
The Quick Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by Venerable Geshe Lobsang Dorje

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Let's begin with the breathing meditation.

Last week, we began discussing the second main heading of this lamrim teaching, which is:

II After developing certainty [about the paths], the explanation of how to purify the mind on the stages of the path

This heading is elaborated under two subheadings:

A. How to serve your spiritual teacher as the root of the path

B. How to purify the mind in stages

A. How to serve your spiritual teacher as the root of the path

This has two subheadings:

a. What we do in the actual meditation session

b. What we do in the breaks between sessions

a. What we do in the actual meditation session

What we do in the actual meditation session can be further subdivided into three:

- Preparation
- Actual practice
- Conclusion

Preparation

1. Cleaning your room and arranging the symbols of enlightened body, speech, and mind

Last time we began discussing the list of six preparatory practices.¹ The first, which we began last week, is cleaning the house or room. Next, we arrange the altar with representations of the Buddha's holy body, speech and mind.

So, before we begin a retreat or practice session, we should clean the house or meditation place well. After having done that, we set up the altar, which involves placing various holy images on it.

An explanation of the holy objects will be more detailed when we come to the section on visualising the merit field. Here, we will just focus on setting up the altar with holy images representing the enlightened beings. There are certain procedures and a correct order, in terms of where to place images that represent our gurus, buddhas, deities, and so forth. We ~~have to~~ must learn these procedures, because when we set up our altar, we cannot just place or arrange objects randomly.

For example, the meditation objects we rely on for seeking protection, for seeking help, may include worldly deities, or worldly Dharma protectors. In honouring them, it is inappropriate to place these worldly deities and gods higher or at the same level as the gurus and buddhas. However, the text says that you can make exceptions in cases where we are meditating in a limited or confined space. If there is not enough space to correctly separate the different objects of reverence, this is an exception as to where you should place the images.

In arranging the holy objects, if some are made of expensive materials, like gold or silver, we should not use that criterion of material value to place them more prominently than images made from inexpensive materials, like plaster or wood. It is said that if we do, this clearly indicates our lack of understanding as to why we place these holy objects on the altar – it indicates that we regard those images as being like our personal belongings.

While it is fine to place whatever holy objects we already have on the altar, it is specifically instructed that we have a representation of the buddhas, such as a painting or statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. As a symbol of our gurus or spiritual teachers, we should have an image of Tsongkhapa. As a representation of the holy Dharma, we should have a Dharma text, such as short sutras or Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*. As a representation or symbol of the holy mind, we can place a stupa or vajra and bell on the altar.

In the beginning, we might need to spend time arranging our altar in the proper order. However, later, we won't need to rearrange the altar for every session or every day. As a substitute for this preparatory practice of arranging the altar once it has been properly set up, in the following sessions or days, we can simply gaze at the altar and remember the gurus and the buddhas, and their qualities and kindness. Paying attention to or viewing the holy objects will accumulate merit and leave a positive impression in our minds.

On the other hand, if we think, 'Why should I bother to view the holy objects, because I've seen them before?', we will be depriving ourselves of the opportunity to accumulate merit and gain positive imprints from simply viewing the holy images and symbols.

There's a story relating to one of Lord Buddha's principal disciples, Shariputra, who had more opportunity than anyone else to be with Lord Buddha. It is said that the cause for that was the good karma he created in one of his past lives, in which he'd been born as a messenger. Very late one night, he ended up taking shelter in a temple. The room where he was staying was dark, so he lit a lamp to start stitching his torn shoes, which were worn out from overuse. As he lit the lamp, he saw beautiful murals of buddhas on the wall. When he saw these, faith arose in him, and he wished: 'How wonderful it would be if I could meet this beautiful buddha one day'. It is said that because

¹ (1) Cleaning your room and arranging the symbols of enlightened body, speech, and mind; (2) obtaining offerings without deceit and arranging them beautifully; (3) adopting the seven-featured sitting position of Vairochana on a comfortable seat, after which you take refuge, develop bodhichitta, and so on, while "in an especially virtuous frame of mind"; (4) petitioning the merit field; (5) offering the seven-limbed prayer and a world mandala – practices that contain all the key points of accumulation and self-purification; (6) further petitions, which follow the oral instructions, made in order to be sure your mental stream is sufficiently imbued [by your meditations]. (From: *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, Ed. Trijang Rinpoche, trans. Michael Richards.)

of this instance of seeing a buddha's image and having faith in it, he had the opportunity to be constantly in the presence of Lord Buddha.

2. Obtaining offerings without deceit and arranging them beautifully

After the first preparatory practice – cleaning the room and setting up the altar – we then make offerings to the holy objects. So, the next preparatory practice is arranging the offerings beautifully, without deceit or any taint of corruption.

The term 'corrupt' here can be explained in two ways: first, with respect to the objects we offer; and second, with respect to our motivation in making the offerings.

There are two explanations regarding corrupted or wrongly acquired objects or offerings. One is more relevant to the sangha and refers to the five types of wrong livelihood. The second is more relevant to lay people and refers to acquiring objects through negative actions, such as stealing or killing, or other means of wrongly acquiring offering objects.

It is said here that one is better off not making offerings at all than making tainted offerings. In Sanskrit, the word 'offering' is *puja*, and in Tibetan, it is *choepa*, which means to delight or please the noble beings. So, we can understand that offering objects wrongly acquired through negative actions are not a cause to delight or please the noble beings. We should completely avoid acquiring offerings wrongly, even if the intention is to make offerings to holy objects.

However, if we already possess an object that was acquired wrongly on some other occasion and was not acquired for the purpose of making an offering to the holy objects, it is said to be more beneficial to offer it than not offer it. We should, however, ensure that when we offer it, our intention is to accumulate merit and purify negativities.

As sangha or ordained monks and nuns, we should avoid the five wrong livelihoods and any objects acquired through them, as such objects are considered corrupted or inappropriate.

The five wrong livelihoods are related to one's motivation or intention. Of course, if your intention is honest and sincere, your livelihood cannot be wrong. For the sangha, wrong livelihoods include seeking offerings through flattery or deceit, and any gift or object received from others by directly or indirectly pressuring them. One should also not secretly plan to receive a larger or greater gift from others by giving them something smaller; such goods are also tainted by wrong livelihood.

Offering objects can also become corrupted with respect to the motivation with which we acquire those objects. For example, if we offer an object with the motivation to impress others or receive praise or admiration, such offerings become tainted because of that wrong motivation. In short, our motivation should not be corrupted by any of the eight worldly concerns or dharmas.

If our motivation for making offerings is just to enjoy good health, live long, overcome illness, or find a good rebirth

as a human or celestial being, then the scope of our motivation will be small or limited. It is said we should avoid limiting the scope of our motivation to just serving our temporary purposes. The best motivation to have for making offerings is bodhicitta: the wish to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

After ensuring our offerings are not corrupted or tainted, the second component of the preparatory practice is arranging the offerings very beautifully. When we arrange the offerings, we should not take shortcuts, or do things in the easiest way. Rather, we should take the time to do whatever it takes for our arrangement to look as beautiful and pleasant as we can make it. We should ensure that we put the offerings on the best material we can afford – embroidered with gold or silver thread, for example – and make sure it is clean. We do all of this to accumulate merit and purify negativities.

For this reason, it is also important that, wherever we can, we put an effort into arranging and making the offerings ourselves, rather than asking someone to do this for us. The point ~~is~~ of making offerings like this is to accumulate merit for oneself.

There is a story from Atisha's life that when he was very old, he continued to make his own water-bowl offerings, despite the infirmities of old age. At that time, his students offered to do it for him. Atisha replied sarcastically by saying: 'Is it appropriate for you to ask me if you can have my food as well?'. In ancient India, there was a tradition that, when a king was offering charity to his subjects, he would offer those gifts with his own hands while sitting on his throne. This was because the king saw it as a means of increasing his merit.

Sometimes, we might wish to do the offering practice, but feel we haven't anything to offer. We might say to ourselves, 'I don't have any wealth, or anything suitable to offer'. Such a mentality is wrong. If we have a pure intention to offer, there is no shortage of things to offer to the Triple Gem. For example, we can offer water, flowers, etc.

At the same time, after hearing it's okay to offer water and flowers, if we then simply offer easily accessible things and don't think of offering actual goods that we may possess, that is also not right.

One offering we commonly make is a set of seven water bowls, so I will explain how to make water-bowl offerings. You need a set of seven bowls. When making the offering, make sure you never place an empty bowl on the altar. Therefore, what you do is this: with the stack of bowls in one hand, first, fill the top one with water. Then you pour water from that into the next one, leaving some in the first, which you offer and place on the altar. Then, pour most of the water from the second bowl into the third, leaving a little behind.

In this way, you can place all the water bowls on the altar without offering an empty one. Placing a completely empty bowl on the altar is said to be an inauspicious, causal dependent-arising, resulting in poverty in the future. The life story of the great yogi Milarepa recounts how Milarepa once offered a large, empty brass pot to his teacher, Marpa. Marpa commented: 'It is good that you

offered the bowl to me, but it is inauspicious that it is empty'. As a result of this, during his meditation retreat, Milarepa faced great hardship and had to live on just eating nettles.

When you set the water bowls in a line, always make sure you leave a tiny gap between the bowls, the width of a grain of barley. And when you offer the water bowls, you start from the left to right and, at the end of the day when taking down the water bowls, you begin to empty them from the right to the left.

When you are pouring water into a bowl, make sure you hold the jug or water vessel with both hands, as a sign of respect. Holding it with one hand is regarded as disrespectful. It is like having a VIP guest in your house – when you pour tea for that very important guest, you would show respect in the way you held the teapot.

Also, when you pour water from the jug into the bowl, it is recommended that, initially, the stream of water is thin and narrow, then gets bigger in the middle, and finally the stream tapers off again to become thin at the end. You need to fill each bowl with just the right amount, neither under-filling the bowl nor filling it to the point of overflowing. Both extremes are considered inauspicious.

This is an explanation of how to make water bowl offerings. Besides water, you can also offer items like flowers, food, or anything you have. Whatever you offer, you must make sure it is all very clean and that the arrangement is as beautiful as you can make it. When you look at it, it should look very pleasant.

We have finished the first two preparatory practices, which include cleaning our house or room, setting up the altar, and arranging offerings on the altar. Once these practices are done, the next thing is the actual meditation session, which begins with sitting in a proper meditation posture: the eightfold posture. We will go over this in next week's teaching.

*Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
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