

Taking Refuge

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1855 Burnside Rd Sebastopol, CA 95472 USA edvan@crl.com Ed Van Tassel is a Lama of the Shang-pa Kagyu Tradition [This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues. Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way - The Coombspapers Archives, ANU].

-----REFUGE - 1 Refuge, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "shelter or protection from danger or trouble". It is "a way or means of obtaining shelter or safety; a resource; recourse to a practice." It seems unlikely that even Atisha, The Refuge Lama, would find much to quarrel with in such a definition, as far as it goes. Because refuge may be all of these things a safe haven or a practice. But to Buddhists of all schools and persuasions Refuge is much more than that. It is the first step along the path to samyaksambodhi, perfect, complete and unsurpassable enlightenment. It is both the first step and the practice of a life-time which deepens and matures with us along the way.

The goal of this life is the attainment of happiness.

Everything we do, from a major undertaking to scratching an itch is directed by this motive. We assume that happiness is based in our relationship with the objects of the senses.

If we can avoid this and attract that then everything would work out. If, in fact, we were able to configure appearances to our specifications, this partner, that job, this house and that golf score, then our happiness would be complete. But appearance turns like a great kaleidoscope and no matter how we set it up it always changes. Refuge is an inner gesture of acknowledgement, arising out of our own experience and understanding, that what we seek cannot be had in this life the way we are living it even under the very best of conditions. So even before we consider taking refuge something must already be stirring. The kind of experiences that bring us to refuge have been summarized as the Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind. This is probably not very far from the original Christian concept of "conversion" expressed in Greek as metanoia, the turning of the mind inward away from the things of this life.

Buddhists are referred to in Tibetan as nang-pa which means an inward person. It has long been recognized that without this "conversion", this turning of the mind, our practice lacks the power and the incentive to bring it to fruition.

We may proceed in fits and starts distracted by this desire

and that aversion and never develop the necessary intensity and commitment. The Four Thoughts, if properly understood and used will help the mind to turn away from the frustrating overdriven quality of total involvement in samsara into the path to freedom. These thoughts are topics for intensive study and meditation. It is not sufficient to simply hear them, recognize their validity in passing and then go on. They must become a part of our being and never far from our awareness.

The first thought has to do with the recognition of our extraordinary good fortune in the form of the Precious Human Body. Now, just because it walks upright on two legs and has a fancy 1400g brain on top does not mean that this is what we're talking about when we speak of the Precious Human Body. It may indeed be human but it's being precious depends on the special set of endowments that make it a suitable vessel for the Dharma. Before we go much further it might be good to consider the question, human as opposed to what? Could I possibly be reborn as something else? On the wall in every Tibetan temple or monastery, usually in a prominent place, you will find a large painting of the Wheel of Life the, the Bhavachakra. The wheel is held and displayed by Yama, the ferocious Lord of

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Death, who glowers over its top curvature. The wheel itself consists of several concentric bands of figures. The outermost shows twelve vignettes illustrating the twelve links in the chain of interdependent arising, the lawful sequence by which all phenomena come into existence and pass away. In the center of the circle are three beasts, usually a pig a cock, and a snake forming a circle often with the tail of one in the mouth of the one that follows. These are the Three Poisons, desire, hatred, and ignorance. They are the motive force that drives the cycle of existence. In the first band out from the center we see a great moving chain of human beings cycling through the various states of exaltation and degradation. It is almost identical to the Wheel of Life in medieval Christian times in which king, priest, warrior, beggar, thief, and leper swing through the macabre dance in which the humble are elevated and the mighty are debased with a kind of helpless inexorability that makes us slightly uneasy as we look on.

By far the greatest space in the central band of the painting is occupied by a depiction of the Six Realms. The meaning of this set of symbols is very dense and manylayered. At one end of the continuum the vast majority of Tibetans understand these realms as something akin to parallel worlds and accept the paintings and descriptive texts as something similar to a traveler's narrative being an accurate representations of actual places where they might be reborn in the next life as a consequence of the relative balance of virtuous and nonvirtuous actions performed in this one.

Let us pause here, for a moment, and consider rebirth which is, now in modern times, such an alien idea here in the west, although it was not always so. We have a difficult time with this one but it is not so very far removed from the basic conservation laws of physics which we find to be very neat and logical. According to these laws matter and energy may neither be created nor destroyed but undergo transformation from state to state dependent on various causes and conditions. We might wonder if life itself, being neither created nor destroyed, undergoes similar transformation which manifests as the cycle of embodiment.

Indeed the other end of the continuum of understanding of the Wheel of Life is a very profound statement about the nature of embodiment and manifestation. Both of these extremes may be either too concrete or too rarified for us to resonate with. It is probably best to start in the middle with things that we can see and experience for if there is anyone who has not seen and experienced a Hungry Spirit it is simply because they are not looking in the right place. Any teaching of the Dharma can be clarified by looking no farther afield than at ourselves and those around us. The six realms describing the six conditions of rebirth, may be very profitably understood as being psychophysiological states through which we all pass more or less continuously and find a more enduring center of gravity in one or another. Beings in Hell are dominated by anger and hatred. They live in constant torment and threat of violence. They are pictured as being cleaved, torn, and variously abused by demons of wrathful appearance. Their major suffering has to do with extremes of heat and cold. We have all experienced both hot and cold anger although we usually tend to express it in one way or the other. The result of hot anger is quite often a chilly response. When we are hell beings we are burning with rage or are in a numbing emotional coldness unresponsive and inaccessible. We are in the grip of paranoia and see the environment as hostile and rejecting. Externally we see hell beings, that is, beings whose center of gravity is in hellish experience, in cases of severe mental disorder in which the torment is so great that life becomes unlivable and falls into complete chaos or becomes self-destructive.

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Hungry Spirits are overwhelmed by a kind of greed and the result is the experience of hunger and thirst for which there is no relief. They are depicted iconographically as frantic beings having very small necks and gigantic bellies.

As hungry spirits we feel a deep sense of impoverishment and lack. There is a kind of narcissism in our neediness that centers on our own condition and excludes others. We are continuously scanning, on the lookout for something for us but nothing that we find satisfies but only increases the pain of our lack and the frenzy of the search. In these times of widespread homelessness there are many hungry spirits in the streets. They may be seen scrounging in garbage cans and sleeping in the sheltered corners of parking lots wrapped in tattered blankets or newspapers.

This is not greed in the strictest sense but the feeling of denial that drives the hungry spirits.

The animals are just what you would expect. They are locked in and their breadth of horizon is not very great. Their problem is a kind of mental dullness, a kind of waking stupor that leaves them vulnerable to bad judgement and its consequences including exploitation by others. When we are cycling through the Animal Realm we are impulsive and unreflective in pursuit of the earthy satisfactions of the body, food, sex, sleep, warmth, not necessarily in that order. We are an easy mark for predators of various kinds and are unable to see our own condition as the source of our difficulties. Our actions are governed by tropisms and limitations that any watcher of TV nature specials will recognize immediately.

The Human Realm is the lowest of the Higher Realms. Our problem, as you probably already know, is desire. With us it is a bit more tempered and rational than the blind craving of the Hungry Spirits or the automated grazing of the Animals. We are caught between the hammer and anvil of two very powerful laws. They are the law of attraction and repulsion and the law of impermanence. The law of attraction and repulsion manifests in us in the form of desire and aversion which are two sides of the same coin.

We are always in a state of wanting something. It is important to understand that this wanting is a given, it is a constant, it never goes away. It sometimes appears to go away but it simply changes objects. No matter how much we get we always want. This runs afoul of the law of impermanence which simply reflects the fact that every thing changes. Everything is in the process of becoming something else. Nothing that we get appears quite the same as it was when we just wanted it. And even if it is a close enough approximation in the beginning it won't be that way for long. The things that we want even when we have attained them are constantly leaving our lives and the things that we don't want even when we have successfully avoided them will eventually show up. But we don't give up. Our condition is one of continuous embroilment, running after some things, running away from others, while the ground keeps shifting under our feet. Busy, busy, busy! The weakness of the Demi-Gods is in their envy and so their condition is one of strife. In their endless striving it doesn't seem that they ever wonder if they have enough.

They are obsessed with the belief that they don't have as much as the Gods when, in fact, their potential is identical. The motive here is not material but interpersonal. As Demi-Gods we are always comparing ourselves and our condition to that of others and coming out on the short end. Our need is to equal, to surpass, to dominate. We are very competitive in all areas of our lives and are unable to rest if we think we are losing anywhere. The Demi-Gods are shown in the paintings as medieval Central Asian military types carrying out yet another fruitless assault on the Realm of the Gods.

The Gods are at the pinnacle of samsaric existence. They come in three varieties. There are the Gods of the Desire Realm, the Form Realm and the Formless Realm.

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The differences are related to their ability to enter into and maintain states of concentration. The ones accessible to us are the Gods of the Desire Realm. Theirs is a certain success. They are absorbed in the pleasures of the senses, flavors, aromas, music and so on. The Gods of the Desire Realm may be viewed any Sunday in the magazine section of the newspaper where they are usually displayed with their beautiful children gathered around a bounteous table at their somewhat less than rustic country estate overlooking the vineyards. They are often kind enough to share with us their recipes and their opinions on the comings and goings of their peers.

There is something obviously trivial about them and a very keen observer may note that their ability to use their senses to discern the relative reality of the world is strangely impaired. Their downfall is their pride and their fall is inevitable.

According to the tradition, just before they fall into lower migrations their garlands of flowers begin to wilt, their bodies develop offensive odors, and they are avoided by the other gods. It can't be put much better than that.

Is it possible that I, John Smith, could be reborn as a cat? No, a cat is born as a cat, no more no less. There is no John Smith in there trapped in a cat's body. According to the tradition we are talking about a long succession of lives in which consciousness evolves and devolves. If over a great many lives one's consciousness operates more and more on an animal level then John Smith might as well be a chimpanzee or whatever. The human form is the most advantageous for the practice of the Dharma in that our condition is relatively free from extremes which allows our basic intelligence to function. Basic intelligence is not the same as intellect but has to do with the clarity of mind that allows our mental and perceptual processes to function. We are not so overwhelmed by our pain, enjoyments, and obsessions as beings in other realms. But an intact human form with all of the senses working and a basic functional intelligence is not all there is to it.

Other more external conditions are necessary for the Dharma to have the possibility of entering our lives.

It is sometimes difficult for those of us who were born and have lived all of our lives in North America to understand that we are almost unique in the world in that we have not experienced major chaos and devastation in the last fifty years. Almost all of the rest of the world has. Few other areas of the world have escaped the destruction of war, famine, and pestilence. We remain relatively untouched and still maintain a standard of living that allows us leisure to reflect on our lives rather than commit our full resources to simple survival. In addition, trouble elsewhere has brought a fair number of qualified spiritual teachers to this country and into our lives. We are also searching for something and although we may not know exactly what it might be, we are intelligent enough to understand that we are not going to find it outside of ourselves and have the confidence to begin. These, taken together, constitute the wealth of the Precious Human Body.

Having given the matter of our highly desirable situation some thought we may stumble upon a secret. It is not going to go on forever. We are going to die. This has been something of a secret in our culture for about the last hundred years. Until fairly recently death has been concealed from us. This is the second Thought that Turns the Mind, the thought of death and impermanence. Many of us have seen ads for life insurance that begin "If something should happen to you...", in which death is presented as some rare tropical disease. You probably won't get it but it never hurts to prepare for the unexpected. All phenomena are impermanent. That means that they come into existence, pass through a lawful development and pass out of existence.

It is useful to think that in one hundred years time, with the exception of a few trees and tortoises, hardly any living thing now present in the world will still be alive.

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And although we all know that death comes at the end of life we expect it to be a natural end far removed from the present. We have plans for tomorrow, but then, so do the seven thousand people who will die today in automobile accidents. We have no idea when we might lose this precious situation that we now have. It is worth considering whether we might not be able to practice in the after death states if life is truly continuous. We can certainly practice in the after death states but only if we have developed the qualities that come from practice in this life. For example we can act with volition in a dream, but only if we have developed the intentionality in the waking state.

Finally, there is no yardstick by which we may measure our actions, goals, accomplishments, and the meaningfulness of our lives as a whole that is more true and unerring than the certain knowledge of our own eventual death. To consider what is important to us in this light may be a very profitable exercise. For it is well said that anything that is still here when we are gone was never truly ours.

The critical thing in understanding the Third Thought, the inexorability of karma has to do with the fact that every action has consequences and that these consequences reflect the nature and quality of the original action. If you plant beans corn never comes up. Our negative actions produce no happiness for ourselves or those around us. We can blame

our pain on fate and those close to us for only so long.

Externalizing our difficulties is, in itself a cause that produces, as its effect, a certain kind of blindness in which we fail to see ourselves as part of our situations.

Perhaps we realize that in a way we are not really responsible for what we have become. We may try to change in a desultory way with little effect. Few of us would actually choose our negative actions if we had any choice in the matter. It is good to realize that responsibility is not a given but an achievement. It dawns on us that we must achieve responsibility or continue to damage our lives through negative actions the results of which may be with us far longer than we might imagine.

Finally we may recognize a certain futility in our actions.

No matter what we do or how hard we try things never seem to come out as we had hoped and planned. The effort was misguided; what we thought we wanted proved to be other than what we had thought; we had it but then, too soon, we lost it. For a great variety of reasons associated with the endlessness of desire and the impermanence of phenomena nothing really seems to work in this place. The Forth Thought reminds us that there is a certain basic kind of unsatisfactoriness about samsara that no kind of effort will resolve. And so we become open to the search. We become seekers.

What transforms seekers into practitioners is the commitment of refuge. Different spiritual paths call it by different names but it is the same thing. The impulse to refuge according to this tradition arises out of confidence, faith, conviction, all of which are valid translations of the Tibetan word *depa*. The first kind of confidence is the confidence of attraction. This arises through the presence of a great teacher.

There is something about this person that makes us want to just be in their presence and whatever it is that he or she has, we want some. The second kind of confidence is that of desire. It usually comes from the contemplation of some variant of the four thoughts. We feel the desire to do something about the condition of our lives. We want to deal with our suffering or approach the qualities of enlightened mind. Finally there is the confidence of understanding. It is the confidence of experience. We have entered into the practice and have some notion that it will take us where we want to go. Based upon confidence we go for refuge.

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All Buddhists of all schools and persuasions go for refuge to The Three Jewels, in Tibetan, the Three that are Rare and Precious. As is most often the case in these

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teachings, the sources of refuge have many levels of meaning. Our own level of understanding and insight determine the level at which we enter any practice and refuge is, first and foremost, a practice, and in it we go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The Buddha in the most concrete sense refers to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the wise one of the Shakya clan. He is a source of refuge in that he demonstrated attainment in a very real and practical sense.

Although his spiritual biography has been mythologized to emphasize certain aspects of the teaching, the fact remains that he and others like him were people like us who accomplished The Great Work. He is a source of inspiration and we take refuge in him as a most singular expression of our human potential.

In the Mahayana tradition the Jewel of the Buddha refers to all Buddhas of all times. It is said that this is the fortunate eon and that 1000 Buddhas will appear. The historical Buddha is the fourth; there were three before him and there are nine hundred ninety-six yet to come. It becomes apparent here that we are not looking at any specific individual who was a human and attained enlightenment. Here we are looking at the pervasive nature of Bodhi mind at all levels of expression and evolution. We take refuge in what is vast and profound beyond our comprehension. The article of faith that all beings have Buddha nature is the basis of the whole enterprise and is the subject of innumerable stories and parables. This Buddha nature is Tathagatagarba, the seed of transcendence which is at the heart of all creatures. It is now, at this very moment, directly present in ourselves. It is the essence of all of the Buddhas of the Past, Present, and Future. We take refuge in the immediacy of its manifestation.

The Dharma, in paintings of the Refuge Tree, is represented by books containing the canonical writings which consist of the words of the Buddha Shakyamuni and commentaries written on them by the sages.

Different works are accepted as authentic by various schools. The Tibetans and Asian in general share a great respect for language and the written word. They recognize a very deep mystery in the way that meaning is transmitted by the vowels and consonants. Books, particularly Dharma books are treated with reverence. They are never set directly on the ground, stepped over, or handled carelessly. But the books are, in a sense, a symbol because the Dharma is not books.

The Buddha Shakyamuni left behind a process. The Dharma is, in a practical way, The Dharma is the means by which enlightenment is attained. It is both the teaching and the practice of the path inextricable interwoven. The Dharma is the practicality, the doing of the thing. And it is in the teaching and practice of the Dharma that we take refuge.

The Sangha is the community of practitioners. It is sometimes defined in a very broad way and is for other purposes very specific.

Sometimes the Sangha is presented as consisting an assembly of four or more fully ordained monks or nuns. At other times it is broadened to include all spiritual practitioners, their common bond being the mind that seeks the way. In the Vajrayana the Sangha is often presented as including the exalted Sangha as a special category which consists of Bodhisattvas such as Chenrezik, Manjushri, and others who manifest pure qualities of fully enlightened mind. The Sangha is the vessel of the Dharma. It is the realization of its transmission from generation to generation through the succession of teachers and students. It is the support and the context of the Dharma as it exists in the world and it is in this that we take refuge.

These, then, are the sources of refuge held in common by all schools of Buddhism. The Vajrayana will add at least one more and sometimes three. The main addition is that of the lama. Lama is most often said to be the Tibetan rendering of the Sanskrit

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word guru which isn't really much help unless you know sanskrit. Tibetan is a syllabic language which means that each syllable may have independent meaning. In this case "la" means high or elevated, and "ma" is a nominalizing particle so that the whole thing means roughly high one. Other interpretations let the "ma" mean what it means in practically all languages namely mother. The lama is the teacher and is taken to be a source of refuge of at least equal importance to all of the Buddhas of the past present and future for the overwhelmingly significant reason that this is the person who appears in our lives, teaches us the Dharma and guides us along the path to liberation. The lama occupies a unique position in the Vajrayana and the selection of a teacher is the most important task of the beginning student. Since it seems that westerners have a great deal of difficulty learning to make effective use of spiritual teachers of all disciplines and the landscape is littered with casualties it will probably be useful to spend a bit of time with this.

Westerners in general and Americans in particular do not take kindly to anyone who places himself above others. An authentic lama never places himself above anyone but will permit himself to be used as an object of refuge in a manner consistent with the tantric principle of Dak sNang, pure appearance or sacred outlook. The lama is seen as a fully realized Buddha. It is somewhat difficult for us to understand the use of attitude and belief as a tool. We tend to see our attitudes as something akin to indisputable fact, sacred and inviolable. What distinguishes the Vajrayana from the Mahayana in general is the wealth of method, upaya. Upaya is well translated as the skillful application of means. Skill, as used here goes beyond simple ability and know-how. The connotation is more in line with the dexterity of a juggler or the special prowess of a magician. It is very close to the core concept of the Vajrayana special method of Dak sNang. As the magician, we are engaged in the creation of appearance and by this we must understand not a superficial external shell, the artificial mask of the thing, but the thing itself as pure appearance. The magician is not deceived by his creation but enters fully into relationship with it nonetheless. The more deeply we are able to enter into our appearance, understanding it as such on one hand and, at the same time accepting it, the greater will be our return. Skill in the application of these means involves not falling into the errors of the extremes. At one end of this continuum we might be completely unable to get beyond our perception of the lama as being human just like us who gets mad, eats junkfood and so on. At the other extreme a naive deification of the lama may result in a kind of emotionally dominated delusional state that exaggerates our vulnerability to our own personal weaknesses and those of others.

It will probably clarify this situation if we distinguish between a lama and The Lama. Lama such and such is an individual who gives teachings and empowerments. He or she probably wears robes while performing the functions of a lama but may not at other times. At this stage of things the lama is likely to be Tibetan but may by now prefer a Big Mac to a bowl of tsampa. The Lama is not visible to the same eye. The Lama is one; lamas may be many. Our teacher may participate in and manifest The Lama according to the level of his or her realization. A very great lama may manifest The Lama more or less continuously, a less accomplished lama more occasionally. The Lama is presented in the teaching as Dorje Chang. He may be experienced as the Sambhogakaya, the mind of absolutely pure phenomena. Here the teaching is directly communicated as experience. The appropriate attitude toward The Lama is devotion. In the Tibetan Dharma literature devotion is described ranging from deep adoration through respectful attentiveness to an act of perception. The former is most commonly seen in prayers associated with guru yoga practices such as Calling to The Lama from Afar. As an act of perception devotion is presented in a Mahamudra context as seeing the lama (our teacher) as the Buddha and understanding his actions as

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beneficent activity for the benefit of sentient beings. It has been said that the special expertise of the Kagyu is devotion. Correct devotion is indispensable to samaya, or commitment, as it expresses itself in the teaching and practice of the Vajrayana. So it is very important that we get it right.

With respect to personal weaknesses perceived in the teacher it is necessary to be very careful since the spiritual teacher is a very attractive target for projections of all kinds. Never the less, teachers who are completely free from personal weaknesses are very rare and some of these rare individuals were not so free in their youth. The conquest of these weaknesses constitutes a good part of the biographical literature. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that Milarepa was a mass murderer and that his teacher, the great Marpa, was originally forced to leave his home and family because of a very destructive disposition. A student who expects the teacher to be free from personal weakness is being unrealistic. It is not unrealistic to expect that the teacher will not be dominated by them.

A student who is not able to carry perceptions of the teacher skillfully on the path and protect himself or herself from negative impressions and actions should probably be looking for another teacher. It is wise to take your time in making the selection. In Tibet and other parts of Buddhist Asia things were very much easier.

The lama was a local phenomenon, almost part of the landscape. It is likely that the Lama and his/her predecessors had ministered to the spiritual needs of the village for generations and at the time of refuge the teacher at the monastery automatically became the tsawai lama, the root teacher. Everyone knew who was who and there was unlikely to be any mistake. Here it is different. The Dalai Lama expressed the opinion that twelve years is not too long. It has been wisely said, when looking for a teacher keep both eyes open; when you have found your teacher close one.

The second additional source of refuge unique to the Vajrayana is the Yidam. Yidams are usually referred to as gods or deities but they are not gods in the sense that we understand them in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Deities in this tradition are understood to be aspects of enlightened mind. So if we ask if there actually is a Chenrezik,

the expression of enlightened compassion, the answer is both yes and no. In essence the mind of compassion exists with the kind of attributes symbolized by the iconographic form of Chenrezik. But is Chenrezik an entity in the way we are inclined to think of it, no.

But if we think of the compassion of the enlightened mind as a lifeless concept then we are missing the point. The function of the Yidam is to be found in the name. The word Yidam consists of two syllables meaning to link the mind and thus the Yidams are often referred to as meditational deities. The Yidam is the context within which tantric practice takes place. A full treatment of the role of the Yidam in tantric practice would not be helpful in this discussion.

Let it suffice to say that each time we sit to practice deity yoga we are taking refuge in the Yidam.

The nature of the Dharmapalas, or Dharma Protectors, and their position as sources of refuge is not particularly easy to grasp. The fact that these and other qualities are more often than not imbedded in some kind of mythic storyline may not make things easier. Two of their qualities may facilitate eventual understanding. Once again it is appropriate to remind ourselves that the Dharma is best studied within even though the phenomena in question may be presented in such a way as to seem to be external to ourselves. Many of the protectors, in their very fierce appearance, are to be understood as wrathful aspects of compassion. What we learn out of difficult situations is quite often far more valuable than what we learn with ease. The second quality has to do with transformation. And that is that many of the protectors were originally demons. We should not be too hasty in judgement of those things we fear

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in the world and within ourselves. Initially we may take refuge in the protectors on faith or as a matter of form but as our practice develops so will new understandings. Refuge is the first in a series of vows of increasing complexity and specificity of commitment that a Buddhist may take. It is important to understand the commitments. There is the "C" word and we will have to take a look at it. We are, in this time and place, very sensitive to commitments in many areas of our lives, and with good reason. We are naturally concerned about having to give up things we want in our lives and having to take on things that we don't want. But mostly we fear not being able to keep our commitments. In Buddhist psychology a vow is seen as a "form". It is a form that is not perceptible to the senses but it exists as a form none the less. In English we also acknowledge this in the understanding that like any form vow and promises may be "broken", some irreparably. In considering the commitment of refuge we should see it not as a pass - fail situation where we break this form but as a case of operating sometimes within this form and sometimes outside of it. We should see it as the refinement of an impulse that is at the foundation of our being, our Buddha nature. This impulse that draws us toward the realization of our most fundamental nature is present in all of us and expresses itself in different ways at various times. In a quiet moment of bright sanity it may be very strong and lucid. At such a time we may conceive the thought of refuge and the desire to enter the path to freedom in one form or another with such striking clarity that we are motivated to take on a spiritual discipline. Then later in the day we will say "Wait a minute, what am I doing? I don't have time for this!" But sanity, if cultivated, will always return. It cannot be damaged or made to go away no matter what we do. It can only be obscured. The first three commitments are prohibitions. Of these the first is, having taken refuge in the Buddha, do not again seek refuge in worldly gods because they are subject to the same laws as we are and cannot help us gain our freedom. The Tibetans have a very rich pantheon of worldly gods. Specifically mentioned in this tradition are the Hindu gods, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahadeva, the Nagas and so on. We might be tempted to dismiss this prohibition without giving it much thought.

Yes, our ancestors worshipped the gods of the forest and the river back in the days when they painted themselves blue and ran around in animal skins. But this has no impact on us any more. The old gods are dead and it seems silly to try to revive them. Robert Graves is reported to have remarked that although we have forgotten the old gods they have not forgotten us. So let's look again. Are the old gods dead. It seems that Moloch is still alive and doing well. As the embodiment of greed, avarice, unrestrained acquisitiveness, perhaps he is the god of the '80s and '90s. Priapus, lust, is still with us and narcissus, self love, seems as popular as ever. What do we worship? To what do we pay homage? What controls us? These are our worldly gods. What do we do to try to make the pain go away? Our objects of refuge will be found here. Is this a new and modern interpretation of the gods. No, this is what they have always been and their inner meaning has always been recognized. Although we may renounce them at the moment of refuge, actually giving them up will, for most of us, be the work of a lifetime.

Having taken refuge in the Dharma do no harm to other beings nor speak against the religions or spiritual disciplines of others.

Abstaining from harmful actions seems so self-evident as to make a long presentation unnecessary. It will be enough to say that our notion of what constitutes harm to others may be refined as we mature.

As for the religions of others, the current Dalai Lama has written on the importance of having several valid religions to suit the needs of different types of persons with differing needs and inclinations. One does not need to be a scholar in comparative

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religion to see that the moral codes are essentially universal and that insights have not been the exclusive province of one group or cultural entity throughout history. Having taken refuge in the Sangha do not become overly involved with people who take pleasure in negative actions or those whose values and motives are excessively materialistic. What we are talking about here is actually using the Sangha as a true refuge, as a receptacle for what is genuinely positive in life. If we permit ourselves to be seduced into negativity then both ourselves and our seducers enter the chain of consequences that will ultimately bring us to harm. Entering the path of honest positive action is far more difficult than the alternative. There seems to be a kind of asymmetry in the world that favors the down side as evidenced by the fact that it is so much more difficult to create than to destroy and there are so very many more criminals than there are saints. It is foolish not to make use of all of our resources.

The three positive commitments have to do with respect. Having taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha we treat their expressions, symbols, and representatives with respect. This includes statues and holy figures, books of the scripture, and representatives of the clergy. This commitment covers not only Buddhist but other religions as well.

Please bear in mind that the refuge ceremony is not necessarily true refuge in the same way that an empowerment ceremony may not be true the true empowerment. The refuge ceremony approaches refuge to the extent that the participant is able to bear in mind its significance and enter into the spirit of it. If it is cultivated it will grow and flourish providing a firm foundation for one's practice.

The great Atisha was called the Refuge Lama. So highly did he esteem the teachings on refuge as being central to the whole practice of the Dharma that most of his teachings were given with in the context of refuge. Today it seems to be the reverse and refuge is, more frequently than not, tacked on to an empowerment leaving the beginning student unsure whether anything has happened or not. This slightly muddled essay was patched together from a number of talks on refuge given over several years with the beginning student in mind. Hopefully it will not increase the confusion.

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