
A dzogchen perspective on reciting the refuge and bodhicitta

James Low

Extracted from a seminar on 21st – 22nd November 2009

Mannheim, Germany

Transcribed by Daniel Beierstettel

Edited by Barbara Terris and James Low

Excerpts

In awakening to the open dimension which is our own ground, we are the natural mode, or dharmakaya. In opening to the immediate non-dual field of experience, we are the radiant mode or sambhogakaya. In opening to and responding within the precise context that we manifest in, we are the communication mode, or nirmanakaya.



Some Western people have fantasies that in their last life they were a Tibetan yogi, or they imagine that one day somebody is going to recognise them as some great reincarnation, as a tulku. Understandable as these fantasies are, they are not helpful because actually, being ordinary is very very special. The ordinary goes everywhere. If you become famous, there are lots of place you can't go, lots of things you can't do.



The essence of the bodhisattva practice is to stay relaxed and open and allow oneself to arise in response to the situation as it reveals itself. The more we take the bodhisattva path, the more we realise how limited we are and that there is a kind of undertow, like in the sea when the water catches you and pulls you back. To counteract that we need to practice wisdom. The more we practice wisdom, the more calm and peaceful we are. Then, of course, the danger lies in not wanting to be disturbed, which in turn needs to be rectified by getting back into the world and being with others. At first when we practice, we find more clarity; then we go back into the world and we become more confused.



A dzogchen perspective on reciting refuge and bodhicitta

We are gathered here in what is known as the 'Ngakpa House'. The term '*ngakpa*' means somebody who uses mantra. Mantra, *ngak*, is a function of speech, and speech is linked with energy. All the time we are breathing in and out and when we stop breathing we die. When the breath is moving up through the throat, it comes to the vocal chords where its potential is realised through the setting up of particular vibrations through which we make particular sounds. These are understood in terms of the languages we speak.

In the Tibetan tradition reciting is very important. In Europe people always used to read aloud. It was not until around the 10th century, that silent reading became customary and acceptable in monasteries. Up to the recent past schoolchildren would spend a lot of time learning by rote, through repeatedly reciting aloud. The link between reciting and memorising was very important. People would have memorised poems and certainly most people would have known quite large parts of the Bible and hymns by heart.

Nowadays however, even at a very early stage in their education, children are encouraged to read in silence. They start with making a noise, then they quickly learn to read quietly –you can see little children's mouths moving as they read—and then their reading becomes completely internal. This separates the energetic quality of engagement with language from one's cognitive engagement. Reading becomes all about meaning as an abstraction, rather than about making sounds, which is a participation in the shared field of arising experience.

Generally speaking, most people nowadays are pretty quiet; for example we no longer have street-sellers shouting their wares. However due to the most marvellous new invention, the mobile phone, people now feel entitled to make a lot of noise in public. Unfortunately, they are not making the noise with an actual person who is present with them but with somebody very far away. This is very strange. We can sit together quietly on the train and our neighbour is talking to somebody very far away and you are hearing what they say. There is an implicit law in this: you can hear, but you can't speak, because they are having a 'private conversation'. This further promotes our habit of retroflection, of turning back inside ourselves what could come out into the world, what in fact belongs in the world as an immediate responsiveness.

Making sound is very important for it is an aspect of accepting that our existence is part of the world and that we make an impression on the world. It helps us to see that part of what we call our identity is created through the process of interaction: that the external flow of exchange, the

external dialogue, is replicated by an internal dialogue. In fact the structure of our mental processes is dialogic.

REFUGE AND BODHICITTA

སངས་རྒྱས་ཚོས་དང་ཚོགས་ཀྱི་མཚན་རྣམས་ལ།
 བྱང་ཆུབ་བར་དུ་བདག་ནི་སྐྱབས་སུ་མཚེ།
 བདག་གིས་སྦྱོན་སོགས་བགྱིས་པའི་བསོད་ནམས་ཀྱིས།
 འགྲོ་ལ་ཕན་ཕྱིར་སངས་རྒྱས་འགྲུབ་པར་ཤོག། ॥

སངས་རྒྱས་ཚོས་དང་ཚོགས་ཀྱི་མཚན་རྣམས་ལ།

SANG GYE CHO DANG TSOG KYI CHO NAM LA
*Buddha dharma and sangha of supreme, (plural) to
 assembly best*

To the Buddha, the Dharma and the Assembly of the Excellent Ones

བྱང་ཆུབ་བར་དུ་བདག་ནི་སྐྱབས་སུ་མཚེ།

JANG CHUB BAR DU DAG NIKYAB SU CHI
Enlightenment until I refuge for go

I go for refuge until enlightenment is gained.

བདག་གིས་སྦྱོན་སོགས་བགྱིས་པའི་བསོད་ནམས་ཀྱིས།

DAG GI JIN SOG GYI PAI SO NAM KYI
I doing generosity other perfections¹ doing, practicing virtue through

Through the virtue of practicing generosity and the other perfections

འགྲོ་ལ་ཕན་ཕྱིར་སངས་རྒྱས་འགྲུབ་པར་ཤོག། ॥

DRO LA PHEN CHIR SANG GYE DRUB PAR SHO
all beings to benefit in order to buddha accomplish may it happen

May I attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings

¹ The six paramitas, or perfections, are generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditative concentration and wisdom.

TO THE BUDDHA, DHARMA AND SANGHA

I GO FOR REFUGE UNTIL ENLIGHTENMENT.

BY THE MERIT ARISING FROM GENEROSITY AND THE OTHER VIRTUES

MAY I GAIN ENLIGHTENMENT FOR THE SAKE OF ALL SENTIENT BEINGS.

This refuge and bodhicitta prayer is a very common one, which all Tibetans will know. We can recite it quite slowly to give the quality of the sound a chance to echo through our bodies. Then the cognitive interpretation of the words, the energetic quality of the sound, the presence of the breath, and the spaciousness out of which these three arise, can be held together.

It says that we will take refuge in the buddha, the dharma and the sangha until we attain enlightenment. We have to think about what it means to take refuge. We may think that the Buddha is a kind of papa-figure, the big strong one who knows all the answers, who can do everything, who is better than other people's papas. From that point of view the Buddha is like the king, and that is why we place him on a throne. Of course the implication of that is that if we are thinking in terms of our papa, then we must be in the place of the child—and children don't get enlightened, adults get enlightened. As long as we are in a relationship of looking for papa, we do something special outside ourselves, and implicit in this is the impossibility of awakening. One of the traditional functions of the papa is to say, *"It's your bed time now. Go to sleep."* – *"I want to stay awake!"* – *"No, no, no, off you go to sleep."* The child isn't ready to go to sleep but is being told they can't trust their own experience.

The purpose of our study of dzogchen is to understand the nature of 'being ready'. From the point of view of dzogchen we are always *already* in the state of openness. Awakening or enlightenment is not a new experience, something to be gained, but is a quality of seeing the integration of the ever-present awake openness with the energy of confusion. It's not that our confusion is the obstacle to awakening. As long as we see it as something to be removed, we have two factors: the 'good state' and the 'not so good state'. With this comes the belief that if only we can move from our current 'not so good state' to the 'good state' we will be happy.

The problem with this view is that when we go somewhere else, we go as we are. When immigrants come to Germany for a better life, they don't become Germans. They become foreigners who live in Germany: They have their own language, their own culture, their own way of cooking food and yet – here they are. The children go to school and gradually speak more maturely in the German language, and are sort of Germans, but not really Germans. This is quite a problem. In the same way we think 'I

will become enlightened! If I go to the land of enlightenment, I will be me in the land of enlightenment.' But my mother tongue is samsara. I like to eat a samsara-burger with my tea, and have a side-dish of karmic chips to dip in the mayonnaise of attachment and the ketchup of ignorance. But when I try to prepare this food in Buddhaland, the Buddhas become unhappy. And they say, *"If you want to live here, you have to eat our food!"* This is the problem.

So the centre issue is identification: What is the basis of our sense of self? What are we constructed out of? When we take refuge it's not so much a projection on to some good things somewhere else but rather the practice of staying present in yourself. Being present in relation to the Buddha, being present in relation to the dharma, and being present in relation to the sangha...

Refuge

When we recite this together we imagine that the Buddha is in front of us. We imagine the Buddha's form as radiant, translucent. We can see through it; it's like a rainbow. The Buddha represents all the teachers and by engaging in the practice we are reminded that we are always in relation with them. The heart of all the Buddhas is openness or emptiness; there is nothing solid to grasp. Our heart also is open and empty. Taking refuge is a connection of emptiness to emptiness. The sky-like quality of our awareness and the sky-like nature of manifesting the Buddhas are inseparable.

Dharma means actuality, how things are. It means 'that which is unchangeable'. In the Tibetan language the word for Buddha, '*sang gye*', is made of two parts. The first part, '*sang*', means pure, purifying, without any limit or conditioning. '*Gye*' means expansive, radiant, full of all that is required. These two aspects link with the two principle aspects of dzogchen, *kadag* and *lhundrup*. Primordial purity or *kadag*, the focus of *trekchöd* practice, essentially means releasing fixation and limitation. '*Gye pa*' equates with *Lhundrup*, the immediate presence of the non-dual experiential field, and this equates with the practice of *thögal*.

All our experience is a continuous flow of thoughts, feelings and so on and yet, all of these moments are displaying themselves in the open field of our awareness. The stillness of the mind itself is inseparable from the movement and ceaseless change of what is arising, all that we experience. This is the quality of taking refuge in the dharma. The term 'dharma' also means 'phenomena'. So when we talk of dharma in this context, it means the true nature of everything—*dharmatā* in Sanskrit—and simultaneously, the momentary particularity of each phenomenon.

We take refuge in the sangha. The sangha means a group, an assembly, an association. What is associated? Subject and object. Everything is the sangha: the holy bodhisattva-sangha; the sangha of the monks and nuns; the sangha of motorcars; the sangha of the apples; even the sangha of the butchers. Everything one is connected with is part of the sangha and as long we are alive, we are always connected with something.

The general buddhist teachings list five bad things which cause you to go immediately to hell when you die. One of these is causing schism in the sangha. How would we do that? By saying, *'This is good whereas that is not so good.'* This afternoon, many people will be going to the football match and they will shout, *'Mannheim is the best!'* In that way we are always cutting the world into what is good and what is not so good: *our group, our family, our kind of occupation, our religion.* But on a deeper level, everything is our immediate connection. When we are here and present, everything is immediately with us. After that immediate moment we put in our categories; we pull out our scissors and cut down the lines and we say *'Good – bad; right – wrong.'*

When we are taking refuge the essential point is to stay relaxed and present, open and connected with whatever is occurring. Through that we come to see the truly impermanent nature of whatever is arising and passing and come to see the nature of attachment. So when a town like Mannheim has a football team and a stadium, people become followers of that football club. They might do that for many many years and during that period of time the players will change, the managers will change and the success of the team will go up and down. So what are they following? Essentially they are following an abstract concept, a concept which can be used to give a sense of continuity to the flow of events of life, which are always changing.

When we start to observe how our thoughts themselves are impermanent and that the experience of objects being permanent is based entirely on thoughts which are themselves impermanent, then we start to understand what is meant by *'all things are illusory'*. It doesn't mean there is nothing there at all, but rather that what is there, is a construct. The one who is participating in this co-creation of the construct is our mind itself.

So taking refuge is to commit ourselves to being present and to be open to how things actually are, rather than to the intoxication of our habitual ideas about how we think they are. It means to commit ourselves to the practice of being open, to being present with whatever happens, to allowing ourselves to see things exactly as they are. That even includes seeing the arising and passing of the intoxicating thoughts that tell us that things are *not* how they actually are. That is to

say, ignorance arises and passes through the mind in the form of its creation – the thoughts – which say that things are truly self-existing and real.

Just as children can believe in Santa Claus and Mickey Mouse, we believe in this glass of water that I am holding. It seems self-evident that the glass has its own reality, that it exists in and of itself. Yet, for us, it is always a mental event, the product of our imagination. Thus the glass has the same nature as Mickey Mouse. If you watch the television, you can see Mickey Mouse and Mickey Mouse can make you laugh. The glass can hold water. Illusion has its function, but it has no inherent self.

This is the basis of the refuge. **‘TO THE BUDDHA, DHARMA AND SANGHA, I GO FOR REFUGE UNTIL ENLIGHTENMENT.’**

Bodhicitta

Then we say, **‘BY THE MERIT ARISING FROM GENEROSITY AND THE OTHER VIRTUES MAY I GAIN ENLIGHTENMENT FOR THE SAKE OF ALL SENTIENT BEINGS.’** The practice of virtue is important. Although from the point of view of emptiness, of wisdom, there is no real difference between what we call virtuous and what we call unvirtuous, this is only half the story because wisdom and method, wisdom and compassion, need to go together. Although there are no truly existing entities, we *do* have experiences and what we experience is the movement of energy. As we know, the various forms of energy impact us in very different ways.

If you watch a Mickey Mouse cartoon and then you watch a horror movie, you will have two very different kinds of experience. They are both just ‘empty’ programs on the television. Neither is truly real, but the function that they have, the impact that they have on our existence, is very different. When we watch the horror film, there is a kind of repugnance, a withdrawing; our skin tenses up, our diaphragm tenses, our breathing changes. This example points to the way in which virtue is a quality or a force of energetic participation. This quality of manifestation has the possibility of easing our path to enlightenment, because it lightens our way of being in the world with others.

Awakening to our own true nature involves the self-liberation or releasing of the limiting patterns of attachment whereby we construct our ordinary sense of self. When this open sense of freedom arises, it’s a freedom to exist, to manifest, *in connection*. What are we going to do? The stage is set; the curtain opens. What roles are required of us? Do we have the resources to meet the needs of others?

In awakening to the open dimension which is our own ground, we are the natural mode, or dharmakaya. In opening to the immediate non-dual field of experience, we are the radiant mode or sambhogakaya. In opening to and responding within the precise context that we manifest in, we are the communication mode, or nirmanakaya.

This is the natural integration of stillness and movement, the actuality of the buddha. However the unique specificity of each buddha is the fruit of their past activity; their vows, practices and learning. Manifestation is for the other, with the other – the potential for this is both intrinsic and developed. So when we develop qualities like generosity, patience, courage and so on, these qualities help us on the path, and they also bring about a ripening of our capacity to respond. For example we have the transcendent quality, or paramita, of generosity. Generosity means to not keep things to oneself but to share. How shall we share? We will share what we have... But *you* might not like what *I* have. Last night we had some blood sausage, it's very nice to share this. But some people would not like to be offered this gift. So, part of generosity is to find a way to give what is useful to the other. The range of one's capacity– which is sufficient for one's own concerns– has to be deconstructed or opened up, so that there is a hospitality for the particularities of other people. That is to say, the other – the unique specificity of the other – is the invocation to the dharmakaya to show different forms, to show whatever is necessary for the different kinds of beings.

Tradition tells us that when the Buddha was enlightened under the bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, at first he decided that he was not going to speak since no one would understand. Then many gods came and asked him, *"Please say something, help sentient beings to understand"*. It was only then, the texts say, that he spoke. He taught eighty-four thousand different kinds of dharma because there are many different patterns of karmic construction. What the Buddha got for himself – which is to say, the dharmakaya – couldn't be said; nobody can ever say this. But in order to help beings to come into a practice or a path which could awaken them to their own inexpressible experience, the Buddha had to use many different kinds of examples to connect with different sorts of people to bring them to a direct understanding through their own experience.

When we practice the paramitas we integrate wisdom and compassion. By realising the emptiness of the one who gives, the one who is given to, and the thing that is given, there is the practice of generosity within wisdom. The practice of compassion is to be able to give in a manner that is within the capacity of the other to receive.

Sometimes life can be very frustrating because what we might like to do, what we feel we might be able to achieve, seems thwarted or blocked by the situation we are in. At work we might have many

ideas about how to improve and develop things but our 'brilliant' ideas are blocked by the 'stupidity' of others. The more our clarity is connected to our ego, the more we suffer. So we have to disconnect clarity and ego. Then, instead of the clarity being focused on what we as individuals think is best, it functions within non-duality. That is to say, the united, integrated experiential field of subject and object is the arena of clarity. Asking '*What will work?*' brings about a de-centring from one's ego. However, it is not a matter of altruistic sacrifice, since both self and other are part of the same field. Saying '*I must win*' or saying '*You must win*' is not very helpful. The aim is benefit for all! How can we find a way that functions for all of us? This is the quality of the nirmanakaya, connected, tender and powerful.

We are very lucky in the west because we have a lot of social freedom to live as we wish, including doing practice. Yet even here, some people are condemned to be rich, famous and in the public eye all their life. They cannot do ordinary things for themselves like going to the supermarket and waiting in a queue. That can be a limitation to the quality of compassion, because the view from on high is not the view from ground level. In order to be everything – which is what is required – one has to become nothing. Then out of nothing comes everything. But if you are something, you will always be seeking to install your something-ness, and from that position you will relate only to those whose something-ness resonates with yours.

Some Western people have fantasies that in their last life they were a Tibetan yogi, or they imagine that one day somebody is going to recognise them as some great reincarnation, as a tulku. Understandable as these fantasies are, they are not helpful because *actually*, being ordinary is very very special. The ordinary goes everywhere. If you become famous, there are lots of place you can't go, lots of things you can't do. Who wants to be followed by paparazzi?

The essence of the bodhisattva practice is to stay relaxed and open and allow oneself to arise in response to the situation as it reveals itself. The more we take the bodhisattva path, the more we realise how limited we are and that there is a kind of undertow, like in the sea when the water catches you and pulls you back. To counteract that we need to practice wisdom. The more we practice wisdom, the more calm and peaceful we are.

Then, of course, the danger lies in not wanting to be disturbed, which in turn needs to be rectified by getting back into the world and being with others. At first when we practice, we find more clarity; then we go back into the world and we become more confused. In this way we enter the path of pulsation, of the tides of opening and closing, until we find ourselves open through all the phases of the pulsation.