we go to Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, Burma or Tibet, women are very strong in those countries, compared with the surrounding countries where women are placed in a very subordinate role. Take Tibet for example: Tibetan women are powerful, they are very straightforward, and they are often the ones, as also in Burma, who are running the businesses. They are not shrinking violets at all. They are strong and play a role in society. In Buddhist societies, women were not kept locked up - they were easy in their relationships with the opposite sex and, considering the other societies around them such as India and Confucian China, the status of women in Buddhist countries was very good. It wasn't always so good for the nuns, but it was good for the laywomen. In what society has woman not been kept under? Often, that situation is also the fault of the women - as well as the men. Frequently women keep their fellows down and don't encourage other women to be adventurous or to go beyond the expected norm. It is not by any means all the fault of those 'wicked' males: women also are very much there supporting the system. For example, in India, when a woman gets married, the person she has to fear in her new household is not so much her husband as her mother-in-law.

**Q:** Can I go back to patriarchy and sexism in the spiritual path? It has always seemed to me that patriarchy is about as grave a spiritual ill as you could think of - one half of the species subjecting the other half and calling the other half inferior-born or acting as if they were born inferior. And Buddhism, sadly, in its history hasn't been pure in that sense; it has been part of the patriarchal system. Wouldn't you say that the way forward for Buddhism is to make a firm resolution that there will be no taint of the things that have tainted it in the past? And in some ways, the opposition, as I see it, could be a bit like Martin Luther in the medieval times, when he was looking at the affliction that had affected his spiritual path and wanted to reform it. The most important thing for Buddhism would be to transcend patriarchy.

**A:** It's interesting that the two people here most concerned about patriarchy are men! I think that's beautiful. Well done. Yes, of course, in the past, this was a big problem. But in the West, there are so many sincere females interested in spiritual matters. The majority of people coming to spiritual discourses are female although there are a lot of men here as well. This is good. Yes, of course, it is very sad that half the human race was being neglected in the past. And we must redress this. We are doing what we can. In the West, this situation doesn't arise so much in Dharma circles, except that many of the teachers are male and many women prefer that. In the East in recent years consciousness has been rising in Buddhist circles of how women and nuns are being neglected. In certain countries like Taiwan and Korea, nuns are well educated and they are often running the show. Some of the most famous people in Taiwan are actually women and nuns. In those countries there is no issue with discrimination. In the South-East Asian countries there is still a lot of inequality. But even there the problem is now being discussed and thought about. Previously there was not even the awareness that there was a problem.

**Q:** I want to ask you about enlightenment and what it means to you. For myself, I feel that enlightenment is perhaps being in the present moment - of a growing sense of being aware - a sense of beauty. Perhaps you could speak of enlightenment and what it means.

**A:** Being in the present moment without any conceptual thinking is a nice advancement. It's very helpful. But in itself, it is not enlightenment. Of course, enlightenment is a word which we bandy around and in a way, I would prefer to call it realization. A realized mind is one which has a direct seeing of the ultimate nature of the mind. Our mind is normally very dualistic. I'm trying to put this simply so you will understand. I see a watch. There's a subject, the verb and the object. This is because our minds are conditioned. When we are thinking, we are always thinking with concepts and ideas and conditions and patterns. But there is a level of mind, of conscious being, which is not dualistic, which is not conceptual, which by its very definition, is beyond thought. It cannot be thought about and it cannot be conceptualized, but it can be realized. And so, these realizations, these moments of apprehending the unconditioned nature of the mind are usually like flashes. So the idea is to increase the number of flashes and prolong them so that eventually these moments of non-dual awareness will be constant and unbroken. Enlightenment is a different level of awareness which we all possess and which is our true nature.