The First Unique Practice

Taking Refuge

**PART ONE  TAKING REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA, DHARMA, AND SANGHA**

When we were little, my brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche and I pretended to be high lamas in imitation of our father and other lamas. That was our game, to sit on make-believe thrones, performing makebelieve rituals with imaginary bells and drums, and chanting nonsense syllables. Buddhism seemed like everyday social activity, but only after taking refuge with Saljay Rinpoche at the beginning of my first long retreat did I have a feeling of coming home, a keen sense of belonging in dharma.

At that time I was far away from everyone I loved and who loved me, and I was a little homesick. Saljay Rinpoche told me, “Everyone is homesick because our true home is inside us, and until we recognize that, we will long for comfort outside ourselves. The issue is whether we set out for home on the right or wrong path. Taking refuge connects us to the right path.”

Taking refuge is the first of the four unique foundation practices, also called the “inner” ngondro. The four thoughts—or the “outer” ngondro—investigate the habits that leave us spinning in delusion and dissatisfaction. We see that no matter what situation we’re in—from the hells of anger to five-star resorts—that to truly bring an end to suffering, we must accept that that relying on external phenomena doesn’t work. We must renounce our confused habitual patterns of relating to the phenomenal world. So now we have developed the conviction, motivation, and intention to bring suffering to an end, but we still don’t have the means. We may identify our inherent nature as the source of lasting happiness, but until we stabilize the experience of our own basic goodness, this remains an intellectual construct without much benefit.

The inner ngondro provides means and methods for recognizing—or at least glimpsing—our own buddhahood. We are cleansing the mud off the diamond.

The Meaning of Refuge

Everyone takes refuge in something, so once again we work with transforming ordinary tendencies into skillful means for spiritual development. Everyone identifies relationships, locations, or activities that offer the body or mind a sense of security and protection. Even neurotic or unhealthy habits—like eating too much chocolate or giggling compulsively—can function as a protective shield to ward off feelings of anxiety or vulnerability.

Sometimes the sense of refuge only becomes obvious once it no longer exists or is threatened. For example, an American friend told me that on the morning of 9/11, she watched the first plane hit the World Trade Center on television. And then the second plane. The newscasters announced that it was a terrorist attack. Still she watched television calmly until they announced that the Pentagon had been attacked. Then she became scared and started crying. She told me, “For years every morning, I said ‘I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.’ But it turns out that I had also taken refuge in the Pentagon, in the military might of America and its power to protect me. Until 9/11, I never knew that I had relied on the Pentagon for protection.”

Most of us hold in our heart and mind relationships or places that we identify as safe havens. Yet these external refuges tend to disappoint us sooner or later. We acknowledge our conventional needs for security, because this identifies where we start our refuge practice. We connect with familiar feelings, but shift the focus. With dharma practice, we take refuge in ourselves, in our own inherent capacity for happiness, for awakening, for instinctual concern for others. We take refuge in the steady, reliable mind of awareness.

When we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, we use external images, concepts, and symbols to connect with our internal enlightened qualities. We take refuge in our own goodness, in our willingness to let go of ego-fixation and be of more help to others. The more we trust the reliability of internal resources to nurture lasting happiness, the more we decrease our dependency on unreliable phenomena. Eventually we dissolve the conceptual duality between external and internal, relative and absolute, the outside buddha and the inside buddha. But we start by acknowledging our conventional refuges.

Conventional Refuges

Let’s start by asking, “Where do I look for happiness? Where do I seek security and comfort?” In love, in social status, or in the stock market? Our car may break down, our company may declare bankruptcy, or our partner may walk out. Our perfect health will surely deteriorate and a loved one will surely die. The stock market goes up and down; reputations go up and down; health, wealth, and relationships—all these samsaric refuges go up and down. When we place our trust in them, our mind goes up and down like flags flapping in the wind.

One Frenchman told me that his own Tibetan teacher had discouraged students from ordination. This really surprised me. He explained that his teacher had said, “Most Westerners who put on Buddhist robes take refuge in their robes, not in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.” I assured him that this was not limited to the West.

We live with a sense of lack that we long to fill. The monkey-mind habitually tries to merge with something—particularly another person—in order to alleviate our pervasive sense of insufficiency. Yet samsaric refuges are inherently impermanent, and if we rely on permanence where none exists in the first place, then feelings of betrayal and anger compound the loss.

Let’s approach this concept of unreliable refuges through meditation.

Meditation on Unreliable Refuges

* ▶  Sit in a relaxed posture with your back straight.
* ▶  Your eyes can be open or closed.
* ▶  Take a few minutes to sit in open awareness.
* ▶  Now bring to mind an ordinary object that you rely on as part of  your daily routine, perhaps a refrigerator or a car. Make this object  the support of shamata meditation.
* ▶  Now imagine that you are going to the refrigerator in the morning to  get your organic orange juice, or you are going there at the end of the day to get a cold beer. Or be aware of getting into your car to drive to work or to drive your child to school. Stay with the awareness. Try not to get pulled into the story. But if you do, just come back to the awareness.
* ▶  See if you can connect to the assumptions that the object will be there, that it has not broken down or been stolen. See if you can identify the ways in which you have come to rely on this object and how you take it for granted. See if you can connect to the comfort offered by the familiarity of this object.
* ▶  Now imagine going toward your object, but discovering that it is not there. Investigate how you feel. If you get caught up in the story—say you find yourself ten minutes later still fantasizing that you are filing the police report for stolen goods—just try to come back to the feelings and allow your awareness to stay with the emotional reaction, whether it’s strong anger, annoyance, confusion, despair, or anxiety.
* ▶  Conclude by resting in open awareness.  How did that feel? Were you able to notice your initial response to not having your expectations met? Emotions can also become habitual refuges. Responding with anger and self-righteousness and looking for something to blame can become a habitual place to hide. If anger reassures your identity, you may return to that state for shelter, the same way someone else returns to their home. Perhaps your habit is to become overwhelmed by confusion and to ask others to come to your  rescue. Chronic helplessness can be a refuge, a way of pulling back from the world and from your responsibilities. Before starting this practice, it would be quite helpful to know the refuges you depend on, because this examination might really inspire you to turn in another direction.

Taking refuge doesn’t protect us from problems in the world. It doesn’t shield us from war, famine, illness, accidents, and other difficulties. Rather it provides tools to transform obstacles into opportunities. We learn how to relate to difficulties in a new way, and this protects us from confusion and despair. Traffic jams do not disappear, but we might not respond by leaning on our horns or swearing. Illnesses may afflict us, but we might still greet the day with a joyful appreciation for being alive. Eventually we rely on the best parts of our being in order to protect ourselves from those neurotic tendencies that create dissatisfaction. This allows for living in the world with greater ease and without needing to withdraw into untrustworthy circumstances in order to feel protected.

Taking Fruition as Path

For the rest of ngondro, as well as for those practices following ngondro, our path affirms that waking up is within reach. To that end, we take fruition as the path. Enlightenment is the fruition of our path. Our goal is to recognize who we already are. Enlightenment is another way of speaking about buddhahood, realization, awakening, liberation— these are all verbal variations that describe our ultimate goal. We wish to wake up for the benefit of all sentient beings so that they too may realize their own awakened nature—and this includes ourselves.

From now on in our ngondro practice, we enter a context of enlightened beings, living gurus, and reliable sources of blessings. Most importantly, we enter this context with the recognition that in essence, we embody the same qualities as the buddhas. We no longer choose mundane or ordinary phenomena as objects of awareness. For example, we appreciated our human qualities by comparing ourselves to other beings, such as cows. Yet although cows have buddha nature, they do not know it, they cannot recognize it, nor can they function from the place of realization. For these reasons, cows cannot offer the same benefit and blessings as enlightened beings. Therefore using the powers of imagination to bring forth a cow or to bring forth a buddha does not create an equally beneficial context for our practice. For this reason, we use the ordinary human instinct for intensifying our attention to extraordinary beings, and we imagine a refuge tree filled with beings that manifest extraordinary wisdom.

The term *enlightenment* has no inherent visual or verbal expressions, yet words and forms inspire our understanding. In the practice of taking refuge, we encounter Buddha Vajradhara**—**sky-blue in color. Sky itself is spacious, vast, unrestricted, limitless. This represents the absolute, which is the same as emptiness and the same as enlightenment. Every detail within the Vajradhara image–the ornaments, ritual objects, position of his legs and arms—is symbolic. Everything points to concepts that cannot be embodied by words or by images such as wisdom, compassion, or clarity. So we use symbols, rituals, colors, and so forth. We put them to work to expand the self-imposed limits of our universe. In vajrayana, we use these images to access inherent qualities have been buried beneath concepts and language, conventions and habits. We take the awakened state as the means of our path. We do not practice in order to become enlightened; we practice in order to recognize that we are already enlightened. Practice expresses the awakened self. However fantastical and extraordinary Tibetan images may seem, in every case they manifest hidden, unrecognized, or unrealized aspects of ourselves. Everything “out there” is “in here.” The entire path is a shift in perception.

Outer and Inner Refuges

We work with two kinds of refuge: outer and inner. With outer or relative refuge, we see the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as being outside of ourselves. This duality definitely offers more reliability than conventional refuges, but with limited benefits. As long as the Buddha is somewhere other than in our own heart and mind, we won’t see the true buddha—the empty clarity of our own pure awareness. The inner refuge helps us to make the leap from the buddha outside to the inside buddha.

With inner or absolute refuge, the duality between outer and inner dissolves. Ultimately we rely on ourselves, on our own buddha nature, and on our own awakened qualities. Purification is the process of making these qualities become more accessible so that we can integrate them with our daily life. With practice, we recognize in ourselves the very buddha in whom we take refuge. This is the essence of practice.

Wanting to take refuge is itself an indication of buddha nature. We take refuge to be happier, to be free from suffering, and to feel more secure and stable. Why do we say that this wish itself reflects buddha nature? Because we never accept suffering as the normal or natural human condition. Whatever the degree of our unhappiness, this longing arises to be free of it. Where does this longing come from? How can we account for the intuitive knowledge that liberation from dukkha is possible? Own intrinsic wisdom. Nothing else explains why we intuitively know that our unhappiness is off balance, that it’s not our true self, and that it can be alleviated. Our buddha nature does that. It’s like an internal compass that keeps our direction set toward contentment, no matter how much anguish or pain we endure.

Every being has this intuitive intelligence. Touch a worm and it recoils. That’s a worm’s wisdom. Every living thing, to some degree, has the wisdom of flight. Self-protection is a form of compassion. All beings want happiness; they do not want to suffer and do not want to die. These are the seeds of loving-kindness and compassion. When we cultivate compassion for all sentient beings, we include ourselves; we wish that all sentient beings may be protected from harm. If buddha nature did not exist, then what we identify as suffering would not exist. Suffering expresses our separation from buddha nature, and until we eliminate this divide, the suffering of a separate and incomplete “I” will remain.

Some people interpret “buddha nature” as a kind of object. It almost takes on the quality of material matter, and our metaphors might contribute to this misunderstanding. When we speak of buddha nature as a diamond or as an internal compass, it might sound like a physical organ, such as the heart or lungs. It’s not like that. It’s more like mustard oil that thoroughly suffuses every particle of a mustard seed, but becomes evident only when the seed is pressed and the coarse matter eliminated. Yet the oil was never separate from the seed, nor did it occupy a specific location within the seed. We obtain oil through refinement, or we might say through purification, yet what we get was always there.

In the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, I Take Refuge

Taking refuge in the three jewels expresses the most basic, fundamental connection to Buddhism. Having confronted the limitations of samsara, we are ready for a change. We cannot renounce the temptations of samsara all at once, but this vow helps steady our intentions. It reminds us of what is true, what is real, both in the world and in ourselves.

*Taking Refuge in the Buddha*

The outer meaning of taking refuge in the Buddha refers to Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha who lived in India about twenty-six hundred years ago. We call him the awakened one, the one who has gone beyond all dualities and concepts, beyond all forms of confusion and suffering. His enlightenment and his teachings continue to inform all Buddhist schools and practices. Yet in whom did the Buddha himself take refuge? We know that the Buddha’s father, King Suddhodana, sought protection in political power and social standing. We know that the king’s attempts to keep his son bound to the householder life through sensory enticements did not work. Slipping past the palace guards, Siddhartha (his family name) ) embarked on the life of a seeker, taking refuge in forests and in caves, and with teachers who had mastered the practices of asceticism. But after six years, he rejected the austerities, as he had rejected his father’s path, as well as the rituals of the ruling Brahman priesthood. When Siddhartha sat down under the *bodhi* tree, he took refuge in himself. Relying on instinct as well as years of training and experience, he abandoned every orthodoxy, determined to liberate his mind from the very roots of suffering. It’s important to use this model of self-reliance—and it’s important not to misuse it. We cannot dismiss the Buddha’s teachings in the name of creative autonomy, and we cannot just follow the Buddha like a baby duckling follows its mother. We neither discard genuine faith nor indulge in blind faith. But we draw on the ordinary human habit of placing trust in exceptional sources and use the Buddha—his teachings and example—to inspire us.

When we hear words of advice from someone that we hold in high esteem, such as a great scholar, a famous novelist, or a movie star, these words have a dramatic impact, whereas the same words spoken a hundred times by peers or parents might have no effect. The power of suggestion works this way. When someone that we identify as special speaks, we listen with heightened attention and trust. These natural tendencies initially direct our refuge practice. We use the images, words, and activities of enlightened beings to intensify our devotion and receptivity. With the enlightened beings before us, we bow and chant with more enthusiasm than if we imagine regular beings. We take refuge in the guidance and words of the Buddha, who embodies all enlightened beings. We use the outer buddha to take refuge in our inner buddha. But what identifies enlightened qualities?

*The Three Boundless Qualities: Wisdom, Love and Compassion, and Enlightened Activity*

The enlightened qualities that a buddha manifests are boundless wisdom, boundless love and compassion, and boundless enlightened activity. When we venerate the buddhas, we acknowledge and value their manifestation of enlightenment. The seeds of these qualities exist within us but we cultivate them through veneration and devotion.

**Boundless Wisdom**

Boundless wisdom has two aspects: relative and absolute. Absolute wisdom means the direct realization of the empty, illusory nature of all phenomena. Relative wisdom reminds us that the Buddha is not just “spacing out” in nirvana and thinking, “Everything is wonderful, no one is suffering, there is no work for me to do.” Relative wisdom means that the Buddha knows our relative reality; he knows our suffering, our neuroses and delusions, our confusions, concepts, and impure perceptions. *Boundless* here means that there is nothing beyond a buddha’s perception.

**Boundless Love and Compassion**

This is like the immeasurable love that a mother has for her only child. She loves the child more than she loves herself. Limitless love. We are like the Buddha’s child. Love and compassion can be limited by concepts but immeasurable, boundless love exists beyond concepts.

**Boundless Enlightened Activity**

This describes the limitless ways that the Buddha helps us. Yet every day, millions of people suffer from natural disasters, financial crises, romantic problems, monkey-mind problems, and it seems that the Buddha refuses to help. The Buddha himself said that a buddha could provide the perfect conditions for extinguishing dukkha by illuminating the path of dharma. But it’s our responsibility to provide the causes for that to happen. That’s why we practice. The buddhas are always available, but we are not always available to what they offer. They can open the door and shine the light, but if we don’t walk through that door, we remain in darkness.

*Taking Refuge in the Dharma*

When I was a child, I heard my father talk often about the amazing qualities of the Buddha. One day I asked, “If the Buddha’s so great, so wonderful and perfect, why can’t he make why can’t he make sick people healthy? Why doesn’t he just pick up the beggars in Kathmandu and toss them into the pure land?”

“Karma,” my father answered. “Everyone has their own karma to work out. No one, not even the Buddha, can change our karma.”

I continued to press my father, asking, “If the Buddha can’t help people who are suffering, then why are all these people prostrating and chanting mantras and making offerings?”

 “They are changing their own karma,” he explained. “Only you can change your karma and make your karma. The Buddha cannot do that for you, but practicing dharma can. We pray to the Buddha, but even though the Buddha cannot change our karma, praying itself changes our karma. Seeing the enlightened qualities of the buddhas brings us closer to seeing those qualities in ourselves. In this way, practicing dharma becomes our active role in changing our own karma. Our sense of who we are begins to change.”

To eliminate suffering, we need the supreme protector, which is dharma. It is dharma that can really save us from samsara. Only by following the path of dharma—which means practice—can we develop self-realization.

*Taking Refuge in the Noble Sangha*

There are two types of sangha: noble and ordinary. The noble sangha refers to the bodhisattvas, arhats, and other sages who have attained direct realization and hold the lineage of wisdom teachings. The ordinary sangha are members of our practice community. Both types play a critical role in our development, yet we take refuge only in the noble sangha.

While we are still in samsara it’s important to take refuge in what goes beyond samsara, beyond ordinary. Ngondro is a process of envisioning a radically new way of living in the world. For this reason, we keep our orientation toward what we aspire to grow into. We need to make the stretch.

In general, people tend to minimize the importance of the ordinary sangha: Buddha is a big deal, Dharma is a big deal, and Sangha is something to put up with. Yet it’s within the ordinary sangha, monastic or lay, that the roughest edges of our arrogance and pride can be smoothed down a little. Americans—with their car obsessions—have a good expression for this: “Where the rubber meets the road.” Let’s say there’s a shiny new car on the floor. It appears to be perfect. But we still need to take it for a test-drive. The car that never leaves the shop is like a practitioner reciting nice words about compassion and selflessness, but removed from the opportunity to test-drive their intentions and aspirations. How do the bodhisattva ideals hold up when we actually interact with others? Problems within the sangha inevitably arise because we’re talking about unenlightened people trying to get along with each other. Jealousy, competition, and anger inevitably erupt. Although individual practitioners have unenlightened minds and commit unenlightened activities and get ensnared in ignorant understanding, the ordinary sangha still offers the best opportunity to apply dharma. We have shared ideals, shared goals, and we can turn to the lineage of teachers and texts for guidance. We should be able to hold a mirror up to each other in ways that others cannot.

Samsaric friendships are usually based on grasping. If another person can benefit us, then we try to befriend them. But if they become useless, we might try to distance ourselves. We are not really trying to see the genuine qualities of the other, only how we can take advantage of them. We see them in relation to ourselves. Within the sangha, we trust that dharmic values will prevail. This is no different than having faith in dharma.

Taking Refuge in the Three Roots: The Guru, the Yidams, and the Dharma Protectors

In vajrayana practice, in addition to the three jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—we take refuge in what we call the three roots: the guru, the *yidam* (or meditation deity), and the dharma protectors. The guru is the root of blessings, the yidam is the root of accomplishment, and the protectors are the root of activity.

*Taking Refuge in the Guru*

The guru or teacher is of utmost importance because of the interdependent connection between the teacher and the disciple. The Buddha who lived thousands of years ago cannot guide us to our own buddhahood as effectively and expediently as the guru. The living teacher embodies the wisdom of the practice lineage and functions like a lit lamp that has the energetic power to ignite the mind of the student. If you make a connection, you will get lit, too. This is what we call transmission.

Transmission or blessing does not just come through formal rituals and ceremonies, or through words. If a teacher rests his or her mind in realization and teaches from that place, that quality of mind can be expressed and communicated, and can be transmitted to a student ready to receive it. Through the teacher’s hand gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and so forth, the student can receive and begin to embody the view that the guru is transmitting. The living lineage comes through the teacher, not the historical Buddha. For the student, the teacher is kinder than the Buddha because he or she is the root cause of our spiritual maturation. Blessings come not only from the guru, but through the guru, who is perceived as a living buddha, as well as the prime vehicle for the dharma teachings and the noble sangha.

To recognize and use the benefits of the guru’s blessings depends on our devotion. But we are not passive recipients like grass receiving rain. Devotion makes us receptive to all that the guru offers. Without devotion, we are like cups turned upside down, unable to take in anything.

For our refuge practice, the guru is understood to be our personal teacher or guide. The guru may also refer to the teacher who gave us the transmission for this particular practice. The conventional sense of guru as other—the teacher over there who teaches the student over here—is of utmost importance, because without this teacher, or what we call the outer guru, we might never hear the words of dharma. More profoundly, the outer guru puts us in touch with the inner guru, which is the natural wisdom of our original mind, which is what we ultimately take refuge in. It’s the source of everything we normally think we are missing: peace and tranquility, insight and wisdom, compassion and empathy. Everything we long for, we already have. The outer guru is like the key, but when we open the door we discover ourselves, our true guru.

*Taking Refuge in the Yidams*

The meditation deities, or yidams, are the root of accomplishment. When we enter into a relationship with them, their enlightened qualities illuminate our very own, helping us accomplish our own realization. Each yidam signifies a particular aspect of enlightened mind. For example, in the second unique foundation practice, we focus on the meditation deity Vajrasattva to purify our negativities. If we are concentrating on compassion, we might invoke Chenrezik, also called Avalokiteshvara. Basically we use an archetypal projection of an enlightened quality to see ourselves reflected in that mirror. Having created a dualistic structure as a skillful means, we then grow into our enlightened

projection. In the last practice of ngondro, guru yoga, as well as in practices

subsequent to ngondro, we eliminate the duality and inhabit the meditation deity in order to further deepen and clarify our inner qualities, and to experience ourselves as awakened in the present moment. At this stage of our practice, we start with the yidams in a dualistic sense by imagining them “over there” as part of the field of enlightened beings. Ultimately we come to see that the deity and the mind of the student have never been separated.

We refer to the yidams as symbolic forms of buddhahood because the imagery symbolizes and points to views that we use on our path. For example, the six arms of a particular yidam may represent the *paramitas,* the six “perfections” or virtuous behaviors that we need to cross over from samsara to nirvana: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. Four legs might represent the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path of practice. One face represents *dharmakaya*—the oneness of all phenomena, no subject, no object, no duality, no samsara, no nirvana. Two arms represent wisdom and compassion. Two legs represent relative and absolute realities. When the legs are crossed, it represents the union of the relative and absolute.

The important point is that no matter how bizarre images with many heads, arms, or legs may appear—especially if you are unfamiliar with Tibetan images—these forms all have meaning. Furthermore, the meaning directly reflects qualities that you already embody. They are symbolic ways of mirroring your own realized mind. Remember, you are turning away from the refuges of samsara, toward the truest source of protection. What could be more reliable than your own buddha nature? The yidams help us accomplish our goals by taking different forms, which are categorized as peaceful, enriching, magnetizing, and wrathful. This diversity reflects the varying needs of practitioners. Think about parents who use different ways of loving and disciplining their children. If kind and peaceful behavior doesn’t work, a parent might need to display anger. If a child runs out onto the road, the mother might raise her voice out of love and concern, or use punishment. For this reason, we have yidams that are associated with peaceful as well

as wrathful activities. Yidams also perform enriching activities. Say a child is rewarded for

scholastic achievement, and the reward itself builds the child’s confidence and capabilities; or a child is particularly helpful with housework and this behavior is affirmed through praise or a gift. Then we have the activity of power, or what we call magnetizing activity. This is the activity of inspiration. In Tibet, parents used to bring young children to see lamas in hopes of igniting their minds with the flame of inspiration. Parents often tell or read stories to their children about cultural heroes or great religious figures, with the idea that the children might be “magnetized” by beneficial behaviors or attainments. Out of boundless compassion, these deities manifest in any form necessary to guide beings in ways most appropriate for individual needs.

*Taking Refuge in the Dharma Protectors*

Dharma protectors are the root of activity. They are not quite completely realized buddhas, but more like the bodhisattvas of the noble sangha who genuinely aspire to help beings recognize their own enlightenment. Dharma protectors are like assistants, aides, or helpers. These protectors—or *dharmapalas* include a wide range of enlightened beings such as *dakas, dakinis,* and *mahakalas.* The protectors evolved as keepers of the dharma, or guardians of the Buddhist teachings. Worldly protectors are local deities or folk gods that people pray to for help with their crops or for the immediate environment to be protected from floods and storms. These are not enlightened beings and should not be confused with wisdom dharma protectors, who are bodhisattvas.

Traditionally we call dharma protectors “attendants,” but modern people associate “attendant” or “retinue” with displays of royal etquette that seem outdated and perhaps even silly. Even though everything that we’re talking about describes an emanation of mind, we don’t need images or words that create more obstacles, so we should select language that helps rather than hinders us.

We may wish to see the king or president of our country for problems such as health reform or farmland taxation. We do not go to the head of state when our car breaks down or our computer crashes. For these kinds of problems we ask the helpers—attendants, aides, and members of our retinue such as siblings, cousins, and neighbors—to come to our rescue. We also turn to the dharma protectors to request help in removing obstacles to health and wealth, wisdom and compassion.