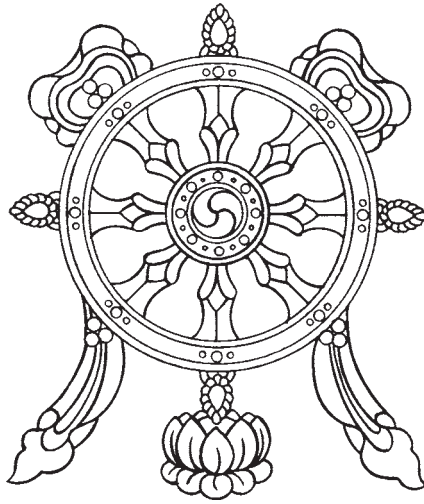


Discovering BUDDHISM *at Home*

*Awakening the limitless potential of your mind,
achieving all peace and happiness*



SUBJECT AREA 7

Refuge in the Three Jewels

Readings

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Further required reading includes the following texts:

The Wish-Fulfilling Golden Sun, by Lama Zopa Rinpoche (pp. 69–75)

Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, 1997 gold edition (pp. 394–428) or 2006 blue edition (pp. 352–84)

Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels, an FPMT Booklet

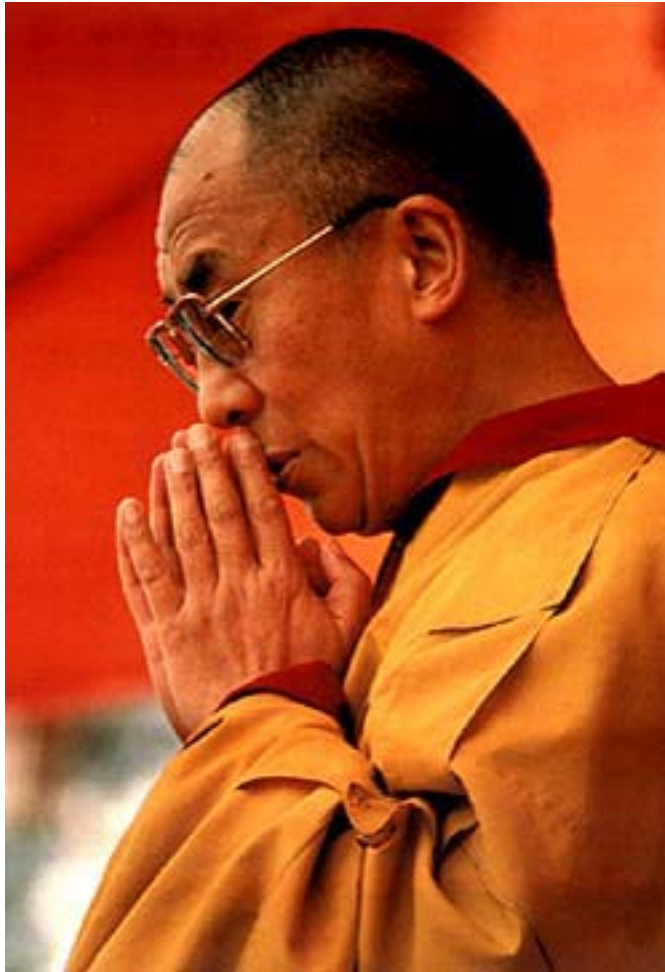
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Seeking an Inner Refuge

by H. H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama



His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people. He came to India after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959. Ever since then increasing numbers of non-Tibetans have been becoming aware of his enlightened and compassionate wisdom. In 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his unwavering advocacy of non-violent resistance to the shockingly cruel and violent Chinese occupation of his homeland. Here is an extract of a teaching given in Delhi in the early 1960's, translated into English for the first time.

From the Buddhist point of view, the mind of an ordinary person is weak and distorted through the power of the delusions and emotional afflictions he carries within himself. Because of this weakness and distortion he is unable to see things as they are; what he sees is a vision twisted and defined by his own emotional neuroses and preconceptions.

The purpose of Buddhism as a religion is to remove these distorting elements from the mind and thus facilitate valid perception. Until the distorting elements have been uprooted one's perception will always be tainted, but once the delusions have been removed by their very roots, one enters into a state of always seeing reality as it is. Then, because the mind exists in perfect wisdom and liberation, the body and speech automatically course in wholesome ways. This benefits both oneself and others immediately in this life and also on the road that follows after death. Therefore Buddhism is said to be not a path of faith but one of reason and knowledge.

We Tibetans are fortunate to have been born into a society where spiritual knowledge was both available and highly appreciated. However, having been born into it perhaps sometimes we took it for granted. Buddha himself said, "Test my words like a gold analyst buys gold and only then accept them." Buddha taught for a long period of time and to people of all backgrounds and levels of intelligence. Consequently each of his teachings must be weighed carefully for meaning and evaluated to determine whether it is literally true or only figuratively so. Many teachings were given in particular circumstances or to beings of limited understanding. Accepting any doctrine or aspect of a doctrine without first scrutinizing it analytically is like building a castle upon ice. One's practice will always remain unstable and will lack fundamental strength and depth.

What does it mean to say "practise Dharma"? Dharma is defined as "that which holds," that is the spiritual lore that holds or leads one out of suffering. Buddhism asserts that although at the moment our mind is overpowered by delusion and distortion, ultimately there is an aspect of mind which is by nature pure and unstained, and that by cultivating this purity and eliminating mental obscurations we are "held back" from suffering and unsatisfying experiences. Buddha taught this potential purity as a fundamental tenet of his doctrine, and Dharmakirti, the Indian logician who appeared a millennium later, established logically its validity. When this seed of enlightenment has been sufficiently cultivated one gains the experience of nirvana, freedom from all the shortcomings of samsara. As well as the concept of the seed of enlightenment, Dharmakirti validated logically the entire spectrum of Buddhist tenets, including the law of karma, the concept of rebirth, the possibility of liberation and omniscience, and the nature of the Three Jewels of refuge: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

As for the actual mode of practice, it is wrong to practise without a logical understanding of the doctrine. The practitioner should know well just what he is doing and why. Since those of us who are monks or nuns are dedicating our entire lives to the practice of Dharma we should be careful to practise immaculately. The Sangha is very important to the stability of the doctrine, so we should do our best to emulate Buddha himself. Anyone considering taking ordination should first think well; there is no need to become a monk just to be an inferior monk. The Sangha has the responsibility of embodying the precepts. If one wishes to continue living an ordinary life it is better to leave monkhood to those of greater spiritual inclination and simply to practise as a layman as best one can.

All religions in the world are similar in that they provide methods for cultivating wholesome aspects of

mind and eliminating unwholesome ones. Buddhism is a particularly tasty religion because, having developed in India when the country was at a high point spiritually and philosophically, it presents both a total range of spiritual ideas and a rational approach to the methods of spiritual development. This is particularly important in this modern era, when the rational mind is given such credence. Because of this facet of rationality Buddhism finds little difficulty in confronting the modern world. Indeed, many of the findings of modern science such as those of nuclear physics, which are considered new discoveries, have long been discussed in ancient Buddhist scriptures. Because Buddha's last advice to his disciples was that they should never accept anything on faith but only through rational investigation, the Buddhist world has always managed to keep the spirit of inquiry very much alive within its precincts. This is unlike many other religions of the world, which lay claims on the truth and thus never allow any type of investigation that seems to threaten their limited descriptions of reality.

Whether or not a person is a Buddhist is determined by whether or not he has taken refuge in the Three Jewels of refuge purely, from the depth of his heart. Merely saying Buddhist prayers, playing with mantric rosaries and walking around temples do not make one a Buddhist. Even a monkey can be taught to do these things. Dharma is a matter of mind and spirit, not external activities. Therefore, to be a Buddhist one must understand exactly what the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are, and how they relate to one's spiritual life. There is the causal Buddha refuge, or all the buddhas of the past, present and future, of whom the most relevant to us is Buddha Shakyamuni, and the resultant Buddha refuge, or refuge in one's own potentiality for enlightenment, the Buddha that one will become. As for the Dharma, there is the Dharma that was taught in the scriptures, and the realization of what was taught, which is found in the minds of those who have received a transmission inwardly. Lastly is refuge in Sangha, both the ordinary monks, who are symbols of the Sangha, and the arya Sangha—those beings who have gained meditational experience of the ultimate mode of truth. Therefore it is said that Buddha is the teacher, Dharma is the way and Sangha are the helpful spiritual companions.

Of these three, the most important to us as individuals is the Dharma, for ultimately we can only be helped by ourselves. No one else can achieve our enlightenment for us or give it to us. Enlightenment comes only to those who practise Dharma well, who take Dharma and apply it to the cultivation of their own mental continuums. Therefore, of the Three Jewels it is the ultimate refuge. By hearing, contemplating and meditating upon Dharma, our lives can become one with it, and enlightenment an immediate possibility.

All the great Kadampa masters of the past stressed that refuge must be practised in the context of an intense awareness of the law of cause and effect; it requires observance of the law of karma as its support. Buddha said, "We are our own protector and our own enemy." Buddha cannot protect us, only our own observance of the law of karma can. If we keep our refuge purely and strive to live in accordance with the ways of karma, we become our own protector. Alternatively, if we live in contradiction to the spiritual way we become our worst enemy, harming ourselves in this and future lives.

The mind of an ordinary person is undisciplined and uncontrolled. To be able to take up higher Buddhist practices, such as the development of *samadhi* or insight into emptiness, or to engage in the yogic methods of the various tantric systems, we must first cultivate a disciplined mind. With refuge and self-discipline as the basis we can easily develop ever-increasing experiences in higher Dharmic practices. Without a foundation of discipline, higher practices will yield no fruit. Everybody wants to

practise the highest techniques, but first we must ask ourselves if we have mastered the lower prerequisite practices such as discipline. The aim of refuge is to transform the ordinary person into a buddha; when this has been accomplished the purpose of refuge has been fulfilled. The moment our mind becomes Buddha, our speech becomes Dharma and our body Sangha. However, the attainment of this exalted state depends upon our own practice of Dharma. To leave the practice to others and hope for spiritual benefits for oneself is an impossible dream. To purify our mind of karmic- and perception-related mistakes and cultivate the qualities of enlightenment within our stream of being, we ourselves must perform the practices and experience the spiritual states. The 108 volumes of Buddha's words that were translated into Tibetan have one essential theme: purify the mind and generate inner qualities. Nowhere is it said that someone else can do this for us. Therefore the buddhas are somewhat limited—they can only liberate us by means of inspiring us to practise their teachings. Many buddhas have come before but we are still here in samsara. This is not because those buddhas lacked compassion for us but because we were not able to practise their teachings. Individual progress along the spiritual path depends upon the efforts of the individual himself.

The process of self-cultivation has many levels. For beginners, however, avoidance of the ten negative courses of action and observance of their opposites, the ten positive courses, is the first necessity. Three of these concern physical actions: instead of killing we should value and cherish life; instead of stealing we should freely give what we can to help others; and instead of taking others' wives we should respect others' feelings. Four concern speech: instead of lying we should always speak the truth; instead of causing disharmony among others by slandering them we should encourage virtue by speaking about their good qualities; harsh and cutting speech toward others should be exchanged for soft, gentle, loving words; and meaningless conversation should be avoided and replaced by meaningful activities. Finally, three concern the mind: attachment is to be overcome and non-attachment cultivated; ill-will towards others is to be exchanged for feelings of love and compassion; and incorrect beliefs are to be eliminated and realistic attitudes cultivated.

These ten fundamental disciplines are to be followed by every Buddhist. Not to do so while engaging in so-called higher tantric methods is to fool oneself. These ten are simple practices, observances that anyone can follow, yet they are the first step for anyone wanting to work toward the powerful yogas that bring enlightenment in one lifetime. When we take refuge and become a Buddhist we must honour the family of buddhas. To follow any of the ten negative courses of action after having taken refuge is to disgrace Buddhism. Nobody is asking us to be a Buddhist. If you are a Buddhist it is a result of your own choice. Therefore you should qualify yourself accordingly. The minimal qualification is to avoid the ten negative courses of action and cultivate their opposites. Granted, nobody is perfect; but if we want to call ourselves Buddhists we have to make some effort. When we see something that causes attachment or anger to arise within us the least we should do is make an effort not to be overcome by these distorted states of mind and instead maintain a free and loving attitude.

The essence of Dharma is cultivation of the mind, for all the positive and negative karmas collected by the body and speech originate in and are given direction by the mind. If we do not cultivate an awareness of our mental processes and the ability to cut off negative streams of thought as they arise, twenty years of meditation in a remote cave will be of little value. Before looking for a cave we should look for good qualities in our thoughts and develop the ability to live in accordance with Dharma. Only then will our sojourn in the distant meditation cave be better than a bear's hibernation. People who talk about tantric retreats while the ten Dharmic foundations are still beyond them just make laughing

stocks of themselves.

As humans we are able to attain enlightenment in a single lifetime. However, life is short and much of our lifespan has already passed by. We should ask ourselves how much spiritual progress we have made. Death can come to us at any moment and when it does we must leave behind everything except the mental imprints of our life's deeds. If we have practised Dharma during our life, have tried to live in accordance with Dharmic ways, or have gained realizations of Dharma, this energy will be there with us. Alternatively, if our life has been spent in negativity, the consciousness traveling to future worlds will be immersed in negative thoughts and haunted by memories of our samsaric ways. Now, while we have the power to practise Dharma, we should do so intensely and purely. Dharma practice brings peace and harmony to both ourselves and those around us, even in this life and, should we not achieve enlightenment in this lifetime, it will give us a wish-fulfilling jewel that can be carried into future lives to aid us on the spiritual path.

Ultimately, our future is in our own hands. Most people make fantastic plans for next week, next month and next year, but what counts most is to practise Dharma right now. Were this to be done, all plans would be fulfilled. When we cultivate virtuous activities today, the laws of dependent arising ensure that a positive stream of change will be set in action. This is the preciousness of being human. Mankind is able to affect dynamically its own future state of being through applying discriminating wisdom to all activities of body, speech and mind. To use and cultivate this distinguishing wisdom is to extract the very essence of the human life.

Colophon:

Translated by Losang Chopel and Glenn H. Mullin. From *Teachings at Tushita*, edited by Nicholas Ribush with Glenn H. Mullin, Mahayana Publications, New Delhi, 1981. A new edition of this book is in preparation. Tushita Mahayana Meditation Centre is the FPMT centre in New Delhi, India.

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Teachings on Refuge

by Lama Thubten Yeshe

When you take refuge in Buddhadharma, the important point is that you have recognised your own profound potential, and from the beginning can see that, “I can do something, I can take the responsibility of liberating myself.” This is different from the attitude we normally have: “I’m hopeless, I’m hopeless; maybe God, maybe Buddha, maybe lama can do something for me.” This sort of human attitude is wrong. From the Buddhist point of view it is wrong to think, “I’m hopeless, Buddha can do something for me.” That attitude is wrong because it’s not true. By believing that you are hopeless you have already decided that you are nothing, you have already put a limit on your profound quality. So the important thing in taking refuge is to have the understanding that you can do something to solve the problem of everyday life by relying, with confidence and trust, on the Buddha’s wisdom – or you can also call it your own activated wisdom – to liberate you from confusion and suffering. So it is really worthwhile. The real significance of taking refuge in Dharma wisdom is that it is the entrance to the path to enlightenment.

That is why, traditionally, every day people in Buddhist countries take refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. But Western people don’t need to copy this, going to the temple every day, taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha without concentration. We don’t need to follow the customs of those countries. What we need to do is to recognise what brings us a liberated joyful life. Instead of relying on, taking refuge in chocolate and apples and biscuits and toys, instead of taking refuge in the beach, in movies, or in popcorn, we should understand in our hearts that the liberated joyful life does not depend on those conditions, those worldly phenomenon.

The Lam.rim shows exactly, logically, scientifically that human happiness and joy do not depend on material conditions. So you should understand clean clear and determine that that is reality. Then you will not be upset by not getting presents and chocolates, or by people not paying attention to you. Otherwise, small things always upset you and small things make you dissatisfied. The over-extreme expectation of getting things from the external world makes problems. So taking refuge in Buddhadharma is really worthwhile.

And some people feel that by taking refuge, “I have to remember my lama’s nose, my lama’s head.” That is not necessary. When you take refuge it is not necessary for you always to remember your lama’s nose. Or, “Every day I have to go to the temple”, or, “Every day I have to say Buddha Buddha, Dharma Dharma, Sangha Sangha, Buddha Buddha, Dharma Dharma, Sangha Sangha. If I forget to say those words, I am completely guilty, I am not acting correctly for one who has taken refuge.” It is not that way, that is a misunderstanding. We are not trying to have the Western mind copy the aspect of Buddhist culture. Westerners should understand that taking refuge is a state of mind. It doesn’t matter whether you are in a plane, in the subway, in a train, in a bathroom or wherever – somehow, you

recognise your buddha-potential and rely on that inner wisdom to stop the problems of everyday life, and you understand that you can deal with these through meditation, through intellectual thinking, or through enacting the six paramitas. From my point of view that kind of thing is good enough, and if you are really taking refuge you don't even need to say one word "Buddha."

And also, ordinarily, when you are depressed you can ask Buddha for help. By recognising Buddha's unlimited wisdom and universal compassion it helps psychologically. When you remember his universal compassion, when you think of his universal wisdom, those objects, somehow on your side also you open up a little bit. In other words, you just think about the reality of the whole world, look at what's going on in the whole world: what's going on in Africa? what's going on in America? what's going on in India? what's going on? By just thinking about all the different conditions of human existence, you find, "Somehow, I'm not too bad, I'm not too bad." So that's the way of opening up, that's what being open means. So when your mind has opened to such a profound universal object, it has space. So it is the same thing when you remember Buddha's unlimited compassion, unlimited wisdom and unlimited power. Thus it is easy to see that taking refuge is not something that you are just relying on words.

Even if you have kind of enormous pleasure, kind of everything coming together, you can't believe it: "How is it I have so much pleasure? I have this, I have this, I have this – I don't know how, what kind of fortune I have, everything is coming together for me" – at the same time, instead of becoming concrete inside, concrete and grasping onto this, you think, "Hmm, all this is coming together so easily, yeah, but it's good that my happiness and pleasure do not depend on this (Lama showing material object)." You use your wisdom. For example, perhaps you have some ambition, "I want this, I want this, I want this, I want this, I want this." So even if somehow everything you wanted comes, whatever you thought of, all materials come together, still you are not too excited: "Well, it is true, it is there, everything has come together, it seems that I can enjoy myself. Hmm, still I hope that I can feel satisfied and together without all these things too, that my satisfaction does not depend on all this." Thus Dharma wisdom not only liberates you when you are miserable, it also liberates you when you have tremendous pleasure.

We always need Dharma wisdom. Even when you have great pleasure, you need wisdom to really make your mind stable. Normally the Western mind is up and down, up and down, up and down, twenty-four hours a day up and down – maybe up and down a hundred times a day. Westerners believe that these outside things are solid, "That makes me happy. This morning I am happy, you say that I am bad so now I feel terrible." This is no good, no good. This up and down comes from not recognising the inner wisdom that can be relied on and not recognising the inner ability to liberate oneself. I think you people understand, I don't need to talk so much about this. Sometimes you can explain refuge in so many ways, I think you understand.

I think in the West, so many people are suffering incredibly; you don't realize. Especially, you are young people, you can do so many things, can't you? Now, at the moment, you can do so many things – you can travel, you can meet interesting people, you can do this, you can do that, you can do this. But when you are old you can't do things any more. So automatically, when you merely think about those miserable conditions, you become so afraid. However, now you are training your mind to understand the profound, so when you become older I think that at that time you will have a better life.

You understand what Buddha means. But still, it is good, when you have taken refuge, to put a buddha-

image in your room, or to make a small shrine room. Then, when you just look at your buddha-image you can remember his knowledge. And also Buddha Shakyamuni's history: how many times did he give his body for mother sentient beings? Sometimes he gave his eye for sentient beings, there are many different reasons, sometimes he gave his leg, sometimes he gave his life completely. At other times he was a monk and he had to marry some lady, so he gave his life completely for that woman. Sometimes he gave his body to the tigers. All kinds of things like these he did, unbelievable things, cutting the meat from his leg and offering it to mother sentient beings. We can't do these things now. Actually, people who have studied the Madhyamaka might remember the bodhisattva who cut off his meat, piece by piece, and with respect offered it to others. Instead of his having pain, he was blissful, completely blissful. This is a good example for us. It is not that he didn't have the conditions of pain; the condition of his body is a painful situation, it is made for pain. But he had the key of mind control, and through his psychic power, the power of his consciousness, instead of pain he felt bliss.

Normally my guru, His Holiness Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, uses this example when he gives teachings. In Tibet we have a lot of beggars; in one day perhaps ten beggars come before you and say, "Hello, we need something." Most of the time what we give is tsampa, the Tibetan national food is tsampa. It's a kind of muesli, sort of ground-roasted barley – some people give just a little and other people give quite a lot, it depends. So he says, when somebody knocks on your door to ask for a little tsampa, you become irritated, irritated. But when somebody asks a bodhisattva to give a piece of his body, he is completely blissful. The bodhisattva understands that this person is helping: "This man is helping me to complete my paramita of charity", so he is completely blissful. That is his attitude. When somebody comes here asking for us to give something, instead of having the attitude of wanting to give, we become irritated and angry. But the bodhisattva who has really trained his mind in such a way is blissful: "Because this person is asking me, I can do something. This beggar is helping me to develop my path to enlightenment", so cutting off his flesh he is completely blissful. Those are good examples and not just stories. Also, when Jesus was crucified, he manifested ordinary suffering, showed a horrible appearance, but actually he must have been totally blissful, giving his body in order to take the negativities of mother sentient beings. Although outwardly he appeared suffering he must have been blissful.

You can see that inner progression is so profound, so profound. Another good example in the West is the Christian missionary. It is good, those Christian people, they take refuge in God, somehow they understand that God is responsible for everything and so they go to Africa or some other terrible place. They go to serve other people. They are the same as us – do you think they don't like muesli? They like muesli, they like chocolate, they like cake, but somehow they give up that situation and because of God go to that other place and accept the suffering in order to help those poor people. I feel they are wonderful; somehow they have inside themselves the ability to cope, by taking refuge in God. I think they are profound.

And we Buddhist people, even though we know that if we do one hour's meditation in the morning the whole day is completely blissful, each of us has the experience, we are still lazy, aren't we? Even though we know clean clear, through experience – not only words, that if we have good meditation in the morning the rest of the day goes very easily, sometimes we degenerate, we don't meditate. We forget things. Maybe when you come here to Chenrezig Institute you meditate, but when you go to Melbourne or Sydney it is less and less, and when you reach the centre of Melbourne, then all these things have finished. The only thing left is icecream. I'm joking. Anyway, it is good, we should understand that there are examples in the West also, the Christian people. There are some very sincere people and they

get something, they get something. So it is important that we learn to meditate and have some experience, and then continuously develop.

Actually, meditation is taking refuge. Meditation is your taking refuge, because inside you have the attitude, “If I meditate I can liberate myself” by using Buddhist wisdom and Buddhist method. So it is really worthwhile. Otherwise, I myself feel that without recognising the profound inner ability and having confidence in and relying on that, human beings are useless. Especially in the West, it is very dangerous – we dedicate our entire life to the pursuit of happiness but the result is misery, misery. That’s the story of our lives, isn’t it? So you understand, it is really worthwhile. Especially old students should try to set a good example for new students. The bodhichitta attitude is to help other sentient beings, and the Buddhist way is by just being a good example yourself, that is good enough. Not just words, just be a good example, give energy to new people. That is the way in which you help. Otherwise, perhaps you have some fantastic intellectual understanding, but if by your behaviour you set a bad example it can’t help, you can’t help other sentient beings.

Anyway, I have no intention to talk too much, but if you have any questions before taking refuge please ask them. It is good to make it clean clear. The subject of refuge is so vast that we can never completely cover it for you, so if you have any questions please ask.

Student: What is the difference between Jesus and Buddha?

Lama: According to their appearance in this earth, each of them is relatively different but absolutely the same thing. Basically, Jesus taught by his actions of compassion and love – perhaps the Western world needed to be taught that way. When Buddha Shakyamuni came, he taught with his profound speech, through his actions showed his enlightened realisations, and he showed the function of his omniscient wisdom.

Student: If the Buddha represents your higher self and universal wisdom and compassion, does that mean that if you are a woman you can imagine the Buddha as being female?

Lama: Yes, of course. Definitely yes. It is very important to understand that even if you are a female, the profound buddha-potential is the same as in men, even though relatively the structure of our bodies is different. This is too temporal, relative, but when one is controlled, what is the difference? Like Tara, you can see the painting of that female aspect of Buddha. And also, there is no distinction between men and women in that it takes one longer to discover enlightenment and a shorter time for the other. It depends completely upon the development of the individual. In Tantric Yoga we have the explanation that even in this life, starting from knowing nothing of the inner reality, one can reach enlightenment, equal with Shakyamuni Buddha – both men and women have equal ability to do this.

Student: I would like you to tell us a little about the benefits of taking refuge.

Lama: The benefits of taking refuge? The benefit of taking refuge is that you liberate yourself, as I said before. Taking refuge in Buddha and Dharma means – first of all, what is Dharma? Dharma is wisdom, the clean clear sharp wisdom, seeing clearly, is the Dharma. And taking refuge means you become Dharma, you become the Dharma wisdom light. Perhaps at first, at the beginning, you are a small candle light, but by meditating each day the small candle light is activated and becomes bigger,

bigger, bigger, bigger – and then your Dharma wisdom is transformed into the omniscient wisdom, totality wisdom. And in the same way, by taking refuge and so on, you increase your compassionate loving kindness attitude. So when you increase your loving kindness actions you become liberated from the self-cherishing thought, don't you? Then you have no conflict with other human beings. Even if other people are making some conflict for you, instead of getting angry you have compassion, "What can I do?" So you have control. You don't have to control yourself like this (Lama squeezing himself up into a tight ball): "I am controlled, I am controlled." Just control, just control, it doesn't need any effort (Lama showing relaxed aspect). At first, it's true, we need a lot of effort, sort of meditation and effort; but after some time you don't need this – just your being is meditation, just being is liberated, just being is loving kindness, just being is bodhisattva, bodhichitta. It is difficult at the beginning, but also I cannot say "You are a beginner, therefore you should squeeze yourself", Perhaps you are more advanced than I am, who knows? We never know – the thing is, in Buddhism, we don't judge, we cannot judge. For example, I cannot say "I am the wisdom man, your teacher – you have to learn from me." No, I cannot; I can learn from you too; we are helping each other. Even though we are not yet enlightened, each of us has different aspects of wisdom more developed – so you have certain wisdom better than mine and I can learn from you too.

Student: When you take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, you are taking refuge in the higher pure clean clear self. Since the guru is the embodiment of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, is the guru like your clean clear self also?

Lama: That's right. Yes. If you understand it in such an absolute way, it is like in Christianity we have one God. Similarly, the guru is the Buddha, the guru is the Dharma, the guru is the Sangha – you can understand it in that way too. Good.

Student: Could you talk a bit more about refuge in the Sangha?

Lama: Okay. Good. There are two levels of Sangha: relative Sangha and absolute Sangha. We are all relative Sangha. I am learning from you people, you are helping. If I have some understanding, if I am receptive, I learn from you people. You people also give me energy. Actually we give each other energy. Let me make an example. I have the attitude that when I give my students Dorje Sempa Initiation they have to retreat for three months, do a strict retreat for three months. And if they do a group retreat they are almost always successful. But some people say, "Lama, I want to retreat by myself, alone; please let me." I say, "Alright, alright." You know – what can I say? Baby cries, wants – what can I say? It is not my way to say, to insist that, "You have to do it with the group." Then they would freak out, wouldn't they? Anyway, I know they would freak out and instead of becoming positive would turn out negative. So I have to say, "Yes, yes, yes." Then I watch with my big eyes, I watch what they are going to do. The result is always disaster; they never finish a good retreat. They always break down and end up maybe neurotic, saying, "Not possible, I get much lung", and these things. It's obvious, I understand.

But retreating with a group is always helpful. Let's say today I'm lower, I'm a little bit depressed. My negative mind is questioning, "Ooh, why is Dorje Sempa, I don't understand?" Actually, the negative mind doesn't want to understand, so, "Why, we are European people, all these Tibetan trips, Dorje Sempa and yab and yum, all these things make me really ... instead of staying here and meditating I want to meet my girlfriend/boyfriend." Anyway, all these ridiculous kinds of minds come out. So then

you tell your friend, “I have this happening, I don’t understand.” Then your friend, who is a bit strong, says, “Wait a minute, maybe you think this way. What, what.” So actually he is really the one who brings me up and helps me get myself together. So then I can control the one who brings me up and helps me get myself together. So then I can control my negative mind a little bit. So actually, we are learning from each other, kind of recycling each other, helping. Really, human beings are so kind, incredible. Since the time we were born up to now sentient beings have been the source of life – our growth and everything. So you can understand the idea of kindness of mother sentient beings, you can see.

We are the Sangha: you are my Sangha and I am your Sangha too. So we are all Sangha for each other, we help each other. What is the reason, why do we need this? The need is simple. If you stay at some place where you are surrounded by people drinking wine, drinking wine every day, intoxicated every night and having all kinds of activities going on, if you stay there maybe one year, every day they are giving you teachings: “Drinking wine is very nice, it brings your spirits up; whenever you are lonely, whenever you are depressed, drink wine.” “Maybe, yes, today I don’t feel so good, perhaps I’ll have a drink today, check it out.” So then you feel, to some extent, for a short time, it helps. For a short time you can ignore the problem; you become sort of unconscious. So however, you know I know, most of our students, when they go back to their own homes, their old samsaric homes, they become a complete disaster. One day they say, “Oh, last night I talked with my friend, or my mother too late, I can’t do meditation.” So they sleep too late in the morning, when they get up it is already about lunchtime, so too late for meditation. So then the next evening, the same old story, “I have to go to a party.” So, two days no meditation. “Oh, really.....” That is the samsaric environment – not enough Sangha vibration. So we are sick people who cannot stand by ourselves. We need some kind of stick or other help to stand. We are not yet liberated so we do need the Sangha to help. We definitely need. So for that reason, relative Sangha, we are all Sangha.

Absolute Sangha, we need better Sangha actually, who understand such inner absolute quality of reality, non-duality. That is the real Sangha. We are relative Sangha but we are not perfect Sangha. We can still help each other but not in the profound way, not until we discover non-duality. So we desperately need the help of Sangha.

Also, you can see, you come here for a meditation course, you know its going to be difficult. Most of you students know its going to be difficult. “I’m sure my knees are going to hurt, and especially listening for two or three hours to this monk pumping, pumping, pumping, pumping.” A situation in which you have never been before. And then sitting for six hours every day. “Six hours sitting?” – even you can’t believe that yourself, “I could not believe it.” I’m sure you could not believe it yourself. It’s true, this is the human beauty, the beauty of the human quality; you could not believe it, I tell you. You cannot judge yourself, “I can do, I cannot do.” The human being can do unbelievable things. Let’s say we talk about Milarepa – it seems to us that he is outrageous, doesn’t it? But if we want we can do exactly the same as Milarepa did. You see, you can never make any limitation on the human potential, it is so profound.

You can see that here we put everybody’s energy together. I’m sure that Scott sometimes makes you irritated – he’s the police, the Chenrezig police, so sometimes he makes you irritated. Doesn’t he say to you, “Please come to meditation, please, if you don’t come it’s not so nice.” “Why, leave me alone. I want to be free from you, I don’t want your samsara”, you say. Anyway, you understand. The thing is that when we meditate, when it’s meditation time, somehow we make it a little bit exclusive. So I tell

them to ask people who don't come to please come, tell them to use their wisdom and request sort of lightly, "Please you come, these people need the help of your energy." I believe that too – so everybody is together and give energy to each other. You could not believe it. I mean, some young guy is sitting in front of you very sincerely. You're an old man like me, feeling terrible, your mind is going sort of, "Eerh", so you learn from him, "I have to do something better." So as soon as you have decided that you want to do better you are beginning to be better. But if you say at the beginning, "I'm hopeless, I don't care, I'm jealous of these people", then you become worse.

We do need Sangha, we do need Sangha help. I tell you. I think that most of our Western Dharma practitioners' problem is that when they go back to their own samsaric nest there is no support, spiritually no support. Everything is delusion, delusion, delusion. I mean it is obvious, we take all that garbage into our minds so then it becomes difficult for us.

Until you reach a certain level, you do need that help. If you discover the absolute truth, or the first bodhisattva bhumi, then you don't need any support. Absolutely, you don't need any external support. Then you can go anywhere – you can go to Sydney, you can go to Melbourne – you can liberate yourself. Also, many times students come to liberate people, but instead of their liberating other people, the other people liberate them – to samsara. So even I'm afraid that if I were to stay a long time in the West, perhaps Western people would liberate me into samsara! And they would give me the chocolate initiation! I'm joking, incredibly.

Student: When we meditate, is there any structure that we should follow to remind us of the refuge that we have taken?

Lama: Normally what we do before meditation when we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is to recognise or recall the profound wisdom, profound compassion and profound power of the Buddha. We recognise that through having developed these three, that totality is Buddha. There is no more significance than that. That is the Buddha. So if I actualise, I can develop the totality of these three within myself. Not only me, but all universal living beings. So with this profound remembrance and compassion for all mother sentient beings, you go into the meditation. That is good enough. That is the structure of entering meditation by taking refuge. Thank you, good question. Or the formal way of taking refuge is that you visualize your father on your right side, your mother on your left, all people who irritate you in front and the people to whom you are greatly attached, who you love, behind, and all universal living beings surrounding you. Then you take refuge in the Buddha, as we do in the Lam.rim. So when you take refuge you make everybody take refuge together. Then from the crown of the Buddha's head different coloured light radiates to each sentient being, purifying their impure bodies, speech and mind, and transforming them into liberated beings. That way of taking refuge is also very good. And after that the Buddha dissolves into you. Thus you identify yourself with the totality of the Buddha's nature, you become completely of the nature of the Buddha rather than feeling hopeless. So this is very helpful psychologically to eliminate the low opinion and limited view of yourself. So the first one is sort of instinctive taking refuge, and the second is the formal way of taking refuge.

Student: Is it preferable to meditate at the same time every day? Before you only spoke about meditation in the morning, but could you do it at night?

Lama: Yes, sure, sure you can do it. But what is important about the morning is that it is the beginning

of the day. When you get up in the morning you have to face the day, you are beginning your activity to enter that day of life. So it is good to think, “Well, fortunately, today I’m alive. I could have died last night.” You don’t want to think that you might have died last night? If you had died last night what would have happened to you? Would you be really upset? Maybe if you died last night you would be very upset today! I’m joking. Well, if you died last night then today there would be no upset being....actually, your question is a very good question. In the Western lifestyle, it is sometimes difficult to have time to meditate in the morning. You can never predict what life is like, so at least for a short time you should think, “Today I have a human life, it is so worthwhile. I am so happy to be alive. So what I should do today is to be as happy as possible myself, control my situation, and help as much as possible those surrounding me.” So you just have to think that way for a short time, it is very powerful. If you develop that determination in the morning, even if during the day somebody tries to irritate you, you still have space. And also, meditation is not necessarily sitting like this, You can meditate while you are having your morning shower, or while you are traveling by car or bus. Meditation is just thinking the words or remembering the Dharma subject, that’s all.

Now we are going to take refuge, but our approach is a little different to the one I have just explained. This time you visualize the object from whom you are taking refuge in front of you. You are taking refuge from Lama, and the higher beings – buddhas and bodhisattvas – of the ten directions. In front of them you promise or determine that, “From now until the end of my life, until I reach enlightenment” – make such a powerful kind of determination – “I take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, for my inner wisdom to progress. They are what really elevate or lead me to liberation. I have discovered that the light of wisdom is the only vehicle to liberate myself from confusion, suffering and ego conflict. So now, instead of my taking refuge in chocolate and ice cream, I will really inwardly trust, inwardly completely rely on the object of Buddha, Dharma wisdom and profound Sangha. Especially to transform myself into Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.” So you recognise profound quality.

“Also, I am really fortunate that I don’t have the concrete conception that always takes refuge by relying on material objects. If I had that kind of belief it would be extremely disastrous; it would be completely stupid – I would waste my life making it worthless, absolutely useless. If I spent my life believing that ice cream is my real source of happiness, I am totally stupid. How could I be happy in this life let alone the next, creating such unbelievable karma. Somehow, I am really fortunate that I can understand intellectually really clean clear, that if I develop my Dharma wisdom, through becoming relative Sangha I can transform myself into absolute Sangha and can equal the realisations of Guru Shakyamuni. It is unbelievable. This is the right approach, it doesn’t matter what kind of life I am involved in – movie star life, nightclub life, it doesn’t matter what kind of life; it doesn’t matter to which class I belong, I am never going to give up this profound understanding. This is the most profound and precious thing, beyond compare with any kind of Western material pleasure – this awakening totality life of Dharma wisdom is beyond compare. The Dharma is the way to eternal bliss, eternal happiness, enlightenment.”

Determine, “Not only myself.” You visualize also on your right side your father, on your left your mother, “They are so kind, even though sometimes they are mean, telling me that I am not good enough, actually, in their way they want the best thing for me. Even though my father and mother are ignorant, they want me to become a film star or a millionaire, this kind of thing. They mean well, I cannot blame them. In fact they want me to be happy and free from miserable situations. Also, it is through their kindness that I have come in contact with Dharma wisdom, the profound wisdom and

method of the Buddha, I am grateful to my mother and father for this fortune. They are very kind.” Then in front of you, you visualize your enemy. Of course, normally, we don’t have enemies, but whoever has irritated you in your life, you can put there. And behind you, you put all the objects to which you are attached, at which you grasp. And then visualize all universal living beings surrounding you. And you are their leader in taking refuge, leading them to refuge. So think with much compassion, “I and all these surrounding universal beings have been confused and uncontrolled for countless lives, and through wrong conception have been taking refuge in material atoms, a completely wrong attitude. Who has really eliminated all this wrong attitude that leads to misery and dissatisfaction are the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Buddha can read our mind, sees whatever we need, and shows the method and wisdom to liberate each of us. So the real, profound liberator is Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, so from now until I have completely transformed myself and unified with the Triple Gem, I take refuge.”

The object is not only lama, but all buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats of the ten directions. So you determine this in front of them. From the crown of each of them white light radiates and comes into your crown; from their throats red light radiates into your throat; and from their hearts blue light radiates into your heart. The white purifies the impurity of thoughts and the blocked, uncondusive nervous system so that the body can be controlled, the red light purifies the uncontrolled energy of speech, and the blue light purifies the wrong conceptions and fanatical wrong views. At the same time you repeat this ...

Lama performs the refuge ceremony.

Thank you.

It is good that each time you are meditating, taking refuge, or even if you are not meditating, just remember the experience of clarity and contemplate on that. Even if you are eating, contemplate on that clean clear experience. That’s good enough.

Colophon:

Teaching given by Lama Thubten Yeshe, Wednesday, September 12, 1979.

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Essential Buddhist Practice

by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Preface

This teaching discusses morality as a basis for all Buddhist practices and realizations. Before engaging in the more esoteric practices, the practice of pure morality, such as abandoning killing, lying, stealing, and so forth, is a necessary prerequisite. When we refrain from these non-virtues, our mind naturally becomes clear and calm. With this calm and stable mind, we are able to gain the higher realizations of the path. By practicing pure morality, we are able to turn the mind away from the delusions such as anger, attachment, and ignorance. Then, on this basis, we can develop the other aspects of morality, such as bodhicitta. As Rinpoche states in this teaching, “compassion is the foundation of Buddha’s teaching, and the very heart essence is to abandon giving harm to other sentient beings, through such actions as the ten non-virtues.”

— Author unknown

The Actual Teaching from Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Compassion: Foundation of the path

The teaching of the Buddha is differentiated from other teachings by its great compassion towards every sentient being. Every sentient being is the important point. It is not that we should feel compassion only for our own friends when they have problems, a wounded dog, a nice bird, or a small child; we should feel compassion for every sentient being. We should stop harming all sentient beings and, on the basis of this, try to benefit all of them.

The foundation of the Buddha’s teaching is compassion for every sentient being. A sutra says:

If this one Dharma comes into your hand, all Dharmas come into your hand. If you do not have this Dharma, none of the Dharmas come.

This one Dharma is compassion. If you have compassion, you can attain all other realizations of the path to enlightenment and all the immeasurable qualities of Buddha’s holy body, holy speech and holy mind. If you have compassion within your mind, you can have all these realizations.

In order to free all sentient beings from all suffering and lead them to happiness, especially to full enlightenment, you attempt to achieve all realizations, including the six paramitas, and both the generation and completion stages of the Highest Yoga Tantra path. The lower tantras have the paths with and without sign; however, with Highest Yoga Tantra, one generates the graduated path of generation, followed by the graduated path of completion.

If you have compassion for others in your heart, the question arises, “How can I make my life beneficial for other sentient beings?” You can be of ultimate benefit to others by completely developing your

own mind. This means training your mind in the graduated path to enlightenment from beginning to end, from guru devotion up to the unification of no-more learning. Compassion causes you to generate these realizations through listening to and reflecting and meditating on the whole lam-rim from beginning to the end.

The question may arise, “Where do I start?” The root of the path to enlightenment is guru devotion, but the foundation is compassion. In a past life, while Guru Shakyamuni Buddha was pulling a carriage on the red-hot burning iron ground of the hot hells, he generated great compassion for another being who was suffering in the same way. He thought, “I will pull the carriage instead of him. Also, so many other sentient beings are suffering now and will have to experience such karmic results as this hell suffering, so I will experience all their suffering. By pulling this carriage in the hells, may I receive all their suffering upon myself.” As soon as he generated this great compassion, his consciousness was transferred to the pure realm of Tushita. His experience of the hell suffering of pulling the carriage on the burning iron ground ceased immediately, and his consciousness migrated to the realm of the happy migratory beings.

There are many stories about the compassion generated by Guru Shakyamuni Buddha in his past lives as a bodhisattva. From this compassion, Buddha generated bodhichitta and then accumulated merit for three countless great eons by practicing the six paramitas. Even by practicing just the first paramita of charity, Buddha accumulated much merit, offering even his holy body. There are stories of Buddha making charity of his holy body one thousand times under one tree. Out of his compassion for us, the sentient beings, Buddha followed the path, purifying obstacles and accumulating merit for three countless great eons. Because of his compassion, Guru Shakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment for us.

Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma at three places in this world (Sarnath, Rajgriha, and Vaisali) and thus enabled uncountable numbers of pandits and yogis in India, Nepal, Tibet, and other countries to complete the whole path to enlightenment. This is illustrated in the biographies of Marpa, Milarepa, Naropa, Tilopa, Saraha, and all the other lineage lamas. After these yogis completed the path and revealed the teachings, numberless other sentient beings followed their examples, practicing their teachings and also actualizing the graduated path to enlightenment. You can still see the caves and holy places where these yogis practiced and had attainments of the path. By reading their life stories, studying their teachings, and seeing these holy places, so many living beings have accumulated so much merit.

All this came from the compassion generated by Guru Shakyamuni Buddha when he was a sentient being, before he generated bodhichitta and became a bodhisattva. All the realizations up to enlightenment come from that compassion. While suffering as we are now in the six realms of samsara, under the control of karma and delusions, Buddha practiced great compassion.

Buddhists celebrate four special days in the life of Buddha: the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, Buddha’s descent from Tushita, his enlightenment, and his passing away into the sorrowless state. On these four special days, the merit of taking vows or making offerings is increased millions of times. This power of increasing merit also comes from the compassion generated by Buddha before he was a bodhisattva. Our opportunity to meet Buddha’s teachings while we have this precious human body qualified with eight freedoms and ten richnesses also comes from Buddha’s compassion. Since we have met the Buddhadharma, our wisdom eye has opened enough to discriminate what is right and to be

practiced from what is wrong and to be abandoned. All this comes from Buddha's compassion.

Since we have met the Buddhadharma, through our understanding of the teachings we have accumulated so much merit, the cause of temporal and ultimate happiness, up to enlightenment. In a few minutes—even in one minute—we can plant the seed of the whole path to enlightenment. By reciting and meditating on lam-rim prayers, we have the chance to be nearer to lam-rim realizations, nearer to enlightenment. All these benefits come from Guru Shakyamuni Buddha's compassion.

Having met the Buddhadharma, we have an incredible opportunity to obtain whatever we wish. We can practice any teachings we wish—Hinayana, Paramitayana, Tantrayana—and be liberated from the entire suffering of samsara. All these great advantages come from compassion. Besides this, no matter how much heavy negative karma we have accumulated with our body, speech and mind, by reciting Guru Shakyamuni Buddha's mantra once: *tayata om muni muni maha muniye soha*, we purify 84,000 negative karmas accumulated in the past. By reciting Guru Shakyamuni Buddha's holy name: *lama tönpa chom dän dü de zhin sheg pa dra chom pa yang dag par dzog pä sangyā päl gyäl wa shak ya tub pa la chag tsäl lo*, or the Vajrasattva mantra, we can purify even the heaviest negative karma that exists, the Highest Yoga Tantra root downfall of abandoning the vajra guru. All these opportunities come from compassion.

Reciting Vajrasattva mantras can purify completely any transgression of pratimoksha, bodhisattva, or tantric vows. This is because of the compassion of Vajrasattva. In a past life as a bodhisattva, with a strong motivation of compassion and bodhichitta, Vajrasattva prayed to be able to benefit sentient beings so that even by reciting his name, they could immediately purify even the heaviest negative karma, the cause of suffering.

Reciting the names of the Medicine Buddhas, the mantra or holy name of Milarepa, or the mantras of other powerful deities in the ears of animals or human beings at the time of death can prevent their rebirth in the lower realms. Reciting such mantras and blowing on cloth derived from animals (silk or wool, for example) can even benefit that being. A person who practices Chenrezig and recites *om mani padme hung* can purify an animal even by blowing on its bones, meat, or skin.

Reciting the names of the Medicine Buddhas causes any prayers you make for Dharma purposes to succeed. In the past the Medicine Buddhas prayed for sentient beings to receive whatever happiness they wished through reciting their names. If they meditate on the Medicine Buddhas and recite their holy names, sentient beings quickly succeed in their prayers; this happiness and success results from the prayers of the Medicine Buddhas in the past when they were bodhisattvas. All this comes from the compassion they generated prior to actualizing bodhichitta. As I said before, if this one Dharma comes into your hand, all the Dharmas come into your hand.

If you have compassion within your heart, even in your daily life, you harm other sentient beings less. The more compassion in your heart, the less you harm others, and the more you benefit them. When you see or hear of others' suffering, the thought always comes: "What can I do? How can I help?" You sacrifice yourself and rush to help others, to free them from their difficulties. You help them with every capacity you have; if you are unable to help them directly, you ask somebody who can.

In this way there is much more harmony in your day-to-day life. You have much happiness within your own mind and bring much happiness to the other people with whom you live and work. A person with

a compassionate nature, a good heart, finds happiness and satisfaction wherever he goes, whether in a city or in the mountains. Seeing such a person makes everybody happy. Even if your mind was unhappy before, as soon as you meet such a person, there is tranquillity in your heart.

Morality: Heart of the path

Compassion is the foundation of Buddha's teaching, and the heart essence is to abandon harming other sentient beings, by abandoning such actions as the ten non-virtues, for example. Realizing the shortcomings of all the harms you cause others—and yourself—through the ten non-virtues, you should live in the vow of not committing the ten non-virtues. You should live in moral conduct, avoiding harm to others. This is the very heart of Buddhadharma. As Lama Tsongkhapa explains in *The Foundation of All Good Qualities*, the lam-rim prayer in *Jorchö*:

Even if you have generated bodhichitta, if you do not train your mind in the three types of morality, you cannot achieve enlightenment.

The definition of whether or not the teaching of Buddha exists in a country does not depend on having Buddhist scriptures, libraries with all the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*. It does not depend even on the existence of people with intellectual understanding of the entire path of sutra and tantra. Even though there is a need to understand the words, this does not define the existence of the teachings. The existence in the world of Buddha's teaching, and even of the unmistakable understanding of the meaning of the teaching, depends on realizations of the path to enlightenment.

Liberation from samsara (everlasting liberation from all suffering and causes of suffering, karma and disturbing thoughts) depends on the realizations of both tranquil abiding and great insight. By developing these realizations, one can cease the obscurations.

Great insight involves the analysis of emptiness and brings rapturous ecstasy, extremely refined mental and physical pliancy. With these experiences, whenever you analyze emptiness, your mind naturally abides in equipoise meditation on emptiness. This is the unification of tranquil abiding and great insight.

Achieving these realizations, which directly remove obscurations, depends on a foundation of moral conduct. These three higher trainings—moral conduct, concentration, and great insight—form a part of the realizations of the graduated path of the being of intermediate scope. The three higher trainings, which are practiced with the renunciation of samsara but without bodhichitta, comprise the path of self-liberation.

Whether or not the Buddha's teaching exists in a country is mainly defined by the existence of vinaya teachings, of people living in the practice of moral conduct. It is not that someone can explain the scriptures; the teaching exists in a country if there are people living in the practice of vinaya, such as the eight different levels of pratimoksha vows. It is extremely important to devote your whole attention to the very heart of the teachings: avoiding harm to others, which means living in the pratimoksha vows.

The teachings explain that disciplining evil-doers and not allowing them to do non-virtuous actions develop the perfections of a country: there are good crops, the king who maintains discipline becomes famous, and the people in that country experience much happiness and peace.

The last time I went to Tibet, I examined the country on the way to Lhasa by truck. The people who live there created so much negative karma through destroying monasteries, holy objects, and holy beings; they caused much harm to other sentient beings. Because so much negative karma was created, the whole place had become very barren and depressed—even the mountains looked depressed! Many mountains had cracks with water coming out. Countryside doesn't have mind, but still to me it looked upset. There was something missing. Negative minds and actions affect the country, destroying the richness, the essence, of a place. In the same way the protein content of food is decreased, and even medicines have less power. The food is more difficult to digest, and very easily becomes the cause of sickness.

If there is no discipline in a country—or in a nunnery or monastery—to control evil-doers, these beings continuously accumulate negative karma and harm themselves and others. Therefore, even in terms of the benefit to the world, it is very important to put much effort into the very heart essence of Buddhadharma, practicing moral conduct and avoiding harm to others. If you are a monk or nun, there is no question that this is your main practice, your main responsibility. However, even if you are a lay person with one, two, three, four, five, or eight precepts, you should put all your effort into preserving them. Remember your vows and feel this responsibility: “If I don't control my mind and live in the discipline of moral conduct, I harm other sentient beings. Besides destroying my own chance to achieve liberation and enlightenment and continuing the endless suffering of samsara, I harm others so much, and even pollute the place where I live. My own negative mind and immoral actions affect the place where I live and prevent the development of the enjoyments of others, as well as myself.” This is explained in the teachings.

Inner and outer elements

If a person has a negative mind, with harmful and non-virtuous thoughts, the wind within his body, which is the vehicle of that mind, also becomes negative. The negative wind then causes the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) within the body to become unbalanced and disturbed. Because of the disturbance of the four inner elements, the four outer elements of earth, fire, water, and air become unbalanced and violent, resulting in floods, earthquakes, fires, volcanic eruptions, and cyclones, which can destroy whole cities and kill many thousands of people. An inner imbalance affects the four external elements, making them unbalanced and dangerous. The very rough, disturbed weather from a cyclone results from disturbance of the four elements. Imbalance of the four inner and outer elements also causes epidemic diseases and famines. Imbalance of the four inner elements also affects the wider outside world—even the planets, sun, and moon can become disturbed and harmful.

Living in the essence of the teachings, the discipline of moral conduct, protects us from the objects that cause non-virtues to be accumulated. If you live in morality, your mind always abides in virtue, with righteous thoughts and the correct way of thinking, so the wind, the vehicle of the mind, does not become negative. In this way, the four inner elements cannot be disturbed and harm you. For example, disease does not arise, and you are healthy—even physical health comes from the mind. The actual evolution begins with the mind. The best way to be healthy in this life and all future lives is to live in morality, the essence of the teachings.

In this way, the four inner elements do not become disturbed and harmful, and do not affect the outside world: the planets, sun, moon, and weather, causing them to become violent and harmful. All the dangers of floods, earthquakes, famines, and epidemic diseases then do not happen, and there is

peace in the country, in the world. Without these dangers, sentient beings enjoy happiness. All this happiness and peace is dependent on each of us, on how much control we have over our mind, on how much we practice Dharma. So much is dependent on how well we live in the essence of the teaching by practicing moral conduct.

Remember this evolution when you have done something immoral and are feeling mentally or physically unhealthy. Your ill health affects the outside world and other beings so that they also become unhealthy. Remembering these examples, think: “I am responsible for the happiness of other sentient beings. Their happiness depends upon me.” As much as possible, put all your effort into practicing moral conduct. Protect the vows you have taken. Also, take more vows—increase and develop them.

The pot, the water, and the reflection

As Lama Tsongkhapa says:

Even if you have generated bodhichitta, if you do not train your mind in the three types of morality, you cannot achieve enlightenment.

If you degenerate or tear your morality, you become like a pot with no bottom—no matter how much delicious food you put in such a pot, it cannot stay there but runs straight through. If you have no base of morality, you are like a pot without a bottom. You have no base for attainments, for realizations.

Lama Tsongkhapa also says in his lam-rim teachings:

There is no practice other than the morality of living in the vow of not harming others. If you degenerate your morality, immediately purify it. This should be understood. This behavior is pleasing to the learned ones.

The main practice is the morality of the pratimoksha vows. Without this, there can be no realizations. The purer your practice of the pratimoksha vows, the more quickly you are able to achieve realizations of lam-rim, the three principles of the path, and tantra. Geshe Sengye, the present abbot of Sera Monastery in Tibet, from whom I received many teachings, often said this.

Geshe Sengye also said that the pratimoksha vows are like a pot, the bodhisattva vows like water contained in the pot, and the tantric vows like a reflection in the water. Without the pratimoksha vows, there is no way to practice the bodhisattva vows, and then no way to practice tantric vows. Without the pot, there is no place to put the water, so there can be no reflection.

Many tantric texts, such as the Manjushri Tantra root text, mention that without living in the moral conduct of the pratimoksha vows, one cannot achieve enlightenment. The teachings also mention that not liking pratimoksha vows but liking tantra is a sign of the degeneration of the teachings. In his lam-rim teachings Lama Tsongkhapa mentions that a person who keeps full pratimoksha vows is the best practitioner of tantra.

Living in the ordination of the pratimoksha vows is very helpful, enabling you to practice Dharma. Living well in the pratimoksha vows, you are able to practice bodhisattva and tantric vows well; if you are unable to practice the pratimoksha vows well, you cannot practice bodhisattva and tantric vows. As

explained in Geshe Sengye's example, these depend on each other: the pratimoksha vows are the pot, the bodhisattva vows, water in the pot, and the tantric vows, the reflection in the water.

Even during meditation and concentration, the clarity of our mind depends on how well we practice pratimoksha vows. The more purely we practice, the less sinking thought—one of the obstacles to concentration—we will experience. Gross sinking thought means the object of meditation is not clear; subtle sinking thought, that there is concentration on the object of meditation, but no strength in regard to the mind focusing on the object. The object is seen very clearly, but there is no intense concentration focusing the mind on the object. Living in the moral conduct of pratimoksha vows can stop the causes of sinking thought and attachment-scattering thought.

Renouncing samsara

Since they are taken with the motivation of renouncing samsara, pratimoksha vows should also be practiced with the thought of renouncing samsara. Even if there is no actual realization of renunciation, at least there should be a simulated thought of renouncing samsara. Renouncing samsara means renouncing all suffering, including all temporal samsaric pleasures. Constantly be aware of the six types of suffering, the three types of suffering, and that samsaric pleasures are only in the nature of suffering. Even though you may see something as pleasant, there should be the understanding in your heart that it is only suffering. With this awareness of the shortcomings of samsara, attachment does not arise.

By living in the practice of moral conduct with the thought of renouncing samsara, you do not create the cause for sinking thought and attachment-scattering thought. If you are able to keep the pratimoksha vows purely, your mind is clear and calm, so your concentration is very good. This is very easy to understand. When you have no thought of renouncing samsara, you look at samsara as beautiful and see samsaric enjoyments as true happiness. All these enjoyments are impermanent in nature. When you are hallucinated by samsara, your mind clings to samsara and samsaric enjoyments, rather than seeing them as completely suffering in nature, like being in the center of a fire. Of the shortcomings of samsara, particularly remember that nothing is definite—even today, even this minute.

Also remember that enjoying samsaric sense pleasures can become the cause of liberation and enlightenment, or the cause of samsara. Enjoyment itself is not necessarily negative; it becomes negative, the cause of samsara, when you enjoy samsaric pleasures with a mind grasping at the happiness of the self.

As Lama Tsongkhapa explains in *The Great Lam-rim Commentary*, following desire and enjoying samsaric pleasures are meant to bring satisfaction, but result only in dissatisfaction. You do these actions expecting to find satisfaction but, in reality, the result is only dissatisfaction. After one experience of sense pleasure, you want more. Hoping to find satisfaction, you think: "I'll try once more. I'll try again." But the result is the same—only dissatisfaction. You expect to find satisfaction, the fulfillment of your desire, and be completely happy—but again the result is dissatisfaction.

Lama Tsongkhapa also says that following desire brings many other disturbing thoughts. This is easy to understand. Because of desire for some object or person, jealousy, anger, pride and many other disturbing thoughts arise, and you can experience many heavy problems for an incredible length of time. By following desire that one time, expecting to find satisfaction, you experience only dissatisfaction. Not only that, following desire brings many other harmful, disturbing thoughts, and you experience

misery for a long time. As long as you follow desire, there is no end to suffering. There is no satisfaction, so there is no end. This is the worst, most pitiful suffering. Following desire endlessly is the greatest suffering. While you are experiencing suffering, it is very important to realize that your suffering comes from following desire and not finding satisfaction.

As Lama Tsongkhapa says in a lam-rim prayer:

Enjoying samsaric perfections and not finding satisfaction is the door to all sufferings. There is nothing to trust in samsaric perfections. Please grant me blessings to realize the shortcomings of samsaric perfections and to generate the strong thought seeking the happiness of liberation.

Of the six types of shortcomings of samsara, it is especially important to meditate extensively on these two: 1) following desire results only in dissatisfaction, and 2) nothing is definite. Lama Tsongkhapa's words in this verse are unbelievably clear, and so true. This verse describes very clearly our whole life story. The sufferings of other samsaric beings, of the whole world, which every day we hear about or see in the newspapers or on TV, and even the day-to-day suffering in our own lives are contained in these two major problems.

With the suffering of change, you should have the definite understanding that these samsaric pleasures are only in the nature of suffering. The base on which you label "pleasure" is only suffering. With constant awareness of this, you will be able to practice moral conduct well. Asanga explains ten ways in which Dharma happiness transcends samsaric happiness, which is temporary, cannot be developed or completed, and is entirely dependent on external objects.

Developing perfect concentration

Practicing moral conduct with the thought to renounce samsara stops the obstacles to concentration. To have the actual realization of shamatha, or tranquil abiding, you need to live very purely in morality. For perfect concentration you need to cut off the obstacles to concentration, such as sinking thought and attachment-scattering thought, so that your mind abides peacefully on the object of concentration. By cutting off these, you are able to focus on the object without any difficulty or effort. There are nine levels of tranquil abiding. To achieve even the ninth level, which is similar to but still not the actual tranquil abiding with full characteristics, you need to live very purely in the moral conduct of the pratimoksha vows.

Many Tibetans interpret meditation as meaning only tranquil abiding; this is the usual concept held by someone who has studied Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. Some years ago, many questions concerning meditation were arising from other Buddhist countries and especially from the West. His Holiness the Dalai Lama sent Geshe Rabten Rinpoche to Dalhousie to see if any meditators there had attained shamatha. Geshe Rabten Rinpoche was one of Lama Yeshe's teachers, and also mine. Besides ordaining me, he gave me my very first explanation of Dharma and teachings on debating at Buxaduar in India. Geshe Rabten Rinpoche taught Western students for many years in Dharamsala, then lived for many years in Switzerland, where he founded a monastery, which is still existing, in Vevey, Mont-Pèlerin.

So, Geshe Rabten Rinpoche went to Dalhousie to check the meditators. In Dalhousie there was a group of ascetic monks guided by one very high lama who had achieved the clear light stage of tantra.

This lama and all his disciples practiced vinaya very strictly and led solitary ascetic lives. On the basis of strict vinaya practice, they experimented on the lam-rim and tantric paths.

At that time, I think His Holiness asked many meditators to practice tranquil abiding. According to the general view, Gen Jampa Wangdu started to practice shamatha from that time. After he began practicing shamatha, Gen-la had a dream in which he was riding a horse on a road round a mountain; after some time, the horse fell down. Gen-la thought: “This might mean that I won’t achieve shamatha.” Actually, I think it was a good sign indicating that Gen-la would be able to overcome the physical and mental obstacles to shamatha, that he would be able to destroy the obstacles to perfect concentration. Because of the dream, Gen-la thought that he would not succeed, but this implies that Gen-la did accomplish the realization. The dream actually indicated success. Gen Jampa Wangdu achieved tranquil abiding in Dalhousie.

Gen Jampa Wangdu often praised refined mental and physical ecstasy, which means that he had the attainment of tranquil abiding. Gen-la often used to say that once you had achieved this experience of rapturous ecstasy, any other concentration you might have called meditation is not meditation. This means that by comparison it is not meditation. From time to time Gen-la used to talk about his experiences like this.

However, Gen Jampa Wangdu also used to say that to succeed in perfect meditation on tranquil abiding, a practitioner needed the foundation to stop obstacles—in other words, pure moral conduct. Recently, during the thought-training teachings, Chopgye Rinpoche also said that in order for a person to achieve perfect shamatha, there should be no discomfort at all in his heart regarding moral conduct. The practitioner should be fully confident that he has kept his pratimoksha vows purely.

With tranquil abiding, you can concentrate perfectly, like a candle flame that is steady and unmoved by wind. With steady light from a candle flame, you can see a drawing in a book very clearly. With the realization of tranquil abiding, you can see absolute nature, or emptiness, very clearly. Without any difficulties or obstacles, you can concentrate continuously on emptiness. By having tranquil abiding, you can then develop the realization of great insight.

To have illumination and dispel darkness you need such causes as electricity, gas, kerosene, or wax. Without these, you cannot have and enjoy light. Moral conduct is similar to the materials that make it possible to have light. Moral conduct, the pratimoksha vows, is the root of liberation from samsara. Actually, you can tell from your own experiences how extremely important moral conduct is. When your mind is very disturbed and unclear, it is very difficult to concentrate. And if you check for degeneration of moral conduct, you will find you have made some mistake in your pratimoksha vows. There is a very clear correlation.

If you check, you can see this from your own experience. If you do not practice moral conduct well, your mind is overwhelmed by disturbing thoughts, and you cannot meditate. Even when you say prayers, you cannot meditate on the meaning of the prayers. Your mind is like a cyclone. Or like a bird swept along by a strong wind, unable to stay still in space for even one minute.

Preserving the teachings

The ability of our organization, the FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradi-

tion), and each of us to bring happiness to other sentient beings depends on the existence and development of the teachings in our minds. The teachings have to exist and be preserved within us, and then we have to spread the teachings we are preserving to the minds of others. In this way, they too will have happiness by protecting karma: abandoning negative karma and practicing good karma by living in the vows. When the teachings exist in the minds of sentient beings, they enjoy happiness, now and in the future. This depends on our first preserving the teachings within our minds. You may recite many mantras and prayers or read many scriptures; however, the teaching of Buddha is not in the mouth but in the mind. It is the mind that makes the determination to practice moral conduct, and then you live by this determination.

The basic teaching involves living in the pratimoksha vows, avoiding giving harm to others, avoiding the ten non-virtues, and keeping whatever number of vows you have taken. Through this, you actualize the Paramitayana path and live in the bodhisattva vows. On the basis of living in the tantric vows, you then actualize the tantric path. Feel: “I am responsible for the happiness of all sentient beings. How much I can benefit other beings depends on how much of the teaching of Buddha I am able to preserve within my mind.”

Thogme Zangpo's Requesting Prayer

Essence of the holy body, speech, and mind of the victorious ones,
Immeasurable treasure of precious qualities and extensive, unceasing actions,
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

Having abandoned the precipices of lower nirvana,
You lead me to sublime, peerless enlightenment.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

In an ordinary form you work for migratory beings,
Integrating all actions of the three times' buddhas
In order to subdue unfortunate sentient beings.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

You liberate the extremely foolish and stubborn ones
Who are unable to be liberated by the many gone-to-bliss
From the ocean of samsara so difficult to cross.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

If I rely upon you with great devotion,
Without effort, you quickly grant every temporal and ultimate wish.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

If I accomplish again and again the meaningless works of this life,
There is danger of missing the great meaning and having an empty life.
Please grant me blessings to renounce this life.

In my heart there is no confidence that I will not die today,
But in my actions I still plan to live forever.
There is a danger I will be clawing at my chest in terror at the time of death.
Please grant me blessings to remember death.

Unable now to bear the smallest suffering,
I am brave to be so careless of action and result.
There is a danger of falling down the precipice
Into the terrifying abyss of suffering migrators.
Please grant me blessings to practice the holy Dharma day and night.

If remembering the sufferings of migratory beings does not make my hair stand on end,
There is a danger of losing hope in the works for self and others,
Please grant me blessings to train my mind in loving kindness and compassion.

Accepting to avoid giving harm to others,
On meeting my enemy, I am very brave to harm him.
There is a danger of losing my three vows.
Please grant me blessings to abandon ill will.

Promising to train my mind in the four Dharmas of virtue,
I have so much pride and wish for control.
There is a danger I cannot practice what I promised.
Please grant me blessings to practice humility.

Promising to offer happiness and benefit to others,
I am jealous and angry at others' wealth.
There is a danger of great promise and poor practice.
Please grant me blessings to generate happiness in others.

Accepting to meditate on cherishing others and renouncing myself,
I plan to harm others in return for harm.
There is a danger of defeating myself and others.
Please grant me blessings to return benefit for harm.

With my stomach full of food and warmed by the sun,
Dharma is my religious form,
But with miserable conditions I become ordinary;
My mind is not mixed with the Dharma.
Please grant me blessings to take miserable conditions into the path.

Not having abandoned discriminating thoughts of attachment and anger,
I talk eloquently of how samsara and nirvana are one.
My words and my practice are opposite.
Please grant me blessings to avoid discriminating thoughts of attachment and anger.

Though I say that nothing truly exists,
Just from praise and criticism, happy and unhappy thoughts arise.
There is not even a small practice.
Please grant me blessings to cut off grasping the I.

My kind mothers from beginningless rebirths
Are strongly tormented by unbelievable sufferings.
I do not have the power to guide them;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

The kind mothers who cooled my torment by heat
Will burn a long time in unbearable hell suffering.
I, the foolish one, cannot guide them at all;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

The kind mothers who warmed me with their bodies
Are now tormented by cold, their bones and flesh cracked.
I cannot guide them at all;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

My kind mothers who fed me again and again with milk
Now cannot find food and drink for hundreds of years.
I cannot give them even one drop of water;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

My kind mothers are tormented by so many sufferings,
Meeting the undesirable, separating from the desirable,
Experiencing birth, old age, sickness, and death.
You, with infinite compassion, please guide them quickly.

In this life and all other lives,
Until I and all sentient beings become enlightened,
Without separation,
May I be born at the holy feet of the guru.

In all my lives may I never be parted from perfect gurus.
By making good use of the glorious Dharma
To fulfil the good features of the stages and paths,
May I quickly attain the enlightened state of Vajradhara.

This guru yoga prayer written by the bodhisattva Thogme Zangpo, like his thought transformation text *The Thirty-seven Practices of the Bodhisattva*, is very effective for the mind. It also makes the meditation subjects very clear. This prayer has great blessings so I thought it might benefit our minds.

Essence of the holy body, speech, and mind of the victorious ones,
Immeasurable treasure of precious qualities and extensive, unceasing actions,
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

Thogme Zangpo is saying that the guru is the essence of the holy body, holy speech, and holy mind of all the buddhas. Because he has all these precious qualities, the guru is called an immeasurable treasure. All the qualities and realizations that Thogme Zangpo himself received came from his guru, Chöje Rinpoche. Even though Thogme Zangpo is relating precious Lord of Dharma to his own guru, you can still say the same prayer but relate it to your own virtuous friend.

Having abandoned the precipices of lower nirvana,
You lead me to sublime, peerless enlightenment.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

Relate the verses to yourself and also to other sentient beings. “To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request” can be said at the beginning or end of the verse, whichever is more effective for your mind. The requesting prayer begins with the qualities and actions of the guru.

In an ordinary form you work for migratory beings,
Integrating all actions of the three times’ buddhas
In order to subdue unfortunate sentient beings.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

Relate this verse to yourself as well as to others—you are the unfortunate being. As your mind is impure, you cannot be subdued by the pure sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya aspects of Buddha. The only aspect left that can subdue you, that you can see, is the ordinary aspect having delusions. “Ordinary aspect” means nothing other than having mistakes and delusions.

You liberate the extremely foolish and stubborn ones
Who are unable to be liberated by the many gone-to-bliss
From the ocean of samsara so difficult to cross.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

This verse refers to someone who is extremely ignorant, does not listen, and has great difficulty understanding. For example, think of the extremely unsubdued mind of an animal such as a buffalo. When you try to protect a buffalo from danger, he believes you are trying to harm him, so he actually runs towards the danger. There is no way to make him understand. Think also of a moth that flies around a candle flame. You try to catch it to protect it, but no matter how hard you try, the moth does not come near you. It constantly tries to get near the candle, until it flies into the flame. The moth is so foolish and stubborn that there is no way to make it understand. Many sentient beings are extremely foolish and stubborn, difficult to subdue, and unable to be liberated by the many gone-to-bliss.

Relate this verse also to yourself. First of all meditate on how, because you are so deeply ignorant, stubborn, and difficult to subdue, you have been left out. With one thought, all the numberless buddhas are saying the same things: “Do not cherish yourself; cherish others. Cherishing yourself is the source of all suffering; cherishing others is the source of all happiness. The works of this life have no es-

sence.” All the buddhas are explaining that you should cut off grasping to this life; that this perfect human rebirth, which is so useful, will be difficult to achieve again; that the actual time of your death is uncertain; that you should protect karma; that samsaric perfections have no essence, and grasping them cheats you; that nothing—not the “I” or anything else—exists from its own side; that you should always practice pure appearance; that you should practice patience whenever anger arises; that you should practice compassion and loving kindness...

You are being told these things all the time. Not only one guru, but so many gurus have said the same things again and again. But there has been no change in your mind, no change in your actions. You are doing the opposite: grasping at this life, wasting your perfect human rebirth doing meaningless worldly works and non-virtuous actions. So many times your gurus have emphasized the importance of practicing morality and charity in order to create the cause of happiness in future lives and abandon the cause of the lower realms. However, you always do the opposite, creating the cause of the suffering migratory realms.

Constantly, day and night, you are cherishing yourself. This self-cherishing has not become less and less, but is still as strong as steel, as hard as a rock. You are always doing the opposite: constantly practicing impure appearance; constantly believing things to be truly existent, which is the root of samsara. Constantly, spontaneously, and very strongly, you practice all the wrong conceptions—without a break of even one second! This is your practice, this is how you spend your life. Unable to be liberated, too difficult to subdue, you have been left out by all the buddhas. You are like a fish swimming towards a hook, a moth flying into a flame, an elephant running towards a pit. Your body, speech, and mind completely follow hallucinations. It is good to meditate on this.

For the ocean of samsara so difficult to cross, think of the twelve links. If you cannot practice the remedy to control even one attachment in one day, how will you ever be liberated? Because you do not practice even one remedy, the ocean of samsara is very difficult to cross. Think of yourself, and then of your guru. First recognize your own nature, then think of the kindness of your guru in liberating you from the ocean of samsara that is difficult to cross. Remembering this kindness is very effective.

If I rely upon you with great devotion,
Without effort, you quickly grant every temporal and ultimate wish.
To you, precious Lord of Dharma, I request.

This verse contains all the eight benefits of correct devotion to the virtuous friend. All the realizations from perfect human rebirth up to full enlightenment, which all come from the root of guru devotion, are also contained in this verse.

If I accomplish again and again the meaningless works of this life,
There is danger of missing the great meaning and having an empty life.
Please grant me blessings to renounce this life.

This verse can relate not only to an empty life but also to an empty mind. There is a danger of returning from this human rebirth with nothing. “If I accomplish again and again the meaningless works of this life” means passing your life doing activities out of worldly concern, distracted by the happiness of this life: sleeping, gossiping, and obtaining food, clothing, and reputation. Passing your time distracted

by sense objects, you do not obtain the great meaning that can be achieved with this perfect human body.

In my heart there is no confidence that I will not die today,
But in my actions I still plan to live forever.
'There is a danger I will be clawing at my chest in terror at the time of death.
Please grant me blessings to remember death.

If you really examine your heart, you have no confidence that you will definitely survive today, that you will not die. Even for the short period of today, these twenty-four hours, you cannot be confident, but you act as if you are planning to live forever. In this way you do no Dharma practice. When death suddenly happens, since you made no preparation for death when you had the opportunity, there is the danger of clawing at your chest in fear of death. Because you do not want to die, to leave your body, to separate from your possessions and relatives, you will claw at your chest in terror.

Unable now to bear the smallest suffering,
I am brave to be so careless of action and result.
'There is a danger of falling down the precipice
Into the terrifying abyss of suffering migrators.
Please grant me blessings to practice the holy Dharma day and night.

Since we cannot bear even the smallest discomfort at present, we are brave to be careless of karma, to think that it doesn't matter. The result of being careless of karma is described by Thogme Zangpo in the second part of the verse. Remember this verse again and again, especially when there is danger of carelessness in your practice of moral conduct. You cannot stand even the smallest discomfort in your knees or back during meditation or teachings, or the discomfort of heat or cold. You cannot bear the small discomforts you experience while practicing Dharma. And you cannot bear living in the vows.

You are very brave to be careless about the Buddha's teachings and what the guru has explained. Being careless and creating negative karma by doing the opposite of what should be done is very brave. By remembering the present small discomforts that you cannot bear, and endless future lifetimes of suffering in samsara, you become careful in your practice of moral conduct.

"Please grant me blessings to practice the holy Dharma day and night" means that we should attempt to live in the moral conduct of the commitments we have taken. We should live purely in our vows; for example, if we have taken tantric vows, we should keep those samayas. This verse relates particularly to moral conduct.

It is very good to look at the nearest animal, such as an ant, and think: "In a minute I could be like this ant. It is just a minute away—no great distance." You have been such an animal numberless times. Even in this life, you have created so much negative karma to be born as an animal, but have not yet experienced the result. Each time you eat food ignorantly creates the cause to be reborn as an animal—and this is just one example. The general explanations of karma list many other actions that cause you to be reborn as an animal.

Just look at the ants and worms near you. You yourself have been born and have suffered like this

numberless times. You have accumulated so much negative karma of which you have yet to experience the result. When you think in this way, there is no way you can relax. You have got to do something immediately. Immediately you have to confess and purify whatever pratimoksha, bodhisattva, and tantric vows you have degenerated. Revive them, then put all your effort into practicing these vows correctly, particularly the pratimoksha vows.

Without practicing moral conduct, no matter how much charity you perform, you cannot achieve a human body, though you may be born as a rich naga or some similar being. Without relying on the cause, moral conduct, you cannot receive a human body. Especially to receive a perfect human body, you have to create all the eighteen causes through perfect moral conduct. One of the previous Ganden Tripas explained that the cause of a perfect human rebirth is keeping pratimoksha, bodhisattva, and tantric vows—this probably relates to the perfect human rebirth that again has the opportunity to practice tantra.

It is very frightening just to look at the animals around you: the dogs, birds, worms, and tiny insects. It seems as if there is no connection at all between their body and your consciousness. It seems impossible for your consciousness to take such a body. When you do not remember karma and do not watch your mind, when you look at your body and at them, it seems impossible for you to become like that. Without thinking of the heavy hell sufferings, simply look at the creatures around you—it is terrifying! “Right now I have got to change my mind; I have got to change my actions. I have to be really careful about my moral conduct.” Try to understand all the vows you have promised to keep and put all your effort into keeping them. When you relate like this to the suffering of other sentient beings, because of the fear that this is a possibility for you, your carelessness in moral conduct suddenly stops.

It is good to relate like this when you see any dangerous, ugly creature, whether tiny or big—or even human beings with much suffering and no opportunity to practice Dharma. “If my next life were to be like this person’s, how could I stand it? Would I be able to bear it? As I am now, I have met the Dharma and have every opportunity to practice. If my next life were like this, could I stand it? Could I stand to be even a human being with so much ignorance and suffering, with no opportunity to practice Dharma?” It is very good to think like this about animals and even about humans. “In order not to be reborn like this, the basic thing I have to do is practice morality.”

If you were born as a millionaire, but with no opportunity to meet and practice Dharma, it would be unbearable. Even though you would be wealthy, since you would have no opportunity to practice Dharma, you would constantly create only the causes for suffering. Thinking like this helps you to practice confession and individual purification. You immediately do the most powerful practice, then try to do your best to practice morality.

Also think: “I am sitting now on the rim of the pot where the hell beings are cooked. In just a moment, I will fall into the pot. If I practice moral conduct, I won’t fall in; I will be saved from that. If I am careless and don’t practice moral conduct, I’ll fall in. It’s just a moment away. If this fragile breath stopped now, I would fall into the hell pot. This is easy to understand—I have created uncountable causes for this.”

The verse on perfect human rebirth from Lama Tsongkhapa’s *Hymns of Experience of the Graduated Path to Enlightenment* is also very good to remember:

This perfect human rebirth is much more precious than a wish-granting jewel. To find such a perfect human rebirth is almost only this time. It will be extremely difficult to find again. Life decays so easily and is so short, like lightning in the sky.

Visualizing mountains of wish-granting jewels, dollars, or diamonds, meditate on your perfect human rebirth. You can understand “almost only this time” by examining your everyday attitudes, which are under the control of disturbing thoughts. By thinking of the causes of a perfect human rebirth, you can see that it will be extremely difficult to find one again. Also, death happens very easily. Due to internal and external causes, life decays very easily. Because of the many internal causes for death, the inner delusions, there are many external conditions for death. From all directions, every hour, every minute, life is full of conditions for death. Like a flame blown out in a strong wind, death can happen so easily.

The span of life is very short. The appearance of this life is like a minute, like a second, like the duration of lightning. The appearance that comes during lightning is very short. When you are walking at night and there is a flash of lightning, you see your surroundings very briefly before they disappear. Like this, the appearance of this life is very brief. It is extremely important to remember this again and again, again and again. Since the appearance of this life is so short, like lightning, the conclusion is that there is nothing to cling to, nothing worth getting angry about, nothing worth getting attached to. Special emphasis should be placed on attachment because it makes you unable to practice moral conduct.

By thinking of this nature, realize that all worldly works are like a husk and take the essence day and night. You, the venerable guru, practiced this way. I request that I, a seeker of liberation, also be able to practice like this.

Lama Tsongkhapa actually wrote: “I, the yogi, practiced this way. I beg you, the seeker of liberation, also to practice like this,” but we say the verse a little differently.

The appearance of this life is very short, like the duration of lightning. This appearance that you now have of beautiful scenery, friends, a beautiful house, and enjoyments—the objects of disturbing thoughts appearing as beautiful—is very short, as if for just a minute. This beautiful appearance of a body, house, or sense objects can be stopped in a minute. It is extremely important to feel that this appearance is for just a minute. In this way the grasping mind does not arise, and you have the time and space to meditate on and develop loving kindness and compassion for others. The grasping mind occupied with attachment does not give you even the time and space to develop your mind, to develop loving kindness and compassion for all sentient beings.

Also think, even while you have the appearance of such things as the environment and sense objects, that it is all a hallucination. This is especially important in relation to the people to whom you are attached, particularly to the body as an object of attachment. All objects of anger and attachment, all sense enjoyments, are hallucinations. You are completely distracted by hallucinations, trapped in hallucinations.

First, everything now appearing to you—the self and all these beautiful objects—appears only after you label the base. If you did not label “beautiful” on this base, you would have no appearance of

beauty. If you had not thought: “This is beautiful,” the object would not appear beautiful to you. After someone says that something is beautiful, you believe that it is beautiful. Only through your own mind believing in and labeling an object as beautiful does it appear beautiful. For example, you go to Lhasa. You have never been to Lhasa before and somebody tells you: “This is Lhasa and that is the Potala.” By believing what the person says, you have the appearance of Lhasa and the Potala.

It is similar with the example of the letter A. Before a child is taught: “This is A,” he sees just a figure. Before he believes that figure to be A, he does not see A. However, after the child is taught: “This figure is A,” and he believes it, he has an appearance of A. If he did not believe it, there would be no appearance of A. In the same way, beauty does not come from outside, but from your own mind. Ugliness and beauty come from your own mind; they are your own creation.

There is no appearance of anything—house, thangka, light, friend, enemy—without your mind labeling that object. From this you can understand the basic point that everything appearing to you comes from your own mind. Nothing appears to you independent of your own mind.

The second point is that all these things that appear to you—samsara, nirvana, beautiful sense objects—are merely imputed by thought. Since they exist in mere name, there is no reason at all to grasp at any object, to become angry with or attached to it. There is no reason at all. The conclusion is that you become angry at and attached to the objects of your own creation.

The appearance of the “I,” object, action, and people as existing independently from their own side is completely untrue, a complete hallucination. This is proved by the evolution of the way things exist. This appearance of independence, of existence from its own side, is completely empty, completely hallucinated. Because all these things appear to be independent and existing from their own side, first you grasp that appearance and cheat yourself. On top of that, although these things are impermanent, you believe them to be permanent and again cheat yourself.

Third, you see this body, which is completely impure and terrifying, the container of thirty-six dirty things (skin, bone, flesh, veins, blood, pus, and so forth) as completely pure and clean. However, as soon as you start to think about what is beneath the skin, it is only terrifying. There is nothing to be attached to, to cling to—instead of grasping, you are simply terrified. After analyzing well, you could never think of the inside of the body as clean or beautiful. In some ways the beauty you see is between the skin and you. That projection is the object of attachment. There is nothing there. By analyzing even the skin, you cannot find anything worth being attached to. Only when you do not analyze and are not aware that the body is impure does attachment arise. When you are aware, attachment disappears. This shows that there is something wrong with attachment. When you analyze it, attachment cannot abide. It is like true existence. When you analyze, you do not find anything that exists from its own side to cling to. This shows it is a wrong conception. Again, by believing the body to be clean and pure, you cheat yourself.

The fourth point concerns samsaric pleasures. When your body has contact with sense objects, in reality it is only in the nature of suffering; but since you think that is pleasurable, it appears to you as pleasure. This type of feeling is only suffering. If you repeat the action, the suffering increases until it becomes the suffering of suffering. When it is not gross, the feeling is called “pleasure” and appears to be pleasure. Again, by being attached to that feeling, you cheat yourself. Running to seek samsaric

pleasures cheats you of your own life. All the works you have done following this wrong conception make your life completely empty. All these works become only the cause of *samsara*.

Think like this: First of all, the appearance of this life is very short. Second, the things that appear to you are hallucinations, so if you cling to them, you are completely cheating yourself. You have received a perfect human rebirth this one time, which can definitely make it possible to achieve enlightenment; if you don't grasp the opportunity this one time, you are making your life empty. On the basis of this, realize that you are cheating yourself by following these wrong conceptions, working for the happiness of this life.

Thinking in this way, seeing everything as a complete hallucination, you don't find any reason to grasp or be attached, so there is no obstacle to your practice of moral conduct. In this way, since much unnecessary waste of time is stopped, you have so much time to practice Dharma. Everything you do with an awareness of emptiness and impermanence, the opponents to wrong conceptions, becomes Dharma. Constantly think: "This appearance of beauty is a hallucination and can cease at any moment. I am having a good time enjoying the six sense objects today, but tomorrow could be something else completely. By this time tomorrow, I might not be seeing any beauty at all. Everything, even my body, might be fire—or ice!"

In a city, one day can be very nice and the next, completely something else. If a cyclone, flood, or earthquake happens, even though you may not die, you may become a beggar or homeless. This very important point helps you to control your mind, stop obstacles, and practice moral conduct purely.

It is also very helpful to think that all the failures in your Dharma practice—ending your relationship with your guru, breaking his advice, degenerating your vows—are the result of your own past karma. You are creating the result similar to the cause. Karma is expandable, more expandable than, for example, getting many millions of seeds from planting one seed. If you dislike and break *pratimoksha* vows in this life, if you dislike tantra or sutra teachings, if heresy arises towards your virtuous friend or the teachings, these become the cause for the same things to happen for many lifetimes. Breaking your guru's advice in this life becomes the cause of breaking the guru's advice for many lifetimes. Even though it takes only a short time to commit the mistake in this life, you experience the result for a long time. In many future lifetimes you will make the same mistake. Even if you are able to take vows, you will break them again; it will be very difficult to keep them purely. If you think of the long-term disadvantages, you will be careful in this life to put all your effort into practicing purely.

As Gomo Rinpoche said, breaking the advice of one guru pollutes your relationship with your other gurus. I think this is very much possible and can also be related to your own moral conduct. If you have broken *samaya* by abandoning or criticizing your guru, if you become a teacher, there is a danger of your polluting your disciples. It is very important to think of the long-term disadvantages, not just of those in this life. Without needing to think of the lower realms, you can think of the shortcomings of making the same mistake again for many lifetimes. Purifying the mistake and making the determination not to repeat it will help to stop experience of the same thing in your future lives.

Another point to consider is that you take the vows for other sentient beings. When you take the vow of *Amoghasiddhi* during tantric initiations, you say: "I am going to keep all three vows." If someone promised to do something for you—to free you from prison or pull you out of a fire—and he did not

do what he promised, think how harmful that would be. You are one sentient being, and you take the vows for the sake of all sentient beings. When the danger of carelessness comes, think: “I am cheating all sentient beings. How can I put myself before other sentient beings?” All sentient beings want you to lead them to enlightenment, to free them from all their suffering. Your ability to help has to come from developing your understanding of the true teachings and actualizing the realizations of the path in dependence upon moral conduct. Otherwise, you are giving up sentient beings.

Also, sentient beings are suffering so much. The suffering of one sentient being is unbelievable—and uncountable sentient beings are suffering. “How dare I give them up! Only cherishing myself, seeking my own happiness, and not attempting to achieve enlightenment through practicing moral conduct so that I can guide sentient beings—how cruel I am!” When you follow your delusions, chastise yourself like this: “There is nothing worse I could do! How terrible!” Thinking of other sentient beings who are obscured and suffering so much is another way to develop inspiration not only to achieve enlightenment in order to guide other sentient beings, but even to keep your vows in your daily life. You can benefit and bring happiness to all sentient beings even in your daily life.

The simplest, easiest way to live in your vows is to keep away from the objects of disturbing thoughts, particularly of attachment. In other words, avoid the object of attachment. This is the main responsibility of beginners, especially Sangha (here, I’m not talking about the absolute Sangha). This is the essential practice in your life. There are various ways to train your mind through lam-rim and thought transformation, but the best method is to avoid the object of disturbing thoughts. Keeping away from the object is the easiest solution. Train your mind continuously in lam-rim. When you have stable realizations of the three principles of the path and of tantra, even if you are constantly with the person, living with them, he or she cannot disturb you. No matter how many objects of delusion surround you, they cannot disturb your practice to achieve enlightenment. Because he has no delusion, such a practitioner has no object of delusion. There is no object of anger because there is no anger. There is no object of worldly concern clinging to this life, because there is no worldly concern.

If remembering the sufferings of migratory beings does not make my hair stand on end,
There is a danger of losing hope in the works for self and others.
Please grant me blessings to train my mind in loving kindness and compassion.

Accepting to avoid giving harm to others,
On meeting my enemy, I am very brave to harm him.
There is a danger of losing my three vows.
Please grant me blessings to abandon ill will.

You are very brave and successful in avoiding harming others until you see your enemy, someone who bothers you; then, you are powerful and successful in harming and torturing him. With your speech, you say the most hurtful words and complain about his mistakes. With your mind, you generate strong ill will and anger. With your body, you beat him, put him in prison, or kill him. You are capable of doing all these things. In this way there is a danger of losing your three vows.

Even if you have not met Mahayana or tantric teachings, if you live in whatever number of pratimoksha vows you have taken and practice them well, you will have no fear at all. Your mind will be relaxed and comfortable. Even if death happens, you will be very happy and comfortable because you have done

no wrong. You will have no fear. Keeping pratimoksha vows is the main protection. Spirits and human beings cannot harm a practitioner who is living correctly in pratimoksha moral conduct—spirits are scared of such a person. Domo Geshe Rinpoche, without doing any particular pujas, cured one woman in Darjeeling who was possessed by a spirit. Basically this happened through the power of his moral conduct. A person who lives in pure moral conduct has much power to heal.

Promising to train my mind in the four Dharmas of virtue,
I have so much pride and wish for control.
There is a danger I cannot practice what I promised.
Please grant me blessings to practice humility.

The four Dharmas to train your mind in virtue are: if somebody beats you, not to beat them in return; if somebody speaks harshly to you, not speaking harshly in return; if somebody criticizes you, not criticizing them in return; if somebody is angry with you, not returning the anger. After accepting to train your mind in virtue, if another person gets angry at you, you don't return their anger. If you have accepted these four Dharmas but have much pride and wish for control, you cannot do the practice as you promised.

Promising to offer happiness and benefit to others,
I am jealous and angry at others' wealth.
There is a danger of great promise and poor practice.
Please grant me blessings to generate happiness in others.

Accepting to meditate on cherishing others and renouncing myself,
I plan to harm others in return for harm.
There is a danger of defeating myself and others.
Please grant me blessings to return benefit for harm.

After accepting to meditate on cherishing others and renouncing yourself, in practice you retaliate when someone harms you. Despite your promise, if somebody harms you, there is always a plan in your mind immediately to return their harm. This is what is meant by great promise and poor practice.

With my stomach full of food and warmed by the sun,
Dharma is my religious form,
But with miserable conditions I become ordinary;
My mind is not mixed with the Dharma.
Please grant me blessings to take miserable conditions into the path.

Not having abandoned discriminating thoughts of attachment and anger,
I talk eloquently of how samsara and nirvana are one.
My words and my practice are opposite.
Please grant me blessings to avoid discriminating thoughts of attachment and anger.

Though I say that nothing truly exists,
Just from praise and criticism, happy and unhappy thoughts arise.

There is not even a small practice.
Please grant me blessings to cut off grasping the “I.”

My kind mothers from beginningless rebirths
Are strongly tormented by unbelievable sufferings.
I do not have the power to guide them;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

The kind mothers who cooled my torment by heat
Will burn a long time in unbearable hell suffering.
I, the foolish one, cannot guide them at all;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

The kind mothers who warmed me with their bodies
Are now tormented by cold, their bones and flesh cracked.
I cannot guide them at all;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

My kind mothers who fed me again and again with milk
Now cannot find food and drink for hundreds of years.
I cannot give them even one drop of water;
You, the compassionate one, please guide them quickly.

My kind mothers are tormented by so many sufferings,
Meeting the undesirable, separating from the desirable,
Experiencing birth, old age, sickness, and death.
You, with infinite compassion, please guide them quickly.

In this life and all other lives,
Until I and all sentient beings become enlightened,
Without separation,
May I be born at the holy feet of the guru.

In all my lives may I never be parted from perfect gurus.
By making good use of the glorious Dharma
To fulfill the good features of the stages and paths,
May I quickly attain the enlightened state of Vajradhara.

This completes the requesting prayer composed by the great bodhisattva Thogme Zangpo. I mentioned these techniques and talked a little on these subjects for everyone who wants to practice, but especially for the Sangha. Besides understanding this advice, I am hoping they might find some benefit through applying it. These ways of thinking help to protect you.

Dedication

May I and all others, particularly the Sangha of the FPMT, be able to live a life of pure moral conduct, like Lama Tsongkhapa himself, train our minds in bodhichitta, and live in pure view and conduct. In this way, may we be able to complete our lives without corrupting the pure wisdom of the second Buddha's teachings.

Colophon:

This teaching was given at the Himalayan Yogic Institute in Kathmandu, Nepal, in May 1987. The transcript was previously called *Karma and Morality* and was originally published as a Wisdom Publications Transcript.

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Refuge

by Lama Thubten Yeshe

Taking refuge is the first step on the Buddhist path to inner freedom, but it is not something new. We have been taking refuge all our lives, though mainly in external things, hoping to find security and happiness. Some of us take refuge in money, some in drugs. Some take refuge in food, in mountain-climbing or in sunny beaches. Most of us seek security and satisfaction in a relationship with a man or a woman. Throughout our lives, we have drifted from one situation to the next, always in the expectation of final satisfaction. Our successive involvements may sometimes offer temporary relief but, in sober truth, seeking refuge in physical possessions and transient pleasures merely deepens our confusion rather than ending it.

We should try to determine for ourselves whether or not our experiences have been beneficial. When we take refuge only in agreeable sensations or emotions, the problem of attachment is merely aggravated and we are sadly disenchanted because we expect lasting satisfaction *from* what turns out to be mere flickers of ephemeral pleasure. We take refuge in darkness and sink into even deeper darkness.

Buddhist refuge is a process of turning inward that begins with our discovery of our own unlimited potential as human beings. This discovery generates tremendous zeal for the development of our inborn wisdom-energy. Complete, perfect wisdom is buddhahood. Perhaps the word ‘buddha’ conjures up a remote and rather oriental image. But “buddha” is just a word, and it means a totally opened mind, an “opened lotus.” When we finally realize our human potential and arrive at this total openness of mind, we become buddhas.

However, at the outset we feel hopeless, helpless, and incapable of self-improvement. Buddha seems to be somewhere in the sky, completely out of reach, and *we* are nothing. But this is not true; we should not underestimate ourselves. Shakyamuni, the historical buddha, was once even more confused than we are, but by discovering his own latent wisdom-energy he attained enlightenment. There are countless buddhas, and all living beings have the innate capacity to unify their minds with the unsurpassable clarity of enlightenment.

During Shakyamuni Buddha’s lifetime, many people attained profound insight and experienced miraculous bliss as a result of merely seeing him. In spite of his bodily disappearance so long ago, we still benefit from the power of his wisdom and compassion. By cultivating our own latent powers and continuously developing our wisdom, we too can immensely benefit others. However much the world around us changes and our fortunes fluctuate, our inner world can remain stable and balanced when fortified by this profound understanding. Wisdom brings unfailing happiness, unlike those temporal objects of refuge which bring only tantalizingly brief and inconclusive moments of pleasure.

The three objects of refuge are Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Taking refuge in Buddha involves accepting the guidance of enlightened beings as the only remedy for the confusion and dissatisfaction of our present life. This is the only way we can realize our dormant capacity for attaining inner freedom. There are two aspects of refuge: the outer and the inner. Outer refuge means seeking guidance from living buddhas, since we are unable to achieve liberation without a teacher. Buddhas also provide inspiration and are sublime models for us to emulate. When we contemplate the enlightened state, its reflection within our own mind fills us with joyful, radiant energy. This demonstrates that though at present we are not fully enlightened, the seed of buddhahood is contained within each of us. Inner refuge is directed towards this seed of enlightenment, this inner buddha-nature. We recognize that, ultimately, we are our own refuge.

If we are convinced that we are beyond hope and incapable of change, or if we think we are already perfect, then of course there is obviously no reason to take refuge. But if we honestly examine our minds, our way of life, and the pattern of our relationships we can clearly recognize our own spiritual sickness. The enlightened being we turn to at this point is in effect the doctor who diagnoses our ailments and restores us to perfect health.

The medicine prescribed by a buddha is the Dharma. Dharma is wisdom: the wisdom that understands our own true nature, and reveals our own latent power of self-liberation. Taking refuge in Dharma means using that wisdom *now*. This will restore our hitherto obscured sense of human dignity and make us feel that we can, after all, do something positive about ourselves. Those who take deep refuge never feel lost or desperate. Refuge frees us from such abject mental states. As our self-respect and confidence increase, our relationships with others improve. Having discovered our own inner strength we also recognize and respect the buddha-nature in others.

Dharma means understanding reality. Meditation and prayer are not Dharma; they are merely tools for reaching this inner wisdom. Even if we meditate all day, but totally lacked Dharma understanding, we would achieve precious little. Nor are religious texts Dharma; they are merely books about Dharma, means for communicating information about Dharma. True Dharma or religion is a personal experience that each of us must elicit from within himself alone. There is a Dharma bell within us and we should use it to awaken and activate our own dormant wisdom. Usually our mind is completely occupied with stale, unprofitable, repetitious thoughts: clutching at fantasies, and giving way to anger, jealousy or despair when they elude us. Practising Dharma means ringing our inner wisdom-bell, being always on the alert and clearing away the refuse that clogs our mind, the attachments and addictions that haunt our day-dreams. By making this our daily practice, we ourselves become Dharma; all our energy becomes Dharma wisdom. Then we are truly taking refuge, allowing the inner Dharma alone to regulate our lives.

The third object of refuge is the Sangha. Sangha consists of those who are endowed with wisdom. They are like the nurses and friends who help us to recuperate from an illness. Sangha is not only those who wear red or yellow robes, but also those friends who influence us beneficently. These spiritual friends energize and inspire us, and are therefore to be clearly distinguished from ordinary friends who hold us back. For example, everyone at this present meditation course comes from a different background and has a different outlook. But we have opened our hearts to each other and shared some profound experiences. We may in fact feel more warmly towards friends we have made here than towards older friends at home. Why is this? Because we sense a spirit of unity: together we have

responded to the beauty of Dharma wisdom.

True spiritual friends support one another in their practice and promote each other's growth in knowledge and awareness. We *need* support, because we are so easily influenced by our environment and by the people around us. Let us suppose that I am a heavy drinker, but have decided to take myself in hand and give the habit up. Then a friend says, "What a hot day! Let's have a drink somewhere." So I go with him that day, and again the next day, and soon I find myself back in the same old rut.

Moreover, in ordinary friendships we often confuse attachment with affection. For instance, my friend might show his apparent affection for me by suggesting that we go on a drinking bout together. If I decline, he might think me unfriendly and feel rejected, so I give in. This is how friends can bring us down. He didn't use threats or force but by displaying the kind of affection that consists only of clinging and attachment, he led me into a situation I would rather have avoided.

It is therefore essential that we develop the wisdom-eye that distinguishes true love from mere attachment, and that can see the difference between what benefits us and what harms us. We should rely entirely on this wisdom, rather than on our ever-fluctuating emotional responses.

I can clearly see the importance of spiritual friendship when I visit my students around the world. When they are among friends in the supportive environment of a meditation course, they are happy and enthusiastic. But after they leave and try to practise on their own, their energy slowly subsides, and by the time I see them again they are back in the doldrums. This shows our need for strengthening influences that keep our energy flowing in the right channels. Whatever persons provide this influence—be they Eastern or Western, white or black, male or female—are of the true Sangha.

It should be clear by now that the impulse to take refuge arises from seeing the necessity of developing our minds and cultivating our wisdom. Being Buddhist is an inner experience, and not one that can necessarily be measured by our outward behaviour. I often meet people who hold no particular religious or philosophical views but who, in a quiet and simple way, take refuge in wisdom. They are sensitive to their own and to others' needs and try to give their lives meaning by developing themselves and helping others. In my opinion, such people are Buddhists, although they may never have heard of Shakyamuni Buddha or his Dharma.

Taking refuge is not difficult, but it would be a mistake to think that we can passively sit back and let Buddha, Dharma and Sangha do the work for us. Buddha said, 'You are responsible for your own confusion, and you are responsible for your own liberation.' What saves us from confusion is our wisdom. If we take refuge while fully understanding the meaning of the three objects of refuge, our wisdom will grow and will of itself fill us with energetic determination to follow the path to liberation.

Once we have formally taken refuge, we assume a certain responsibility for our behaviour. We should watch our mind and examine the inner processes of action and reaction. 'What is my mind doing now? What impulse is arising? When I act like this, what is the result?' For example, we should observe how others react when we utter empty, unnecessary words or when we talk without understanding what we are saying. Words are very powerful. Bodily communication also has a strong effect on others; our posture, our movements and our facial expression make a deep impression on other peoples' minds.

Since most of our problems involve other people, it is important to be aware of our behaviour and to avoid harming anyone.

This process of action and reaction is called karma. Karma may seem like a technical philosophical term, but it is nothing other than our own experience. It tells us what results to expect from our actions, and thus plays a vital role in spiritual practice. We want to meditate and develop wisdom, but if we make no attempt to control our behaviour and our distraught, scattered mind, we shall not get very far. For this reason we say, ‘Watch your karma.’ We must act with discriminating wisdom in order to create the best internal conditions for achieving our aims.

To recapitulate: Buddha is the totally opened mind, the state beyond confusion; Dharma is the path of wisdom leading to that state; and Sangha consists of those who are endowed with wisdom and can help us along the way. It is our own lifelong dissatisfaction that impels us to take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We realize that clinging to daydreams and physical possessions has never given us lasting joy. Therefore, in order to rid ourselves of this dissatisfaction and gain an understanding of reality, we take refuge in wisdom: the path to inner freedom.

But you should be careful neither to exaggerate your own problems, nor to be concerned exclusively with taking refuge for yourself alone. Remember that all beings alike are confused and unhappy. Therefore, whenever you take refuge, visualize your mother and father at your side, your friends and relatives behind you, those who agitate you sitting before you, and all other beings surrounding you. With sympathy and loving kindness think, ‘All living beings in the universe, including myself, have been in confusion since time without beginning, taking refuge in fictions and constantly encountering obstacles. Now I have the opportunity to develop my human potential and become unified with the omniscience of totally opened consciousness. Instead of listening to my confused, clinging mind, I shall listen to wisdom; this is the only way to liberate myself and all beings. For this reason I now take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Then visualize Shakyamuni Buddha before you: white light radiating from the crown of his head, red from his throat and blue from his heart. You can visualize your own spiritual teacher as this main object of refuge or, if it comes more naturally, Jesus Christ or another spiritual guide whom you revere as one who has transcended all delusion. Your object of refuge should be visualized in a gentle and loving aspect, and radiating the three coloured lights. These rays of light flow into you and all the surrounding beings, and purify all negative energy, especially despair and self-degradation.

At this point a question may arise. “If taking refuge is a matter of relying on our own inner wisdom, why do we have a formal refuge ceremony? Why is this ritual necessary?” The answer is that it reminds us how critical the moment of taking refuge is: it marks our arrival at a crucial insight into our own nature. So many times in the past we have sought security in trivialities, but now we have discovered our innate capacity to fulfill the most exalted destiny of all: complete emancipation from suffering. We are determined that, from this moment on, rather than taking refuge in ephemeral fictions, we will take refuge in our own pure, clear wisdom-energy and set out on the path to liberation. The ceremonious action of taking refuge strengthens this determination.

Colophon:

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