

## Tantric Refuge

When a Westerner takes up Vajrayana practices, I think it's because they have a sensitivity to those finer spiritual forces woven throughout this world, and they are able to make use of their benevolent influence in their lives. Without this sensitivity, such practices as prayer, mantra and visualization would not make very much sense, and indeed we hear them criticized by outsiders to these traditions. There's not much value in debating people with greatly different perceptions, but perhaps describing the world view and ways of engaging the divine in the Vajrayana will be of interest and even practical to some and so I thought to write out a few thoughts on this subject. Mostly I do this for my own benefit. If others find some advantage in these ideas, even better.

All Buddhists are familiar with the practice of Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels, The Buddha as our Teacher, the Dharma as the Teachings we follow, and the Noble Sangha as our support, those who have accomplished the teachings, and whose practice we can emulate.

People who follow the Mahayana and then, based on that take up a Vajrayana world view and practices also Take Refuge in what are called The Three Roots: The Lama, Yidam, and Dharma Protector.

A combined verse of Refuge is sometimes recited and reflected on in Tantric Sadhanas, or methods of accomplishment:

*I take refuge in all the Glorious, Holy Lamas;*

*I take refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the mandalas;*

*I take refuge in all the Buddhas,  
those who have conquered and gone beyond;*

*I take refuge in all the Supreme Dharma;*

*I take refuge in all the Noble Sangha;*

*I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis,  
Protectors and Defenders of Dharma,  
who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness*

Although these are usually thought of as preliminary practices, coming before the main method, they are actually profound practices in themselves that deserve to be praised and taken up. It's a great advantage to understand the nature of Refuge and these sources of benefit for our lives.

### The Role of Devotional Practices in Buddhism

Not everyone has a devotional temperament, but we do all need some amount of receptivity to truth as taught and embodied by our teachers, and those throughout time who have transmitted liberating teachings. If our understanding is just in our intellect, that is but the seed of accomplishment. It helps us a great deal to be able to feel in our heart the love and wisdom of our spiritual ancestors. When we resonate with them, beyond the language that is used, we are connecting with a rarified energy that can help us a great deal in our lives.

Buddhism has a reputation for being a do it yourself kind of religion, but that's just how it is seen by outsiders, or by those who prefer to practice by themselves, with the strength of their own will. There are other ways to connect with these lineages and practices though, and all are equally valid approaches. We're all so different in our makeup, there's no one way, honestly.

As Ani Tenzin Palmo said:

*'We are not alone. This universe is full of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are on our side. And, as is known in all Buddhist countries, although it is not always emphasized in the West, we can pray to them.'*

Ani-la added that: *'This is not being theistic – this is being practical. If there's help out there, why not invoke that help? ...'*

In Zen Philosophy Zen Practice, Thich Thien An describes what he calls Self Power and Other Power, and optimally, how they work together.

*The methods of self-power and other-power were both originally taught by Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. According to the teaching of the Buddha, every living being has a Buddha nature. Therefore, it is within the potential of every man to realize that Buddha nature and to become enlightened. But to reach that state is a tremendously difficult task, calling for dauntless courage and unflinching will power. Thus, very few people are capable of reaching enlightenment by themselves; very few have the required spiritual qualification. For the majority of people it is necessary to rely upon the help of others, and here we find the germ of the "other-power" schools.*

We could also say that here is the reason we have the devotional practices. Connecting to wise teachers, and to the benevolent forces in the universe supports and helps us to to develop ourselves, to transform, to experience states of greater freedom and ease, and to help others. They can miraculously appear and provide just the help we need, against all disbelief. More commonly, they are a steadying influence, gentle encouragement, synchronicity or what mundane thinking would simply call good timing.

We do live in a magical universe, with an abundance of spiritual forces around and within us, permeating all of our lives here. That we don't often know them is on account of our obscurations, and our ordinary conceptions, but they are there.

The purpose of changing our thinking is that it leads to more openness, more receptivity to these positive spiritual forces, which facilitates their functioning in our lives. This can be done more formally, through reciting verses, but the actual change happens within, and is more subtle than that.

It's worthwhile to consider each of the practices of taking refuge in the Three Roots. Each of these are profound means of transformation, healing, liberation and enlightenment; they provide help, support and strength in various areas of our lives. This illuminates the meaning of taking refuge, and the advantages that are available.

When we contemplate

*I take refuge in all the Glorious Holy Lamas*

inwardly, we are turning towards our teachers. There are many ways this can be done. What they all have in common, I think, when they are effective means, are that these are heart-practices. Here especially, I think we have to find our own way, and that we can be open to learn from what works for others. Here is a simple verse I reflect on at times, along with directing my mind and opening my heart to the gifts and the light of my guides and mentors:

*With gratitude,*

*I turn to my spiritual ancestors*

*I ask them for their support, protection and strength*

*and I open myself to their inspiring, positive energy...*

Traditional Guru Yoga practices describe merging with the mind of the teacher, and this is surely one way we can connect with their wisdom mind. I also like to think that the function of a teacher is to help us to awaken our own wisdom, love, and strength. Reflecting on their lives and teachings and inspiring example, from our heart, awakens the sense of their presence in

us. This comes as assurance, guidance and revelation beyond what we knew before.

Taking *Refuge in all the Glorious Holy Lamas* is uplifting; it brings energy and inspiration. The Lama is called *the Blessing Root*, as connecting with our wise and loving teachers always has this joyful, exhilarating, and enlivening quality to it.

I've heard one definition of *a blessing* in Buddhism as that which removes obstacles.

In one teaching I was listening to recently, Lama Lodro Rinpoche mentioned that the Three Roots are included in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Why then would they be mentioned separately, meditated on in this way? I think the reason has to do with our teachers being closer to us than the Buddhas. They are the ones that make the teachings available, and cause them to appear to our minds as something we ourselves can achieve. There is no way to measure the great value of such a blessing in our lives.

*I take Refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the Mandalas...*

The Yidams are referred to as *the Accomplishment Root*. These are the names and forms, and mantra practices we take connect with and take up to bring the result of our own and others benefit, in accord with the Holy Dharma. More than this, the spiritual life we are connected with has profound influence. This is so personal it's not easy to talk about, but something should be said, I think.

If you ask someone who is steeped in the Indian Spirituality whether they are monotheistic, or polytheistic, they may say they are both, or neither, or that such terms don't accurately apply. Truth is One, and the help that comes to us appears in many forms. Even for one person it can be that way.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said:

*'You are not alone because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do...'*

It can be surprising to find that others relate to the Divine in the same or even similar way as we do. It's uplifting to find that there are traditions we can relate to deeply, but the source of this feeling of being inspired by teachings on Buddhist Divinities is within us, as our own experience on some level, even just that of faith and intuition.

The *Yi-dams* are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we take up as practices, either over the course of our whole lives, or when we have the need for certain qualities and powers to manifest.

When I think of the Buddhas on this level, I remember more fully that they are always with me, always available. I know in the next instant that these same Divine Qualities, of love, strength, and wisdom are in everyone, all throughout this world.

To *Take Refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities Gathered in the Mandalas*, changes what we think of ourselves, and others, and our world. A mandala is a sacred symbol we enter into in meditation, with a center, the particular aspect of the divine life, surrounded by all that we could say naturally emanates from and supports that Divinity. This includes His or Her Pure Land, and Hosts of Bodhisattvas, Protectors. We contain all this within us.

It's true, we are inherently rich, all of us, and this practice makes that abundantly clear. We all have access to resources we can make use of throughout our lives, for the sake of all beings in every realm, to ease their various sufferings and to provide whatever they need.

*Avalokiteshvara*

*Tara*

*The Healing Buddha*

*Manjushri  
and Vajrasattva*

When we engage in Vajrayana practice, it's universally taught that we visualize ourselves and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and Pure Lands not as flesh and bone, but as beautiful light, transparent forms, communicating, love. This is entirely in accord with how things are, as expressed in the Avatamsaka teachings:

*To all internal and external worlds  
Bodhisattvas have no attachment at all,  
Yet do not abandon works beneficial to sentient beings;  
The great ones cultivate this kind of knowledge.*

*In all lands in the ten directions  
They do not depend or dwell on anything;  
They do not grasp things, such as livelihood,  
And do not arbitrarily create distinctions.*

*They engage with all sentient beings  
In all worlds in the ten directions;  
Observing their essential nature,  
They practice dedication reaching everywhere.*

There are a couple of ways we can hear the term 'non-attachment'. One assumes there is something there, and we are not going to take it up, or pursue it. This is ordinary non attachment. The other way, based on Buddhist Wisdom is to see there is nothing to be grasped, as far as an ego or identity goes, and so the mind is naturally liberated from attachment in a different way. We are then free to receive and give without obstruction, *unimpededly*, as they say.

The lines:

*I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis, Protectors and Defenders of the Dharma who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness...*

bring us to the third of the Three Roots. In general *the Dakinis* are referred to as *the Activity Root*. I have elsewhere written about these as the Buddhist equivalent of what we in the West refer to as angels. There are many levels of Divine Life, and safety and protection, healing and comfort, guidance and care comes to us in this form, at times, whether we see it or not. Being open to it makes for greater receptivity, appreciation and confidence in our lives that we are not alone, that we are helped in inconceivable ways on spiritual levels.

Taking Refuge in this Divine Activity is a gesture on our part of faith and a way of honoring the sacred help we have received in the past, are upheld by now, and will continue to be guided by and cared for in the future, until we reach an advantageous rebirth, liberation from samsara, and enlightenment.

Over the course of our lives, we're going to meet all manner of conditions that need to be responded to skillfully, with various means. We should all know the resources we have, simply by virtue of being human, and because we live in this world where there so many capable, compassionate spiritual lives dedicated to helping others. The way we find out just what we can access to help us is through faith and devotion. We move from a mundane world view to sacred outlook. The way opens just like that, and we learn gradually, almost imperceptibly, until we find ourselves one day standing on a very different ground, with this divine life all 'round.