

# Words of My Perfect Teacher - Part Two, Chapter One

## *Taking refuge, the foundation stone of all paths*

*Crowned with the Three Jewels of the outer refuge,  
You have truly realized the Three Roots, the inner refuge;  
You have made manifest the three kayas, the ultimate refuge.  
Peerless Teacher, at your feet I bow.*

Taking refuge,<sup>106</sup> the foundation stone of all paths, <sup>107</sup> is explained under three headings: approaches to taking refuge, how to take refuge, and the precepts and benefits of taking refuge.

### **I. APPROACHES TO TAKING REFUGE**

#### **1. Faith**

Just as taking refuge opens the gateway to all teachings and practices, it is faith that opens the gateway to taking refuge. As the first step in taking refuge, therefore, it is important to develop a lasting and stable faith. Faith itself is of three kinds: vivid faith, eager faith and confident faith.

##### **1.1 VIVID FAITH**

Vivid faith is the faith that is inspired in us by thinking of the immense compassion of the Buddhas and great teachers. We might experience this kind of faith on visiting a temple containing many representations of the Buddhas' body, speech and mind, or after an encounter with a great teacher or spiritual friend we have just met personally or whose qualities or life-story we have heard described.<sup>108</sup>

##### **1.2 EAGER FAITH**

Eager faith is our eagerness to be free of the sufferings of lower realms when we hear them described; our eagerness to enjoy the happiness of higher realms and of liberation when we hear what they are; our eagerness to engage in positive actions when we hear what benefits they bring; and our eagerness to avoid negative actions when we understand what harm, they cause.

##### **1.3 CONFIDENT FAITH**

Confident faith is the faith in the Three Jewels that arises from the depth of our hearts once we understand their extraordinary qualities and the power of their blessings. It is the total trust in the Three Jewels alone that comes from the knowledge that they are the only unfailing refuge,<sup>109</sup> always and in all circumstances, whether we are happy, sad, in pain, ill, living or dead.\* The Precious Lord of Oddiyana says:

The faith of total trust allows blessings to enter you.  
When the mind is free of doubt, whatever you wish can be achieved.

Faith, then, is like a seed from which everything positive can grow. If faith is absent, it is as though that seed had been burnt. The sutras say:

In those who lack faith  
Nothing positive will grow,  
Just as from a burnt seed  
No green shoot will ever sprout.

Of the seven noble riches, faith is the most important. It is said:

The precious wheel of faith  
Rolls day and night along the road of virtue.

Faith is the most precious of all our resources. It brings an inexhaustible supply of virtues, like a treasure. It carries us along the path to liberation like a pair of legs, and gathers up everything positive for us like a pair of arms.

Faith is the greatest wealth and treasure, the best of legs; It is the basis for gathering all virtues, like arms.

\* This means that our faith in the refuge will enable us to deal with the experiences of the intermediate state (bar do) after death.

The compassion and blessings of the Three Jewels are inconceivable, but nevertheless their ability to reach into us depends entirely on our faith and devotion. If you have immense faith and devotion, the compassion and blessings you receive from your teacher and the Three Jewels will be equally immense. If your faith and devotion are just moderate, the compassion and blessings that reach you will also be moderate. If you have only a little faith and devotion, only a little compassion and blessings will reach you. If you have no faith and devotion at all, you will get absolutely nothing. Without faith, even meeting the Buddha himself and being accepted as his disciple would be quite useless, as it was for the monk Sunaksatra, whose story was told in the previous chapter, and for the Buddha's cousin, Devadatta.

Even today, whenever the Buddha is invoked with sincere faith and devotion, he is there, bestowing blessings. For the Buddha's compassion there is no near or far.

For all who think of him with faith  
The Buddha is there in front of them  
And will give empowerments and blessings.

And the Great Master of Oddiyana says:

For all men and women with faith in me, I, Padmasambhava,  
Have never departed-I sleep beside their door.<sup>110</sup>  
For me there is no such thing as death;  
Before each person with faith, there is a Padmasambhava.

When one has confident faith, the Buddha's compassion can be present in anything. This is illustrated by the tale of the faithful old woman who was helped towards Buddhahood by a dog's tooth.

Once there was an old woman whose son was a trader. He often went to India on business. The old woman said to him one day: "Bodhi Gaya is in India, and that's where the perfectly enlightened Buddha came from. Bring me some special relic from India, so that I can do my prostrations to it." She repeated her request many times, but her son kept forgetting and never brought her what she had asked for.

One day, as he was preparing to leave again for India, his mother said to him, "This time, if you fail to bring me something for my prostrations, I shall kill myself in front of you!"

The son travelled to India, concluded the business he had planned, and set off back home, once more forgetting his mother's request. It was only as he was nearing his house again that he remembered her words.

"Now what am I going to do?" he thought to himself. "I haven't brought anything for my old mother's prostrations. If I arrive home empty-handed, she'll kill herself!"

Looking around him, he saw a dog's skull lying on the ground nearby!" He pulled out one of the teeth and wrapped it in silk. Arriving home, he gave it to his mother, saying, "Here is one of the Buddha's canine teeth. You can use it as a support for your prayers."

The old woman believed him. She had great faith in the tooth, just as if it really were the Buddha's. She did prostrations and offerings all the time, and from that dog's tooth came many miraculous pearls.\* When the old woman died, there was a canopy of rainbow light around her, and other signs of accomplishment.

Now a dog's tooth does not contain any blessings. But the old woman's faith was so strong that she was sure that it really was the Buddha's tooth; Through her faith the tooth was imbued with the Buddha's blessings, until in the end that dog's tooth was in no way different from a real Buddha's tooth.

Once, in the province of Kongpo, there lived a simple-minded fellow who later became known as Jowo Ben. He made a journey to Central Tibet to see the Jowo Rinpoche.\*\*

When he first arrived in front of the statue, there was no caretaker or anyone else about. Seeing the food-offerings and the butter-lamps in front of it, he imagined that the Jowo Rinpoche must dip pieces of the offering cakes in the melted butter of the lamps and eat them. The wicks were burning in the lamps, he supposed, to keep the butter liquid.

"I think I'd better eat some, like Jowo Rinpoche does," he thought to himself, and dunking a piece of dough from the offering tormas into the butter, he ate it. He looked up at the smiling face of the Jowo.

"What a nice lama you are," he said. "Even when dogs come and steal the food you've been offered, you smile; when the draught makes your lamps sputter, you still keep smiling. Here, I'll leave you my boots. Please look after them for me while I walk around you."\*\*\*

\* *ring bsrel*: round objects like minute pearls which emerge from the relics of realized practitioners.

\*\* *The famous statue of the Buddha in Lhasa. See note 295.*

\*\*\* *Eating the offerings and putting his boots up in front of the statue would be considered a scandalous act of sacrilege.*

He took off his boots and put them up in front of the statue. While he was circumambulating round the middle pathway that circles the temple, the caretaker saw the boots. He was about to throw them out when the statue spoke.

“Don’t throw those boots away. Kongpo Ben has entrusted them to me!” Ben eventually came back and took his boots.

“You really are what they call a good lama!” he said to the statue. “Next year, why don’t you come and visit us. I’ll slaughter an old pig and cook it for you and brew you up some nice old barley beer.”

“I’ll come,” said the Jowo.

Ben went back home and told his wife, “I’ve invited Jowo Rinpoche. I’m not sure exactly when he’s coming, though-so don’t forget to keep an eye out for him.”

A year went by. One day, as she was drawing water from the river, Ben’s wife clearly saw the reflection of Jowo Rinpoche in the water.

Straight away she ran home and told her husband: “There’s something down there, in the river... I wonder if it’s the person you invited.”

Ben rushed down to the river and saw Jowo Rinpoche shining in the water. Thinking that he must have fallen into the river, Ben jumped in after him. As he grabbed at the image, he found that he could actually catch hold of it and bring it along with him.

As they were proceeding towards Ben’s house, they arrived in front of a huge rock on the side of the road. The Jowo did not want to go any further.

“I do not enter laypeople’s homes,” he said, and disappeared into the rock.

This place, to which the Jowo himself was seen coming, is called Jowo Dole, and the river in which the image appeared bears the name of Jowo River. Even nowadays, it is said that this place confers the same blessing as the Jowo in Lhasa, and everyone does prostrations and makes offerings there. It was by the power of his firm faith that Ben experienced the compassion of the Buddha. Although he ate butter from the lamps and food from the offerings, and put his boots up in front of the Jowo-acts which otherwise could only be wrong-the power of his faith made it all positive.

What is more, it is also upon faith alone that actual realization of the absolute truth, the natural state, depends. It is said in a sutra:

O Sariputra, absolute truth is only realized through faith.

As you develop a faith quite beyond the commonplace, by its power the blessings of the teacher and of the Three Jewels will enter you. Then true realization will arise and you will see the natural state as it really is. When that happens you will feel an even more extraordinary and irreversible faith and confidence in your teacher and in the Three Jewels. In this way faith and the realization of the natural state support each other.

Before leaving Jetsun Mila, Dagpo Rinpoche asked him when he should start to teach.

“One day,” the Jetsun replied, “You will have a realization that brings you an extraordinarily clear vision of the nature of your mind, quite different from the one you have now. At that time, firm faith will arise in you and you will perceive me, your old father, as a real Buddha. That is when you should start to teach.”

Our capacity to receive the compassion and blessings of the teacher and the Three Jewels, therefore, depends entirely on devotion and faith.

Once, a disciple, called out to the master Jowo Atisa, “Jowo, give me your blessing!”

“Lax disciple,” Atisa replied, “give me your devotion ... “

So absolute unwavering trust, arising from extraordinary faith and devotion, is indispensable. It opens the door to taking refuge.

## **2. Motivation**

There are three different levels of motivation for taking refuge with this sort of faith.

### **2.1 THE REFUGE OF LESSER BEINGS**

Fear of the sufferings of the three lower realms-the hell realm, the preta realm and the animal realm-motivates us to take refuge simply with the idea of obtaining the happiness of gods and men.

## 2.2 THE REFUGE OF MIDLING BEINGS

The knowledge that wherever we are reborn in any of the realms of samsara, high or low, there is no freedom from suffering, motivates us to take refuge in the Three Jewels just with the aim of attaining for ourselves the level of nirvana, peaceful and free from all samsara's sufferings.

## 2.3 THE REFUGE OF GREAT BEINGS

The sight of all beings plunged in the great ocean of samsara's infinite sufferings and undergoing an unimaginable variety of torments motivates us to take refuge with the idea of establishing them all in the unsurpassable and omniscient state of perfect and complete Buddhahood.

Of these three levels of motivation, here we should choose the way of great beings, taking refuge out of a desire to establish each one of the whole infinity of beings in the state of perfect Buddhahood.

The happiness of gods and men may seem at first sight to be true happiness. In fact, however, it is not free of suffering; and as soon as the effects of the good actions that lead them to those states of happiness are exhausted, they fall back into lower realms. Why strive to achieve the happiness of higher realms if it only lasts for a moment? The sravakas' and pratyekabuddhas' nirvana brings peace and happiness, but to ourselves alone; when all beings-our mothers and fathers since beginningless time-are sinking in samsara's infinite ocean of sufferings, not to try to help them would not be right. To take refuge in the Three Jewels with the wish that all beings may attain Buddhahood is, therefore, the way of great beings and the gateway to infinite merit. That is the way we, too, should adopt. It is said in the *Jewel Garland*:

As there are infinite kinds of beings  
The wish to help them is infinite, too.

## II. HOW TO TAKE REFUGE

According to the Basic Vehicle, one takes refuge in the Buddha as the teacher, in the Dharma as the path, and in the Sangha as companions along the way.

The general method of the extraordinary Secret Mantra Vehicle is to take refuge by offering body, speech and mind to the teacher, taking the yidams as support and the dakinis as companions.

The special, sublime method of the Vajra Essence is to take refuge in the rapid path whereby one uses the channels as the nirmanakaya, trains the energies as the sambhogakaya and purifies the essences as the dharmakaya.

The ultimate and infallible refuge in the indestructible natural state is based on the primal wisdom inherent in the refuge. That wisdom's essential nature is emptiness; its natural expression is clarity; and its compassion is all-pervasive.<sup>111</sup> Taking refuge here means to realize in one's own mindstream, with total confidence, the great inseparability of these three aspects of primal wisdom.

Having gained a clear understanding of all these ways in which refuge should be taken, we now go on to the actual practice of taking refuge. First, visualize the field of merit<sup>112</sup> in the presence of which you will take refuge.

Consider that the place where you are is all a Buddhafield, beautiful and pleasant, made of all sorts of precious substances. The ground is as smooth as the surface of a mirror, without any hills, valleys or irregularities. In the middle, in front of you, grows a wish-fulfilling tree with five great branches spreading from its trunk. Its perfect leaves, flowers and fruit stretch so far to the east, south, west and north that they fill the entire sky, and every branch and twig is hung with a multitude of entrancing jewels and bells of many kinds.

On the central branch is a jewelled throne upheld by eight great lions. Seated upon the throne, on a seat consisting of a multi-coloured lotus,<sup>113</sup> a sun and a moon, is your own glorious root teacher, incomparable source, of compassion, embodiment of all past, present and future Buddhas, appearing in the form of the great Vajradhara of Oddiyana. His body is of a compelling white colour with a rosy gleam. He has one face, two arms and two legs<sup>114</sup> and is seated in the royal posture.\* In his right hand he holds a golden five-pronged vajra with the threatening gesture. In his left hand, which rests in the gesture of meditation, he holds a skull-cup containing a vase filled with the ambrosia of deathless wisdom. The lid of the vase is topped by a wish-fulfilling tree. He wears a brocade cloak, monastic robes and a long sleeved blue tunic, and on his head the lotus hat. Seated in union with him is his consort, the white dakini Yeshe Tsogyal, holding a hooked knife and a skull cup.

\* *rgyal po'i rol stabs*: the posture of royal ease, with the right leg half extended and the left bent in.

Visualize him like this in the space before you, facing toward you. Above his head are all the lamas of the lineage, seated one above the other, each not quite touching the one below. The teachers of the general tantra transmission are innumerable, but here we visualize particularly the main figures of the Heart-essence lineage of the Great Perfection: Samantabhadra, the dharmakaya; Vajrasattva, the sambhogakaya; Garab Dorje, the nirmanakaya; the master Manjushrimitra; Guru Sri Singha; the learned Jnanasutra; the great pandita, Vimalamitra; Padmasambhava of Oddiyana and his three closest disciples, the King, Subject and Consort-the Dharma king Trisongdetsen, the great translator Vairotsana and the dakini Yeshe Tsogyal; the omniscient Longchen Rabjampa; and Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa. Each of them should be visualized with their own particular ornaments and attributes. They are all surrounded by an inconceivable multitude of yidam deities of the four sections of tantra and by dakas and dakinis.

On the front branch is the Buddha, the Conqueror Sakyamuni, surrounded by the thousand and two perfect Buddhas of this Good Kalpa as well as all the other Buddhas of the past, present and future and of the ten directions. All of them are in the supreme nirmanakaya form, garbed in monastic robes, bearing all the thirty-two major marks of Buddhahood-the crown protuberance, the wheels marked on the soles of the feet and so on-and the eighty minor signs. They are seated in the vajra posture. Some are white, some yellow, some red, some green and some blue. Inconceivable rays of light stream forth from their bodies.

On the right-hand branch visualize the eight great Close Sons,<sup>115</sup> headed by the Bodhisattva Protectors of the Three Families - Manjushri, Vajrapani and Avalokiteshvara - and surrounded by the whole noble sangha of Bodhisattvas. They are white, yellow, red, green and blue. They all wear the thirteen ornaments of the sambhogakaya,<sup>116</sup> and are standing with both feet together.

On the left-hand branch visualize the two principal sravakas, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, surrounded by the noble sangha of sravakas and pratyekabuddhas. All are white in colour, and dressed in the three monastic robes. They too are standing, holding their staffs and alms-bowls in their hands.<sup>117</sup>

On the rear branch visualize the Jewel of the Dharma in the form of piles of books. Topmost of them, encased in a lattice of lights, are the six million four hundred thousand tantras of the Great Perfection, the label of each volume facing towards you.\* All these books appear very clearly and distinctly, and resonate with the spontaneous melody of the vowels and consonants.

Between the branches are all the glorious Dharma-protectors, both the wisdom protectors and the protectors constrained by the effect of their past actions.<sup>118</sup> The male protectors all face outwards; their activity is to prevent outer obstacles from coming in, protecting us from hindrances and conditions unfavourable to practising the Dharma and attaining enlightenment. The female protectors all face inwards; their activity is to keep inner accomplishments from leaking out.

Think of all these figures of refuge, with their immeasurable qualities of knowledge, love and power, leading you as your only great guide.

*\* These are long Tibetan looseleaf volumes, wrapped in cloth, with a cloth label tucked in the left-hand end*

Imagine that your father in this lifetime is with you on your right and your mother on your left. In front of you, gathered together in an immense crowd covering the surface of the earth, are all beings of the three worlds and the six realms of existence, the first row consisting of all adversaries who detest you and all obstacle makers who harm you. All these beings with you are standing up, with the palms of their hands joined. Expressing respect with your body, do prostrations. Expressing respect with your speech, recite the refuge-prayer. Expressing respect with your mind, cultivate the following thought:

“O Teacher and Three Jewels, whatever happens to me, favourable or unfavourable, pleasant or painful, good or bad, whatever sickness and suffering befall me, I have no other refuge nor protection than you. You are my only protector, my only guide, my only shelter and my only hope. From now on until I reach the very heart of enlightenment,<sup>119</sup> I place all my trust and faith in you. I shall neither seek my father’s counsel, nor ask my mother’s advice, nor decide on my own. It is you, my teacher and the Three Jewels, that I take as my support. It is to you that I make my offerings. I pledge myself to you alone. I have no other refuge, no other hope than you!”

With this burning conviction, recite the following text:

In the Sugatas of the Three Roots, the true Three Jewels,<sup>120</sup>  
In the bodhicitta, nature of the channels, energies and essences  
And in the mandala of essential nature, natural expression and compassion,  
I take refuge until I reach the heart of enlightenment.<sup>121</sup>

Say this as many times as possible in each session. Until you have said, it at least one hundred thousand times, be sure to practise it in distinct sessions<sup>122</sup> and make it your constant and most important practice.

You might wonder why your enemies and obstacle-makers are given precedence over your parents in the refuge practice, since they are visualized at the front of the crowd, while your father and mother are beside you at the back. The reason is that we who have undertaken the Great Vehicle must have the love and compassion of bodhicitta equally for the whole infinity of beings. More particularly, the only way to accumulate an immense amount of merit and not waste all that we have already accumulated is to make patience our main practice. As it is said:

How could we practice patience if there were no-one who made us angry?

It is the harm caused by enemies and obstacle makers that gives you the opportunity to develop patience. Careful observation will show you that, from the point of view of Dharma, enemies and obstacle makers are kinder to you than your own parents. Your parents, by teaching you all the trickery and deceit necessary to succeed in this world, can prevent you from getting free from the depths of the lower realms in your future lives. So their kindness is not as great as it seems. On the other hand, enemies and obstacle makers are extremely kind to you. It is the adversity your enemies cause you that provides you with a reason for practising patience. They separate you, whether you like it or not, from your wealth and possessions-the bonds that prevent you from ever getting free from samsara and therefore the very source of all suffering. Negative forces and obstacle makers, too, provide you with a focus for the practice of patience. Through the illnesses and sufferings they provoke, many past misdeeds are purified. What is more, enemies and obstacles bring you to the Dharma, as happened to Jetsun Mila, whose uncle and aunt robbed him of all his wealth, and to the nun Palmo, who, because she had been stricken with leprosy by a demon naga, devoted herself to the practice of Avalokitesvara and subsequently attained supreme accomplishment. The Omniscient Longchenpa, King of Dharma, says:

Assailed by afflictions, we discover Dharma  
And find the way to liberation. Thank you, evil forces!  
When sorrows invade the mind, we discover Dharma  
And find lasting happiness. Thank you, sorrows!  
Through harm caused by spirits we discover Dharma  
And find fearlessness. Thank you, ghosts and demons!  
Through people's hate we discover Dharma  
And find benefits and happiness. Thank you, those who hate us!  
Through cruel adversity, we discover Dharma  
And find the unchanging way. Thank you, adversity!  
Through being impelled to by others, we discover Dharma  
And find the essential meaning. Thank you, all who drive us on!  
We dedicate our merit to you all, to repay your kindness.

Not only have your enemies, therefore, been very kind to you in this life; they have also been your parents in past lives. This is why you should give them such an important place in this practice.

When the time comes to conclude the session, visualize that your yearning devotion causes innumerable rays of light to stream out from the refuge deities. The rays touch you and all sentient beings, and, like a flock of birds scattered by a slingstone, you all fly up with a whirring sound and dissolve into the assembly of deities.

Then the surrounding deities melt into light, from the outside inwards, and dissolve into the teacher in, the centre, embodiment of the three refuges. All the deities above the teacher's head also dissolve into him. The teacher then dissolves and vanishes into light. Rest for as long as you can in the primordial state free from all elaboration, the dharmakaya, without any movement of thought.

As you arise from this meditation, dedicate the merit to the infinity of beings with these words:

Through the merit of this practice,  
May I swiftly accomplish the Three Jewels  
And establish every single being,  
Without exception, on their level.

Remember the deities of the refuge constantly, in all situations. When you walk, visualize them in space

above your right shoulder and imagine that you are circumambulating them. When you sit, visualize them above your head as the support of your prayers. When you eat, visualize them in your throat and offer them the first part of your food or drink. When you sleep, visualize them in your heart centre. This practice is essential to dissolve delusions into clear light.

Whatever you are doing, never separate from a clear mental image of the refuge deities. Entrust yourself with, total confidence to the Three Jewels and devote yourself entirely to taking refuge.

### **III. PRECEPTS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING REFUGE**

#### **1. The precepts of taking refuge**

The precepts consist of three things to be abandoned, three things to be done, and three additional attitudes which are to be observed.

##### **1.1 THE THREE THINGS TO BE ABANDONED**

Having taken refuge in the Buddha, do not pay homage to deities within sarilsara. In other words, since the gods of the tirthikas, like Isvara or Visnu, are themselves not liberated from the suffering of samsara, nor are local gods, owners of the ground, or any other powerful worldly gods and spirits, you should not take them as your refuge for future lives, make offerings to them, or prostrate to them.

Having taken refuge in the Dharma, do not harm others, even in your dreams. Make vigorous efforts to protect them to the best of your ability.

Having taken refuge in the Sangha, do not get involved with tirthikas and other such people who do not believe in the teaching of the Conquerors or in the perfect Buddha who taught it. Although there are no real tirthikas in Tibet, you should also avoid getting involved with anyone who acts like a tirthika—who insults and criticizes your teacher and the Dharma, for instance, or who denigrates the profound teachings of Secret Mantrayana.

##### **1.2 THE THREE THINGS TO BE DONE**

Having taken refuge in the Buddha, honour and respect even a tiny piece of broken statue representing him. Raise it above your head, \* put it somewhere clean, have faith and perceive it with pure vision, considering it as the true Jewel, of the Buddha.

Having taken refuge in the Dharma, respect even a fragment of paper bearing a single syllable of the scriptures. Place it above you head and consider it to be the true Jewel of the Dharma.

Having taken refuge in the Sangha, consider anything that symbolizes it, be it no more than a patch of red or yellow cloth, as the true Jewel of the Sangha. Honour and respect it, raise it above your head, put it somewhere clean and regard it with faith and pure vision.

*\* To carry something on the crown of one's head is a sign of veneration.*

##### **1.3 THE THREE SUPPLEMENTARY PRECEPTS**

Look upon your teacher, the spiritual friend who teaches you here and now what to do and what not to do, as the true Jewel of the Buddha. Do not even so much as walk on his shadow, and endeavour to serve and honour him.

Consider every word of your sublime teacher as the Jewel of the Dharma. Accept everything he says without disobeying a single point.

Consider his entourage, his disciples and your spiritual companions who have pure conduct as the Jewel of the Sangha. Respect them with your body, speech and mind and never upset them, even for an instant.

Particularly in the Secret Mantra Vehicle, the teacher is the main refuge: his body is the Sangha, his speech the Dharma and his mind the Buddha. Recognize him, therefore, as the quintessential union of the Three Jewels and see all his actions as perfect. Follow him with absolute trust and try to pray to him all the time. Remember that to displease him with anything you do, say or think is to renounce the entire refuge, so put all your determination and effort into trying to please him all the time.

No matter what happens to you, be it pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad, sickness or suffering, entrust yourself entirely to the Jewel of the teacher. Recognize all well-being as springing from the compassion of the Three Jewels. It is said that everything pleasant and good in this world—even the slightest breeze on a hot

day-comes from the compassion and blessings of the Buddha. In the same way, the smallest positive thought arising in your mind results from the inconceivable power of his blessings. In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Santideva says:

As when a flash of lightning rends the night,  
And in its glare shows all the dark black clouds had hid,  
Likewise rarely, through the Buddhas' power,  
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world.

So recognize the Buddha's compassion in everything that helps you and makes you happy.

Whenever you encounter sickness or suffering, when demons and enemies create obstacles, or whatever else may befall you, just pray to the Three Jewels and do not rely on any other methods of dealing with such problems. If you have to undergo medical treatment or make use of a healing ritual, do so in the recognition that those very things are the activity of the Three Jewels.

Learn to have faith and pure perception by recognizing everything that appears as being manifested by the Three Jewels. When you set off to go somewhere, whether to work or for some other reason, go there paying homage to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha of that direction. Make the refuge prayer your constant daily practice, whether you use the text of the Heart-essence quoted above or this prayer known as the four-fold refuge, which is common to all vehicles:

I take refuge in the Teacher.  
I take refuge in the Buddha.  
I take refuge in the Dharma.  
I take refuge in the Sangha.

Recommend to other people that they take refuge and encourage them in the refuge practice, Entrust yourself and others to the Three Jewels both for this life and for lives to come, and practise the refuge diligently.

When you go to sleep, visualize the deities of the field of merit, as described above but in your heart, and fall asleep with your mind concentrated upon them. If you cannot do that, think of your teacher and the Three Jewels as being really present by your pillow, full of love and compassion for you. Then fall asleep with faith and pure perception, without losing the thought of the Three Jewels.

When you eat or drink, visualize the Three Jewels in your throat and offer them the taste of everything you eat or drink. If you cannot do that, offer them the first mouthful or sip, thinking, "I offer this to the Three Jewels."

When you have new clothes to wear, before putting them on for the first time lift them up and offer them mentally to the Three Jewels. Then wear them with the thought that the Three Jewels have given them to you.

Whenever you see anything that gives you joy or that you find desirable, offer it mentally to the precious Three Jewels: lovely gardens full of flowers, streams of clear water, beautiful houses, pleasant groves, vast wealth and possessions, beautiful men and women in fine clothes.

When drawing water, throw a few drops into the air and say "I offer this water to the Three Jewels," before pouring it into your container.

All good and desirable circumstances in this life-comfort, happiness, popularity, profit or whatever-spring from the compassion of the Three Jewels. With devotion and pure perception think, "I offer all this to them." Offer to them whatever sources of merit you create-prostrations, offerings, meditation on deities, recitation of mantras and so on-and dedicate them to the benefit of all beings. Make offerings to the Three Jewels as often as you can, on full and new moon days, and in the six periods of the day.\* Always observe the special times consecrated to the Three Jewels.

*\* dus drug, six times: three times in the day and three times in the night.*

Whatever happens, good or bad, never forget to take refuge in the Three Jewels. Train yourself until you reach the point where even feeling afraid in a nightmare you remember to take refuge, because that means that you will also remember to do so in the intermediate state. In short, place your entire trust in the Three Jewels and never give up the refuge even at the cost of your life.

Once, in India, a Buddhist lay practitioner was taken prisoner by some tirthikas, who told him: "If you renounce taking refuge in the Three Jewels we won't kill you. Otherwise we'll put you to death."

He replied, "I can only renounce taking refuge with my mouth. I could never do so with my heart." So

they killed him.

We should really be like that layman. Once we give up taking refuge in the Three Jewels, then no matter how profound the practices we undertake may be we are no longer even part of the Buddhist community. It is said:

It is the refuge that makes the difference between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist.

There are plenty of tirthikas who avoid harmful acts, meditate on deities, practise on the channels and energies, and who obtain the common accomplishments. But, not knowing the refuge in the Three Jewels, they are riot on the path to liberation and will not be free from samsara.<sup>123</sup>

There was not a single one of all the multitude of sutra and tantra' teachings that Jowo Atisa did not know or had not read. But of all of them, he thought that the refuge was of such primary importance that it was the one thing he used to teach his disciples-to the extent that people nicknamed him the "Refuge Pandita."

So, from the moment you enter the path of liberation and become a Buddhist, practise the taking of refuge along with its precepts, and never give them up even if your life is at stake. As a sutra puts it:

Those who take refuge in the Buddha  
Are true lay followers;  
They no longer should seek refuge  
In any other deity.  
Those who take refuge in the sacred Dharma  
Should have no harmful thoughts,  
Those who take refuge in the noble Sangha  
Should no longer associate with tirthikas.

These days, some people claim to be followers of the Three Jewels but do not have the slightest respect for their representations. They consider paintings and statues representing the Buddha or books containing his words to be ordinary goods that can be sold or pawned. This is called "living by holding the Three Jewels to ransom" and is a very severe fault. To point out the ugliness of a drawing or statue of the Buddha or otherwise criticize it, unless you are evaluating its proportions in order to fix it, is also a grave error and should be avoided. To place books containing the scriptures directly on the floor, to step over them, to wet your fingers with saliva to turn the pages and similar disrespectful behaviour are all serious mistakes as well. The Buddha himself said:

At the end of five hundred years  
My presence will be in the form of scriptures.  
Consider them as identical to me  
And show them due respect.

It is an everyday maxim that one should not put images on top of the scriptures. For it is the representation of the speech of the Buddha, rather than that of his body or mind, that teaches us what to do and what not to do and also ensures the continuity of his doctrine. The scriptures are therefore no different from the Buddha himself, and are particularly sacred.

Furthermore, most people do not think of a vajra and bell\* as anything but ordinary objects. They do not appreciate that they are representations of the Three Jewels. The vajra symbolizes the Buddha's mind, the five wisdoms. The bell bears the image of a face which, according to the outer tantras, is that of Vairocana and, in the view of higher tantras, is Vajradhatvishvari. In other words, it bears an image of the Buddha's body. The letters engraved on it are the eight seed-syllables of the eight consorts, and the bell itself symbolizes the Buddha's speech, the sound of the Dharma. So together, vajra and bell fulfil all the criteria of representations of the Buddha's body, speech and mind. More particularly, these two objects contain all the mandalas of the Secret Mantra Vajrayana, and so are considered extraordinary samaya objects. To treat them with disrespect is therefore a grave fault. Always venerate them.

\* *The vajra and bell are "samaya objects," sacred objects required for the practices of the Vajrayana (see glossary).*

## 2. The benefits of taking refuge

Taking refuge is the foundation of all practices. By simply taking refuge you plant the seed of liberation within yourself. You distance yourself from all the negative actions you have accumulated and develop more

arid more positive actions. Taking refuge is the support for all vows, the source of all good qualities. Ultimately, it will lead you to the state of Buddhahood. And in the meanwhile it will secure you the protection of beneficent gods and the realization of all you wish for; you will never part company from the thought of the Three Jewels; you will remember them from life to life and find happiness and well-being in this present existence and in rebirths to come. Its benefits are said to be innumerable.

In *The Seventy Stanzas on Refuge*, it is said:

Indeed, anyone can take the vows,  
Except those who have not taken refuge.

Taking refuge is the indispensable basis for all the vows of the Pratimoksa, those of a lay practitioner, a novice, a monk and so on. Before generating bodhicitta, receiving the empowerments of the Secret Mantra Vajrayana, and all other practices, it is essential to take a complete and authentic refuge vow. There is no way to begin even a one-day practice of purification and reparation\* without first taking refuge. It is the support for all vows and all good qualities.

*\*gso sbyong: a ritual for purifying and repairing errors in keeping the various vows.*

To take refuge with a faith fully cognizant of the qualities of the Three Jewels unquestionably brings benefit. But even simply to hear the word “Buddha,” or to create any link, tenuous though it may be, with any representation of the Buddha’s body, speech and mind can plant the seed of liberation, and in the end will lead to the state beyond suffering. In the Vinaya, the story is told of a dog who chased a pig around a stupa. Through this “circumambulation,” the seed of enlightenment was sown in both of them.

According to another story, three people attained Buddhahood because of a single clay tsa-tsa. There was once a man who saw a little clay tsa-tsa statue lying on the ground by the road.

“If it stays there,” he thought, “the rain will soon ruin it; I’d better do something about it.” So he covered it with an old leather shoe sole that had been left lying nearby.

Another person, passing the same spot, thought to himself, “It’s not right to have an old shoe sole covering that tsa-tsa,” and so he took it off.

As the fruit of their good intentions, both the one who covered the tsa-tsa and the one who removed the covering inherited kingdoms in their next lives.

With pure intention, he who covered  
The Buddha’s head with a shoe  
And he who then uncovered it again  
Both inherited a kingdom.

Three people—the person who had moulded the tsa-tsa in the first place, the person who then covered it with the sole of a shoe, and the person who finally uncovered it—all obtained the happiness of higher realms, inheriting kingdoms and so forth, as a temporary benefit, and at the same time progressed towards Buddhahood by sowing in themselves the seed of ultimate liberation.

By taking refuge you distance yourself from all negative actions. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels with sincere and intense faith reduces and exhausts even the evil actions you have already accumulated in the past. And from that moment onwards, the compassionate blessings of the Three Jewels render all your thoughts positive, so that you no longer do anything harmful.

An example is King Ajatasatru, who killed his father but later took refuge in the Three Jewels. He suffered the agonies of hell for one week and was then freed.

And Devadatta, who had committed three of the crimes which bring immediate retribution, even experienced the fires of hell while he was still alive. But at that moment he had faith in the Buddha’s teaching and cried out, “I am determined from the depths of my bones to take refuge in the Buddha!” The Buddha explained that because of these words Devadatta would become a pratyekabuddha called Utterly Determined.<sup>124</sup>

Now, therefore, through the kindness of a teacher or spiritual friend, you have already received the authentic Dharma and have given rise to some slight intention to do good and to stop doing wrong. If you make the effort to practise taking refuge in the Three Jewels, your mind will be blessed and you will increasingly develop all the good qualities of the path, such as faith, purity of perception, disillusionment with samsara and determination to get free from it, faith in the effects of actions, and so on.

On the other hand, no matter how intense your disgust with samsara or your determination to achieve

liberation may be now, if you do not bother to take refuge in the teacher and the Three Jewels or pray to them, appearances are so seductive, the mind so gullible and thoughts so quick to deceive, that, even while you are doing good, this can easily turn into something negative. So it is important to know that there is nothing better than taking refuge for cutting the stream of negative actions for the future.

Now for another important point. It is said:

Demons particularly hate those who persevere in the practice.

And also:

The more intense the practice, the more intense the demons.

We are in an age of decadence, and people who meditate on the profound meaning and whose good actions are powerful can easily be deceived by the seductions of ordinary life. They are held back by families and friends. They suffer from adverse circumstances like sickness and interference from negative forces. Their minds are invaded by thoughts and hesitations. In many such guises, obstacles to Dharma practice come up and destroy all their merit. But as the antidote to these dangers, if you make a real effort to take refuge sincerely in the Three Jewels, everything that opposes your practice will be transformed into favourable circumstances and your merit will grow unceasingly.

Nowadays householders, announcing that they are going to protect themselves and their flocks from disease for the year, call in some lamas and their disciples—none of whom have received the necessary empowerment or oral transmission, nor practised the basic recitation<sup>125</sup>—to open up the mandala of some wrathful deity.<sup>126</sup> Without going through the generation and perfection phases, they goggle with eyes like saucers and whip themselves into an overwhelming fury directed at an effigy made of dough.\* They always perform “red offerings” of flesh and blood, and their cries of “Bring them! Kill them! Just you wait... Hit them!” arouse feelings of violent aggression in everybody who hears them. A closer look at such ceremonies shows that they are as Jetsun Mila says:

Inviting the wisdom deities to protect worldly beings is like dragging a king off his throne and making him sweep the floor.

Padampa Sangye says:

They build a Secret Mantra mandala in the village goat-pen and claim that it is an antidote!

*\* Correctly understood, such an effigy symbolizes the false notion of a truly existing self. Here sacred ritual is being used in an external way, contrary to its intention.*

Practices of this sort poison the Secret Mantrayana and transform it into the practices of the Bonpos.<sup>127</sup> Those who perform “liberation” practices should be beyond all self-centred interest. Only such people, acting on a vast scale for the benefit of beings and the teachings, may legitimately liberate enemies and obstacle-makers who are committing the ten pernicious acts. But when such a practice is done with ordinary anger,<sup>128</sup> taking sides, not only will it have no power to liberate the beings at which it is directed, it will also cause rebirth in hell for the people who perform it.

For someone not accomplished in the generation and perfection phases and who does not observe the samayas, the performance of the “red offerings” of meat and blood brings realisation neither of the wisdom deities nor of the Dharma protectors. Instead, all kinds of malevolent gods and demons gather to partake of the offerings and tormas. They might seem to bring about some immediate benefit, but the final outcome will be a multitude of undesirable consequences.

A far better protection than all of that would be to place your confidence in the Three Jewels. Ask teachers and monks who have pacified and controlled their own minds to recite the refuge a hundred thousand times. You will be brought into the care of the Three Jewels; nothing undesirable will happen to you in this life and all your wishes will be realized spontaneously. Beneficent gods will protect you, and all those who might do you harm—the demons and obstacle makers—will be unable even to approach.

Once someone caught a thief and gave him a beating, accompanying each very hard blow of the stick with a line from the refuge prayer:

“I go for refuge to the Buddha,” whack! “I go for refuge to the Dharma,” whack! and so on.

Having inculcated those lines firmly into the robber’s mind, he let him go. The robber spent the night under a bridge, his mind filled with the words of the refuge prayer, along with the memory of the painful thrashing he had received. While he was lying there a whole troop of demons drew near over the bridge. But

then they cried, “There is someone here who takes refuge in the Three Jewels!” and all ran away screaming.

There is no better way to dispel the ills of this life than to take refuge from the bottom of your heart in the Three Jewels. And in future lives it will bring you liberation and omniscience. It is hard to even imagine all the benefits of the refuge. The *Immaculate Sutra* says:

If all the merit of taking refuge  
Were to take a physical form,  
The whole of space, entirely filled,  
Would not be enough to contain it.

And in the *Condensed Transcendent Wisdom*:

If the merit of taking refuge took form,  
All the three worlds could never contain it.  
Could the vast amount of water in all the great oceans  
Ever be measured with a quarter-pint scoop?

What is more, as the *Sutra of the Heart of the Sun* says:

He who has made the Buddha his refuge  
Cannot be killed by ten million demons;  
Though he transgress his vows or be tormented in mind,  
It is certain that he will go beyond rebirth.

Devote yourself earnestly, therefore, to taking refuge, the basis of all Dharma practices, for its benefits are immeasurable.

*I have taken the threefold refuge but have little heartfelt faith.  
I follow the threefold training, but have let my commitments slip.  
Bless me and all those who are faint-hearted like me  
That our faith may be firm and irreversible.*