
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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As usual, let us engage in our meditation practice. [*tong-len meditation*]

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and then put them into practice well.

When generating this motivation, we can recall the visualisation done during our *tong-len* meditation practice, where we focused on all sentient beings. Our goal is to alleviate the sufferings of all living beings and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness, and it is for that purpose that we strive to achieve enlightenment. The stronger our wish to alleviate the sufferings of sentient beings and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness, the easier it will be for us to generate true love and compassion for them.

We also need to remember that thinking about the welfare and generating love and compassion for all sentient beings is an optimum means to accumulate extensive merit.

As explained in the teachings, this is a very profound practice where one is able to accumulate extensive merit in a short time.

We can understand from this how a pure Dharma practitioner's way of thinking and conduct is invaluable. The practitioner's mind is an incredibly highly precious and valuable state when these thoughts predominate.

ACCUMULATING MERITS (CONT.)

Last week we ended with this hypothetical question in the commentary:

What is the perfect method to achieve Complete Enlightenment?

The Tibetan term for enlightenment *dzog-jhang* has a very specific connotation. *Dzog* literally means complete or entire and, in this context, relates to achieving the complete state of perfection by developing all possible qualities. *Jhang* has the connotation of pacifying or removing, which relates to having removed all faults and obscurations, i.e. the deluded obscurations and the obscurations to omniscience have both been completely abandoned.

Having raised this question about the perfect method to achieve complete enlightenment, the commentary explains:

The method can be elaborated into two which are the excellent path and the excellent deed.

The referent method here is to achieve complete enlightenment, and one needs to understand that it consists of none other than pacifying all faults and

achieving all possible good qualities. Recall that the purpose is to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings, and lead them to highest happiness. However, in order to do that, one needs to first achieve enlightenment oneself.

A bodhisattva is a being whose **mind** is imbued with bodhicitta, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all beings, and their **conduct** and deeds are to engage in the six perfections. These are the essential points here.

As the commentary further explains:

The thought here refers to the Mind-generation (bodhicitta), arising of which is, as indicated here, dependent on one accumulating merits.

The definition of mind-generation or bodhicitta was also explained very clearly in last week's session.

As the commentary specifies, the development of bodhicitta is dependent upon accumulating merits. This clearly explains that the person who wishes to generate the awakening mind or bodhicitta needs to be someone who has a great stock of merit. Bodhicitta cannot be generated by those who have amassed a lot of negativities, the imprints of which are still prevalent in their minds.

Therefore, the preliminary practices of purifying negativities and accumulating merit are of great importance. The first chapter of the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* explains the benefits of bodhicitta, the second chapter explains the way to generate that mind by engaging in practices of confession and purification, and the third chapter specifically presents the way to accumulate merit through the seven limbs of practice, such as prostration and so forth.

In the past I have explained¹ the meaning of this prayer:

I go for refuge to the Three Jewels
I confess all negativities individually
I rejoice in the virtues of all beings.

These three lines specifically indicate the means of accumulating merit by first going for refuge to the Three Jewels, while *I confess all negativities individually*, and *rejoicing in the virtues of all beings* is a means to accumulate merit. In essence, what is being explained is that the mind-generation of bodhicitta can only be developed within a being who has purified their negativities and who has accumulated a great stock of merit. It does not arise in those who have great negativities still prevalent in their mind.

When we think in these terms we realise that generating bodhicitta is not easy when one still has a lot of negativities yet to be purified. However, we can still move in the right direction by making aspirational prayers, and engaging in regular practices and dedicating towards that end of generating bodhicitta. These are the methods that we can employ at our level. As the commentary indicates, the generation of bodhicitta is dependent upon accumulating merits.

¹ See the teachings of 12 November 2013 and 3 December 2013.

The text explains the means of accumulating merit in the following lines:

7. *Facing paintings, statues and so forth
Of the completely enlightened one,
Reliquaries and the excellent teaching,
Offer flowers, incense - whatever you have.*
8. *With the seven-part offering
From the [Prayer of] Noble Conduct,
With the thought never to turn back*

Setting up an altar to receive offerings²

The commentary explains:

To explain here how to, and in front of what to make offerings, the offerings are made in front of the visual representations of the holy body, speech, and mind. The representations of the holy body includes such objects as the image of the fully Awakened Shakyamuni Buddha in the form of paintings, [which also refers to thangkas] engravings, [on wood or metal], mouldings or statues made out of clay, [statues which are moulded, or made out of clay].

The **holy body** is represented in these forms.

Here we need to understand that these representations of the holy body are placed upon the altar. Other explanations indicate that one first needs to have a clean area, and then place these representations of the holy body on the altar. We also need to understand that the images that we place on the altar represent the holy enlightened being. Regardless of the material value of the image, whether it's made of clay or expensive material such as bronze or gold, all images have to be respected and treated equally.

This is a very important point. Otherwise you might think, 'Oh, the clay statue is less valuable so not so important, and you put it to one side in favour of an image which is more expensive and which you think is more precious. This would be a mistake, as there would be a danger of accumulating a negative karma for disrespecting an image of the Buddha.

The main point to understand here is that whatever the form of the image on one's altar, it needs to be regarded as the actual Buddha. One needs to visualise the actual Buddha and other enlightened beings as being present. This is really important as it will instil a strong reverence towards the image. It will also help to instil a conscientious mind based on knowing shame and embarrassment, which prevents one from engaging in non-virtuous deeds. We need to understand that having an altar and visualising the actual buddhas as being present will help one to maintain a more conscientious mind, and to refrain from negative deeds.

The term 'embarrassment' refers to refraining from misdeeds out of consideration and respect for others, while 'shame' refers to refraining from misdeeds because of personal values. These two states of mind help us to avoid engaging in negativities, and accumulate virtues. This is also explained clearly in *Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*.

Next is the representation of the **holy mind**. As the commentary explains:

The representation of holy mind includes a stupa containing precious relics.

It's good to understand here that the stupa represents the holy enlightened mind. If one has a stupa, then one places that to the right of the statue on the altar.

The representation of holy speech includes holy dharma scriptures such as the twelve branches of excellent teaching.

The representation of the **holy speech** are the teachings of the Buddha. In short, any Dharma book can be a representation of the Buddha's teachings, and this is placed on the left side of the altar. A representation of the holy speech of the Dharma could be a text such as the *Vajra Cutter Sutra*, or a lam-rim text such as *the Great Treatise on the Graduated Path to Enlightenment*. Many of you already have that text, so it would be good to place it on the altar.

Offerings are placed in front of these visual representations of the actual enlightened body, enlightened speech, and enlightened mind of the Buddha, which are also referred to as the indestructible or vajra body, speech, and mind. As indicated earlier it is important to have the conviction that these representations indicate that the actual holy body, speech, and mind are actually present.

Manifest offerings

The commentary begins its explanation on **offerings** with this hypothetical question:

What are the objects of offering?

This is a significant question because you might have an altar with representations of the holy body, speech, and mind, but if the types of offerings have not been explained then you might start to think, 'Oh, if I should be making offerings, then what kind of offerings should I make? The commentary explains:

The essential objects are offerings of flowers, incense, light, perfume, and food.

So the answer to the question is that there are five types of offerings.

Flowers should be beautiful and fragrantly scented - they should not have a foul smell. Traditionally these are placed in front of the altar, but there are also other forms of flower offerings such as ornaments and the jewelled crowns adorning the representations of the enlightened beings.

If the representation of the enlightened being is in an ordained form, then the flowers can be visualised as flower garlands hanging from the top of a canopy.

These different forms of offerings can also be incorporated into an understanding of the tantric teachings and explanations as well, and it would be good to have this understanding.

The essential point of offering flowers and other offerings is that whatever the offering may be, they should be beautiful. The actual offering is generating the thought that making these offerings generates uncontaminated bliss in the mind of the enlightened being, which pleases the mind of the enlightened being. So the actual offering

² This and the following headings have been introduced for ease of reference.

is that combination of the enlightened being experiencing uncontaminated bliss and being pleased with that. The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word 'puja' is 'to please'. So the actual meaning of 'offering' is to please the enlightened beings.

When making offerings it is good to consecrate them by reciting the mantra OM AH HUM three times. This will suffice for blessing the offerings, as well as presenting the offerings. Those of you who engage in tantric practice would be aware that offerings are consecrated or blessed initially through the recitation of OM AH HUM, which represents the three points of the indestructible vajra body, speech, and mind of the enlightened being. Through the power of these three, all offerings can be blessed and consecrated, thus creating a pure offering.

There are more detailed explanations of each of the syllables OM AH HUM, but in a very simple way if one can implement the following visualisation when blessing the offerings, then that will make it very meaningful.

When reciting the OM AH HUM the first time, one visualises that through the power of the mantra the ordinary colour, shape and smell of the offerings are purified.

When reciting OM AH HUM for the second time, one visualises that the purified offerings then transform into uncontaminated pure offerings that generate bliss in the minds of the enlightened beings.

With the third recitation of OM AH HUM one imagines that these pure uncontaminated offerings increase to fill the entire space.

Having consecrated the offerings in such a way then, as mentioned earlier, the actual offering is when one generates the conviction that the enlightened beings experience uncontaminated bliss. A more profound understanding is that the real offering is that it generates non-dual bliss and emptiness in their mind.

The main implication of 'increasing' is that the offerings are inexhaustible. We may wonder how placing a limited number of offerings on the altar could be sufficient to be regarded as extensive offerings. So after consecrating them one visualises that the offerings multiply and increase numberless times, so they become an incredibly vast amount of offerings, and one accumulates extensive merit.

There is an explanation of 'increase' in a more literal sense of filling to the brim and overflowing. There are accounts where when one of the previous Panchen Lamas was consecrating an offering it actually started to overflow because of the power of the consecration.

There are different types of **incense**, but an important point is that they need to be fragrant.

It is said that **light** offerings are presented to the eyes. However, we can place the light offerings in front of the altar.

The main purpose of offering **perfume** is so it can be applied to the holy bodies, but some perfumes can also be offered solely for their fragrance.

The **food** offering of course is offered for consumption by the mouth.

These offerings should be of finest quality. As mentioned earlier, the actual offering is when one generates the mind that each of these offerings generates a newly formed uncontaminated bliss in the mind of the enlightened being. However, we should not misinterpret this to mean that the enlightened beings obtain a newly formed uncontaminated bliss that they have not obtained before, because they have, in fact, already obtained unceasing uncontaminated bliss.

But making these offerings generates a newly formed uncontaminated bliss in addition to the uncontaminated bliss that the enlightened being is perpetually experiencing. This is an incredible means of implanting the seed to obtain uncontaminated non-dual bliss and emptiness within our own mind, and again is a means to accumulate extensive merit.

These are essentially the main objects of offerings, and, as it's part of our regular practice, it's good to understand what they represent and how to offer them.

Next, the commentary posits another hypothetical question.

Is it appropriate to offer whatever object one wishes to offer?

We see here how immaculate this presentation is. Indeed, the fourth Panchen Lama was a great scholar and master, and here he is giving a very practical and reasonable presentation of these teachings so that our ordinary minds are able to engage in the practice.

The point of this question is to remove doubts about whether we can offer what is affordable or not. The answer, as the commentary explains, is:

Yes, one should be offering whatever objects are at one's disposal.

Our offerings should be whatever objects we can comfortably offer. There are specific explanations of appropriate offerings such as offering one third of whatever one owns. These, again, are all significant points to understand.

As further explained in the commentary:

Jowo said, if one has a packet of white rice, offering it completely and wholeheartedly means one has a noble mind of enlightenment.

The main part of any offering is that it should be offered wholeheartedly. If one offers in that way it means that one has a noble mind of enlightenment, while not offering it completely and wholeheartedly means that one does not have a noble mind of enlightenment. This relates back to the point made earlier, which is that by making offerings one accumulates merit, which is a suitable basis for generating the mind of bodhicitta. If one lacks merit, then one will not be able to generate the mind of bodhicitta.

As further explained here,

These are the actually arranged substances of offering, so they are called manifest objects of offering. Sharawa said that what you offer to lama and the Three Jewels should be the same, whereas Lagsowa said that offering to the lama should be superior.

That covers what are called the actual or manifest offerings.

Mental offerings

Then the commentary goes on to explain:

As to the mental offering, this refers to the seven practices as described in the Samantabhadra aspirational prayer ...

We know Samantabhadra's aspirational prayer as the seven-limb practice. These seven limbs are:

... namely, prostration, offering, confession, rejoicing, requesting, supplication, and dedication.

As the commentary further explains:

These seven are also called offering because to make offering means to please the object to whom it is offered, and these seven practices please and delights the very special objects.

The seven-limb practice

It is also good to understand that one performs a **prostration** with all three of body, speech, and mind. The prostration of one's body is the actual physical act of joining our palms together, kneeling down and prostrating on the floor; reciting praises and salutations to the enlightened beings is the prostration of speech; while generating genuine reverence and faith while doing the prostrations is the prostration of mind.

Again, there's a literal meaning of each syllable of the Tibetan word for prostration which is *chag-tsal*. The first syllable *chag* has the connotation of eliminating all negativities, while *tsal* has the connotation of receiving the blessings of the body, speech, and mind of the enlightened beings. When we understand that prostration encompasses these two points, it makes the practice much more meaningful.

There are some other significant points to recall when doing a prostration. When one places one's palms together on the crown of one's head, it symbolises purifying negativities that we have created through one's body. At that point, one contemplates that all the negativities created through one's physical body are purified, and one obtains the blessings of the indestructible holy body. Next, placing one's palms together at the throat signifies the prostration of speech. Here one thinks that the negativities created through one's speech are completely purified and one obtains the indestructible speech of the holy enlightened beings. Thirdly one places the palms at one's heart, which represents the prostration of mind, thinking that all the negativities that one has accumulated through one's mind are completely purified, and one obtains the non-dual bliss and wisdom of the enlightened beings within one's own mind. Thinking in this way makes the prostrations really significant.

It is also good to understand that prostrations serve as a specific antidote for overcoming pride. That is quite obvious as anyone with a big ego would not even consider doing a prostration, or show respect for others. Therefore, engaging in the practice of prostration helps to overcome pride.

The teachings also explain that one accumulates the equivalent merit to become a universal monarch.

Earlier there was an explanation of what we call actual or manifest offerings. In the seven-limb practice there is another very, very significant **offering**, which is the offering of one's practices such as observing morality, engaging in generosity, the practice of patience, and so forth. So, the practices that one engages in are an actual offering. It is as the great Milarepa said, 'I don't have any material possessions to offer, but what pleases my holy guru's mind is the offering of practice, and that is what I can offer'.

As mentioned before, this is very significant. If one does not have much practice to offer then of course the next best thing is to present material offerings. But it is far better to offer both material offerings and offerings of practice, as this will make the offering much more meaningful. Making offerings is said to be a specific antidote to overcoming miserliness.

Engaging in the practice of **confession** and purification is an antidote to negativities created through one's body, speech, and mind, such as the ten non-virtues that have been accumulated over beginningless lifetimes.

Confession and purification occurs when it is intact with the four opponent powers. So keep that in mind. For it to be intact the four opponent powers need to be integrated into the purification practice. More specifically, to purify the degeneration of bodhisattva vows, one engages in the practice of the thirty-five buddhas. The opening lines of the Thirty-Five Buddhas of Confession Prayer begin with the purification of the bodhisattvas' moral downfalls. Purifying the degeneration of tantric vows is done through the Vajrasattva practice. Both purification practices have to incorporate the four opponent powers.

When the purification practice is done properly and takes effect it is said that one will not have to experience the ill effects of the negativities one has created. One can understand that purification practices are an antidote for overcoming all negativities.

The next limb is **rejoicing**. It is said that the practice of rejoicing enables us to increase whatever virtues and merit that we have accumulated. Rejoicing is said to be a specific antidote for overcoming jealousy.

Next comes **requesting**. Here we are requesting to turn the wheel of the Dharma, or requesting the teachings. Engaging in this practice is said to be a specific antidote for overcoming the negativities of disparaging the Dharma that one would have accumulated in the past.

Supplication means making requests for the lamas and the teachers to not pass into nirvana. This practice is said to be incredibly powerful as it creates the causes and conditions for one's own long life; it is said that the best practice for one's own longevity is making requests to the lamas to live long. It is through this practice that one can obtain what is called the *siddhi* or attainment of immortality.

The final part of the seven-limb practice is **dedication**. The significance of engaging in the practice of dedication is that it will secure the virtues that one has accumulated so they don't go to waste. While rejoicing is a specific practice that enables one's virtues to increase, dedication is a specific practice that enables one's virtues and merits to remain secure and not decline.

The greatest form of dedication is to dedicate whatever virtues and merits one has accumulated to become a cause for the Buddha's teachings to flourish and remain for a long time, and for sentient beings to be happy, and for their suffering to be removed.

Dedicating to the long life of the virtuous teachers is highly significant because it automatically means that one is dedicating for the teachings to remain for a long time, and if the teachings remain for a long time that will become the means for sentient beings to obtain happiness. It is good to understand this co-relationship. Dedicating for one's teachers to have long life and so forth is said to be an unsurpassable and incredibly powerful dedication.

Of course, there has to be something to dedicate, meaning that one has to have actually engaged in a practice for it to become a dedication. An aspirational prayer on the other hand can be made at any time and it doesn't require an actual substance. It is good to understand this distinction.

The Samantabhadra practice

In the teachings, there is often a reference to making offerings such as those made by Samantabhadra, which refers to mentally transforming the offerings. So there's a specific practice of visualisation where one mentally transforms the offerings so that they become inexhaustible.

The way to do that is to visualise the bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the form of a monk. Samantabhadra holds a jewel in the palms of his hands at his heart. From this jewel, numerous light rays radiate out, and at the tips of these numerous light rays there are various types of offerings, such as flowers, incense, and so forth, as presented earlier. Then from each of these offerings numerous light rays radiate out with further offerings at their tips, and from each of these even more light rays. Through this visualisation one can imagine that the whole universe is filled with these offerings. This is how to visualise the inexhaustible and expansive offerings of Samantabhadra.

To do this practice on a personal level you can visualise yourself as Samantabhadra, with your palms together at one's heart. Then visualise holding a jewel and from the jewel held at your heart light rays radiate forth, as mentioned earlier. At the tip of each light ray are the individual offerings such as the flowers, incense, light, perfume, and music. From each of these further light rays radiate out and so on, and in this way one makes numberless offerings to the infinite numbers of enlightened beings. This is a means for accumulating extensive merit through what are called the mentally transformed offerings.

While there are extensive ways of making offerings such as these mentally transformed offerings, the lamas have advised that at our level it is good to find whatever means possible to make actual material offerings. That is because if we were to just resort to making mentally created and transformed offerings then we might be creating the karma to be able to see many nice things in the future but not to be able to actually use or enjoy them ourselves. This might be a situation that some of us are

experiencing now, seeing many things around but don't have the karma to use them.

One accumulates merit with both types of offerings, but there are different ways to accumulate merit and different results to be experienced.

From this presentation, you should understand that Samantabhadra offerings are mentally created or transformed offerings.

This specific list of practices is called the seven-limb practice, and the connotation of 'limb' needs to be understood as being a cause for enlightenment. All of these offerings of the seven limbs have to be intact to be a cause to achieve enlightenment. If one does not engage in these practices of accumulating merit through the seven-limb practice, then enlightenment will not be possible. If even one is missing then one will not be able to traverse to the state of enlightenment. The traditional analogy is an ox cart: if one of the wheels are missing it will not be able to move. A contemporary example can be a car which needs four wheels to move: if one of the wheels is missing it can't move.

The seven bowls that are offered on the altar can also represent the seven-limb practice. So if the question 'Why do you have seven bowls?' arises, that can be a suitable answer.

Classifications of the seven limbs

If the seven-limb practice were to be categorised into **two divisions**, then confession is the practice of purification, while the remaining six are practices to accumulate merit.

They can also be categorised into **three divisions** which are purification, accumulating merit, and increasing. Here confession is the limb of purification, and the limb of increasing is rejoicing. Increasing relates particularly to increasing one's own virtues. Of course, one can rejoice in the virtues of others as well, and dedicate that, which is also a means of accumulating merit, but increasing here specifically refers to rejoicing in having accumulated virtues oneself.

More specifically it said that when one rejoices in one's own virtue, it becomes a means to increase one's own merit, but rejoicing in the merit of others cannot help to increase their merit. So increasing merit refers to one's own merit or virtues.

The four remaining limbs are the accumulation of merit.

There is a further classification into **four divisions**, which are purification, increasing, accumulation of merit, and to prevent the degeneration of that merit so that it is not wasted, which is the dedication.

It is good to understand these specifics of the practices of accumulation of merit and purification, because when we engage in any practice ourselves, we will be able to understand their significance, which will enhance our practice and make it more meaningful.

There's also a classification of **nine limbs of practice**, where generating bodhicitta and taking refuge are added to the seven limbs. Those of you doing the Yamantaka practice should recall that the seven-limb practice in the sadhana incorporates these two limbs as well.

The main point, however, is that the seven-limb practice specifically relates to the Samantabhadra practice.

There are many more points that can be incorporated into this teaching. For example, as part of the mental prostration one can visualise manifesting oneself with many bodies. Visualising having countless bodies while doing prostrations with one's own physical body can represent all of one's previous lives where one has accumulated extensive negative karmas. It is in this way that previously created negative karma can be purified.

Then one can expand each body so that it has many heads with each of them reciting the praises and the confessional prayer together many times, and each of them with many hands, doing prostrations all together. With this visualisation, one can expand the amount of merit that is accumulated with each prostration. It is good to remember these points and incorporate them into one's practice.

In summary, you have been introduced to the way to engage in the practice of prostrations. You have also learnt how to engage in making offerings, and you have learnt how to engage in the practice of confession to purify negative karma. In addition, you have also learnt how to increase your virtues by engaging in the practice of rejoicing. If you wish to receive the Dharma you have to make requests for the Dharma to be taught, so you have also learnt how to make requests for the lama to live long.

You have learnt the way to secure the virtues you accumulated during the practices of prostration making offerings, rejoicing, and purifying negative karmas through confession and purification, so that these virtues are not dissipated and do not go to waste. Through the first six practices of the seven limbs one accumulates virtue and merit, and as a way to not let that go to waste, one secures this virtue and merit with a dedication.

We regularly recite the seven-limb prayer so it is good to know the significance of the practices and how to engage in them. The following verse from the *King of Prayers* lists the seven limbs concisely.

May any small merits that I have amassed by thus
Prostrating, making offerings, confessing, rejoicing,
And asking the buddhas to remain and teach
Dharma,
Be dedicated to supreme and perfect enlightenment.

Memorising this verse will be an easy way to remember what they are.

The translation of the commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* called *Joy of the Blossomed Excellent* by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltzen is used with the kind permission of Samdup Tsering.

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