

True Refuge

Tarchin Hearn

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wangapekabooks@clear.net.nz

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*May our explorations serve to deepen awareness,
ripen the fruits of wisdom and water the flowers of compassion,
that we may bring health and joy to all beings.*



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Welcome

I would like to begin this project with a bow of respect, acknowledging the mysterious interweaving of our lives. Your hands on the page, or mouse, or track-pad and your eyes scanning the script. My aspirations flowing through fingers on keyboard; desiring to share something extraordinarily immediate yet fundamentally un-pin-down-able. Your breath subtly shifting. My heartbeat adjusting to this very idea.

All of me engaged in the writing,
and all of you engaged in the reading,
and both of us
– each an entire community of communities –

inter-beings of inner and outer,
micro and macro;
myriad movements of responsiveness,
rhythmically ebbing and flowing,
breathing,
digesting
and
metabolizing;

interminglings of empathy,
imagination and understanding.

May we link together well
and recognize the profound and meaningful,
right here
in the very midst of our merging.



Preface

WE ARE LIVING IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES. From one perspective you could call it, ‘a perfect storm of catastrophes’: pollution, corruption, environmental collapse, loss of democracy and rising of kleptocracy, corporate obsession with growth, worship of celebrity, money and social status, erosion of public trust in governing institutions and systems of justice. The list is depressingly long and we’ve hardly scratched the surface. It’s a mayhem of volatile uncertainty, and we’re all in it together, you and me, good guys and bad guys, possums, peaches, sea creatures and micro-organisms.

Ironically, in spite of our wealth and modernity, our worldly knowledge, science and technology, computers and internet, many people feel increasingly

vulnerable to factors outside themselves and beyond their control. Think of over paid executives, 'market forces' and shadow-ridden supervisors in departments, faculties and bureaucracies. Think of climate change, earthquakes, tsunamis, pandemics and failing healthcare systems. Life is and has always been a dynamic of shifting transformation in myriad dimensions and levels of being. This is not the problem. Our tragedy today is in not using our capacity for intelligence, compassion and clear seeing, to meet this extraordinary dancing of life in courageous and creative ways.

In the past, and arguably still today, a need for a sense of certainty in the midst of general chaos and personal helplessness, has triggered the emergence of religions and religious institutions which themselves often ended up becoming tyrannies of divinity, expertise, and authoritarianism. Any voice that would give us a sense of order and dependability seemed better than a background atmosphere of uncertainty. In 1846, Ludwig Feurbach, a German philosopher, published a small book called, *The Essence of Religion*. He wrote;

“The feeling of dependency in human beings is the basis of religion, but the object of this dependency, that upon which they are and feel themselves dependent, is originally nothing other than nature. Nature is

the first, original object of religion, as is amply confirmed by the history of all religions and peoples.” (my bold)¹

In writing this, I think Feurbach was way ahead of his time. Even today, we haven't realized the profound implications of our ecological roots in any meaningful way. We humans have become lost in delusions and misunderstandings of individual self-ness – selves that inevitably have to compete with other selves in a doomed-to-fail game of survival which today has morphed into a variety of global wars and conflicts. For many people, nature is no longer the miraculously evolving living matrix that we are, rather, it has become an external resource to exploit, or almost as bad, a kind of decorative background scenery for humans to enjoy and holiday in.

Today, religion is degenerating into the veneration of money, markets and power. Shopping has become an unconscious form of worship. Just three days back on Christmas day, we heard on the radio an enthusiastic report that New Zealanders had spend a record amount of money through EFT-POS and credit card transactions! It was announced in a way that seemed to imply that we should be overjoyed at our accomplishment. In the same news there was not even a hint of the original spirit of this season's celebrations. Driven by feelings of alienation and uncertainty while at the same

time yearning in our depths for something meaningful, we try, with the support of blind faith or compulsive prayer or even inspired thinking, to reach for God, love, understanding or wisdom, but our efforts seem to frequently miss the mark.

In my own life, this grasping and seeking for something of meaning has led to merging the study and practice of buddhadharma with many threads of scientific enquiry, especially in the fields of biology and ecology. I found myself looking, sometimes quite consciously and at other times as if through a glass darkly, for some sense or understanding of what I've come to see as the mystery of refuge, a way of being that can illumine our true place in the cosmos. This book you are now holding in your hands is an outflow of these efforts.



Introduction

*In the Buddha, the Dharma and the excellent Sangha,
I take my refuge till enlightenment is reached.
By the power of generosity and other good deeds,
May I realize buddhahood for the sake of all living beings.*

AT THIS VERY MOMENT, in Buddhist temples around the world, devotees with palms joined at the heart are reciting verses of refuge to the *Buddha, Dharma* and *Sangha*, in a ritual called ‘taking refuge’, or ‘going for refuge’. For many of these people, this act of devotion is a practice they learned from their parents or grandparents and has become something of an ingrained habit; a largely unquestioned part of being the person they are. Christians, Moslems, Jews and Hindus, along

with practitioners of other institutionalized forms of religion can be seen performing similar rituals in similar moments of devotion.

For some people, taking refuge is much more than just a religious habit. It can be a powerful moment of emotionally charged poetry that helps them touch a place of deep inspiration and uplifting aspiration. For others, contemplating refuge becomes a doorway into a lifetime of questing and questioning that takes them far beyond the gates of the temple and the religious symbolism of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In their quest, they may even find themselves asking, what is refuge? Who goes for refuge? And for that matter, what do we actually mean by Buddha, Dharma and Sangha?

For some, the journey of refuge can expand in the direction of a vigorous exploration of what we are, and where we are, and how we as human beings fit in with the rest of the world and the cosmos around us. Questioning this way, we may find ourselves asking what we actually mean by 'going for' or 'taking' refuge. Is refuge to be found in a location, something one can 'go' to? Is refuge a thing, something that can be taken or held? If we really look deeply, enquiring with the whole of our being, we may end up feeling our way into a fresh understanding of the very fabric and functioning of life and, in doing so, touching a sense of vast meaning, profound belonging

and unfathomable completeness. At this moment we might realize that the contemplation of refuge has brought us back to the fullness of what, where and who we are. We will have recognized and realized our true home.

Years ago, I set out to write a booklet on refuge, one that would be filled with explanations and clarifications of Buddhist tradition. As time passed, my expanding reflections and explorations, coupled with teaching and working with people both in cities and in retreat, took me ever more deeply into a vast and complex weaving of life experience. I began to sense that truly seeking refuge and actually resting in or realizing refuge, were the underlying themes of everyone's lives whether they had heard of refuge or not. Refuge is the concern of everyone, not just Buddhists.

As I pointed out in the preface, all of us are participating in a turbulent world of climate change, political instability, social upheaval, economic uncertainty and natural disasters. For the millions of people finding themselves engulfed by fire, flood, earthquake, war and rising poverty, the search for meaning and physical and emotional resilience is no longer a mere philosophical diversion. It is central to their survival as well functioning, decent human beings. This search for meaning, in the midst of emotional stress and increasing feelings of disempowerment, is the viscerally real

work of refuge in action. I would say that it has been our central human work throughout history. The capacity to wonder about what we are and where we are going and how we are connected with others and what we can contribute to the world, is what makes us humans fully human. Whether we grapple with this as a religious concern or as a secular practicality for survival and success, these questions are profoundly at work in the bones and marrow of beings from all cultures.

Celtic tradition sings of home and belonging. Deep ecologists celebrate their inseparable interweaving with all life. Physicists feel their way towards a beautiful theory that links everything. Devotees of religions of all kinds, yearn for union. Buddhists honor the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Sufis embrace the beloved. Christians give themselves over to the Christ Consciousness or to Godhead – “Not my will be done but thy will be done.” Muslims practice surrender. Agnostics let go into the ineffable. Sufferers learn to embrace their life situation. This journey towards refuge, towards safety, belongingness, well being, meaningful being, and a fundamental sense of home, is the underlying dominant theme of all human endeavor. It is the beginning, the middle and the end of all paths of awakening. It is initially felt as a deep emotional yearning. It unfolds through mindful life experience. It culminates in the manifesting of a richly matured human

being. Refuge is both the starting point of our explorations and the final realization.

In these pages, I hope to share with you some glimpses into what could become a life long journey of contemplation and practice. Rather than a traditional presentation with methodically developed themes and arguments, I have opted for a collage of poetry, observations and, hopefully, some fresh avenues for question and enquiry. I'm trusting that your intuition will knit these various offerings together, in ways that are relevant to your own unique situation and circumstance.

For practicing Buddhists, I hope this small book will revitalize your understanding of what, in my life, has become a deep and fertile ground of contemplation. For those of you who are rooted in other traditions of enquiry, I hope you will taste the flavor of refuge or at least have a tantalizing whiff, a possibility for living that seems vast and profoundly universal, yet is arising, at this very moment within you and around you in the dance of living relationship which is our very beingness.

Part One



*I take refuge in wisdom, compassion and non-clinging awareness
I take refuge in the full richness of here.
I take refuge in the ever present immediacy of now.
Truth is all around me.
It is the thusness of this moment,
the suchness that we are.
My refuge is to live within the truth.*



True Refuge

WHEN THINGS ARE DIFFICULT, when you feel thwarted, disconnected or in extremis, when your life shatters and everything falls apart, what do you reach out for? Where do you go for support and safety? Where is your sense of at-homeness and belonging? Do you seek refuge in complaining? Or do you knuckle down and become more stoic? Do you reach for a familiar distraction: eating, sex, drugs, entertainment or shopping? Do you slump into despair, or become numb or insensate? Are you the type of person that feels compelled to talk things over with someone? Where do you go and what do you do when the chips are down, when you need support, when what we call in Buddhism, the eight worldly winds – worry and concern over praise and blame, loss and gain, pleasure and pain, fame and loss of reputation – threaten to blow down your house or sink your boat? In these kinds of moments, where do you go for refuge? Have an honest think about this.

*For the sake of all beings;
Let us awaken our sense of belonging,
our sense of rightness, our sense of knowing health and wholeness.
Let us live in and as the great ocean of appearance,
this matrix of being and becoming.
Let us engage in this communion of sentience,
this embodiment of wisdom and compassion in action.*



IN BUDDHIST TEACHING, it is said that truth, or dharma, is good in the beginning, good in the middle and good at the end. Here is a meditation that I originally learned from the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. I find it inspiring at many levels. It is definitely good in the beginning, in that it can help us deal with difficulties that crop up in our day to day lives. It is good in the middle where, in the midst of exploring a wide array of dharma practices, it can remind us of the essential work of awakening. It is good right through to the end as it brings us back to the unpretentious simplicity

and straight forwardness of a life well and fully lived. This practice can be summarized in four words: stopping, calming, resting and healing.

Stopping

If you look into moments when you feel unhappy, when you feel out of tune, when you are distracted, or in the grip of difficult energies, you will inevitably see that you're not very present. Mindfulness is absent. Fragmentation and disorder abound everywhere you look. Whirling in conflictive winds of planning, fantasizing, dreaming, and internal dialoging, it can feel as if we were reaching desperately, and often compulsively, in a multitude of directions at the same time. Each of these reachings are attempts to make things better, but the end result is often just more fragmentation, chaos and lack of groundedness.

Now is the time to stop.

Stopping means bringing to an end the present state of mindlessness, forgetfulness, scatter and compulsion. Through stopping, we begin to feel more grounded and engaged in the midst of whatever is happening. We are fully and utterly where we are; right here in this particular place; right now at this time. Looking deeply into our current situation, we can see that this

place and this time are actually vast and immeasurable mysteries of creative collaboration that ultimately involve all places and times.

Think of stopping by for tea or stopping over for the night, not stopping in the sense of blocking or preventing, but easefully pausing in order to richly engage. We settle in, making ourselves at home; opening our senses and deepening into the immediacy of what is happening within and around us: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching and all of this mingling with thinking, remembering, planning, dreaming and so forth.

To encourage stopping we can mentally say the word, while at the same time relaxing into an awareness of our breathing and opening our sense doors to where we are and what we are doing.

Open the doors.

Open wide the doors, oh daffodil.

Breathe with it deeply . . .

Calming

Having interrupted the flow of unawareness, we can then enter the rich and engaging work of calming. This is unfolded in five progressive steps.

Step 1 – Recognizing

With an appreciative awareness of your breathing, recognize the overall state of your body/mind. We are looking for a global, felt-sense quality. It might be a negative feeling or emotion such as anger, frustration, irritation, yearning, or a sense of helplessness. It might be more of a texture of body/mind/energy. Jittery, tight, holding, smooth, fluid, light, heavy, bubbly or strong are some examples of what I mean by texture. It could have a neutral or passive quality; for example, dull, frozen, distracted, foggy or vague. It could even be a positive state; happy, interested, blissful, or inspired. Whatever it is, negative, neutral or positive, having stopped the flow of unawareness, supported by a rich appreciation of our breathing, we then recognize the over-all feeling or quality that is present. It can sometimes help to name it in a simple and straight forward way. “This is (such-and-such).”

Step 2 – Accepting

When we recognize a state, particularly if it is a difficult one, we sometimes find ourselves, at least at a subtle level, trying to control it or to push it away. Unfortunately, these efforts often lead to more agitation. Rather than

fighting it, making excuses for it, justifying it, or trying to deny it, we allow ourselves to accept or acknowledge it. For some people it almost feels as if they need permission to do this, as if it was somehow immoral to accept or acknowledge that we are, for example, angry or frustrated. Stay with your breathing; this can be a great support. On the inhalation name the state that is present and on the exhalation mentally say, “It’s okay to be this way.” In our stopping, and recognizing, and accepting, we give some space for this moment to relax and reveal its story.

Step 3 – Embracing

Once we find we can be with the state without needing to push it away, we then open even further and actively embrace it with sensitivity, caring and concern or another way of putting it, with all our love, awareness and interest. If the state seems to be predominantly mental then try embracing it with your physicality. How will you do this? What changes take place in your chest, throat, belly, arms and legs when you do this? If it seems to be a physical situation, embrace it with your mind or your attentiveness. How does the mental act of embracing take place? How does it feel?

All along, it will help to sustain a rich appreciation of your breathing. Each time you inhale, mentally name the present quality of body/mind and each time you exhale, mentally say, “I’m here for you”. Do this again and again, as if you were speaking directly from your heart. There is a definite flavor to this. You’re not a policeman, judge or juror, okaying an action, but a lover or a caring friend, whispering intimacies of kindness and appreciation.

Step 4 – Looking deeply

Embracing this current state with mindfulness and caring we now begin to look even more deeply into it. Instead of ‘look’ we might say investigate, question, inquire into, analyze, sift and savor or sensitively feel our way. Looking deeply, listening deeply, smelling deeply, tasting deeply, touching deeply, thinking deeply, reflecting deeply. Just as we might be with a friend who is suffering, giving them all of our attentiveness and thereby supporting a space for them to unfold their own story, however they need to do so, so too, in embracing our own suffering with kindness and caring and a tremendous degree of interest, we look deeply into the fullness of what is happening and allow the actual situation to gradually speak and reveal itself.

Step 5 – Insight

In the midst of looking deeply, we will begin to have fresh – or at least refreshed – insights and understandings into how such a state has arisen. These patterns of need in my childhood gave rise to these tendencies to react to certain situations. This current physical challenge is draining my energies so I react with patterns of anger. This is a familiar pattern that has arisen in other similar situations. In-sight is the act of ‘sighting into’ and with this deeper seeing, fresh and liberating understandings can begin to emerge.

Recognizing, accepting, embracing, looking deeply and insight; these five, working together, will nurture a meaningful experience of calming.

Resting

Having discovered an increasingly calm and easeful flow of being present with whatever is occurring, we can then begin to cultivate the subtle skills of resting. By resting, I mean proceeding with whatever we are doing with the least expenditure of effort. A friend who taught Tai Chi in Canada used to encourage his students to find and follow what he called ‘the smooth line’. We use our freshly experienced calm to support a flow of rest and revitalization – to follow the smooth line in whatever we are doing.

Unfortunately, today's pace of life seems to encourage anything but this. Suffering and mindless fragmentation consumes immense amounts of energy. In teaching, particularly in cities, I meet many people who complain of being chronically tired. It seems an all too common pattern for people to swing back and forth between hyperactivity and exhausted near-collapse. 'Resting' does not necessarily mean staying in bed and being inactive. Healthy resting involves a steady, gentle, experimental learning of how to do whatever it is we are doing with a quality of fluid ease – to sit, stand, walk and move easefully; to think, to work and to engage in conversation, in a way that feels relaxed, spontaneous and attentive. This is a little appreciated art that is surely worth cultivating. Gradually we will discover a growing ability to rest in the midst of life and living, however we experience it. There is an increasing sense of settledness and groundedness and we begin to glimpse the possibility of feeling bright, clear and at home in the midst of wherever we are and whatever we are doing.

Healing

True healing is to experience a deepening sense of complete, all embracing wholeness. This is not something we can make happen. It is not a matter of technique or expertise. It is not something we can force into being. It is,

however, something that naturally makes itself known in the wake of honest stopping, deep and profound calming, and a refining of our skill in the subtle art of resting. Healing is a mystery, a moment of blessing and grace that reveals itself in the midst of moving mindfully in the fullness of what is.

Stopping, calming, resting and healing is straight forward and simple. We could think of it as a four fold practice of living refuge which can be useful at any stage of life's journey. For beginners it can give a clear sense of how to work with daily experience and how to make one's life into a path of awakening. For more experienced practitioners it can be a reminder of the depth and profundity of Buddhist teaching and practice. For a being who has ripened in spiritual maturity, this practice merges with a natural flow of presence and wonderment; a way of refuge, we offer to the world.



*There is no mystery more profound than mindfulness/awareness.
This is the path of living dharma.
This is spirituality and practical living all rolled into one.
This is the source of joy and well-being
the well-spring of health and happiness
the treasure at the heart of everything and everyone.
There is no greater mystery.*



“I HAVE LEARNED from long experience that there is nothing that is not marvellous and that the saying of Aristotle is true – that in every natural phenomenon there is something wonderful, nay, in truth, many wonders. We are born and placed among wonders and surrounded by them, so that to whatever object the eye first turns, the same is wonderful and full of wonders if only we will examine it for a while.” John de Dondis (14th Century Mystic)²



The True Lotus of Refuge
Rest easefully.
Let go of everything.
Do not reject even the tiniest moment.



IN THE DAYS OF SAKYAMUNI BUDDHA there was no Buddhism! In a similar way, at the time of Christ, there was no Christianity! There were no Buddhist or Christian churches, temples or stupas. There were, however, societies rooted in religion, and two extraordinary human beings, trying to find

their way through a quagmire of ritual, caste, beliefs and socially accepted understandings, along with political shenanigans that included the politics of money, power and social position. The conditions in those days were not dissimilar from today, yet both of these men eventually came to discover and realize that, as de Dondis wrote, they were *“born and placed among wonders and surrounded by them, so that to whatever object the eye first turns, the same is wonderful and full of wonders if only we will examine it for a while.”* Whatever object the eye turns to is part of the world around us, nature in all its multidimensional and constantly evolving glory. Christ apparently once said of his disciples who were praising God, “If they remain silent, the very stones would cry out.”³ Of course, it might help to be a geologist in order to understand the testimony of stones.

Reductionism is a process of trying to get to the bottom of things. Everything is reduced to atoms, as if atoms were the basement or the ground of existence. Or everything is reduced to mind as if mind was the basement or ground. Yet beings are bottomless. Any ‘perceived’ bottom is really just the experience of a particular person or creature in the act of perceiving. When we look into our arising experience with a great willingness to include and embrace, we discover a matrix of interconnectedness operating in many scales and dimensions. The periphery of any experience extends

as far as one is able to look. In this sense there is no bottom, in spite of politicians and business people constantly referring to ‘the bottom line’. The world is a dancing of uncountable and immeasurable centres of being and knowing. Buddhist texts sometimes refer to this as *suchness* – and *suchness* is fundamentally ungraspable and un-pin-downable. It’s bottomless and so too is the mystery of refuge.

Where did the man we today call the Buddha look for refuge, for a sense of meaning and fulfilment? According to the stories he tried looking in many places without finding what at the time he didn’t even realize he was seeking. He sought refuge in pleasure. He sought it in study. He looked for refuge in wife and family and in fulfilling the obligations of the social class he was born into. He sought refuge in the philosophies and sciences of his time. He sought refuge in extreme asceticism. Can you imagine yourself in his situation? What would you do? In spite of the passion he gave to this search, in none of these seekings did he find enduring satisfaction. Each situation was impermanent. Each person and thing was a product of causes and conditions that were outside his capacity to control. Eventually he found refuge in love and clear seeing, in giving all of his attentiveness to what was happening immediately within and around him. At this point, the entire world and everything and everyone within it, became his teacher.

His own body, speech and mind became places of revelation. Learning the art of open-ended, here and now, mindful awareness, led to a recognition of how to live well with others and how to further investigate the deep and subtle levels of consciousness and being. Rich, caring, wide open awareness is the gate of refuge, the path and the realization of refuge. In Buddhism this gate and path is called the Dharma.



*Truth is all around me.
It is the thusness of this moment,
the suchness that we are.
My refuge is to live within the truth.*



I WAS ONCE TEACHING the above verse in a class. One person observed that, for them, the word truth had become somewhat meaningless since in this post modern world of relativity, each person lived their own truth. It might be good to remember that the word truth probably derives from the old fashioned verb 'to true'. When I was young I was, like most of the boys my age, rambunctious and full of bravado and would ride my bicycle up and down curbs and over rough ground. Eventually the wheels became bent out of shape to the point where the bike was difficult to ride. By carefully tightening and loosening the spokes, I learned to 'true' the wheel. A trued wheel turned smoothly. It was well rounded and balanced. It functioned well. Perhaps even more valuable, I discovered a certain pleasure in truing the wheels – in looking after my 'vehicle'. Truth has everything to do with good functioning. It is not merely an opinion or a collective belief. Life is a communal engagement; a vast interlinking of relationships within relationships. What we do, matters. Let me give you a further sense of what I mean.

Each of us is a living matrix of many interpenetrating realms of community. A few of these realms we consciously name but most of them we only infer. For example, molecules respond to and relate with neighbouring molecules in a vast and complex filigree of processes that we see and name a living cell.

Cells, themselves awesomely complex relatings of atoms and molecules, are at the same time engaging with other cells. Discrete communities of cells called tissues are continuously collaborating with and talking to other tissues in the process of forming the bodies of beings that in turn interlink and mingle together as societies, ecosystems and worlds. Community should be thought of as a process, a verb – not a noun. Deep and subtle mindfulness practice reveals this world of beginningless, endless, creative responsiveness. Everything and everyone is a flowing transformation of causes and conditions in many dimensions and realms. Activity in one realm triggers ripples of responsiveness throughout the rest of the matrix of being. This is the truth of community. It is what community is. It's what life is. Vibrant living community is a dynamic process that is shaped by and in turn influences other facets of community. This is me and this is you. It's what we are and what we do. We are vibrant living community, participating in vibrant living community in all its dimensions i.e. molecular, cellular, ecological, social, national etc. By allowing our mind and body, self and others – the community of life that we are all part of – to function well, and by supporting this functioning of body, speech and mind with all of our heart and all of our skill, is to *“live within the truth”*.⁴



*For the sake of all beings;
Let us awaken our sense of belonging,
our sense of rightness, our sense of health and wholeness.
Let us live in and as the great ocean of appearance,
this matrix of being and becoming.
Let us engage in this communion of sentience,
this embodiment of wisdom and compassion in action.*



BABIES ARE CONTINUOUSLY ADJUSTING to their surroundings while, simultaneously, their environment/surroundings – particularly members of their immediate family along with kittens, puppies and house furniture

– are adjusting to them. This process never stops. At every stage of our life-journey, childhood, adolescence and adulthood, we are continually responding to clues from family and friends, from landscapes and communities, from actions and interactions. This dance of linking and transformation goes on day and night; sometimes intentionally, but mostly automatically – a vast dancing of responsiveness – a kind of pre-conscious knowing in action. The outer situations and circumstances in which we find ourselves mingle and merge with our molecular, cellular and overall biological functioning in a type of subliminal seeking; a here and now experimental groping towards a more functional view/attitude/working hypothesis, with which we can make sense of our lives.

Fortunately we are well equipped for this quest. We each have a built in, though often unacknowledged, inner compass to guide us. We could call one pole of the compass ‘positive’. This is a global, overall felt-sense of rightness; a feeling of good fit, integration, inclusivity and increasing wholeness and harmony. The opposite pole (we could call this one ‘negative’) is a felt-sense of fragmentation, dysfunction, exclusivity and wrongness. Think of this as your wholeness/fragmentation refuge-compass. Even the most experienced and intrepid explorer of unfolding life will take this compass with them and refer to it frequently, skillfully and effortlessly.



*There's a mysterious blessing that graces our lives.
It emerges unbidden.
It endows wisdom in the midst
of any situation or circumstance.
It is known to creatures the world over – not just to humans,
yet it is rarely acknowledged or celebrated by official
religions, teachings or aspirations.
I'm referring to a deep quiet sense of rightness and belonging,
a sense of attunement which can sometimes be in dramatic contrast
to a deeply disturbing sense of danger and disconnect.*



I'M SITTING OUTSIDE A RETREAT HUT at Dorje Ling near Lorinna, an ancient eucalypt clothed valley in the heart of Tasmania, one or two ranges away from Cradle Mountain. The dawn air is shimmering with light and sound and the continuous gurgling hiss and '*lubble*' of the creek as it tumbles through the fractured limestone of the red soiled hill, as if aiming for the centre of the world, but then meeting resistance, hiving off tangentially in an improvised riff with rock and frozen tectonic dancing; a vast choreography of aeons. Immense trees, over seventy metres tall, extend skyward like cathedral columns. A wave of golden green laps this ocean of living world, as the first rays cut across the valley heights and roll shifting breezes and warm radiance in ever joining patches of morning dazzle. The cold shadow in which I sit begins to stir, while all around me is a raucous chorus of laughing kookaburras, cockatoos, wag-tails and numerous other feathered beings, natives all to this sacred place. Mobs of Bennett's wallabies and pademelons quietly graze the dew tipped grasses occasionally pausing to look around before returning to their morning communion.

Earth and creatures and crystal sky and warming radiance are all of one piece. We fit together. This morning, there's a palpable goodness that is surely felt by every living being singing this chorale of birthing sentience. Another dawning, a fresh beginning, a living grace and graciousness.



*God is all around us, is us
through and through.*

*Dharmakaya is all around us, is us
through and through.*

*Unbroken wholeness is all around us, is us
through and through.*

*Nature is all around us, is us
through and through.*

Being this, with appreciation/knowing, is refuge.

Living this, with appreciation/knowing, is refuge.

Communing in this, with appreciation/knowing, is refuge.

*Born in this.
Living in this.
Dying in this.
Refuge is all around us, is us
through and through.*

*Oh God – Dharmakaya – Unbreakable wholeness – Nature,
We release in each other,
through and through.*

*Releasing in thusness, I find refuge.
Every blade of grass, every fly and cricket,
every breeze and ray of sun and call of owl and cry of child.
This world.
This privilege.
This blessing of release.*

*This is refuge,
our beginning, our middle and our end.
May I and all beings realize refuge.*



IF YOU GO TO the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary and look up *refuge*, you'll find definitions such as "shelter from danger or trouble, protection, aid; a place of safety and security, a shelter, a stronghold, a mountain hut in which climbers and walkers can shelter; a region in which a population of animals can survive through an unfavorable period; a bird sanctuary". Roget's Thesaurus lists synonyms such as, *sanctuary, asylum, retreat, safe place, sanctum, cloister, hermitage, shelter and home*. For the phrase 'seek refuge' it offers alternatives such as, "seek safety, take to the woods, throw oneself into the arms of . . . , pull the blankets over one's head, and batten down the hatches".

Humans are often ambivalent about refuge, sometimes grasping for it while at other times shying away from it. Refuge can appear as a place of safety but at other times it can be stifling or restrictive – a potential smother. The

more flimsy and make-shift the shelter, the less secure we will feel and even the best made shelter, with closed doors and no windows, can actually feel claustrophobic. A truly effective shelter, a place of safety and security, will surely be a place where we are secure but also well nourished, where we can feel utterly at home at every level of our being and where we can feel well supported yet, at the same time, spacious and free.

In the relentless pace of modern living, where do we find refuge? Families are often fragmented. Sectarianism of all types is on the rise. Varying degrees of fear, terror, confusion, delusion, depression, desperation and obsessive consumption, are now widespread – not to mention the never ending busyness. In the midst of ecological collapse, failing economies and increasing disparity of wealth and poverty is war, climate change, proliferation of weapons, and the disintegration of our structures of governance. Where are we going for refuge? In a world of tweets and social networks – a milieu of manufactured identities – in a global culture of celebrity, power and the rich and famous, where can we live with a sense of authentic belonging? Where is our true home? This surely deserves some serious contemplation. A home is not the same as a house. Where is your experience of true home?

Sometimes we seek refuge physically. We throw ourselves into activity, or inactivity; into exercise, shopping, drinking, eating, sleeping, collecting things, making things, travelling, hobbies, gardening, mountain climbing and so forth. It's as if we believe that we can find our true home through sweat and effort, or simply by losing ourselves in the sheer act of 'doing'.

Sometimes we seek refuge through speech; through gossiping, complaining, chatting or discussing. I take refuge through phoning, texting, skyping and e-mailing. I take refuge in social networking, in hanging out, in catching up.

Sometimes we seek refuge through mental activity; dreaming, imagining, planning, futuring, studying, fantasizing, reminiscing and so forth. I take refuge in conceptual understanding, in planning futures, in dogmatism or the quiet conceit of certainty.

Most people combine all three; physical, verbal and mental activities in their seeking of refuge, and they go at it from morning till night. Is it any wonder we have so much chronic fatigue and general low grade exhaustion? How we understand refuge is not so different from how we conceive the world. Is refuge an objective 'thing' to be attained; something 'out there' usually elsewhere, located in a particular time or place be it geographical or

mental? Or is it a dynamic, intimate, living process; something very real but at the same time, quite un-pin-downable? Is refuge to be won through an unavoidable battle of duality; self versus other, this versus that? Or is it a process of integrated creativity? Is refuge an answer, an end result or reward for our efforts, or is it a question, the working face of wonderment in action? Is it composed of fundamental lumps – particular bits of universe – or is it an unbroken flowing wholeness? Have a good think about this. What do you personally mean by refuge?

If you do have a sense of ‘seeking’ refuge, what’s the difference between looking for it and desperately grabbing for it? Is there a point where grabbing for security/refuge/well-being becomes simply another name for addiction? Can addiction really be a meaningful refuge?



*Meaning means more than we think.
Not a definition,
a nailing down, a limitation and narrowing.
But a possibility,
a stirring in our juices, our entire body/being.*

*Meaning is a generous beckoning,
a multi-dimensioned invitation,
a gifting of open ended possibility.*

*Meaning is that place of exquisite balance,
‘The Golden Mean’,
a unifying of paradox and a reconnecting of what had
become fractured and alienated.*

*Nourishing, supporting, engaging, enlivening,
bestowing fresh understanding and new modes of sensing,
meaning is the juice of life
a quiver of self-recognition,
to test and taste to the full.*



HERE IS AN EXERCISE THAT CAN be very illuminating.

Irony will sometimes teach us more than earnest explanations. Too often I meet Buddhists who, in the temple or as part of a session of meditation, chant refuge prayers to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and then, in their day to day living, seek refuge in dramatically different ways. Sometimes, when the opportunity has seemed right, I have suggested to them that if they had the courage, they could try being a bit more honest. Instead of chanting “I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha”, which for many people are little more than pious concepts, they could look at where they actually go for refuge, on a daily basis, and then to name it as it is.

Imagine the following situation. You are standing in the presence of your object of ‘reverence’. Your palms are held together in a gesture of prayer. Perhaps you are in front of the refrigerator. “I take refuge in compulsive

snacking.” Or before the TV, “I take refuge in zoning out”. Looked at this way there are an astonishing number of ways people try to find refuge. There is refuge in defensiveness. “I take refuge in irritation, prickliness and self justification.” There is seeking refuge in travel, novelty, money, credit ratings, pensions, and insurance. There is looking for refuge in sex, relationships, romance, or companionship. How about refuge in sleep, withdrawal, or even in passive aggression? Some seek refuge in overt addictions such as drugs, alcohol, coffee, tea, TV, movies, music in the background, texting and social networking. Some seek refuge in routine – in habitual activities. Some take refuge in pausing and breathing. They’re not all negative! There is seeking refuge through hiding from people and situations and seeking refuge through fixing or controlling people or situations. A big one is hoping to find refuge in what others think of me.

Try doing this for a day or two, hands folded, head bowed in prayer, gazing at your current source or object of refuge and at that very moment, recite the words, “I take refuge in _____” (*and baldly state it as it is*). Notice your response.

At the same time, you are saying this prayer, gently float the following question. Is this particular matrix of body, speech and mind a realistic place of

refuge that can give me a sense of safety, well being and belonging in any life circumstance? Will this refuge sustain me in the face of sickness, old age and death? Will it sustain me in the midst of recognizing that life is vast and ultimately unknowable in all its detail, and that everything exists dependent on other things which themselves depend on other things? Will it sustain me when I find myself in new and unfamiliar territory, where my native wit and intelligence are my only guide? Equipped with your wholeness/fragmentation compass, really look into this. Over the course of days and weeks check it out – again and again. These are attempts at refuge, but are they broadly useful or do they just create more trouble? In the process of exploring this way, can you begin to discern the possibility of ‘true refuge’?

Rather than a blunt black or white, yeh or nay, it can sometimes help to think in terms of less functional and more functional places or sources of refuge. Less functional refuge tends towards withdrawal and disengagement – hunkered down behind a rocky outcrop in a storm (which may be necessary in a crisis but not in daily living). More functional refuge tends towards expansion and engagement – lucid, loving, open and accepting.

After you have observed some of your habitual attempts at refuge, take a large sheet of paper and on it, write something like this:

less functional refuge <-----> more functional refuge

withdrawal <-----> expansion

Now jot down the various refuge attempts that you know are familiar patterns in your life. Arrange them along the line between less functional and more functional. What is actually important to you? As a refuge, does it work?! Does it really lead you to an experience of well grounded, thoroughly integrated, wholesome functioning? Can it support a sense of fundamental goodness, wonderment and reverence through all the unavoidable stages of life, including dissolution and death?



*I take refuge in wholeness,
the natural state of complete authenticity and presence.
I take refuge in playful experimentation,
the great flowing, the universal teachings of awakening.
I take refuge in daily practicalities, this unfolding communion of all life.*



IT IS USEFUL TO REMEMBER that refuge will appear in different ways, depending on the situation of the person who is seeking. For those with debilitating addictions or who are frequently vulnerable to strong emotional states such as explosive anger or severe depression, refuge appears as a goal or safe place in a dangerous and dying world. These people want to grab refuge and then to hang on to it. For the gently needy, refuge can appear as a sense of belonging, perhaps taking the form of a community to belong to and be part of. For contemplative scientists, refuge may appear through the experience of non-clinging awareness. For mystics, it may reveal itself in a presence of wonderment, reverence and awe.

In the early stages, the work of contemplating refuge often feels rather passive. It is more of a hope that something good and positive will happen to us or that someone or something will reach out and rescue us. As our lives come more into harmony, our refuge work becomes more active and we discover increasing aspiration to do whatever is necessary to support

the conditions that will facilitate more wholesome living. To take refuge in truth means to live truthfully. To take refuge in love and clear seeing means doing what is necessary to love and to see clearly. Through actively engaging like this, our aspiration subtly transforms into a strong determined passion for practice. Not merely yearning for refuge but skillfully and effectively encouraging physical, emotional and mental activity that is truly life enhancing. Increasingly, we will experience a flow of well being. The universe appears to be ever more interesting and we find ourselves living with a confidence and groundedness that, at the beginning of our journey, we could hardly imagine.

In the end, the question of refuge and ‘attaining it’ transforms and gradually drops away. In its place, we glimpse the possibility of becoming a place of refuge for others – including the otherness of our own sometimes alienated being. Can you become a refuge, a place of strength and healing for the difficult parts of your own being, for the hindrances, the obsessions, the desperations, follies and foibles? What would it mean to be a true refuge for my own demons and those of others? What would it mean for my very beingness to become a place of welcome, of forgiveness, of deep acceptance and clear seeing love?

Refuge is truly a life long contemplation. At the beginning it appears as a goal to be obtained. In the middle it is an ongoing attentive practice. In the end it is the blessing of deeply accepted and appreciated reality itself.



*Refuge is not a place.
It is a continuity,
a filigree of activity,
a way of being and becoming.*

*Refuge is the natural dancing of everyone,
– this earthing, falling round a star,
called into sentience
and calling into sentience,
opening into refuge,
releasing into this measureless empowerment.
Softening towards being permeable,
it's singing through and around.*



WE WERE WATCHING A DVD called “Monte Grande” on the life of biologist Francisco Varela who, at one point, described the relationship with his wife as, “having room for all of him”. Presumably all of him included the lumps and bumps, the inspired and wonder filled moments, the calm and caring, the inconsistencies and uncertainties, the physical and mental, the professional and private, the serious and the clown – all of him; the so

called, 'full monty'. So here we have a big and wonderful question. We could think of it as a modern Zen koan. What would it mean for all of me to be present, with and for, all of you? All of me, the totality that makes me up. All of you, the community of interactive situations and circumstances that are giving rise to the you of now.

How does this compare to, "What would it mean for part of me to be sporadically available for part of you?" How do these two differ in feeling and sense of fulfillment? What would it mean for all of me to be present, with and for, all of you?



I take refuge in the multidimensional ground of becoming.

*I take refuge in the openness of heart and clarity of question,
the activity of that ground.*

I take refuge in all companions on the path of lucidity and freedom.



MY FRIEND, I BREATHE and feel myself resting firmly on the earth; the womb of becoming. I open my eyes of appreciation and look deeply into the whole of you. All of me reverberating with all of you. I see your mother and father and brothers and sisters. I see your aunts and uncles, your cousins, grandparents and great grandparents. I see your friends and adversaries, your teachers and guides. I see acquaintances and passing strangers. All of these beings – each and everyone of them – have needs, hungers, appetites, feelings of lack and aspirations; web workings of reaching and becoming.

I breathe and look deeply into you and see the whole world; the universe unfolding in the uniqueness of being that is you. My friend, you are immeasurable.

Even the tiniest or seemingly least consequential part of you is immeasurable. To feel the vastness of your being both giant and small fills me with immense wonder; awe struck in the face of mystery as big as

all the universe. I touch you, touching me, touching all; immeasurable mystery of life in its fullness.

My friend, I feel the tides of my breathing and rest, embedded in the wonder of now, drinking in the transience that is you. The tapestry of causes and conditions, each shaping your existence: people changing, societies changing, cells changing, molecules changing, sun sent photons, water cycle, earth and organisms and photosynthesis in the world of greenness; this living wholeness, this mirage-like shimmering, this ever freshening newness that is you. This 'beginner's mind', this unborn brilliance, this continually brightening matrix of being with unexpected colour and possibility. I breathe and look deeply and sense an infinity of continuously fresh weaving.

Un-pin-downable; the moment I grasp you, you die and birth into someone I've yet to meet. Indefinable, immeasurable mystery of life in its fullness.

My friend, the breath of my knowing ebbs and flows with the ebbing and flowing of your breath of knowing. The uniqueness of your being defies comparison. Not like so and so. Not like yesterday. Not better than before or smarter than him or more honest than her. This universal mystery of you

is incomparable. You are not like anything that's ever been and nothing will ever be like you again.

I rest with the fullness of what you are, all judging, all valuing; good, bad, indifferent; dissolving in the vibrant surprise of nowness. My friend, you truly are immeasurable!

So, again, our extraordinary koan,
what would it mean for *all of me*, to be present with and for, *all of you*?



*Going for refuge is longing.
Being refuge is belonging.
Everything mirroring, echoing*

*and creatively responding.
Everything, at every level of being,
mirroring, echoing
and creatively responding.*

This mysterious temple of knowing.

*This paramecium,
this bacteria, this person, this family, this forest,
this delicate, trembley butterfly
emerging from her chrysalis in the dew drenched dawning light;*

*Each a temple of uniqueness,
mutually longing for
and belonging in
every other temple of longing and belonging.*

*Ocean currents of temple-ing,
weaving, flowing, mingling through and through,
rivers of freshness
and never ending consummation.*



IN *THERAVADA*, THE OLDEST LIVING tradition of Buddhism, a common verse used while contemplating refuge goes as follows.

Buddham saranam gacchami.

Dhammam saranam gacchami.

Sangham saranam gacchami.

This commonly translates as:

I take refuge in the Buddha

I take refuge in the Dharma.

I take refuge in the Sangha.

The Pali word *sarana* means: protection, shelter, house and refuge. It also means remembrance and remembering, which is similar to the word *sati*, which literally means ‘to remember’. *Sati* is more commonly translated as ‘mindfulness’ or ‘awareness’. Here lies a subtle hint that true refuge, our

real protection, our shelter, our place of being and belonging, is to be found through the process of mindfulness and awareness.

Gacchami is from *gacchati* which means: intent on going (towards knowledge), to go, to be in motion, to move, stand, sit, lie down; to get, arrive at, realize; to go, be, exist, abide; to have existence. Oddly enough, it doesn't mean 'to take' which is how it is often used when translating this Theravadin refuge prayer.

Buddha or *Buddham* is from *bu* or *bodhi* which means to flower, unfold or awaken. This first syllable gave rise to the English word bud, as in flower bud. *Ha*, when pronounced as an explosive syllable, is the sound of joy, surprise and discovery. When pronounced as a quietly exhaled and aspirated syllable, 'h-ab-h-h-h', it is the sound of letting go, letting be, relief, satisfaction and well-being. Together, *bud* and *ha*, – buddha – points to the flowering, unfolding or awakening experience of joy, or joyfully letting be into the flowering that we are, or the blessed relief of letting go into well being and continuous discovery.

For many westerners, *Buddha* is rarely understood in such an active way. More commonly, we refer to *a* buddha and have in mind a cement or resin

statue, often available in garden supply centers, or if built from precious metals and gems, found in great temples, museums, and fine art collections. Sometimes we refer to *the* Buddha meaning a particular man who was the founder of Buddhism, twenty-five centuries ago. It is not uncommon to refer to Buddha as if it were the name of that man. Buddha is usually used as a noun referring to a person or an object, but consider the possibility of it being a verb pointing towards the dynamic creative activity or living experience that is the natural ground of what we are.

I have re-imagined the classical story of the historic Buddha. I needed to do this in order to make an ancient ‘myth’ relevant to my own life and the lives of people living today. On the so-called night of the awakening, a determined yogi, formerly known as Prince Gotama of the Shakya clan, entered a deep experiential recognition of his inter-beingness with all of life. Perhaps Gotama was a very common name at that time, so to make the story particularly pertinent, let’s call him, Fred. This will help to remind us that he was a human being, essentially like you and like me. On that night of the awakening, Fred experienced how his mother and father, grandparents and great grand parents – a lineage of parent and child going back to the dawn of time – had participated physically, emotionally, conceptually and societally in bringing forth the person he had come to be. He

saw how everyone and everything he had met throughout his life – the food that he had eaten, the water that he drank, the rivers and rain, the sun and moon, the earth, wind and sky, plants and creatures – were all contributing to his lived experience, as simultaneously he was contributing to theirs. He saw how physical functioning shapes mental and emotional activity that, in turn, shapes physical activity. Everything and everyone is inter-dependent at myriad levels of being. Not only did he sense that his true being and beingness was ultimately immeasurable and fundamentally un-pin-down-able, but he realized that this is the truth of everyone. Experiencing a profound continuity of sentience wherever he looked, he must have been one of the earliest realizers of deep ecology.

A little later, Prince Fred was walking along the road, rapt in the flow of being the universe unfolding, when another man approached him from the opposite direction. Seeing that Fred was walking with extraordinary presence and radiating an almost palpable field of well-being, he felt drawn to make contact. Perhaps he said, “Namaste” followed by, “Who are you?” I can imagine the yet to be named buddha, without thinking, almost replying a habitual, “I’m Fred”, but something stopped him. Instead, he replied, “That’s a really good question. Just a moment while I check it out.” Pausing and mindfully breathing, he looked even more deeply into the

continuum of life unfolding that was manifesting himself, and the stranger, and the road, and the trees, and the birds singing in the early morning sun. Everywhere he looked, he saw a seamless process of unfolding, a continual awakening of compassion and understanding, a dancing of serene unimaginable openness. Hovering in the midst of this, gently holding the question, “Who am I?” he saw with great clarity that he was only conventionally Fred but in actuality he was Bodhi or awakening – in action. Before he even finished the thought he dived back into contemplation and was filled with the joy of knowing that this was the fundamental state of affairs of everything and everyone, and so he said, “I’m Bud – ha-ha-ha-ha!” and burst into joyous laughter that grew in strength until it infected the man who had asked the question and they were both laughing in joy and happiness surrounded by singing birds and the warm morning radiance lifting gentle mists in the greening rice paddies. That was how I imagine the moment when the word ‘buddha-ha-ha-ha’ was born.

Continuing with my fantasy, every time the monks of old said ‘Buddha-ha-ha-ha-ha-’, they had a tendency to burst into expressions of joy and so this became a bit awkward when writing down the teachings so they shortened it to just one ha, Buddha, which gradually became treated as a noun, a someone called Buddha. He was the Buddha and the rest were just ordinary

folk. From that point on, people were left with religion and seriousness, and they lost the joy and spontaneous freshness of buddha as the natural process of life-unfolding, in action. Many people *seek* refuge in the Buddha. People who actually find refuge, however, find it in the multi-dimensional and dynamic process of *bud – ha-ha-ha-ha-ing*.

Buddham saranam gacchami. I take refuge in Buddha. When we recite this phrase, instead of focusing on a clear but limited understanding of what it means, let your intuition play in the field of these three words, *Buddham saranam gacchami*, and taste the implications of their dancing in your continuously transforming body of lived experience. Risk some ambiguity. Use a bit of poetic license.

All of these possibilities, each and every one of them, including those still to be imagined, weave with and through each other: reflecting and reverberating, synergizing and symbiosing, hinting and carrying, inspiring and uplifting – meaningful mystery – this life, our life, aliveness/bodhi unfolding.



*I dwell, abide, live, proceed, move;
in the remembering of home,
(my home is this living/remembering/knowing)
sheltered in a true sense of belonging,
housed in a knowing of good fit
recognizing and remembering the natural awakening that life is.*

*I awaken the intent of the awareness of home.
I abide in, and as, the joy, the well-being,
the innate goodness and rightness of remembering,
of being aware of the activity of awakening,
 this buddha karma that is all around,
 that is me and we.*

*I sit, stand, move and lie down remembering
a deep sense of well-being that arises in the natural
rightness – the fullness of here and now awakening.
I take refuge in this natural state
of complete authenticity and presence.*

Dance with these possibilities and allow your current needs and understandings to find meaning in this vast and life-long contemplation. Feel it as aspiration. Live it as practice. Rest in it as realization. *Buddham saranam gacchami.*



Dhammam saranam gacchami. I take refuge in dhamma. *Dhamma (Pali)* or *Dharma (Sanskrit)* is a term widely used by many religions in India. It derives from *dhareti* which means to hold, support, or to form a foundation; and *ma* that, in many languages, means mother or nourisher. In a root sense, dhamma is that which holds, supports, nourishes or mothers. Traditionally, dhamma, or dharma, means: truth, facticity, and as-it-is-ness. It can also mean phenomena, teaching, doctrine or path. Dharma is, that which nourishes or mothers our foundation and support. Actually, what nourishes or mothers us *is* our foundation/support. It is truth/nature-as-it-is, in all its fullness. This is the path that all beings are walking. This is what teaches us and continually points out to us the natural unfolding

that we are. In this sense dhamma is universal in scope and is certainly not limited to Buddhist teaching. Wisdom traditions of all cultures have declared the dhamma or dharma. To live by dharma is, to borrow a phrase from Vaclav Havel⁵, “to live within in the truth”. To study dharma is to learn from truth.

I move through life, continuously being and abiding in the fullness of what is. I take refuge and realize a flow of well-being in the collaborative dance of all phenomena, the web of life that both nourishes and teaches all of us.
Dhammam saranam gacchami.



Dharma is easeful resting.
Dharma is moving in heartfelt confidence.
Dharma is utter interbeingness.

*Dharma is a pathless land –
it is also a landless path.*

*Dharma is walking – completely in step – savoring
the vast mystery of becoming.*

*Dharma is remembering the blessing of mindful breathing
when conflict and disharmony abound.*

*Dharma is not rushing
– don't worry, death is always on time – you won't be late!*

*Dharma is letting go
is falling into love
is a flowering of presence
into presence.*

*Dharma, my friend
is
thus.*

AHHHH!



Sangham saranam gacchami. I take refuge in sangha. *Sangha* means community. In a limited way it sometimes refers to the community of ordained Buddhist monks and nuns. In a wider sense, it refers to the community of *bodhisattvas*, beings who have dedicated their lives to awakening for the sake of all sentient beings. In its widest and most comprehensive use, it refers to the community of all life, the total ecology of being and becoming, an interdependent relating of what we call animate and inanimate, a communing of everyone and everything, a true community of interbeing. *Sangham saranam gacchami.*



*We abide in the fullness of nature;
trees and birds and microorganisms,
soils and waters, winds and weathers
authentic, present,
constantly budding,
a universe flowering as you and me and all of us together.
This is buddha ground,
the all inclusive reach and range of becoming;
the actual living Buddha.*

*We thrive as and in an immeasurable flow;
a great braided river of awakening,
streamings of sentience,
lifelines within lifelines
all merging as an ocean of ever-fresh living now-ness.
This is the central Dharma.
There is no other teaching.*

*We come home;
rejoicing in family and friends,*

*comrades, colleagues and co-journey-ers all
this path of perception and knowing,
this unfolding community of all life.
Here is the wholeness of Sangha.*

*In Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, I realize refuge
Buddham saranam gacchami.
Dhamman saranam gacchami.
Sangham saranam gacchami.*



IN LATER FORMS OF MAHAYANA Buddhism we find refuge expressed in an increasing number of ways. One might go for refuge in our teachers, or in the gurus of particular traditions and lineages. We may go for refuge in the Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, Nirmanakaya and Svabhavakaya⁶. We may

find refuge in wisdom, compassion and non-clinging awareness, or in the practice of the Bodhisattva Vow⁷. We may realize refuge in love and clear seeing or in cultivating the six *parami* or perfections: generosity, wholesome relating, patience, skilled and enthusiastic use of energy, a continuity of caring and enquiry and profound understanding.

Sometimes refuge is divided into outer, inner and secret. For outer refuge, Buddha is represented by your personal teacher or guru. Dharma is what she or he teaches. Sangha is the community of Buddhist monks and nuns. With inner refuge, Buddha is one's own *buddhanature*. Dharma is one's cultivation of tranquil abiding (*samatha*) and clear seeing/understanding (*vipassana*). It could also be one's conscious bringing forth of ethical living (*sila*), meditation (*samadhi*) and wisdom or profound understanding (*pañña*). Sangha is the community comprising all the aspects of life from atom to eco-system that collaborate together in bringing forth one's body of experience. In secret refuge, the essence of Buddha is emptiness/clarity, an ever-fresh expression of unimpeded awareness. Dharma involves allowing things to be just as they are. Sangha is the community of all life, a sangha of universal interbeing.

As we broaden from Buddhism into what might be called ‘the great vehicle of life unfolding – in all its manifestations’, we might find ourselves expressing refuge in terms of Truth, or God or the spacious openness of interbeing. Whatever serves as an integrating function in your being and your lived experience is the compassionate face of refuge. May we trust it, follow it and realize it.



*I rest
Like water poured in water
Life in life
Me in thee
This sense of homeness
Everything and everyone
A flowing of being and belonging*

*Like braided rivers of now
Macromés of appearance
Each in its place of togetherness
Dancing in this joy of suchness unfolding
This universe
This home
My refuge.*



HERE IS A REFUGE PRACTICE CALLED “Touching the Earth in Six Prostrations”. I’m indebted to Thich Nhat Hanh and the four great lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, Kagyu, Nyingma, Sakya and Geluk for inspiring this contemplation.

In truth, the only real refuge, the only dependable place or grace from which we can never fall, is the ground of reality. It won’t let you down! As a Sufi saying goes, “It doesn’t matter how fast you run, or how hard you dig your heels in, you can’t get away from your own two feet.” Well, no matter how

fast you run or how hard you dig your heels in, you can't get away from the totality of interbeing that is manifesting this present unfolding moment. To know this, and to be this, is to touch the earth, the ground of being. To truly touch the earth is to live each day, well rooted in a vast mystery of life that has been unfolding for billions of years.

If you are physically unable to prostrate, you can, as the Buddha did on the night of the awakening, reach down with your right hand and firmly but sensitively touch the earth. Even more basic is to feel your bottom on your chair or cushion, and through this sense your intimate connection with the earth. This gesture is a metaphor for being in touch with the very ground of being.

First, I'll outline the basic process. Then, in order to hint at the possible vastness of such a practice I've written a more expanded version.

The Basic Practice

- 1) Contemplating the ecological ground – a matrix of living beings and processes – in wonderment and appreciation, I touch the earth.

- 2) Contemplating the genetic and historic ground of my ancestors – a vast river of talents – with profound gratitude and appreciation, I touch the earth.
- 3) Contemplating my teachers and mentors – an ocean of inspiration – feeling your presence within and around me with deep appreciation and gratitude, I touch the earth.
- 4) Realising that myself and these three facets of the ground of becoming have never been separate, I touch the earth.
- 5) Letting go of negativities and clinging, I touch the earth.
- 6) Radiating lovingkindness to all beings, I touch the earth.

An Expanded Version

1 – *Standing; feet firmly upon the earth, I soften into my bones and muscles, my whole body, swaying in space, a dancing of fine adjustments supporting this upright posture. Breathing in and breathing out; I feel the tides of air, the ebb*

and flow, the endless intimate breathing with a living world. Present; all my senses are open: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking.

Standing, breathing, present; I open the doors of appreciation to the vast ecological ground of becoming. I feel myself intimately partnered in a dynamic matrix of living process, a multi-levelled unfolding of uncountable interdependent manifestations of embodied knowing. With each breath, I breathe with a photosynthesizing world. My body, speech and mind are expressions of air, water, earth and radiant solar energy; weavings of becoming; journeyings of atoms, molecules, cells, and organs. This living world within me and around me is a dancing of organisms, bio-systems, planets, solar systems and cosmic arisings.

I sense the rivers and oceans in my blood and tears. I feel the mystery of transforming vegetable and animal flesh, the continuous coming into being and passing away that is my body, feelings and thinking. With awe and wonderment, sensing the beginninglessness and endlessness of everything that is, experiencing this as the ground and soil of life, I touch the earth.

Contemplating in this way, I bring my hands together in a gesture of prayer and bring them to my forehead, throat and heart, with the mantras OM,

AH, HUM (*embodied communication and mind*). Then I lower myself down to the floor, resting there for a while, physically touching the earth while sensing the union of myself and this vast ocean of wholeness unfolding. On each exhalation I relax more deeply into the ground. After three or four unhurried inhalations and exhalations I mindfully stand up.

2 – Standing; feet firmly upon the earth, I soften into my bones and muscles, my whole body, swaying in space, a dancing of fine adjustments supporting this upright posture. Breathing in and breathing out; I feel the tides of air, the ebb and flow, the endless intimate breathing with a living world. Present; all my senses are open: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking.

Standing, breathing, present; I open the doors of appreciation to the genetic and historical river of becoming. My mother and father, grandparents, great grandparents; a beginningless chain of ancestors extending back as far as I can imagine. I feel the presence of whole societies, peoples migrating across the earth, meeting new challenges, discovering ways of surviving, passing on knowledge to future generations, a river of talents, flowing through as an eternally creative present. I feel your presence in the shape and workings of my body, the dance of my senses, the play of my attitudes, the history of mammalian life, the unfolding mystery of living forms weaving the

story of becoming that is this planet making itself known through me and around me.

I feel your presence flowing out into my children and my children's children, generations of ancestors yet to come. Knowledge of healing, of educating, of growing food and building shelter, of arts and sciences, of religion and philosophy. Feeling this vast repository of talent and knowledge empowering my body, speech and mind, experiencing this as the ground and soil of life, with profound wonderment and respect, I touch the earth.

Contemplating in this way, I bring my hands together in a gesture of prayer and touch them to my forehead, throat and heart, with the mantras OM, AH, HUM. Then I lower myself down to the floor, resting there for a while, physically touching the earth while feeling the union of myself and these myriad sources of talent and knowledge. On each exhalation I relax more deeply into the ground. After three or four unhurried inhalations and exhalations I mindfully stand up.

3 – Standing; feet firmly upon the earth, I soften into my bones and muscles, my whole body, swaying in space, a dancing of fine adjustments supporting this upright posture. Breathing in and breathing out; I feel the tides of air, the ebb

and flow, the endless intimate breathing with a living world. Present; all my senses are open: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking.

Standing, breathing, present; I open the doors of appreciation to all the beings who have been dharma teachers for me: yogis, gurus, mystics and mentors of many lineages and traditions; artists, musicians, philosophers; scientists, adventurers, writers; educators, social activists, healers, and friends; beings who have inspired the unfolding of my life in the direction of Wisdom and Compassion. I open the doors of appreciation to teachers of the past, teachers in the present and teachers yet to come. I feel your presence around me and within me. You inspire and shape me in innumerable wondrous ways. You are expressions of the very foundation of my being, reminders of what is truly functional and meaningful. With deep gratitude and profound appreciation, knowing your presence is expressing itself today through my body, speech and mind, experiencing all of you as the ground and soil of life, I touch the earth.

Contemplating in this way, I bring my hands together in a gesture of prayer and touch them to my forehead, throat, and heart, with the mantras OM, AH, HUM. Then I lower myself down to the floor, resting there for a while, physically touching the earth while feeling the union of myself and

these myriad sources of guidance and inspiration. On each exhalation I relax more deeply into the ground. After three or four unhurried inhalations and exhalations I mindfully stand up.

4 – Standing; feet firmly upon the earth, I soften into my bones and muscles, my whole body, swaying in space, a dancing of fine adjustments supporting this upright posture. Breathing in and breathing out; I feel the tides of air, the ebb and flow, the endless intimate breathing with a living world. Present; all my senses are open: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking.

Standing, breathing, present; with deepening confidence that myself and these three great treasures, these three faces of the ineffable ground of being, have never been separate in the least; sensing the unbroken wholeness of totality, a seamless un-pin-down-able mystery appearing as the fullness of now; with reverence, vitality and presence, resting in the blessing of non-separation, the spacious openness of interbeing, I touch the earth.

Contemplating in this way, I bring my hands together in a gesture of prayer and touch them to my forehead, throat and heart, with the mantras OM, AH, HUM. Then I lower myself down to the floor, resting there for a while, physically touching the earth while feeling the mystery of union

revealing itself in every moment of knowing. On each exhalation I relax more deeply into the ground. After three or four unhurried inhalations and exhalations I mindfully stand up.

5 – Standing; feet firmly upon the earth, I soften into my bones and muscles, my whole body, swaying in space, a dancing of fine adjustments supporting this upright posture. Breathing in and breathing out; I feel the tides of air, the ebb and flow, the endless intimate breathing with a living world. Present; all my senses are open: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking.

Standing, breathing, present; I recognize how clinging to patterns of body, communication and conceptualizing are habits inherited or arising from this same triple ground. Feeling the suffering of clinging, the struggle of trying to make permanent that which is impermanent; feeling the anguish, pain, hopes, fears and confusions of uncountable beings weaving these present patterns of dysfunction and defensiveness in my own being; with courage and determination to uplift everyone, letting go of clinging in body, speech and mind, I touch the earth.

Contemplating in this way, I bring my hands together in a gesture of prayer and touch them to my forehead, throat and heart, with the mantras

OM, AH, HUM. Then I lower myself down to the floor, resting there for a while, physically touching the earth while completely letting go in every aspect of my being. On each exhalation I relax more deeply into the ground. After three or four unhurried inhalations and exhalations I mindfully stand up.

6 - Standing; feet firmly upon the earth, I soften into my bones and muscles, my whole body, swaying in space, a dancing of fine adjustments supporting this upright posture. Breathing in and breathing out; I feel the tides of air, the ebb and flow, the endless intimate breathing with a living world. Present; all my senses are open: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking.

Standing, breathing, present; experiencing a vast glow of kindness and interest for every manifestation of life; radiating lovingkindness to all beings of present, past and future, with a deep wish that everyone recognize the true nature of being; with body, speech and mind I touch the earth.

Contemplating in this way, I bring my hands together in a gesture of prayer and touch them to my forehead, throat and heart, with the mantras OM, AH, HUM. Then I lower myself down to the floor, resting there for a while, physically touching the earth while feeling the healing presence of

lovingkindness flowing out in all directions, supporting and nourishing every arising manifestation. On each exhalation I relax more deeply into the ground. After three or four unhurried inhalations and exhalations I mindfully stand up.

After finishing the practice, sit in meditation, smiling, breathing, present – appreciating the immensity of life in all its grandeur. Then finish by sharing the merit, making the aspiration that through practising in this way, all beings will come to know their own true nature.

Further Hints and Comments

1. If you are just beginning this practice, first learn the general format. Feel free to use your own words and images, ones that touch your own life most relevantly. The words I have used in this expanded version are just to give a hint at the vastness of these themes. As you familiarize yourself with the spirit of these contemplations, you may find your words becoming simpler as you silently deepen into the essence. At that point simply remembering the basic practice can be enough to evoke vast experience.
2. Explore each of the three aspects of the ground as a flow-through. The continual flowing exchange of materials and energies, revealed in a dancing

of transient forms that is this ecosystem of life. Talents of past generations flowing into you and out through your children and your interactions with others. Guidance and inspiration from the past and present, flowing through you and inspiring all the beings that you meet. In the realm of true refuge everything is an expression of flow and transformation – an unbroken wholeness of being and becoming that involves the entire universe.

3. Come to know the triple ground, not just intellectually, but with your body, your feelings and your felt sense understandings.

4. Explore the interbeingness of the triple ground. Each of your teachers was influenced by parents and ancestors and the particular environment they lived in. Each of your ancestors had mentors and sources of inspiration and were part of the ecology around them. The ecosystems of the world have been shaped by human history and high aspiration. The ground of being may be expressed in three aspects but in fact it is one seamless holomovement.

5. Do each prostration in a smooth unhurried manner as if the entire exercise was an exquisitely sensitive body awareness exploration similar to that found in some forms of Tai Chi or Kum Nye or Feldenkrais awareness through movement work.

(If you are involved with the Tibetan practice of 100,000 prostrations, after completing these six and before you sit in meditation, you could continue with the more traditional form of prostration, infusing your practice with this knowing of the presence of the Triple Ground.)

6. Learn to see other beings – family, friends, strangers, co-workers, enemies and so forth – as expressions of this vast creative ground.

7. Practice the essence of touching the earth in every moment of the day, walking, working, cooking, driving the car, etc. Not stepping out of the ground for an instant! Like water returning to the sea – at rest, attentive, even, loving, appreciating, respectful, responsive, clear – we discover a profound sense of connectedness and belonging.



*Spacious in every direction and dimension,
This is the essence of refuge.
Spontaneous ever fresh awareness,*

*This is the nature of refuge.
Interdependent manifestation, uninterrupted and unimpeded,
This is the expression of refuge.
Unshakable knowing that essence, nature, and expression
are faces of the same ungraspable mystery,
This is the foundation of refuge.
Understanding this,
love and clear-seeing suffusing all,
just as it is,
I and all beings take refuge.*



IN BUDDHISM, REFUGE IS regarded as both the beginning and the end of the path of deep enquiry. We are driven to search by its lack. We are enticed and drawn forward by its promise. We are fulfilled in its presence. In its broadest sense, refuge could be thought of as an attitude or strategy for living, a way of being and behavior that reflects our understanding and

experience of the universe. How we conceive of refuge reveals how we cope with the immense mystery of living.

When our life feels unified, fulfilled, rich and wondrous, the practice of refuge involves simply resting in and as the fullness of what we are, with great reverence, vast appreciation and profound respect. This resting/being/is-ness/allowingness encompasses and involves everything. In contrast, when our life feels unsatisfactory, painful, constrained and lacking in meaning, our attitude to refuge often involves us in trying to control or to change the way things are, or, at least trying to shift the way we understand things. This approach to refuge involves a lot of effort and inevitable pockets of frustration.

My root teacher, Namgyal Rinpoché once began a class by saying, “Nobody gives a damn about awakening when they are feeling good”. When we are feeling good, when we feel utterly at home in the midst of the situation we find ourselves in, there is little inclination to move away from this flow of good functioning. Our cells are happy. Our synapses are dancing. Our senses sparkle. Our minds are bright. Our relationships are joyful. Life is good and love is everywhere. On the other hand we don’t always feel like this. We struggle, and complain, and blame, and dream, and strive, and engage in myriad activities in a desperate attempt to find our way back

to health and well-being. But does struggling actually bring us home? Sometimes it just makes us more adept at struggling!



*In the Buddha, the Dharma and the excellent Sangha
I take my refuge until enlightenment is reached.
By the power of generosity and other good deeds,
May I realize Buddhahood for the sake of all living beings.*



A WIDELY RECITED BUDDHIST refuge verse contains the line, “I take my refuge until enlightenment is reached”. Does this imply that there comes a point where refuge is no longer needed? The answer is both yes and no.

With deepening experience, refuge is realized to be simply the natural, always present(ing), ever evolving play of being/becoming in all its fullness. In some forms of Tibetan practice such as *mahamudra* and *dzogchen*, this experience is referred to as recognizing the *view* or *base*. At this point, going for refuge, or taking, or seeking refuge, transforms into an emphasis on what is called *meditation* or *path*; the conscious, sensitive, skilful cultivation of this natural, always present, play of being/becoming. Here we work towards developing an increasing familiarization with openness, relaxation and responsive engagement.

Good meditation has a flavor of love, caring and a profound generosity of spirit. It sings with alertness, awakens, and refined discrimination – all of these qualities coming together in the here and now dancing of vibrant presence. The challenge of learning or practicing meditation comes down to the fact that even after tasting moments of true refuge, ingrained emotional habits of grasping and defensiveness will continue to arise depending on our present situation and circumstance. When this happens, cultivating refuge involves trying to remember, recognize, or re-establish our experience of wholesome stability. Eventually we will be able to see/understand/experience even these challenging manifestations of embodied knowing, as the creative display of life in all its fullness.

Through effective, long term meditation on refuge, the ratio of difficult to smooth-flowing states, will gradually shift towards a deepening sense of integrated presence, and the need to consciously ‘work’ at our meditation, will soften into an effortless flow of awakesness. The living mystery that we originally called refuge and then began to see as meditation now reveals itself as an immeasurable field of responsiveness involving everything and everyone – *a collaborating, creative play of flex and give – a flowering of knowing responding to, synergizing and symbiosing with, innumerable other flowerings of knowing – a natural presence of generosity, creativity and mutual support-in-action.* We might call this the natural state of contemplation-in-action. This stage, which was traditionally called the *action* or *fruition*, is marked by an emphasis on living in ways that support others to awaken to their own innate refuge/meditation/contemplation-in-action.

This last phase is really just one’s current horizon of knowing/experience. A horizon is not a final end. It is simply as far as one can see/understand at present. Here emerges an experiential knowing that refuge, meditation and contemplative action; view, meditation and action; base, path and fruition, are names for different facets of understanding of a single completely integrated, all-inclusive mystery of being/becoming. This is an extremely subtle union; refuge, meditation and contemplative action; all rolled into one. It is

home. It is mystery. It is the real teacher/guru. It is God. But in truth, it is beyond words and symbols. My friend . . . it is you! It is us. It is all that is.



*I realize refuge in the actual state of affairs,
the vast ungraspable suchness that is this living world/universe.
This is ever-fresh buddha-ha-ha-ing in action.*

*I recognize, celebrate and cultivate
the paths, teachings and encouragements
that support our realizing the true state of affairs.
This is dharma put to good use.*

*Releasing into a profound sense of being and belonging
with the community of all life, I am home.
This is the knowing of true sangha,
the fruition of all refuge practice.*

*Gradually, buddha, dharma and sangha
merge and mingle until each one
contains and reveals the other two.
This is a wondrous three-in-one refuge.
It's where we belong.*



HERE IS A UNIVERSAL REFUGE PRACTICE that can feel meaningful no matter what religious or philosophical leanings you have.

Settle into this ever available natural buddha-ha-ha-ing of being in the way that feels most real for you. For one person it will appear as a quality of ungraspable spacious openness. For someone else, it will appear as clarity and unimpededness. It could arise as lovingkindness or compassion, as joy or serenity. It could come in the forms of silence, stillness or a sense of being profoundly centred. It could arise through radical inclusiveness – you as the total field of all events and meanings. It could be sensed as a

‘cloud of unknowing’ or the presence of God, the Christ consciousness, the Beloved, or the intelligence of nature unfolding, or a sense of being rooted in and part of the living earth. In a more classic Buddhist fashion, it could arise as a union of compassion and emptiness, cognizance and emptiness, or spacious, open, ungraspable awareness. Whatever sings most deeply in your being, settle with that. Breathe with it. Relax in it. Abide as it. Have confidence in it. Celebrate and nourish it. Do whatever supports your growing into this mystery while at the same time, this mystery grows into you. To live this way is good for you and good for the world. It is the ground of living refuge.

Recognizing the practices, methods, themes and attitudes that strengthen and integrate you, engage with whatever is appropriate for the situation you find yourself in. Such practice could involve the cultivation of generosity, wholesome relating, patience, skillful use of energy, a continuity of caring and enquiry or profound understanding. It may involve stopping and looking deeply, or cultivating mindfulness, forgiveness, acceptance and joy. It could take you in the direction of service to others, compassionate work, or bringing forth beauty and inspiration for the wellbeing of others. Whatever tends to augment your capacity for empathy, presence, awakens and kindness; engage with it again and again until it sinks into your bones and

becomes an inseparable flavor of who you are. This is the refuge of dharma in action and it will reveal a world of awesome aliveness wherever you look – a world of embodied sentience.

Feeling your deep belongingness with all life. Not belonging to, but belonging *with*. You belonging with the earth and the earth belonging with you. You belonging with the birds and the birds belonging with you. You belonging with soils and streams with oceans and the sky, with worms, honey bees, cows and coyote, fish and seals; and all of these beings belonging with you. We are family. We are sangha. We are woven on the looms of each other's lives. Do whatever supports a maturing sense of your rootedness in this extraordinary community that we are. To live in this way is to know the refuge of true community.

Gradually these three fundamentals of refuge; buddha, dharma and sangha; base, path and fruition; view, meditation and action; unity, love and healthy community – however you name them – these three merge and mingle until each one contains and reveals the other two. This is a three-in-one refuge. It's where we belong. It's what we are. It's what we do. It's home!



*Dwelling in a space of love,
tendrils of curiosity reaching forth in all directions,
we feel our way,
softening and sensitizing into the richness of community,
a living world within us, around us and through us.*

*Apprentices of wonderment and awe,
probing and questioning,
sampling and savouring
with calm abiding and vivid discernment
together exquisitely intermeshed,
we touch our home,
this world,
of you and me and all of us together,
precious
beyond words.*



ULTIMATELY, TRULY MEANINGFUL REFUGE involves recognizing the seamless interweaving of our inner and outer experience; a rich ecology of life and living; an ongoing, ever evolving dynamic of health and wholeness. Meaningful refuge will never be found in prestige and fame, nor in possessions and control, nor in this particular situation or that. It can, however, be found in the extraordinary ordinariness of being able to love and be loved, to know and be known, to sense and be sensed, to recognize and be recognized, to value and be valued, to appreciate and be appreciated, to give and be given to. Health and wholeness involves a dynamic collaboration of subject and object, inner and outer, self and other. This multi-dimensional unfathomable mystery of feeling, sensing, and knowing, is the base of all experience, including your current experience of reading these words, with the flow of sensation and understanding that animates you at this very moment.

We humans are always looking for the cause of this and that with a largely unconscious expectation that through finding the actual cause of something,

we will then be able to control or shape it. In spite of our dedication to this search which often leads us to declaring our discoveries as laws of nature or laws of the land, we still seem to be swamped in situations beyond our ability to control. Causality is inherently confusing because every cause gives rise to multiple results or effects, while every result emerges from multiple causes. In this sense, there is no such thing as a single cause or effect. Everything is a collaboration of myriad inflows and everything participates in myriad outflows. This means that in the real world, everything we do matters! Every act and every thought radiates out in multiple directions. At the same time, everything that takes place in the universe ultimately ripples through us as changes in our mind and body. Living is a synergy of all of us. Even the most ordinary life – you and me, the stranger passing on the street, and that butterfly alighting on a flower – is a great mystery in the wondrous act of communal unfolding. Look around you. Feel the moment. This is it!

True refuge is true health and wholeness. We are home, embedded in living-community-unfolding. Expressed in terms of what it is not, refuge is ungraspable – an un-pin-downable empty knowing. Expressed in positive terms, it is the immeasurably vast, multi-dimensional dancing of interbeing. In Buddhism, the beyond-words nature of refuge is called *dharmakaya*,

the body or embodiment of truth. One's personal, subjective experiential knowing of refuge is called *sambhogakaya*, the body or embodiment of bliss. The objective appearance of refuge, what might be called a third person perspective of true being, is called *nirmanakaya*, the undying body of illusion. The union of these three facets of embodiment is called *svabhavakaya*, the body of transcendence or, as the Christian Mystics sometimes hinted, the state or experience of 'abiding where there is no abiding'.



*In the vast expanse of nature unfolding,
in faith and trust and wonderment, we give ourselves to this suchness;
this seamless mystery of birthing and dying.*

*Spacious, loving, with feet solid in the earth,
we nurture the hints at blessedness;
the myriad faces and masks of god.*

*Moving in this flow of compassion and deepening enquiry;
we engage with all beings in ways that support the integrity,
stability and beauty of the entire biotic community.*



SO ONE LAST TIME, WHAT IS REFUGE? Refuge is an ever deepening journey of understanding into what and who we are. It begins with hope, gradually transforming into aspiration, then determination, then suspected revelation, then experienced revelation, then maturing confidence. With deepening experience, refuge as a religious concept or psychological goal, quietly slips from the horizon of our concern as we increasingly stand our ground in the so-called ordinary – reverence and humbleness and gratitude, all tumbled together as a tremendous immanence of aliveness and mystery. What may

have begun as a Buddhist practice has led us to a deepened appreciation of life in all its unknowable, ungraspable, still-in-process, ongoing-ness. Constantly evolving, wondrously complex and awesomely inclusive, it is what I am, what I know, and what I experience. It is what you are too. Trying to describe refuge to others is often a point of frustration. Living it, in simple just as it is-ness, is effortless and fulfilling. May all beings learn to engage it, intuit it, value it, dive into it and, through doing so, may we contribute to the wellbeing of all of us together, this living world.

The question of what and who and where we are, is constantly before us. We are born from the earth and we will die back into the earth. Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes. The journey of refuge is the journey of clarifying our true nature. Are we isolated individuals desperately looking for wholeness or are we unified Being – ungraspable mystery in action – delighting in, and dancing as, a universe of multi-dimensional discernment – a bringing forth of worlds?



*Refuge is vast yet intimately near,
utterly dependable yet refreshingly new,
transcendent yet continuously manifest,
ungraspable yet thoroughly knowable.
Refuge is exactly what you are.*



Part Two

The Verses

– Reminders of Home –

There will never be a perfect verbal expression of refuge. What is rich and engaging for one person will be abstract and theoretical for another. Refuge is a living quality of being; a transient, ephemeral, ungraspable, unmaintainable way of functioning that in the freshness of the moment, feels life enhancing, inspiring, and deeply meaningful. In the course of my decades of engagement with teaching and exploring dharma, different understandings, different passions of need and interest have emerged. Variations of refuge verse have blossomed in my mind in response to finding a flatness or a not quite rightness in old ways of expression. In the end, true refuge is inexpressible. It is an experience. A way of being. Yet still the joy of singing its praises bursts forth in the midst of muscle and synapse and ionic release.



I pray to the wetlands,
I pray to the deserts,
Include me in your embrace.

I pray to the rainforests,
to the grasslands,
to the tundra, and the boreal forests,
Bless our families with health, curiosity, and great compassion.

I pray to the coral reefs,
to the tidal zones,
to estuaries, deltas, benthic depths and the great oceanic empty zones,
be firm in the midst of our extending human madness.

I pray to the volcanic hot zones and the boiling mud pools
to the icy caps and mountain peaks,

to rolling hill country,
rills and rivers, creeks and braided waterways,
pray care for this adolescent tribe.

Heal our rambunctious self infatuation,
our tunnel vision and above all,
our blinkered pride.

I pray to the living wind and rain,
to the sun, moon, planets and stars,
all my cousins near and far,
pray wrap us in your solicitude.

My eyes are moist,
this vulnerable stripped bareness;
remembering communion deep and wide;
sadness, joy, frustration, confusion, awe, reverence . . . ?
We belong with each other.

Feeling your feeling
Sensing your sensing
We are woven intimacies, through and through.

We are alive.
We are blessed.
We are spacious and luminous.
We gaze at stars and empty vastness, and feel our fluid bones,
a great symphonic cry of longing and joy,
a dancing of solidity, flux and knowing,
histories revealing, stories concealing,
I care for you all.
Each and every part
and every moment of every part,
all included, nothing ignored.

We are life,
praying with life,
to life,
for life,
in all its abundance –

We are a circle of blessing
We are suchness
beyond words.



For the sake of all beings;
Let us awaken our sense of belonging,
our sense of rightness, our sense of knowing health and wholeness.
Let us live in and as the great ocean of appearance,
this matrix of being and becoming.
Let us engage in this communion of sentience,
this embodiment of wisdom and compassion in action.



I take refuge in the spacious openness of all phenomena.
 There is no other Buddha.
I take refuge in the creativity, the dynamic energy,
 the clarity of all phenomena.
 There is no other Dharma
I take refuge in the boundless uninterrupted responsiveness

of all phenomena.
There is no other Sangha.
I take refuge in naturally present ever fresh awareness,
the heart essence of being,
the wondrous completeness of this present moment, just as it is.
I take refuge in the knowing that this is the original face of all beings.
For the sake of all beings,
wisdom, compassion, non-clinging awareness.



Wisdom is ever fresh awareness.
Compassion is activity arising with deep understanding.
Non-clinging awareness is the spontaneity of
being in tune with everything
and every situation.
For the sake of all beings,
wisdom, compassion, non-clinging awareness.



Spacious in every direction and dimension,
 This is the essence of refuge.
Spontaneous ever fresh awareness,
 This is the nature of refuge.
Interdependent manifestation, uninterrupted and unimpeded,
 This is the expression of refuge.
Unshakable knowing that essence, nature, and expression
 are faces of the same ungraspable mystery,
 This is the foundation of refuge.
Understanding this,
 love and clear-seeing suffusing all,
 just as it is,
 I and all beings take refuge.



Refuge is vast yet intimately near,
utterly dependable yet refreshingly new,
transcendent yet continuously manifest,
ungraspable yet thoroughly knowable.
Refuge is exactly what you are.



I take refuge in the multidimensional ground of becoming.
I take refuge in the openness of heart and clarity of question,
the activity of that ground.
I take refuge in all companions on the path of lucidity and freedom.



May our explorations serve to deepen awareness
Ripen the fruits of wisdom and water the flowers of compassion
That we may bring health and joy to all beings.



I am wisdom, compassion and non-clinging awareness.
Through the six perfections
May I come to realize this for the sake of all beings.



I remember with gratitude and feel the presence
of all my myriad teachers.
Some point north.
Some point south.
Some point inward.
And some point out.

Some point to skilful controlling.
Some point to letting go.

Some point to mindfulness.

Some point to service.

Some point to self.

And some point to others.

Some point to the mind of clear discrimination.

And some point to the heart of vast empathy.

Actually

All of them are pointing the same way.

Can you see?

All are pointing passionately and directly into the heart of now.

The vast space of present arising knowing.

The joy and peace of not a hint of somewhere else to be.

The adventure of continuous creation, growing itself into newness.

Great Gurus

of many threads and lineages

With tears of blessed relief, the bliss/joy of remembering

I bow to you all with gratitude

and sing your praises through the texture of each day.



In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the excellent Sangha,
I rest in confidence.
By the power of generosity, wholesome relationship, patience, diligence,
stable engagement and luminous understanding,
I live as a flowering of awakening for the sake of all that is.



I take refuge in Buddha;
the natural state of complete authenticity and presence.
I take refuge in Dharma;
the universal teachings and demonstrations of awakening.
I take refuge in Sangha;
the unfolding community of all life.

Through actively cultivating the six perfections.
may I and all beings awaken speedily
for the sake of everything and everyone.



The True Lotus of Refuge
Rest easefully
Let go of everything
Do not reject even the tiniest moment.



I bow down in devotion to all my teachers.
Teachers of the past, teachers of the present,
and teachers of the future.
Especially I honour those who show the Great Mystery of the Ordinary.
Wondering! Wondrous! Wonderful!



I stand my ground and find my sense of belongingness
in the state of complete authenticity and presence.
There is no other Buddha.
I live my life as an incomparable flow of awakening.
There is no other Dharma.
I flow and grow in the unfolding community of all life.
There is no other Sangha.



Going for refuge is 'longing'.
Being refuge is 'belonging'.
Everything mirroring, echoing
and creatively responding.

Everything, at every level of being,
mirroring, echoing
and creatively responding.

This mysterious temple of knowing.

This paramecium,
this bacteria, this person, this family, this forest,
this delicate, trembley butterfly
emerging from her chrysalis in the dew drenched dawning light;

Each a temple of uniqueness,
mutually longing for and belonging in
every other temple of longing and belonging.

Ocean currents of temple-ing,
weaving, flowing, mingling through and through,
rivers of freshness
and never ending consummation.



I take refuge in wisdom
I take refuge in compassion
I take refuge in non-clinging awareness
May the perfections perfect
And easefulness manifest for the sake of all beings.



I find my togetherness in the natural state of
complete authenticity and presence.
This is the actual Buddha.
I release into the immeasurable flowing of awakening.
This is the living Dharma.
I make my home in the unfolding community of all life.
This is the only Sangha.



I take refuge in wisdom, compassion and non-clinging awareness
I take refuge in the full richness of here.
I take refuge in the ever present immediacy of now.
Truth is all around me.
It is the thusness of this moment,
 the suchness that we are.
My refuge is to live within the truth.



I take refuge in wholeness,
 the natural state of complete authenticity and presence.
I take refuge in playful experimentation, the great flowing,
 the teachings and demonstrations of awakening.
I take refuge in daily practicalities, this unfolding community of all life.



God is all around us, is us
through and through.

Dharmakaya is all around us, is us
through and through.

Unbroken wholeness is all around us, is us
through and through.

Nature is all around us, is us
through and through.

Being this, with appreciation/knowing, is refuge.

Living this, with appreciation/knowing, is refuge.

Communing in this, with appreciation/knowing, is refuge.

Born in this.

Living in this.

Dying in this.

Refuge is all around us, is us
through and through.

Oh God – Dharmakaya – Unbreakable wholeness – Nature,
We release in each other,
through and through.

Releasing in thusness, I find refuge.
Every blade of grass, every fly and cricket,
every breeze and ray of sun and call of owl and cry of child.
This world.
This privilege.
This blessing of release.

This is refuge,
our beginning, our middle and our end.
May I and all beings realize refuge.



We abide in the fullness of nature;
authentic, present, continually budding,
flowering as you and me and all of us.
This is Buddha ground.
The ocean of becoming.
The actual living Buddha.

We thrive as and in an immeasurable flow;
a great braided river of awakening,
a gathering of streams, all merging in the ocean
of ever fresh now-ness.
This is the central Dharma.

We come home, rejoicing in our family, friends, comrades,
colleagues and co-journey-ers on this path of perception and knowing,
this unfolding community of all life.
Here is the wholeness of sangha.
In Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, I take refuge.



Refuge is not a place.
It is a continuity,
a filigree of activity,
a way of being and becoming.

Refuge is the natural dancing of everyone,
– this earthing, falling round a star,
called into sentience
and calling into sentience,
opening into refuge,
releasing into this measureless empowerment.
Softening towards being permeable,
it's singing through and around.



I rest
Like water poured in water
Life in life
Me in thee
This sense of homeness
Everything and everyone
A flowing of being and belonging
Like braided rivers of now
Macromés of appearance
Each in its place of togetherness
Dancing in this joy of suchness unfolding
This universe, this home
My refuge.



We take refuge in love and clear seeing.
We live courageously in this earth of birthing and dying.
Our hearts embrace all companions on the path of lucidity and freedom.



Wisdom
Compassion
Non-clinging Awareness
Namo!

However innumerable and varied appearances are
awareness arises with kindness and interest.

However inexhaustible the states of suffering are
activity manifests with patience and love.

However immeasurable the Dharmas are
exploration deepens in all directions.

However incomparable the Mystery of mutually interdependent
arising without boundary

May all parts of the mandala appreciate the rest more fully.



I take refuge in Buddha;
 pure and total presence.
I take refuge in Dharma;
 love, compassion and clear seeing deepening everywhere.
I take refuge in Sangha;
 the diverse ecology of bodhisattva activity.
Through actively cultivating the six parami,
 may I be the Sangha, practising Dharma,
 realizing the innate Buddha mind
 for the wellbeing of everyone.



Dharma is easeful resting.
Dharma is moving in heartfelt confidence.
Dharma is utter interbeingness.

Dharma is a pathless land –
it is also a landless path.

Dharma is walking – completely in step – savoring
the vast mystery of becoming.

Dharma is remembering the blessing of mindful breathing
when conflict and disharmony abound.

Dharma is not rushing – don't worry, death is always on time
– you won't be late!

Dharma is letting go
falling into love
a flowering of presence
into presence.

Dharma, my friend
is
thus.

AHHHH !



In the vast expanse of nature unfolding,
in faith and trust and wonderment,
we give ourselves to this suchness;
this seamless mystery of birthing and dying.

Spacious, loving, with feet solid in the earth,
we nurture the hints at blessedness;
the myriad faces and masks of god.

Moving in this flow of compassion and deepening enquiry;
we engage with all beings in ways that support
the integrity, stability and beauty of the entire biotic community.



Ineffable wholeness,
beyond all words and symbols,
is the Buddha, Dharmakaya.

The activity of this wholeness,
arising without effort,
is the Dharma, Sambhogakaya.

Their union,
this community of embodied knowing,
is the Sangha, Nirmanakaya

With these three facets of living mystery,
understanding their full meaning,
I am solidly home.



You sit out
at night
under the stars.

The milky way
winding herself
around the
bowl of the world
like a starry shawl of caring.

And the river
sings in your cells.

And the earth scent
floods your brain.

And the near zero air
pricks your surfaces
into fresh awakeness.

And the mystery
sounds symphonies
of reverence and love,
weaving messages of meaning.

This moment
this blessed moment
this always available intimacy,
Illumined in the dark.



Now is the place to practice,
right here,
just as you are,
this very moment in all its vastness;
a continuity of freshness
resting resplendently,
at ease in the fullness and flow
of what is presently occurring.

Ripening in faith and trust and wonderment,
letting be,
this matrix of seamless creativity;
the miracle of community that you are,
communing with a community of myriad beings
living around you and through you.

Beginningless – endless;
a mandala of unfathomable knowing,
a mode of experiencing that is utterly inclusive,
a way of abiding, singing with awakeness
and capacities for vast engagement,

a solid ephemerality,
a fusion of immense presence and compassion-filled interest;
in the great river of Buddhist teaching,
such knowings and experiencings
are the ground and source of true refuge.

Become skilled in this resting,
this life affirming freshness,
this gestating womb of nature becoming;
deeply belonging,
profoundly at home;
Where else, and what else, could one be?



I realize refuge in the actual state of affairs,
the vast ungraspable suchness that is this living world/universe.
This is ever-fresh buddha-ha-ha-ing in action.

I recognize, celebrate and cultivate
the paths, teachings and encouragements
that support our realizing the true state of affairs.
This is dharma put to good use.

Releasing into a profound sense of being and belonging
with the community of all life,
I am home.
This is the knowing of true sangha,
the fruition of all refuge practice.

Gradually, buddha, dharma and sangha
merge and mingle until each
one contains and reveals the other two.
This is a wondrous three-in-one refuge.
It's where we belong.



Endnotes

1 For this quote from Feurbach and more see “Christianity Without God” by Lloyd Geering, 2002, p 141

2 “The Worm Forgives the Plough” by John Stewart Colis, Penguin, 1973

3 Luke 19: 37-40

4 Vaclav Havel 1936 - 2011, was Czech playwright, essayist, poet, dissident, and politician. “Living in Truth” is a collection of twenty-two essays published by Faber and Faber, 1989.

5 *ibid*

6 These are central concepts in Mahayana Buddhism and especially in the Tibetan forms. Briefly, *kaya* means body, embodiment, or collection. Dharma can mean truth so *dharmakaya* is body of truth or embodiment of truth. Since truth is fundamentally un-pin-down-able and immeasurable, it is said to be *sunyata*, ‘emptiness’ or spacious openness, which is the ungraspable groundless nature of everything. *Sambhogakaya* is often translated as ‘body of bliss’ but it really points to the body of knowing, the summation of all the knowings that we are. This is the body of our correct understanding/

experience of the nature of things, our embodied understanding, our first person perspective experience of Being. *Nirmanakaya* is sometimes translated as ‘the undying body of illusion-like manifestation’. This refers to our third person perspective experience of the profoundly interdependent nature of all things and processes. This is sometimes thought of as the ordinary, or objective, or public world. *Svabhavakaya* refers to the seamless union of the preceding three: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya.

7 Bodhisattva Vow This is a very central aspiration in all Mahayana schools. There are different wordings but the gist in all of them is the same.

Beings and phenomena are innumerable

May I meet each and every one of them, with kindness and interest.

States of suffering are inexhaustible,

May I touch them as they arise, with patience and love.

Dharmas are immeasurable,

May I explore them deeply and thoroughly.

The ever-present mystery of interbeing is beyond words and symbols,

May I surrender within it fully.

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About the Author

Tarchin Hearn has taught in many countries and over the years has helped establish a number of centres for retreat and healing. His teachings, rooted in Buddhist principles, frequently link personal healing and unfolding with a deep ecological perspective in ways that have inspired a wide range of people from a variety of diverse backgrounds and traditions.

For more information about Tarchin and his work,
visit <www.greenharmatresury.org>

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