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### A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF REFUGE AND BODHICITTA

BY

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#### IN THE FORM OF A COMMENTARY ON THE VERSE KNOWN AS *SANG-GYE CHO-TSOG-MA*

This short chapter by Patrul Rinpoche sets out a traditional view of the meaning and process of taking refuge and developing bodhicitta. The format of a word-by-word commentary on a text is a common one in Tibetan literature. The tone is prescriptive as the author seeks to establish the beginner in the basic principles. There is a time for questioning and a time to believe. To spend one's life on the edge in anxious questioning, "Should I, shouldn't I?", "Is it true, is it not true?" is perhaps to miss out on the taste of engagement. Trusting the teacher and the teaching opens the door, and the view on the other side is very different. The belief system of this aspect of the dharma is both extensive and reassuring. It provides a world of certainty and clarity. This of course is not an ultimate truth but is rather a transitional phase. The teachings, the ideas, the deities, mandalas, practices and so on provide a realm of transformation. One might see their function in terms of a rite of passage. (See van Gennepe, Turner etc.)

To take refuge is to separate from reliance on the props of our daily existence. To develop compassion is to go further and separate from our usual self-centred focus. Having thus cut our ties with the ordinary frame of reference we can enter the world of dharma practice, which is a realm of transition in which a fundamental shift in experience can be effected.

Then finally there is the stage of incorporation, of being able to make contact with ordinary life again but from a different position. Here, it is compassion which is the activating force for awakened manifestation within the forms of ordinary life, while insight or wisdom sustains the ability to incorporate ordinariness without getting lost. Thus the formality of the presentation and the directness of the instructions are focused not on enforcing obedience and enslavement to a dogma but on providing an adequate basis for cutting free from the trammels of habitual responses.

This chapter has interesting similarities with Chetsangpa's treatment of bodhicitta in the chapter which follows it. For both writers, altruism is not just a 'good thing'; as is often the view in the west, but is clearly a tactical position that in relative terms aids one on the path.

## THE TEXT

### THE VERSE

To the Buddha, the dharma and the best assembly,

I go for refuge until enlightenment is gained.

By the merit arising from my generosity and other virtues

May I attain buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings.

### THE COMMENTARY

Taking refuge in the three jewels<sup>1</sup> is the ground of all good qualities, and is the factor which distinguishes buddhists from non-buddhists. .

The ground of the practice to attain the stage of perfect buddhahood and the source of all good accumulations in samsara and nirvana is bodhicitta<sup>2</sup> or the developing of the mind towards supreme enlightenment for the sake of others.

Both will be explained here.

### SECTION 1: GOING FOR REFUGE

There are three factors here: the object to which one goes for refuge, the period for which one intends to take refuge, and the actual taking of refuge itself.

Firstly, the object of refuge is threefold: the supreme teacher who is the perfect buddha, the supreme protector which is the excellent dharma, and the supreme guides who are the excellent assembly of the noble sangha.

Of these, the first is the *Buddha* possessing the four perfect modes and the five supreme and perfect knowings.

Regarding the four perfect modes, the intrinsic mode is the original givenness of pure presence free of all obscurations. The open mode is the original knowing of unceasing perfect understanding. The enjoyment mode is the radiant expression adorned with the major and minor signs of a buddha's body. The apparitional mode is all the appearance that arises as necessary for disciples<sup>3</sup> in order to control and educate them.

As regards the five pristine aspects of original knowing, the original knowing of infinite hospitality is the purity of the basic intrinsic ground. The mirror-like original knowing is the unobstructed clarity of that infinite hospitality. The unbiased original knowing is free of attachment to near ones and aversion towards enemies and strangers. The original knowing of clear distinction is the discerning awareness of all possible objects. The original knowing of accomplishment is the effortless benefiting of others.

*Dharma*, the second of the three objects of refuge, consists of both the teaching or literature, and the understanding of that teaching.

The dharma teaching includes the following three aspects. The teaching on morality is concerned with the antidotes employed to control the affliction of desire. The sutra teachings are concerned with the classification and explication of the various meanings to be found in the brief sayings of the Buddha. These are the antidotes used to control the affliction of anger. The teaching on basic principles is the controlling antidote for the affliction of relying on assumptions.

As regards the dharma of understanding, there is the training in superior ethics which is the subject matter of the teaching on morality. There is the training in superior absorbed contemplation which is the subject matter of the sutra teaching. And there is the training in superior true knowing which is the subject matter of the teaching on basic principles. By the practice of these three trainings, the abandonings<sup>4</sup> and actualisations<sup>5</sup> of the five ways<sup>6</sup> and the ten stages<sup>7</sup> develop in the mind. Thus with the benefits of the abandonings there is the truth of cessation of suffering and with the benefits of the actualisations there is the truth of the path which is nirvana.

The *sangha* referred to here consists of the assembly of bodhisattvas who have reached the irreversible stages<sup>8</sup>. With their true knowing they have directly understood emptiness and due to this, with a compassion that does not lapse back into samsaric ways, they are able to love all sentient beings in the way that a mother loves her only child. Those who do this without falling into a state of quietude<sup>9</sup> are the bodhisattvas who attain the tenth stage.

The second factor in taking refuge is the period for which one goes for refuge. This is said to be “until enlightenment is gained”.<sup>10</sup>

There are three special features to the mahayana system of going for refuge. Firstly the object is special. That is to say, it is different from the object of refuge in the hinayana approach.

The hinayana followers view the Buddha as being the most excellent of all humans and hold that Shakyamuni has only a supreme apparitional mode. They do not believe in his open and enjoyment modes. Also they believe that when that apparitional mode died, his activities for beings came to an end.

Moreover, in the hinayana view, the teaching is seen as ‘the most excellent of all that is peaceful and free of desire’. They believe that the teaching refers only to the ending of suffering in the noble truth of cessation.

In the hinayana view the most excellent assembly of the sangha refers to the sravakas and the pratyekabuddhas. They believe that this refers to the anagami, the ekagami and the arhats<sup>11</sup>. This differs from the mahayana view which has been described above.

Regarding the difference in duration of the period for which one takes refuge, in the hinayana system this continues for one's present life span or at most until the result of a sravaka or pratyekabuddha is gained<sup>12</sup>.

The difference in attitude is this. In the hinayana there arises the thought of revulsion at all the suffering one has to personally endure within samsara and one has a desire to be free of it. Then one goes for refuge on the basis of this view.

Whereas the followers of the mahayana develop the altruistic aspiration for all beings to gain buddhahood. It is on the basis of this view that they go for refuge.

Thirdly, there is the actual practice of going for refuge. Reciting "I go for refuge", I simultaneously visualise that on each speck of dust in the universe there are as many buddhas as there are dust particles in the universe, each surrounded by hosts of bodhisattvas, their spiritual sons. Thus infinite space is full of buddhas and bodhisattvas, each with their mind full of the excellent dharma of teaching and actualisation. They take care of myself and all sentient beings with their great qualities of deep understanding, compassion and power. Before all these great guiding leaders assembled together, I and all sentient beings fold our hands at our hearts in devotion and say, "From this time onwards for as long as the essence of enlightenment is not gained we will rely on you, the three jewels, as our place of refuge. Your teachings shall be our sole practice. Believing that you are our only help and refuge, we fully trust in whatever you do and with this attitude we go to you for refuge."

Regarding the training for the act of going for refuge, there are six different trainings and five general practices.

The six different trainings comprise the three things to be abandoned and the three things to be practised.

The three things to be abandoned are as follows. Having gone to the buddha for refuge, one should not make obeisance to the local gods who wander in samsara. Having gone to the dharma for refuge one must not cause harm or trouble to sentient beings. Having gone to the sangha for refuge, one should not enter into friendships with anti-buddhists<sup>13</sup>.

The three things to be practised are as follows. One must have deep faith and devotion, not forgetting to practise in accordance with the instructions of the Buddha. And one must have respect for even a fragment of a broken statue.

One must be diligent in listening to, reflecting on, and meditating on the excellent dharma. And one must have respect for even a fragment of writing, for writing helps the expression of the dharma.

One must have faith and devotion towards the sangha and those who follow the Buddha and take as one's friends only those who follow virtue. And one must have respect for even a piece of yellow cloth since this symbolises the robes worn by monks and nuns.

The five general practices are as follows. Even if one's life is at stake one will not forsake the three jewels<sup>14</sup>. Although one is in a state of great necessity, one will not seek any other method for the fulfilment of one's aims<sup>15</sup>. One will not interrupt regular religious practice. One will ceaselessly strive to support and encourage oneself and all others in going for refuge. Wherever one goes one will make salutation to the buddhas staying in all directions.

## SECTION 2: DEVELOPING BODHICITTA

In general, one can consider both the relative and the absolute aspects of developing the enlightened mind or bodhicitta.

The development of bodhicitta in terms of relative truth<sup>16</sup> is the attitude of striving for perfect enlightenment in order to benefit others.

The development of bodhicitta in terms of absolute truth is the true knowing or original knowing of the direct realisation of emptiness.

The development of relative truth bodhicitta can be classified into the development of the bodhicitta of aspiration, which is like the desire to travel, and the development of the bodhicitta of practice, which is like the actual journey itself.

Both of these develop from the formal encouragement of bodhicitta and they are known as the development of bodhicitta arising from the grosser external symbols<sup>17</sup>.

The development of absolute bodhicitta has to arise from the strength of one's meditation on the path and so this is known as the development of bodhicitta that is gained with the subtle original as-it-isness.

Moreover, this developing of relative bodhicitta also has the two benefits or 'corners'. With compassion one takes all sentient beings as one's object, and with true knowing one takes perfect enlightenment as one's object<sup>18</sup>. If these two 'corners' are not fully present one cannot enter upon the mahayana development of bodhicitta and so they are both necessary.

Moreover, there are two aspects to the actual development of the bodhicitta of aspiration. These are the perception that the cause is merit<sup>19</sup>, and the aspiration for the result of perfect enlightenment.

Regarding the first aspect, the text says "By my generosity and other virtues". If all one's virtuous deeds are gathered together they can be classified as the merit arising from generosity, the merit arising from morality, and the merit from meditation.

These can be further classified as the six transcending factors. The first two factors are generosity and morality, then come patience, absorbed contemplation and true knowing which are aspects of merit arising from meditation, while the sixth factor, diligence, helps to develop the others.

The six transcending factors must be firmly established in one's mind. Thus a mind that gives to everyone is generous. An attitude of abandoning error constitutes morality. Patience means imperturbability of mind. A spiritually ambitious attitude implies diligence. Absorbed contemplation is indicated by an unwavering mind. And a mind that can clearly distinguish phenomena demonstrates true knowing.

Regarding the second aspect of the aspiration for the result of perfect enlightenment, the text says, "I must attain buddhahood in order to benefit all beings." In this way the verse encourages development of bodhicitta with the two kinds of benefits.

'In order to benefit all beings': with this intention one compassionately takes all beings as the object of one's thoughts.

'I must attain buddhahood': with this intention, employing true knowing, one wishes to have perfect enlightenment as one's object. Following from this one expresses an aspiration such as, "On the basis of all my virtuous roots may I gain buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings, as many as would equal the sky".

There are five aspects to the training process for the bodhicitta of aspiration. Do not allow your mind to forget all sentient beings. Always remember the benefits of developing bodhicitta. Be diligent in the methods of gathering the accumulations of merit and true knowing. Be diligent in the practice of bodhicitta. Practise the four white actions and abandon the four black actions<sup>20</sup>.

If you reject and abandon even one single sentient being then you will have abandoned the root of your aspiration bodhicitta, therefore you must develop an attitude of desire to benefit all sentient beings. If you remember the benefits of this practice then you will feel very happy and you will become diligent in your development of bodhicitta. Therefore you should remember the benefits of always developing bodhicitta.

If you gather the accumulations then the strength of your development of bodhicitta will increase. Therefore you should gather the accumulations using various means such as the seven-part practice<sup>21</sup>.

There are three aspects to the practice of bodhicitta: the cause, the practice, and the training. One practises the cause by meditating on the four limitless attitudes. The actual practice of bodhicitta is performed by developing bodhicitta three times during the day and three times during the night. The practice of the training is remembering the equality of self and others, exchanging one's position with that of others and feeling deep love for them.

Firstly, the four limitless attitudes. Love is the desire that all beings who are without happiness should come to be happy. Compassion is the desire that all those who suffer should be freed of their sorrows.<sup>22</sup> Joy is the wish that all beings may never be separated from the happiness that is free of suffering. Equanimity is the wish that all those who have attachment to friends and

relatives and aversion for strangers and enemies may have their attachment and aversion pacified.

Secondly, the actual practice of bodhicitta. During each of the six periods of morning, mid-day, afternoon, evening, midnight and dawn one should practise developing bodhicitta using whichever ritual text is appropriate, be it long or short.

Thirdly, for the equality of oneself and others, consider that “I and all other beings are the same in desiring happiness and wishing to put an end to suffering”.

Regarding the exchange between oneself and others, one meditates that, “I will give all my happiness to sentient beings and I will take upon myself all the suffering that afflicts them”.

Regarding loving others more than oneself, this is to diminish and discard all self-interest and to act for the benefit of others.

Regarding the eight white and black actions, there are four white actions to be practised and four black actions to be abandoned.

The four black actions are: to deceive those who are worthy of respect; to feel shame at what is not shameful; to insult saintly beings; and to cheat sentient beings.

Their antidotes are the four white actions: not to knowingly tell a lie even though one’s life is at risk; to strive to put all beings on the path to enlightenment; to respect all bodhisattvas as if they were one’s teacher; to maintain a straightforward attitude toward all sentient beings.

If one is diligent in these good practices then in all one’s future lives one will not forget bodhicitta, and all the good qualities of the ten stages and five ways will grow and develop within one, increasing more and more like the waxing moon.

## NOTES

1. Buddha, dharma and sangha and dharmakaya or open mode, sambhogakaya or enjoyment mode and nirmanakaya or apparitional mode. These terms are explained in the text.
2. This means both developing an altruistic intention towards enlightenment and the non-dual attainment of buddhahood.
3. Literally, the ones to be trained and developed. Potentially this means all sentient beings but in practice it refers especially to those whose karma allows them to make a creative contact with the three jewels.
4. All that has to be given up.

5. All that has to be understood.
6. The five ways or paths are those of preparation, application, seeing, practice, and fulfilment.
7. The ten stages are 'the joyful one', 'the stainless one', 'the illuminating one', 'the radiant one', 'the one difficult to attain to', 'manifest presence', 'the one which goes far', 'the unshakeable one', 'the one having good discrimination', 'the cloud of dharma'. The ten stages commence with the third way, that of seeing.
8. That is, those that are beyond the seventh of the ten stages.
9. Such as the nirvana of the sravakas where there is an absence of engagement with the world.
10. In the second line of the root verse.
11. These terms refer to the various stages of abandonment of cyclical experience in samsara in favour of the absolute freedom from suffering, which is nirvana.
12. The second special feature of the mahayana refuge is that the period of taking refuge lasts until perfect enlightenment is gained by all beings. One fearlessly accepts that this may take an enormous amount of time.
13. That is, one should not make friends with people who will undermine one's beliefs.
14. As when someone says, "Change your religion or I will kill you."
15. So that even if one were to become impoverished due to practising the dharma, one would not steal food.
16. See the later chapter on the Two Truths (Chapter 7).
17. Thus these two forms of bodhicitta require (a) repeated performance of the formal ritual promise to develop love and compassion for all beings, leading to (b) subsequent acts for their welfare.
18. By taking all beings as one's object, one strives compassionately to benefit them all, and by taking enlightenment as one's object one strives to gain enlightenment. Thus one benefits oneself by realising the open mode and one benefits others by activating the enjoyment and apparitional modes.
19. That is, to perceive the necessity of accumulating merit since this is the cause of the helpful situations necessary for the path.



20. These are explained below.
21. The seven parts, or branches, are as follows: offering salutation to the buddhas and bodhisattvas; making offerings; confession; rejoicing at the good deeds of others; requesting dharma teachings; beseeching the buddhas and bodhisattvas not to die; dedicating all merit to sentient beings.
22. Compassion also implies taking definite steps to alleviate the suffering.