



Shenpen Ösel

The Clear Light of the Buddha's Teachings Which Benefits All Beings

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Aspiration for the World

*Over the expanse of the treasured earth in this wide world,
May benefit for beings appear like infinite moons' reflections,
Whose refreshing presence brings lasting welfare and happiness
To open a lovely array of night-blooming lilies, signs of peace and joy.*

—The Seventeenth Karmapa, Urgyen Trinley Dorje

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This issue of Shenpen Ösel is primarily devoted to a series of teachings on the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* given by the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche in the Cascade Mountains in Washington state in June of 1999. Copyright © 2000 Khenchen Thangu Rinpoche.

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Shenpen Ösel is a tri-annual publication of Kagyu Shenpen Ösel Chöling (KSOC), a center for the study and practice of Tibetan vajrayana Buddhism located in Seattle, Washington. The magazine seeks to present the teachings of recognized and fully qualified lamas and teachers, with an emphasis on the Karma Kagyu and the Shangpa Kagyu lineages. The contents are derived in large part from transcripts of teachings hosted by our center. Shenpen Ösel is produced and mailed exclusively through volunteer labor and does not make a profit. (Your subscriptions and donations are greatly appreciated.) We publish with the aspiration to present the clear light of the Buddha's teachings. May it bring benefit and may all be auspicious. May all beings be inspired and assisted in uncovering their own true nature.

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Introduction

If you sow a thought, you reap a deed.
If you sow a deed, you reap a habit.
If you sow a habit, you reap a character.
If you sow a character, you reap a destiny.

—*Indian proverb*

The last issue of *Shenpen Ösel* presented the stages of practice of the Medicine Buddha Sadhana. In this issue, the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche presents the teachings of the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*, formally called *The Twelve Great Aspirations of the Medicine Buddha* by the Buddha Shakyamuni.

In these teachings, Rinpoche explains the twelve aspirations; the benefits of hearing, recollecting, and reciting the name of the Medicine Buddha; the meaning of deity in vajrayana Buddhism; the nature of the four maras and the transcendence of obstacles in the path; and the four qualities of a good intention. In addition, Rinpoche describes and explains the mudras or ritual gestures employed in the sadhana.

In the third of these teachings, Rinpoche also gives a particularly lucid description of the five wisdoms associated with the five Buddha families, describing them as five aspects of intrinsic awareness or as five aspects of the wisdom of a buddha.



On the final day of his last teaching visit in Seattle, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamto Rinpoche was asked to say a few words about his life. In response, Rinpoche, who in the past would give actual descriptions of events from his life, asked his translator, Ari Goldfield, to sing a most beautiful and haunting song, entitled, *The Sky-Dragon's Profound Roar*, which we include here as the final selection of this issue.

Also included as the first two selections are *A Joyful Aspiration: Sweet Melody for Fortunate Ones*, a song composed by His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ugyen Trinley Dorje, during his recent escape from Tibet, and *A Song (ala thala thala)* by the Sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje. 

—*Lama Tashi Namgyal*

A Joyful Aspiration: Sweet Melody for Fortunate Ones

*By the Seventeenth Karmapa,
Urgyen Trinley Dorje*

Om Swasti. The right-turning conch of pure compassion in body, speech, and mind
Pours forth a stream of good intentions that never change.
Thereby, may a sweet, resonant melody beyond compare, such music for the ears,
Open the lotus petals of virtue, excellence, and goodness.

It has the supreme name of the Wish Fulfilling Tree, the ambrosial one.
Musical tones of this stainless tree, granting every wish, are dulcet and pleasing.
Throughout its branches the gems of lasting happiness nestle among their leaves.
Sovereign in our realm, may the world be resplendent with the beauty of this tree.

Aspiration for Tibet

A chain of fragrant flowers, these snow mountains are tranquil and fresh.
In a healing land where white incense rises sweet,
May the gracious beauty of luminous moonbeams, light of the spiritual and
temporal worlds,
Conquer all strife, the darkness of the shadow side.

Aspiration for the Dalai Lama

Inspiring festivals of merit in the Land of Snow,
You are the Supreme One holding a pure white lotus.
With the beauty of all good qualities, a treasure for eyes to behold,
May your life be long, steadfast as a diamond vajra.

Aspiration for Culture and Knowledge

The most excellent virtue is the brilliant and calm flow of culture:
Those with fine minds play in a clear lotus lake;
Through this excellent path, a song line sweet like the pollen's honey,
May they sip the fragrant dew of glorious knowledge.

Aspiration for the World

Over the expanse of the treasured earth in this wide world,
May benefit for beings appear like infinite moons' reflections,
Whose refreshing presence brings lasting welfare and happiness
To open a lovely array of night-blooming lilies, signs of peace and joy.

Conclusion

Descending from a canopy of white clouds, the gathering of two accumulations,
May these true words, like pearly drops of light or pouring rain,
Falling in a lovely park where fortunate disciples are free of bias,
Open the flowers of friendship so that well-being and joy blossom forth.

These words of aspiration, sprung from a sincere intention, were written down by Ugyen Trinley, the one who bears the noble name of the Karmapa, while he was escaping from Tibet. One night in the illusory appearance of a dream, on a lake bathed in clear moonlight and rippled with blooming lotus flowers serving as seats, three Brahmins appeared wearing pure white silk and playing a drum, guitar, flute, and other instruments. Created in pleasing and lyric tones, their melodious song came to my ears, and so I composed this aspiration prayer with a one-pointed mind, filled with an intense and sincere intention to benefit all the people of Tibet. Within a beautiful and auspicious chain of mountains, this land of Tibet, may the sun rays of the supreme aspiration for awakening swiftly appear.

Translated under the guidance of Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche by Michele Martin of New York © February 2000; headings inserted based on commentary of Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche; all rights reserved.

A Song

*By the Sixteenth Karmapa,
Rangjung Rigpe Dorje*

This song is ala thala thala,
Ala is the way it arose.
Thala is the way it is expressed in words.
In a pure land, rich with turquoise leaves,

On a throne of brilliant, white shell
Is the deity of long life, the mother Lady Tara.
I pray to her from the depths of my heart.
May there be no obstacles to long life.

If you do not recognize this place,
It is the Retreat House of Palpung.
If you do not recognize a person like me,
There is the upper valley of delightful Shukra

And the lower valley of delightful Shukra;
In the place between the two Shukras¹
Is a child who descends from Tshazhang Denma.²
If you call him by name, it is Thubten Gelek.³

Not now, but on a distant tomorrow it will be decided.
Both the vulture and I know where to go.
The vulture soars into the expanse of the sky;
Our people do not stay, but go to India.⁴

In the springtime, a cuckoo comes as a guest.
In the fall when the harvest ripens, it knows where to go:
Its only thought is travel to the east of India.⁵
In the lofty land of Tibet, the inhabitants, high and low,

And in particular, you, Tai Situ, the Lord and Protector Maitreya,
Who remains above the crown of our head,
May your activities, like the sun and moon set in space,
Be continuous, stable, and without hindrance.

I pray that we meet again and again.⁶
May the three roots—the lamas, yidams, and dakinis—
Protect him from negative conditions and obstacles.
Keep the precise meaning recorded here in the depth of your heart.

In the sixteenth rabjung's [sixty year cycle's] year of the iron dragon, the sixteenth incarnation of the Karmapas, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, composed this song when he was seventeen years old at Palpung Chökhör Ling. May it be auspicious. Under the guidance of Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, translated by Michele Martin of New York © April 1994.

¹This indicates the birthplace of the Sixteenth Karmapa, situated between the two Shukra valleys with a river flowing across one end.

²He was one of the chief ministers of Gesar of Ling, the great Tibetan warrior and emanation of Guru Rinpoche.

³Thubten Gelek is a childhood name of the Sixteenth Karmapa.

⁴Here the Karmapa is clearly predicting the future flight of the Tibetans to India.

⁵Following its pattern of migration, the cuckoo comes in the spring and leaves in the fall; in this same natural way, the Karmapa knows when it is time to leave Tibet for the eastern part of India, where he will take up residence in Rumtek, Sikkim.

⁶The Karmapa is alluding to the fact that Tai Situ Rinpoche will meet the Karmapa again when he reincarnates as the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ugyen Trinley Dorje. It is Tai Situ Rinpoche who discovered the Seventeenth Karmapa and takes responsibility for him; thus they meet again and again.



The Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche

Medicine Buddha Sutra

Twelve Extraordinary Aspirations for the Benefit of Sentient Beings

In the Cascade Mountains in Washington, in June of 1999, the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche led an eight-day retreat to teach the Medicine Buddha Sadhana and Medicine Buddha Sutra. The last issue of Shenpen Ösel published Rinpoche's teachings on the sadhana. This issue is devoted to Rinpoche's teachings on the sutra. Rinpoche gave the teachings in Tibetan; they were orally translated by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso. The following is an edited transcript.

We have finished going through the practice of the Medicine Buddha—how to do it, what to meditate on, and what its meaning is. If you can do this full form of the practice regularly, that will be extremely beneficial, because it bears great blessing. But even if you can do it only occasionally, there will still be great benefit from your involvement in it. There is also a shorter form of the practice that you can use when you do not have time to do the long form. It is found on the last

page in your chant book.* It is a short supplication of the Medicine Buddha by name, which serves as a vehicle for cultivating faith in and devotion to the Medicine Buddha. As is taught in the sutra of Amitabha and in the sutra of the Medicine Buddha, recollecting and reciting the name of the Medicine Buddha is of incalculable benefit. Most of the benefits associated with the Medicine Buddha are connected with the twelve aspirations he made at the time of his initial generation of bodhicitta,** and most of these aspirations are connected in one way or another with his name. Therefore, most of the benefits connected with the Medicine Buddha can be gained by recollecting and reciting his name.

There are three sutras primarily concerned with the Medicine Buddha. One sets forth the twelve aspirations of the Medicine Buddha. Another sets forth the aspirations of the

Most of the benefits associated with the Medicine Buddha are connected with the twelve aspirations he made at the time of his initial generation of bodhicitta

seven other medicine buddhas. The third, an extremely short sutra, sets forth the darani or mantras of the various medicine buddhas. I am now going to explain the main one, the sutra that sets forth the twelve aspirations of the Medicine Buddha. Before I begin, you should know something about the difference between sutras and shastras. Sutras are the Buddha's teachings, and shastras are commentaries on them. Shastras are constructed in order to give a summary of the meaning; therefore, they get right to the point—whereas sutras always begin with an introduction that gives the setting for any particular teaching of the Buddha. A sutra will tell you where the Buddha was living when he gave that particular teaching, why he

happened to give it, who asked him to give it, who and how many were there when he gave it, and exactly what he said and what others said that caused him to say what he said. The Buddha went just about everywhere in India. The setting for this particular sutra was Vaisali, one of the six major cities in India at that time. The retinue in the midst of which the Buddha taught this sutra was extremely large. It consisted of a great many monks and nuns and a great many bodhisattvas, both male and female; it consisted of monarchs, the ministers of these monarchs, and the common people from the kingdoms of these monarchs. There were also innumerable spirits and local divinities in attendance, all of whom had assembled in order to hear this teaching.

The foremost disciple in this gathering—in fact, the person who specifically asked the Buddha to give this explanation, which later came to be known as the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*—was the bodhisattva Manjushri. The sutra begins with Manjushri taking a certain physical posture and making the request. The

***Editor's note:** See page 70 of the last issue of *Shenpen Ösel*.

****Editor's note:** The generation of bodhicitta is based on the altruistic wish to bring about the welfare, and ultimately the total liberation, of all sentient beings from all forms of suffering. What distinguishes bodhicitta from the ordinary compassionate aspirations to benefit others shared by all people of good will is the recognition that one cannot ultimately fulfill these aspirations until one has attained the state of mental purification and liberation of buddhahood, which is the source of all positive qualities, including the omniscience that can see, individual by individual, the causes of suffering and the causes and path of liberation from suffering. This understanding gives rise at some point to the initial generation of the aspiration to attain the state of buddhahood in order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering and to establish them all in states of happiness. This is called aspiration bodhicitta, which must be followed by what is called the bodhicitta of entering or perseverance bodhicitta, which is the training in loving-kindness, compassion, the six paramitas or transcendent perfections, etc. which lead to the attainment of buddhahood. Aspiration bodhicitta and perseverance bodhicitta are both included in the term relative bodhicitta. Absolute bodhicitta is direct insight into the ultimate nature. This state of primordial awareness *is* compassion and loving-kindness and gives rise spontaneously and without preconception to compassionate activity.

posture that Manjushri takes is the same physical posture we take when we formally take the vow of refuge, when we take other forms of pratimoksha ordination, and when we take the bodhisattva vow. Manjushri's left knee is raised, his right knee is on the ground,* and his palms are joined in a gesture of devotion in front of his heart. Manjushri takes this posture because it is the posture that the Buddha's disciples always took whenever they addressed him. And the reason we take this posture in formal ceremonies today is that they did it then. We do it in order to recollect the Buddha when we take refuge or any other ordination.

Facing the Buddha and taking that posture, Manjushri addresses the Buddha, asking him to teach about those buddhas who had made extraordinary aspirations for the benefit of beings—what their aspirations were, and what the benefits of recollecting their names would be. He asks him to explain these things for the benefit of beings in the future.

The Buddha's first response to Manjushri's request is to praise him for making the request in the first place. Addressing Manjushri, the Buddha says, "It is excellent and fitting that you have made this request, because your motivation in doing so is compassion and a wish to bring about the means of purification of obscurations in general, and especially the means of eradicating the sickness of beings in the future."

While praising Manjushri for making this request, the Buddha enjoins him to listen well to the detailed explanation he was about to give. Commentators have explained that this injunction has three specific meanings. The Buddha says, "Manjushri, for that reason, listen well, listen fully, and hold this in your mind." Each of these three points—listen well, listen fully, and hold this in your mind—has a particular meaning with respect to how to listen to the teachings. The first injunction—"Listen well"—means,

Listen well, listen
fully, and hold
this in your mind

listen with an appropriate motivation. If you have a good motivation for listening, then the dharma you hear will be contained in a pure form in your mind. On the other hand, if you listen with an impure motivation—with attachment or aversion or the like—then your mind will become like a container or cup that holds poison, which then turns whatever is poured into it into poison.

The second injunction of the Buddha—"Listen fully"—means, listen attentively. You may have a good motivation for listening to the teachings, but if you are distracted—if you do not direct your mind to what is being said—then listening is of no use. Your mind will become like a cup that is turned upside-down; nothing can be poured into it.

The Buddha's third injunction is, "Hold it in your mind." Even if you have a good motivation and listen well, if you forget what is being taught, then it is lost from your mind. Your mind is then like a broken cup, which, no matter how much is poured into it, will allow it all to leak back out again.

Then the Buddha tells Manjushri that in the eastern direction, innumerable realms away—which means that if you pass beyond this particular realm, the realm of the Buddha Shakyamuni, and go in the eastern direction past a truly large number of other realms—you will reach the buddha realm called the Light of Vaidhurya or the Light of Lapis Lazuli. In that realm there abides the Buddha Bhaishajyai Guru, the Medicine Buddha, also known as the Light of Lapis Lazuli or the Light of Vaidhurya, who teaches the dharma there. The Buddha tells Manjushri that because of the twelve extraordinary aspirations made by the Buddha Bhaishajyai Guru before he attained enlightenment, while he was still engaged in the practice or conduct of a bodhisattva, there is tremendous benefit in recollecting his name and tremendous blessing in supplicating him. In fact, the benefits that accrue from devotion to the Medicine Buddha are based primarily upon the aspirations he

***Editor's note:** The supplicant is generally also sitting on his or her right heel.

made while still a bodhisattva.*

The first of the twelve aspirations made by the Medicine Buddha while still a bodhisattva is, “In the future, when I attain perfect awakening and become a buddha, may my utterly luminous body illuminate innumerable worlds, and may all the beings who see it come to possess a body just like that, adorned with the thirty-two marks and the eighty signs of the body of a buddha.” The essential aspiration here is to have, upon awakening, the extraordinarily luminous form of a buddha, and on the basis of that, to bring about the liberation into buddhahood of any being who sees him. This does not mean that, immediately upon seeing the Medicine Buddha’s form, you become a buddha just like the Medicine Buddha. It means that seeing the Medicine Buddha, even seeing a painted depiction of the Medicine Buddha, or even just hearing about the thirty-two marks and eighty signs and so forth of the Medicine Buddha, instills a habit within your mind. How much of a habit is instilled depends upon your attitude towards what you see or encounter. If you have great faith in and devotion to the Medicine Buddha, then a very strong habit is instilled. If you have some degree of devotion, then some degree of habit is instilled. If you have a little devotion a little habit is instilled. And if you have only the slightest amount of devotion only

It is because of this first aspiration of the Medicine Buddha that there is so much benefit in seeing any depiction of him

the slightest amount of habit is instilled. Regardless of how much or how little, eventually this habit will lead to your attainment of that same form as the Medicine Buddha, as well as to the perfect accomplishment of what he has aspired to.** If you have great faith in the Medicine Buddha, this will happen much more quickly, and if you have no faith whatsoever, it will happen very slowly. But it will definitely still happen. It is because of this first aspiration of the Medicine Buddha that there is so much

benefit in seeing any depiction of him, whether you see it all the time, or whether you see it occasionally—it will do you great benefit.

The second aspiration of the Medicine Buddha, made as a bodhisattva, is also connected primarily with his appearance. It is as follows: “In the future, when I attain perfect awakening and become a buddha, may my body be as brilliant and lustrous as the jewel of vaidhurya or lapis lazuli. May it be stainless and luminous, vast, pleasing, glorious, majestic in every way. And may all who see it be benefited by it.” The apparent and obvious result of this aspiration is the form that the Medicine Buddha exhibits in his pure realm, which form literally has the qualities of being luminous and lustrous and majestic, and so on. But as an additional consequence of this aspiration the Medicine Buddha exhibits his form indirectly even in the midst of impure realms, such as our own, so that beings who are ignorant of what is to be accepted and what is to be rejected, of what is to be done and what is not to be done, can still be inspired by

***Editor’s note:** It is sometimes said that buddhas have no desire to benefit or liberate sentient beings in the ordinary dualistic sense of an “I” helping or liberating an “other”. This is not of course to suggest that a buddha does not care, rather that the natural and spontaneous activity of the totally purified clear light nature of mind is to work spontaneously for the benefit of sentient beings without preconceived ideas, without any sort of forced effort, and without habit-forming thoughts. This activity is conditioned, however, by the aspirations the buddha makes before he or she attains buddhahood, and particularly by those aspirations that the future buddha makes after he or she enters the bodhisattva path of the mahayana. Thus the great emphasis placed on the aspirations of the Medicine Buddha made when he was a bodhisattva. The activity of a buddha is also conditioned by the merit and aspirations of sentient beings.

****Editor’s note:** One should not, of course, prevent oneself from generating great faith in the Medicine Buddha simply because, looking at the deep blue, male, monastic form of the Medicine Buddha, one feels disinclined towards a male monastic lifestyle and feels that one would rather end up looking like Vajrayogini, White Tara, or Guru Rinpoche. The ultimate state of buddhahood involves unlimited freedom of mind, which means that a buddha can manifest at will in whatever form he or she chooses.

seeing an image of the Medicine Buddha or by hearing his name. As a consequence, although they may not be directly interested in hearing about what is to be done and what is not to be done, a devotion to correct action will gradually grow in their minds through having seen these things or having heard these things.

The third aspiration of the Medicine Buddha as a bodhisattva was that upon his awakening (upon becoming a buddha) through prajna and upaya (knowledge and method) he be able to bring about prosperity for all beings. This aspiration is particularly concerned with alleviating a type of suffering that is very common in the human realm, which manifests in its most extreme form as poverty. But even when we human beings are not poor, we still think that we are poor. We have not only the suffering of poverty, but the suffering of unceasing ambition—and also the suffering of constant struggle to secure ourselves, and to secure greater and greater prosperity. The first two aspirations were connected with bringing beings to ultimate liberation. This aspiration is more connected with benefiting beings, and especially human beings, in the short term. It is very important because we may tend to think sometimes that the concerns and aspirations of buddhas only do us good in the long run—that they are only concerned with our liberation and do us no immediate good in this life. This aspiration indicates that this is not true. This aspiration is designed to bring about immediate help. This means that, if you supplicate the Medicine Buddha, it can affect your prosperity in this life. This will not work as immediately as taking a pill, but it can actually make a difference.

The fourth aspiration of the Medicine Buddha is that he be able to extricate beings who have taken incorrect paths and place them on

paths that lead to liberation. All of us want to be happy, and we select various ways to lead our lives that we think will make our lives happy.

For each of us that is our path. Unfortunately, while some of us actually select ways to make ourselves happy, many of us—thinking to make ourselves happy—select ways that are in fact merely causes of more and more suffering. The primary focus of this aspiration is to be able to lead beings away from those counterproductive paths or lifestyles and into paths that lead to liberation. This is done through exhibiting the forms of buddhas, through the presence of their speech in the form of sutras and so on, through the demonstrations of the activities of buddhas, and so on. These things have occurred in our lives already. In one way or another,

We may tend to think sometimes that the concerns and aspirations of buddhas only do us good in the long run . . . [This third] aspiration is designed to bring about immediate help

we have come into contact with some form of depiction of the form of the Buddha, we have heard the sutras or the teachings of the Buddha, or we have been inspired by places connected with the Buddha's life. In short, in whatever way, this activity of the buddhas has already caused us to change our course of action.

The second part of this fourth aspiration is the wish also to establish those beings concerned only with their own liberation* on a path that leads to the full liberation of all beings—in short, on the mahayana path. This refers in part to something that is stated very clearly in texts such as *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, which states that, after someone attains the state of an arhat or arhati—either as a shravaka or as a pratyekabuddha—and has achieved full liberation for themselves from samsara, eventually—sometimes after a very long time—a buddha will reveal his or her form to the arhat or arhati, inspiring that being to enter the path of mahayana and attain full buddhahood. The second part of this fourth aspiration is an aspira-

tion to do just that—to exhibit his form in order to cause beings who are immersed in paths leading to personal liberation alone to engage in paths that will lead to the liberation of all beings, and by doing so, to inspire those beings to increase their love, compassion, and bodhicitta.

The fifth aspiration of the Medicine Buddha is that subsequent to his awakening or buddhahood he be able to inspire morality in all beings. In the words of the sutra, what he suggests is the moral discipline of a monk or a nun. But by extension, this refers to the practice of morality in general, which is to say, conducting yourself physically, verbally, and mentally in a way that is beneficial to and not harmful to others. The idea here is that the inspiration of a buddha inspires one to behave morally. Seeing the image of a buddha or hearing the teachings of a buddha has caused us to enter the door of the dharma to begin with, and to change our physical, verbal, and mental conduct somewhat. Whether upon beginning the practice of dharma you practice with extraordinary diligence, which is wonderful, or not, which is still okay, there will still be some kind of improvement in your conduct. The primary aspiration here of the Medicine Buddha is that, through his blessing, practitioners be able to maintain morality without impairment. The secondary aspiration is that—since ordinary beings will turn away from moral conduct from time to time, and thereby become confused—the Medicine Buddha be able to prevent those who turn away from morality from remaining in a state of inappropriate conduct, so that they will return to moral conduct and avoid lower rebirths.

Part of the fifth aspiration is that for beings who have mistaken the path, who have turned away from moral conduct, the positive habits that they created in the past when they first

adopted moral conduct again become foremost in their minds, through the blessings of the buddhas, thereby causing them to return to moral conduct.

The sixth aspiration concerns those who are born with congenital physical problems. It is an aspiration by the Medicine Buddha to be able by his blessing to heal anyone who is born with any congenital physical problem or defect, such as impaired senses, impaired limbs, or virulent disease. From the point of view of ordinary thinking, you might think it impossible that the condition of someone born with a congenital

physical problem could be alleviated. Yet it is quite possible that such a person could benefit through intense supplication of the Medicine Buddha. And in the cases in which they are unable to ameliorate their condition immediately, the supplication and recollection of the name of the Medicine Buddha and the practice of the sadhana would still generate great lasting benefit.

The seventh aspiration of the Medicine Buddha is that merely hearing his name would alleviate the sufferings of sickness and

The seventh aspiration of the Medicine Buddha is that merely hearing his name would alleviate the sufferings of sickness and poverty

poverty that afflict those who find themselves seriously ill with no help, no friends, and no resources; that merely by hearing or recollecting his name or by seeing an image of him, beings in that type of situation would be freed from both the sicknesses they suffer and the poverty that reinforces the sicknesses; and that furthermore, those beings, once having heard the Medicine Buddha's name, would never again become ill throughout all of their lifetimes until their attainment of buddhahood. This sounds like an extremely vast and profound, even an extreme, aspiration. But it is by no means impossible that it could be fulfilled, especially for someone who has intense devotion to the Medicine Buddha, recollects his name, supplicates him, and so on. This aspiration is an instance of one of the particular benefits of the recollection of the Medi-

cine Buddha's name.

Often we find ourselves witnessing the death of a small animal, an insect, a bird, or some other creature that is about to breathe its last breath. It is gasping away its last few moments of life. Because we have buddha nature and because these beings also have buddha nature, of course we feel empathy and compassion for them. But the compassion sometimes seems futile, because we simply do not know what to do. Because of the blessings of buddhas and bodhisattvas, however, there are things that we can do. One, for example, is to recite the name of the Medicine Buddha in the hearing of that dying animal. This is probably not going to heal its sickness immediately.

Dying birds will not likely suddenly wake up and fly off. But what it will do is ultimately in the long term better than that; it will establish the basis for that being's future liberation.

The eighth aspiration of the Medicine Buddha concerns freeing human beings in particular

The eighth aspiration of the Medicine Buddha concerns freeing human beings in particular from situations of discrimination

from situations of discrimination. It refers to situations like the caste system that was in place in India in the Buddha's time. It often happens in human society that a certain class or group of people will be isolated from the rest and considered to be so far inferior that even their humanity is disputed, as has happened at times to the class known as the "untouchables" in India. The idea here is that, if one of these beings sees an image of the Medicine Buddha or hears the name of the Medicine Buddha, they will generate enough confidence in their humanity, enough recognition of and confidence in the fact that they are just as much a fully fledged human being as whoever is discriminating against them,

that they will be able to escape that situation. And it has happened many times that people born in the lowest caste in societies like India could escape their caste restrictions in various ways, which could be viewed as an instance of the blessings of buddhas. 

Medicine Buddha Sutra

The Buddha Shakyamuni Taught This Sutra to Inspire Us to Practice



The Wheel of Existence

Continuing the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's teaching on the Medicine Buddha Sutra.

So far we have discussed the first eight of the twelve aspirations of the Medicine Buddha presented in the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*. All of these vast aspirations are born of the Medicine Buddha's particular generation of bodhicitta at the beginning of his path. They are explained in the sutra so that we may understand how the blessings of the body, speech, and mind of the Medicine Buddha can enter into us and what the benefits of their doing so will be. The Buddha Shakyamuni taught this sutra in order to inspire us to practice. The idea being conveyed here is that meditation on the Medicine Buddha, supplication of the Medicine Buddha, and recollection of the name of the Medicine Buddha bring extraordinary benefits. By understanding that, you will feel enthusiastic about the Medicine Buddha practice. This enthusi-

asm will cause you to practice, which in turn will cause you to attain the result of practice. So now we will go on from where we left off, beginning with the ninth aspiration.

The ninth aspiration of the Medicine Buddha is to free all beings from the noose or lasso of mara. The lasso of mara refers to that which obstructs liberation. In this case it means any cultivated view that is sufficiently incorrect that it leads you down the wrong path, any view that is actually leading you away from liberation rather than towards it. Now any kind of view—which is to say, any kind of consciously cultivated or developed understanding of how things are—is produced through one’s own investigation and analysis of phenomena, using one’s own intellect or intelligence. This analysis can either be correct, thereby producing a correct view, or it can be incorrect or faulty, thereby producing an incorrect view. Given our native intelligence, we all have the capacity to engage in these kinds of analyses, and therefore we are capable of coming to either correct or incorrect conclusions. If the view you take of things is basically correct, then it will be a strong cause of your liberation. And by causing your liberation it will be an indirect cause of the liberation of others. In short, a correct view of how things are produces all manner of happiness. On the other hand, if your view is sufficiently incorrect and actually becomes a perverted or misguided use of your intelligence, then it will obstruct your path to liberation, thereby preventing you from liberating others and becoming an obstacle to happiness.

There are two types of misguided or malfunctioning intelligence. One is a strongly incorrect understanding of how things are, which actually leads you on the wrong path, and the other is an analysis that causes you to doubt what is actually true, and therefore causes you to be unable

to accept the truth. In either case, the aspiration of the Medicine Buddha here is to free beings from those kinds of misconceptions or misunderstandings, and to establish them on the correct path to liberation.

The other part of this ninth aspiration is connected with the conduct of beings. If your view is correct, then that will cause you to engage in appropriate conduct, which is the conduct of a bodhisattva. And if your view is incorrect, your conduct will follow suit; it will also be incorrect. What is understood here by correct conduct is conduct that does not harm others or yourself, but benefits others and yourself. This conduct naturally ensues from having a correct understanding, a correct view, of how things are. The aspiration of the Medicine Buddha here while still a bodhisattva is that the blessing and the activity of his teaching that will ensue upon his attaining buddhahood will lead beings to a correct understanding and, therefore, to correct conduct that will cause them to attain liberation.

The tenth aspiration of the Medicine Buddha is to free beings from persecution by their rulers. As literally stated, this means, through the Medicine Buddha’s blessing, to free and protect beings from imprisonment, execution, and all the other hardships and cruelties that absolute monarchs impose upon their subjects. But by extension, this also refers to all analogous situations in which something in the external world interferes with your well being—to sickness, to any kind of abuse or persecution by others—regardless of who they may be—and to all the other sorts of dangers and disasters that constantly threaten us. Because the nature of our existence in the world is impermanence, we are constantly in some kind of danger and live in some kind of fear of one thing

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or another happening to us. The point of this aspiration is that through the blessing of the Medicine Buddha beings be protected from these dangers, and from the fear of the arising of these dangers.

A very commonly displayed image of samsara called the Wheel of Existence shows at the center the three poisons* and outside of that the six realms.** Outside the six realms, it shows that this [entire wheel of trans-migratory existence], which represents samsara, is being held between the teeth and the lap by a very wrathful figure. This wrathful figure represents the basic danger and fear that characterizes samsaric existence. As is shown in the painting, sometimes one is happy, and sometimes one is miserable. But in either case, the basic nature of one's existence is change. Because it is change, it is uncertainty, and because it is uncertainty, it is danger. And because it is danger, it is fear. And all of this uncertainty, danger, and fear is represented by this wrathful figure. During the Buddha's lifetime, his senior students and the shravakas were frequently asked by many different people what his teachings were all about. They would be asked many different questions. And when they went to the Buddha and explained that they were not always able to answer all of these questions, he came up with the idea of painting this Wheel of Existence on the door of every Buddhist temple to serve as a representation, in one image, of the buddhadharma.

The purpose of buddhadharma, of course, is

***Editor's note:** The three poisons are the three basic mental afflictions—passion, aggression, and ignorance—represented by a cock, a snake, and a pig, from which all of samsara arises.

****Editor's note:** The six basic categories of samsaric existence: the hell realms, the hungry ghost realms, the animal realms, the human realms, the asura or jealous god realms, and the god realms.

The basic nature of one's existence is change. Because it is change, it is uncertainty, and because it is uncertainty, it is danger. And because it is danger, it is fear

to free one from fear and danger. It is to that end that the Buddha taught the dharma, including this sutra of the Medicine Buddha. We all have fears and anxieties. And these fears and anxieties really stem from the fact that samsaric or cyclic existence is fundamentally full of impermanence, and therefore full of suffering. If you ask, is there no way to transcend these fears and anxieties, the answer is, "Yes, there is a way. If

you practice dharma, and if, by so doing, you connect with the blessings, the compassion, and the aspirations of buddhas such as the Medicine Buddha, fear and anxiety can be transcended," which is to say that, if you practice with great diligence, you can transcend all fear once and for all. But even if you do not practice with that much diligence, even if you only practice a little bit, or even if you merely have some contact with the dharma, there will be some benefit. It will help to some extent. And ultimately, you will be liberated into a state beyond all fear. So, in this tenth aspiration, the expressly stated aspiration to free beings

from the persecution of unjust monarchs really refers to freeing beings from the sufferings of samsara altogether, which means freeing them from the grip of impermanence. And the point of this is that it is possible to transcend the fear and danger which impermanence otherwise imposes upon us.

The eleventh and twelfth aspirations have in common that they are connected with freeing beings from the suffering of poverty. Specifically the eleventh aspiration is to free beings from the suffering of lacking the necessities of life—from the sufferings of hunger and thirst, and the related suffering of constantly having to struggle to survive. This aspiration of the Medicine Buddha is to free beings from lack of food and drink and from the need to struggle to acquire them, and by extension, to extend to all beings

the experience of what is referred to by the Buddha as the delightful taste of dharma. This means that the Medicine Buddha aspired not only to give beings the physical means of survival, physical nutrition, but also the spiritual nutrition of the dharma.

The delightful taste of dharma means hearing the dharma and tasting it in that way, and then practicing it and, through practicing it, becoming truly happy. When one has practiced dharma to the point where one has attained a true and stable state of happiness, one no longer needs to experience the sufferings of samsara, which means that there will no longer be physical suffering, nor will there be mental misery. The benefit of dharma, and the way in which one tastes its delightful taste, can occur to various degrees and in various ways. Sometimes one is benefited simply by hearing the dharma. Sometimes one is benefited by reflecting upon its meaning; sometimes, by meditating upon it. And in some cases the degree of benefit is limited to having a slight contact with it. But in any case, all of these are ways in which, through the aspiration of buddhas, dharma benefits beings and frees them from suffering.

The twelfth aspiration of the Medicine Buddha focuses on actual poverty and specifically on the lack of things that give us comfort. First the Medicine Buddha aspires to be able to provide clothing for all those beings who lack sufficient clothing and are therefore subject to suffering from heat or cold, the elements, and so on. Beyond that, he aspires to provide ornamentation, which means things like jewelry and so forth, for those who lack them. In the same vein, he aspires to provide musical instruments and the sound and presence of music in one's life for those who lack them. This aspiration centers around fulfilling the wishes of

beings and giving beings what they want and what will make them happy in the short run. From one point of view, you might think that this means that simply by praying to the Medicine Buddha you can produce a shower of designer clothing from the sky or whatever musical instruments you might happen to want. So you might actually try praying with those expectations, and you might be very disappointed when they are not fulfilled. This does not mean, however, that the Medicine Buddha's aspiration was

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pointless or ineffective. The way this aspiration takes effect, and indeed the way they all take effect, is that through the aspiration and power of the Medicine Buddha beings come into contact with dharma. Beings meet images, representations, or other expressions of the activity of the Medicine Buddha or of other buddhas. As a result, they abandon the wrongdoing and wrong thinking that reinforce their obscurations, gradually weakening or getting rid of their obscurations altogether, and gradually gathering the accumulations of merit and wisdom through actions performed under the inspiration of the dharma and the inspiration of buddhas. This changes their situation. Either in that life, or

in a future life, they start to acquire the things that they want and have lacked to that point. So it is not the case that this twelfth aspiration does not work simply because clothes do not rain down upon you immediately. It works, but it works in a less direct and more gradual way.

So in the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*, the Buddha Shakyamuni set forth these twelve aspirations that were made by the Medicine Buddha upon his initial generation of bodhicitta. Then, continuing to address Manjushri, who had requested this explanation, the Buddha points out that as a result of the Medicine Buddha's

aspirations, his qualities—both the qualities of his form and being, and the qualities of his realm, which have arisen from his aspirations—are unlimited. The Buddha Shakyamuni also mentions that in his realm the Medicine Buddha has two main disciples in his retinue, bodhisattvas referred to by the names Luminous Like The Sun and Luminous Like The Moon. And then, continuing to address Manjushri, the Buddha says that a man or woman who possesses faith, and therefore diligence and insight, should supplicate the Medicine Buddha, should meditate upon the Medicine Buddha, and should recollect the name of the Medicine Buddha.

Next the Buddha talks about further benefits of supplicating the Medicine Buddha. The Buddha mentions that there are people so avaricious they cannot stand to give anything away. He points out that when people cannot stand to give anything away, it is fundamentally because they do not realize there are benefits in doing so. This lack of realization is what keeps them so obsessed with holding onto their possessions. Such people never think of generosity. If they are forced by circumstances to give something away, it makes them extremely unhappy, even if they have to give it away to members of their own family. The problem with this is that if you have that degree of avariciousness, you are likely to have a somewhat unpleasant rebirth. The Buddha says at this point that if even such an extremely avaricious person hears the name of the Medicine Buddha and makes some kind of connection with him—which basically means knowing something about the Medicine Buddha's qualities—then this will inspire in them an understanding of the value of generosity. And as they come to understand the value of generosity, they will actually become generous. Becoming generous, they will

not have an unpleasant rebirth. And throughout all their future lives, this momentum of generosity will be present, so that not only will they always be generous, but they will actually become a source of encouragement to others to be generous as well.

That is the first benefit explained at this point in the sutra of recollecting the name of and supplicating the Medicine Buddha. As for the second benefit, the Buddha again addresses Manjushri saying that, similarly, there are some people who simply cannot behave themselves.

They have no interest whatsoever in morality. They think morality is pointless. The reason that they have no interest in morality is that they do not understand its value. They do not understand the benefit of behaving morally, and they do not understand the problems that behaving immorally leads to. At the same time they have no interest in dharma or spirituality of any kind, because they do not understand its value. Not knowing its value, of course, they have no interest in it. But when a person in even such an extreme state of mind as that hears the name of the Medicine Buddha, they will come to have respect for and gradual interest in both morality and the practice of

A man or woman who possesses faith . . . should supplicate the Medicine Buddha, should meditate upon the Medicine Buddha, and should recollect the name of the Medicine Buddha

dharma. As a result they will behave appropriately and they will study and practice dharma, which will cause them not only to be happy in this life, but to come to have better and better and happier and happier lives, life after life. The momentum of their conduct and of their study and practice will be maintained, and will increase as time goes on. We see this development in our own experience. Many of us start out knowing nothing about dharma and therefore not having much respect for or faith in it, simply because we do not know what it is. And we may have had so many questions and doubts about

the notions of morality that we had heard about that we really did not respect that either. But at some point something inspired us. We saw something, such as an image of the Buddha, or we heard something, such as an explanation of dharma or the name of a buddha. Something caught our attention, and caused us to entertain the idea of dharma practice, which caused us to change our way of life to some extent and to practice dharma. Whether you are new to the practice of dharma or are completely immersed in it, in either case something has happened. This something happening is exactly what is referred to in this benefit of the hearing of the Medicine Buddha's name. As it says in the sutras, a being such as ourselves comes in contact with some form of the activity and blessing of a buddha—an image of a buddha, the name of a buddha, or teachings that come from a buddha—and being inspired by that, eventually we develop some degree of faith and compassion for other beings [which leads to the development of other good qualities].

Of course, our faith in dharma and our devotion to dharma are not unfluctuating. There are times when we apparently have strong faith and devotion, and other times when doubts arise that seem to obstruct or impede our faith and devotion. In either situation, what is necessary is the same: to supplicate or pray with all available faith and devotion, based on a fundamental confidence in the buddhas and in their teachings. If you supplicate in that way, when you have faith, your faith will increase. And if you supplicate in that way when you have doubts, your faith will increase and your doubts will lessen. So whether or not you are afflicted by

hesitation or doubt about dharma, you have to do the same thing. As the Buddha points out at this point in the sutra, supplication of buddhas, with all the faith and devotion one can muster, is always important.

The Buddha Shakyamuni states four benefits of recollecting or hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha, the first two of which we have now discussed: the alleviation of avarice and the alleviation of immorality. I would like to stop here for this morning, because there were a number of people who were lined up yesterday to ask questions* and did not get a chance to do so. If you would still like to ask your questions now, then please go ahead.

Question: Could you explain the visualization for the short or condensed practice of the Medicine Buddha?

Rinpoche: There are two ways you can do this. One way is to make the supplication, paying homage the Medicine Buddha and thinking that he is actually present in front of you and to visualize him by recollecting his appearance, his color, what he is

holding, what he is wearing, and so on. Another equally valid way is to think that you are paying homage to him wherever he is, in which case you do not specifically have to visualize him at all.

Question: Rinpoche, I have a problem that keeps recurring in my visualization. The deity—Dorje Chang or the Medicine Buddha—is in front and I can see one side of it very clearly in detail and color, and the other side is practically

***Editor's note:** The previous session's questions are included in *Shenpen Ösel*, Volume 4, Number 1.

in the dark. It is muddy, in the shade; the color is very indistinct, and when I get tired I can hardly see anything at all on that side.

Rinpoche: Is it always the same side?

Question: It is pretty much the same side. It is my left side, the deity's right side, that is clear; the other side is not. Also, if I'm sitting, facing straight ahead, and visualizing the deity right in front of me, and if my eyes are partially closed, it feels like the deity is off at an angle. I keep shifting my body to get it in, but it is already straight, but it feels like I'm sitting diagonally and looking over there.

Rinpoche: This is happening spontaneously to you; it is not something you are causing, so if you just leave it alone, if you just continue with the practice, it will take care of itself.

Question: Rinpoche, three questions. In the descent of the body, speech, and mind blessings, do they enter respectively into the three centers specifically, or do they enter generally into the body? Secondly, could you give us a little more detail about the sequence of the practice in terms of the small Medicine Buddha in a certain part of your body, or in others' bodies? And can that be done outside the formal practice? And lastly, is there a connection between the Medicine Buddha and Jambhala? If there is, what is the connection? And if there is a difference, what is the difference? Is there a benefit to relating more to one or to the other?

Rinpoche: As to your first question, in the case of sadhana practice and the recitation of mantra, when you have the blessings of the three gates of the deity dissolving into yourself, you can think that they dissolve generally into your whole body, throughout your whole body without specifying that they dissolve into your head and so on.

In the case of an abhisheka [empowerment], then they would dissolve into the specific parts of your body. As to your second question, you can do the application practice of visualizing a small Medicine Buddha in a specific part of your body or someone else's body, either during the formal practice of the sadhana, while reciting the mantra, or in post-meditation at anytime you want. As to the third question, there is a connection between the Medicine Buddha and Jambhala. The connection is basically that the twelve yaksha chieftains, who are guardians of the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* and his teaching, are of the same class or clan as the Jambhalas. Therefore, in a sense Jambhala is also a guardian of the Medicine Buddha's teaching. I had an indication of this when I was practicing the Medicine Buddha sadhana extensively at a

Taiwanese monastery called Shi Lung Si. Monastics at the monastery and the other participants were also engaged in practicing the Medicine Buddha intensively. One of the reasons they were doing so, they said, was that whenever they engage in the Medicine Buddha practice communally, things go well at the monastery, which they felt had something to do with the

If you supplicate the Medicine Buddha, you get Jambhala's assistance automatically

activity of Jambhala coming along automatically with the supplication and practice of the Medicine Buddha. Therefore, I would say that if you have to choose just one of them to supplicate, the choice should be the Medicine Buddha, since it seems that if you supplicate the Medicine Buddha you get Jambhala's assistance automatically.

Question: Rinpoche, this practice seems so wonderful and complete that I'm having a hard time understanding why we haven't heard much about it until recently. I realize I haven't been practicing that long, but I'm wondering what the place of Medicine Buddha practice is. Is it something that was done a lot in monasteries? Why has it been so long in coming?

Rinpoche: As for the place that the Medicine Buddha practice is given in the monastic tradition in Tibet, it varies quite a bit. In some monasteries a great deal of it is done, and in other monasteries very little of it is done. And just about everything in between. There is no hard and fast rule. As for why you have not heard much about it until now, do not forget that vajrayana is very new in the West. Basically we could say that vajrayana has only been present in this country for thirty years. We have to look at how the Buddha taught. When the Buddha taught dharma, he started with what we call the common vehicle. And then he gradually, gradually deepened his presentation as people became prepared for it by their practice. In the same way, teachers have had to introduce and teach the dharma gradually in this country, simply because, as your practice progresses, your confidence and faith and understanding increase accordingly. For example, most of the teachers who began teaching in the West started by teaching shamatha practice, which was something that did not involve a great deal of faith, because you were working directly with what you could immediately experience in your own mind. The validity of it was obvious from the start. If they had begun by saying this is the fundamental practice of our tradition, you are to visualize the Medicine Buddha and believe me he exists, he has tremendous blessing, and if you pray to him, his blessing will enter you, you probably would not have believed it.

Question: Is this practice directly connected to Tibetan medical practice?

Rinpoche: Yes, it is connected. Medicine Buddha practices are used to consecrate the medicines while they are being prepared. Also the lineage of the medicine comes from a rishi called Rigpe Yeshe—“awareness wisdom”—who was an ema-

Do not forget that vajrayana is very new in the West. Basically we could say that vajrayana has only been present in this country for thirty years

nation of the Medicine Buddha. And when we look at the history of Tibetan medicine, we see that the foremost physicians of Tibet, including the great siddha Yönten Gonpo and others, subsequent to having visions of the Medicine Buddha or receiving his blessing, were able to discover new modes of diagnosis, new preparations of medicine, and would compose medicinal textbooks.

Question: Thank you, Rinpoche, for your transmission and your teaching. I have been taught up to this point that there are basically three ways to assist beings across the ocean of samsara to the shore of enlightenment: like a king, who would lead everyone to liberation; like a ferryman, who would put everyone in the same boat with him and cross over together with everyone, so to speak. Or like a shepherd, who would make sure everyone is there safely before he goes himself. I have confusion about being a shepherd on the one hand and healing and enlightening myself first before allowing everyone else to go in before me. Could you speak to that please?

Rinpoche: There are, as you indicated in your question, three ways that bodhicitta can be generated, according to the sutra tradition. These three different generations of bodhicitta, all of which are acceptable, correspond to how selfish you are. When someone is utterly unselfish, completely and absolutely altruistic, then when they generate bodhicitta, the attitude they will have is, “I will not attain buddhahood, I refuse to attain buddhahood, until each and every other being already has attained it.” This is what is called shepherd-like bodhicitta, as you mentioned in your question. And that is considered the best style of bodhicitta generation from the point of view of the sutras; the

best, because it is completely unselfish. The second best is the thought, “Well, I want to attain buddhahood, they all want to attain buddhahood, I hope we all attain buddhahood together. I will bring myself and all beings to buddhahood at the same time.” This style, called the boatman-like or ferryer-like bodhicitta, is a little more selfish than the first, but it is still very unselfish. The third style, which really does have a little bit of selfishness in it, is the thought, “I really want to attain buddhahood. I really want to attain full awakening. But after I have attained it, I will not abandon beings. I will also liberate all beings. But first of all, I definitely want to attain buddhahood.” That is king-like bodhicitta, which has some selfishness in it, but because it contains the aspiration to liberate all beings, it is still authentic bodhicitta.

The style of generation of bodhicitta in the vajrayana sounds a lot like the king-like bodhicitta, but is not meant to be the king-like bodhicitta. The vajrayana attitude is simply realistic. If you do not attain buddhahood, you cannot liberate other beings. This attitude is not selfish; it is realistic. It could become selfish. You could turn it into king-like bodhicitta, or use it as an excuse for king-like bodhicitta. But it is not really meant to be generated in that spirit. The basic reasoning of vajrayana bodhicitta is, “All I want is to liberate all beings. I obviously cannot do that right now. If I become a bodhisattva, with bodhisattva realization, I can do something, but I cannot liberate them completely, as a buddha can. So, although what I want is to liberate beings and not myself, in order to do that effectively, I am going to have to attain buddhahood myself first.”

The vajrayana attitude is simply realistic. If you do not attain buddhahood, you cannot liberate other beings

Question: Is there a Medicine Buddha practice that involves the laying on of hands?

Rinpoche: The laying on of hands could in some way be combined with the practice of visualizing a small form of the Medicine Buddha at the afflicted part of the ill person’s body.

Question: Rinpoche, I have another question about choosing between practices. In considering tonglen practice, and Medicine Buddha, how would we decide when to use either one, given that you have both transmissions?

Rinpoche: Do you mean for your own development, or in order to benefit another person?

Question: Tonglen that we use for helping others, and it helps us as well. Also, Pema Chödrön has talked about a way to use tonglen to help yourself.

Rinpoche: Both are equally beneficial in every way, in and of themselves. What you should emphasize in your practice is based upon what you have the greatest confidence in, what you have the greatest faith in, and what you have the greatest natural inclination for. So if you have greater confidence in tonglen, it will be more effective. If you have greater confidence in the Medicine Buddha practice, that will be more effective. Historically, we can see in the various lineages that some teachers have emphasized tonglen as their primary practice; other teachers have emphasized the Medicine Buddha or similar practices as their primary practice. It really depends upon your personal inclination. 



Medicine Buddha Sutra

Mudras, or Ritual Gestures, Help to Clarify the Visualization

Continuing the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's teaching on the Medicine Buddha Sutra.

Some of you have inquired about the mudras, ritual gestures, for this practice, so I will begin this morning's session by explaining them. As you know, the main element in our practice is meditation, including visualization, which is mental in nature. But we use our other faculties, body and speech, to clarify and reinforce this mental process. We use speech, for example, to clarify visualizations by reciting the liturgical descriptions and so on, and we use the body to clarify visualizations through physical postures and gestures called mudras. The main point, of course, is the visualization practice itself. So it is accept-

able, especially under certain conditions, to do the practice entirely mentally, without the additional use of mudras.

The first place in this practice where a specific mudra is used is in the invitation of the deity—when you have already visualized yourself as the Medicine Buddha and have visualized the Medicine Buddha in front of you, and are requesting the actual wisdom deity, the Medicine Buddha, to approach and finally dissolve into you as the self-visualization and into the front visualization.*

This and other places in the practice are highlighted by the use of the Sanskrit language as part of the liturgy. The culmination of the invitation, the culmination of each section of offerings, as well as the essence mantra repeated during the main body of the practice are all said in Sanskrit. This is standard for all vajrayana practices. The reason for this is that the Buddha taught in Sanskrit, and it is taught that all buddhas of the future, as well, will teach in Sanskrit. So one uses Sanskrit for the highlights of the practice in order to cultivate a habit or form a connection with that language.

At the conclusion of the invitation in the liturgy you say the Sanskrit mantra, NAMO MAHA BEKENDZE SAPARIWARA BENZA SAMAYADZA DZA. What you are saying is, “Medicine Buddha, together with your retinue, please recollect your vajra samaya and approach.” At that point you visualize that the Medicine Buddha and his retinue appear in the sky in front of you before dissolving into you and into the front visualization. The mudra that accompanies this mantra is called the mudra of assembly, and is made by crossing your arms at the wrists facing inward in front of your chest with the right one in front and the left one closer to your body, and snapping your fingers.

The significance of crossing your arms at the

*Editor’s note: See *Shenpen Ösel*, Volume 4, Number 1, page 29 and/or page 61.

The first place in this practice where a specific mudra is used is in the invitation of the deity

wrists represents the cohesiveness of unimpaird samaya, which brings the wisdom deities. The snapping of your fingers signifies immediately, right now. This actually has the specific meaning of referring to a unit of time called an instant. An instant in this case refers to the smallest division of time measured in any given system. For example, in the general system used in India at the time of the Buddha, the day was divided into thirty periods, which in turn were

divided into thirty periods, and so on, until you got down to a period of time so small it is difficult even to describe, and that was designated as an instant or a moment. In the *Kalachakra Tantra*, the day is divided into hours, which are divided into subsections, which are divided further and further and further until one gets a

period of time so small that in our perception it has no duration, and therefore is something like timelessness or emptiness. In any case, an instant refers to the shortest possible unit of time imaginable. The snapping of fingers in ritual use signifies or designates an instant. In the case of the invitation here, what you are saying by snapping your fingers is, “Please appear here and dissolve into me right now, without any delay whatsoever.” During the offerings, what you are saying when you snap your fingers at the conclusion of the offering mudras is, “Please accept these offerings right now. May they be available to you and may you enjoy them right now, without having to wait.” In the case of an ordination ceremony, such as the refuge ceremony, the snapping of fingers serves to designate the exact instant or moment in time at which you receive the vow.

Next one recites VAJRA SAMAYA TIKTRA LEN, which means, “Through the power of your recollection of your vajra samaya, please remain stable.” During the previous mantra, when you invited the wisdom deities, you invited them and dissolved them into yourself. When you recite VAJRA SAMAYA TIKTRA LEN you dissolve

them into the front visualization and request them to remain there stable as a field of offering for the accumulation of merit. The gesture here is that your hands are turned over so that they are palm up in front of your chest. It is very much like an elaborate or polite way of requesting someone to be seated.

Next, we come to the empowerment. The first five syllables of the empowerment mantra, OM HUM TRAM HRI AH ABHIKENTSA HUM,* refer to the five male buddhas of the five families. This is an empowerment both of yourself and of the front visualization. OM represents Vairochana, HUM Akshobhya, TRAM Ratnasambhava, HRI Amitabha, and AH Amogasiddhi.

These five buddhas of the five families are sometimes taught as buddhas in five different pure realms external to you. And sometimes they are taught as the five aspects of your innate or intrinsic wisdom. In the case of their being the five aspects of intrinsic wisdom, they correspond to the five wisdoms of a buddha. So, for example, Vairochana, who is of the buddha family, is the wisdom of the dharmadhatu. The wisdom of the dharmadhatu is the recognition of the unborn nature or emptiness of all things, which also pervades the other wisdoms, which is why it has that particular name.

These wisdoms are not really separate things. They are enumerated separately in order to show the qualities of wisdom. Generally speaking, one can say that the wisdom of a buddha includes two aspects, two types of wisdom, which are also not really separate. One of them is the wisdom that knows how things are, and that refers to the recognition of absolute truth or the nature of things. This aspect of wisdom is equivalent to the wisdom of the

dharmadhatu.** It is that wisdom that knows how things are, or knows the nature of all things.

The other wisdom of a buddha is the wisdom that knows what there is. The wisdom that knows how things are knows the nature of all things, or absolute truth. But at the same time, a buddha also knows what there is, which is to say, the distinct features of those relative truths or relative things, of which the absolute truth is the nature. This means that, while buddhas recognize the unborn nature of each and every thing, the emptiness of each and every thing, they nevertheless see the manifestation or appearance of that thing clearly, without that clear

These wisdoms are not really separate things. They are enumerated separately in order to show the qualities of wisdom

seeing producing any kind of reification or illusion of solidity. Therefore, the way in which buddhas see relative truth is like seeing something in a mirror. The image is seen extremely clearly and vividly, but there is nothing really there in the mirror [other than mere appearance], and that is also known. So the perception or wisdom of a buddha, the recognition of relative truth, is called the mirror-like wisdom, which is seeing that, while things are unborn, they nevertheless have their

distinct appearances. Mirror-like wisdom is the Buddha Akshobhya.

The third wisdom of a buddha is called the wisdom of equality. This refers to the fact that, from the point of view of the mirror itself, regardless of what appears in it, while it appears distinctly and while the mirror has the capacity to display any image, there are no concepts on the part of the mirror about what it displays. There is no division of the display into self and other. There is no division of the display or image into good or bad, or into any other conceptual framework. This fact that buddhas in their wisdom, which recognizes this display, are free

***Editor's note:** See *Shenpen Ösel*, Volume 4, Number 1, page 34 and page 62.

****Editor's note:** Sometimes translated as the wisdom of all-encompassing space or the wisdom of all-pervasive space.

of all of these deluded concepts, is the wisdom of equality, which is the Buddha Ratnasambhava.

The fourth buddha is Amitabha, who embodies the wisdom of discrimination. A buddha—we, when we have attained buddhahood, or any other buddha—possesses the three wisdoms, which have been explained: the dharmadhatu wisdom, the mirror-like wisdom, and the wisdom of equality. These being the characteristics of the wisdom of a buddha, it is clear that they see or are aware without any kind of conceptualization. But because they are free of conceptualization, you might assume mistakenly that they are unable to distinguish between the characteristics of things. In other words, because buddhas are free of the concepts of good and bad, does that mean that they are unable to distinguish good from bad in relative truth? Because they are free of the concepts of red and white, does that mean that they cannot distinguish a red thing from a white thing? In fact, it does not. Buddhas are perfectly able to distinguish the distinct characteristics of relative things or relative phenomena. That wisdom is called the wisdom of discrimination, which is an aspect of the wisdom that knows what there is—from the standpoint of distinguishing the aspects of wisdom according to that which knows how things are and that which knows what there is. This corresponds to the Buddha Amitabha.

The fifth wisdom is the wisdom of accomplishment, which is embodied by the Buddha Amogasiddhi. This means that, because of the wisdom of a buddha—because a buddha possesses, for example, the wisdom of equality and the wisdom of discrimination—they are able spontaneously to accomplish their activity without conceptualization or effort. Such activity is unceasing, and uninterrupted. The activity of a buddha never fails to accomplish its aim in a timely way. This is what is meant by the wisdom of accomplishment. So the empowerment that you receive at this point in the practice, while

The activity of a buddha never fails to accomplish its aim in a timely way

repeating the syllables OM HUM TRAM HRI AH, internally is the empowerment of the five wisdoms and externally is the empowerment of the five male buddhas.

There is a mudra that goes with each of these syllables. The mudra of Vairochana, which accompanies the saying of OM, is to clasp your hands, intertwining the fingers tightly so that the two hands make a fist, and then extending the two middle fingers joined together. The mudra of Akshobhya, which accompanies the saying HUM, is to clasp your hands making a fist with the two forefingers extended. The mudra of Ratnasambhava, which accompanies the syllable TRAM, is to clasp your hands making a fist with the two ring fingers extended and joined. The mudra of Amitabha, which accompanies the syllable HRI, is to clasp your hands making a fist with the two thumbs extended and joined. And finally, the mudra of Amogasiddhi, which accompanies the syllable AH, is to clasp your hands making a fist with the two little fingers extended and joined.

These mudras are connected with the way in which the five buddhas are perceived—and this is common to all tantras—as being present in the external world. The Buddha Vairochana of the buddha family is said to inhabit a realm in the center, called “densely arrayed.” The Buddha Akshobhya of the vajra family is said to inhabit a realm in the east, called “manifestly joyous.” The Buddha Ratnasambhava of the ratna or jewel family is said to inhabit a realm in the south, called “glorious.” The Buddha Amitabha of the padma or lotus family is said to inhabit a realm in the west, called “blissful” or *sukhavati*. And the Buddha Amogasiddhi of the karma or action family is said to inhabit a realm in the north, called “perfect” or “perfectly complete activity.” The central buddha, Vairochana, is seen as pervasive, pervading all of the other buddhas and pervading all of their activity. Each of the other four buddhas is also connected with

a specific style of activity, a specific way of benefiting beings. Akshobhya embodies pacification. Ratnasambhava embodies enrichment and expansion. Amitabha embodies magnetizing. And Amogasiddhi embodies forceful or direct activity.

When we talk of these five realms, we say that they are in the east, the south, the west, the north, and the middle, but obviously these directions are mere designations.

They have no absolute reality or location. We cannot really say what east is, because a place that is east of one place is going to be west of another. It will be south of one and north of one. Is that place really east, or is it west? Maybe it is south, maybe it is north. You cannot say. So, the directions, of course, are empty. They are valid in relative truth. In a specific context that we have designated, we can meaningfully say that some place is east or west of another place. So they are valid in relative truth, but they are only valid relative to one another, and therefore have no absolute validity and are empty. So, we cannot really say where an eastern realm would be, except relative to our own body. Therefore, in the Buddhist tradition, we call wherever you are facing east.

So for that reason—and now these mudras are going to become a little more complicated—because east is identified as wherever you are facing, it is understood in invitation liturgies that a buddha invited from the east—as, for example, Akshobhya—will approach you from the front. A buddha invited from the south, like Ratnasambhava, will approach you from the direction of your right ear. A buddha invited from the west, like Amitabha, will approach behind you towards the back of your head. And a buddha invited from the north, like Amogasiddhi, will approach you from your left. So therefore, when you receive the empowerment from these five buddhas and then visualize that they dissolve into you, they dissolve into you from those directions. Therefore, the mudras that were previously demonstrated are touched to five points on your head. Because

In the Buddhist tradition we call wherever you are facing east

Vairochana, represented by the middle finger, is in the middle, you touch your clasped hands, making a fist with the middle finger extended, to the very center of the top of your head. Because Akshobhya, represented by the forefingers, is connected with the front, then you touch the clasped hands with the forefingers extended, to your forehead. Because Ratnasambhava, represented by the extended ring fingers, comes from the south, you touch the clasped hands with extended ring fingers, above your right ear. Because Amitabha, represented by the extended thumbs, approaches from the west, you touch your

clasped hands with the thumbs extended to the back of your head or as close as you can get. Finally, because Amogasiddhi, represented by the extended little fingers, approaches from the north, you touch the clasped hands with the extended little fingers, to the left side of your head above your left ear. The making and touching of these mudras is all coordinated with the recitation of the syllables.

When you are actually performing these mudras, the first three are obvious. But when you get to HRI, representing Amitabha, the thumbs at the back of your head, you do not go over the head. You go around from the right as far as you can get. Then you have AH on the left.

The performance of these five mudras while reciting OM HUM TRAM HRIH AH accompanies the receiving of empowerment from these five buddhas, who then dissolve into you. When you say the rest of the mantra, ABHIKENTSA HUM, in order to acknowledge that the five buddhas have dissolved into you, you extend your hands palm upward and then turn [or rotate] them in towards yourself until they are more or less palm downward, to represent the dissolution of the Buddhas into yourself.

Those are the mudras for the empowerment. Next we come to the mudras for the offerings.*

***Editor's note:** See *Shenpen Ösel*, Volume 4, Number 1, page 34 and page 62.

The first offering mudra here accompanies the mantra word ARGHAM. ARGHAM refers to the offering of drinking water. So the mudra is making the shape with your hands of a vessel or container that could contain drinking water, and it is done in the way that Rinpoche just demonstrated [by joining the fingers at their tips and the fingers and palms along the outside edge of the little fingers and the inner edge of the palms as they face upward, with the thumbs resting on the edge of the palms and forefingers].

The second offering, PADIYAM, represents water for washing the feet. The custom during the time of the Buddha was that water would be poured from a conch shell over your feet. So the mudra done at this point is to grasp the end of your forefingers with the last joint of your thumbs and extend the other fingers forward palms upward, which is the mudra of the conch, as Rinpoche demonstrated.

The third offering, PUPE, is the offering of flowers. The mudra depicts casting flower petals with your hands [the nails of the four fingers of both hands, held palms upward in a light fist restrained by the thumbs, suddenly released by the restraining thumbs and extended forward].

DHUPE is the offering of incense, and therefore the gesture or mudra with the hands represents containers of finely scented incense powder [both hands held in fists, fingers arranged on top of each other grasping the thumb, which points downward].

The next offering, ALOKE, represents lamps or lights. The position of the hands with the thumbs extended upward represents a lamp and its burning wick [same mudra as for incense, except that the thumbs, now pointing upward, are free of the fist-clenched fingers].

The next offering, GENDHE, represents the rubbing of perfumed water onto the body, and so the gesture with the hands is like the gesture of anointing or rubbing perfumed water onto someone's body [both hands held, palms facing forward, perpendicular to the ground, fingers pointing upward, moving slightly].

The next offering, NAIVEDYE or NEWIDYE, is food, which is represented by the NAIVEDYE

torma, which is found in the appropriate bowl on the shrine. The mudra here depicts that, with the hands held palms up and the ring fingers extended upward to depict that torma which is on the shrine.

SHAPDA, which means "sound" the first time it appears in this offering, is the offering of music. The gesture here is like the way that the clay drum would be beaten with the fingers [thumbs of each hand grasping the ring and little fingers, the middle finger and the pointing finger extended straight forward with the pointing finger on top, moving slightly up and down with a beating motion].

Following those eight offerings are the remaining five offerings of this section, which as you will remember, are offerings of the objects of the five senses. The first of these, RUPA, means form, and here refers to beautiful form. The mudra that represents it is the mudra of the mirror, with your right hand extended palm outward, and your left hand in a fist with the thumb extended upward and touching the palm of the right hand at the base as though it were the handle of a mirror. This represents the fact that forms are perceived like images or reflections in a mirror.

The second mudra is SHAPDA, which here refers to all sounds. The mudra, however, is always something representing a musical instrument. Some people at this second SHAPDA do the lute mudra, or guitar mudra, however, my own tradition is simply to repeat the previous drumming mudra.

GENDHE, which represents beautiful scents, gets the same mudra as it did before when it specifically represented perfume.

And RASA, which is the offering of tastes, gets the same mudra as ARGHAM, except in this case it is a container of food rather than a container of water.

And SAPARSHE, which represents tactile sensations, gets the mudra of holding aloft fine fabric, which is done by revolving the hands until the palms are facing outward and thumb and ring finger are touching.

When you say TRATITSA, which means individually, then you turn your hands so that the palms are up and snap your fingers.

During the next offering sections—offering the eight auspicious substances, the eight auspicious signs, and the seven articles of royalty—you continue to hold your hands joined in angeli, the mudra of supplication or prayer, as you do during all offerings sections. There is no specific mudra for these and no snapping of the fingers.

When we offer the mandala with the mantra, OM RATNA MANDALA HUM, there is the usual mandala mudra.

Translator: I guess there are a lot of people here who do not know this mudra. Put your hands more or less palm up. Interweave your fingers, with both sets of fingers visible above the palms, not with the fingers behind the backs of the hands. Then with your thumbs grab the ends of the little fingers of the opposite hands. And then with your forefingers, hook around the top joint of the middle fingers of the opposite hands. Then un-interweave your ring fingers so that they stick straight up back to back. That is the simplest way I know to describe it. And there's no finger snap.

Rinpoche: The remaining three sections of offering—ablution, drying, and dressing—have no mudras other than the palms being joined [in angeli, the mudra of supplication or prayer].

However, the way in which your palms are joined in these practices is quite specific. The hands are not pressed against one another so that the palms are flat against each other. There is space left between your palms, so that the shape of your hands is like a budding flower. It is therefore called the lotus mudra, and represents a lotus flower that is about to open. The lotus is a symbol of dharma

in general. It is born in mud or in a swamp, but when the flower emerges, it is stainless and beautiful. So the lotus—and by extension the mudra—represents the practice of dharma, and therefore, in order to remind yourself of that, your palms are joined in these practices in that way.

If you have questions, feel free to ask them.

Question: Rinpoche, you have said that in the future the dharma would be taught in Sanskrit by other buddhas. Could you explain why that would be? Is there something about the Sanskrit language that connects us more closely with the enlightened state? Or will we in the future, as we practice dharma, as we come closer, hopefully, to the enlightened state, be able to understand and make these sounds more intelligibly? Or is this not a definitive teaching and thus to be interpreted from the standpoint of the time of the Buddha when this teaching was given?

Rinpoche: First of all, as to whether or not the statement that all buddhas of the future will teach in Sanskrit is a definitive statement or a statement with a hidden intention—which is to say, one which does not mean what it literally says, but means something that is indicated by what it literally says—is something I cannot resolve. I cannot say to you, “It is a definitive statement to be taken literally,” or, “It is a symbolic statement with a hidden meaning.” I cannot resolve this question because the source of this idea is the

Badhrakalpa

Sutra, the Sutra of the Fortunate Eon, and in that sutra the Buddha gives the names of the parents, the style of teaching, the length of teaching, the number and qualities of the retinue attending the teachings, and so on, for each of the one thousand buddhas of this particular kalpa. This includes the three buddhas who



The mandala mudra

preceded him, and the others who will succeed him. It is in this sutra that he states, for example, that Maitreya will be the fifth buddha of this kalpa and the Lion's Roar will be the sixth buddha. He discusses all of the thousand buddhas up to the very last one, called Rochana. In the same place where the Buddha predicts their coming, he says that they will all teach in Sanskrit. It would be very difficult to try to ascertain exactly what his intention was in saying that.

The effect of using Sanskrit in liturgical practices is basically to establish the blessing [of the original words of the Buddha] in the most important places in the sadhana—in the mantras, which are repeated,* and in the areas of the practice that are highlighted, such as the culmination of the invitation, the culmination individually of the various offerings, and so on. For this reason, then, even when these practices were undertaken outside of the Sanskrit-speaking world, these sections were left in the original language and remain untranslated. Whether or not as an implication of this we can consider Sanskrit a fundamentally superior language depends not so much on the idea of its being superior as its being sacred because we believe the Buddha taught in Sanskrit. There are some Buddhist traditions that maintain the view that the Buddha's teachings were originally given in Pali. But the vajrayana tradition maintains that his original teachings for the most part were given in Sanskrit. Because of that, by using Sanskrit in liturgical practice, we feel that we bring the Buddha's blessing, the blessing of the Buddha's speech, into our practice.

Question: So, does this prediction then still fall

***Editor's note:** The repetition of the main mantra or mantras of a sadhana while performing various visualizations usually comprises the main body of any sadhana practice.

under the teaching of impermanence?

Rinpoche: What do you mean?

Question: What I mean is, is this set in stone or does this also fall under the heading, as we're always taught, that nothing is permanent?

By using Sanskrit in liturgical practice, we feel that we bring the Buddha's blessing, the blessing of the Buddha's speech, into our practice

Rinpoche: The impermanence aspect of this is a fluctuation in the use of Sanskrit in the world. In the Buddha's time, people in the society in which the Buddha was living actually spoke Sanskrit. Now nobody speaks Sanskrit; it is considered a dead language. But according to the sutra, it will come back, and in that way Sanskrit will return to use, and then become a dead language, and then return to use again, and then become a dead language again, and so on. That is an instance of impermanence.

Question: Rinpoche, I'd like to share the tapes of these teachings with KTC sangha, and I'd like to know if that is an appropriate thing to do, and also whether it would be appropriate to practice the Medicine Buddha in a group including individuals who have not received the empowerment. And would it be appropriate to do the short Mahakala practice in the chant book alone at home?

Rinpoche: As for your first question, anyone can practice the Medicine Buddha, whether they have the empowerment or not. As far as instituting its practice in a group, if it were part of a KTC activity, you would need first to receive permission from the appropriate teachers. Secondly, if you have faith in the short Mahakala practice, it is certainly okay to do it at home.

Question: Rinpoche, this question is not directly related to the topic at hand, but since it involves issues of faith and devotion, I thought it might be

relevant and beneficial. This has to do with the nature and appearance of the Gyalwang Karmapas in general. As you know I have been praying to Karmapa as part of my practice, and it is said in the Kagyu tradition that Karmapa is a tenth-level bodhisattva. I've definitely come to believe that, even though I've never had any direct contact with Karmapa. But once, when I was having difficulty in my practice, I went to read the songs in the *Kagyu Gurtso* of the Eighth Gyalwang Karmapa, Mikyo Dorje. And there Mikyo Dorje refers to himself as an ordinary individual. My small mind cannot encompass how such a high-level bodhisattva can think of himself as an ordinary individual. Rinpoche, would you please dispel my confusion?

Translator: Can I abbreviate that a little bit?

Question: Oh, please.

Rinpoche: This type of statement, like the one you mentioned by Gyalwang Mikyo Dorje in the *Kagyu Gurtso*, is typical of great teachers, because their primary responsibility is to serve as a good example for their students, which means that they have to display a manner that is free of arrogance. So, although it is not literally true that they are ordinary beings, they will nevertheless say things like, "I am a completely ordinary person, full of kleshas, with no qualities whatsoever." By saying that, they display the importance of being free of arrogance. You should not take such statements literally.

Question: Rinpoche, is it still appropriate and beneficial to practice the Medicine Buddha sadhana if I have not practiced any ngöndro?

Rinpoche: It makes no difference.

Question: I attend births and help women during their labor, and I was wondering if there

is something that I could do after the baby has arrived to honor the new being and the mother.

Rinpoche: Something will come in this afternoon's teaching on the Medicine Buddha sutra that will answer that question.

Question: May I ask another question? I was wondering if you could talk about what would be a proper mode of conduct if you found yourself being attacked by a sexual predator. If you were able to defend yourself, what would be the right thing to do?

Translator: You mean, how?

Question: Yes.

Translator: What to do to them?

Question: Would it be okay to hurt them?

Translator: How to hurt them or how not to hurt them?

Question: What would be the right thing to do?

Translator: How to get out of it?

Rinpoche: I have to think about that one.

Question: Rinpoche, when I am here, it becomes very clear to me that the best thing to do would be to go home and organize my life so that I am practicing many hours per day. What happens when I actually go back home is that the connection to the teachings seems more distant, and what seems more immediate and real are the needs around me. I begin to have the thought that it is actually selfish or self-absorbed to practice a lot, and that it is more beneficial to help other people. I think this is a fault. Could you comment on that?

Rinpoche: Well actually both are correct. Nei-

ther is a fault. To wish to practice a great deal is correct, and to be attentive to the needs of those around you, and to put them first, is also correct. So you have to gauge the exact balance according to your particular situation, using your own insight. The only rule of thumb is not to be too extreme in either way. Not to be so extreme in the amount of practice that you pay no attention to those around you and their needs, or so extreme in limiting your practice for their benefit that you do not practice very much at all.

Question: Rinpoche, I have some confusion about the visualization. I think I understood you to say that the Medicine Buddha visualization is a mirror of my own innate Medicine Buddha. If he is a mirror, why do you say that he is bigger than mine? Doesn't that create some confusion?

Translator: Do you mean that where your right hand is, is going to be his left hand? Do you mean it literally, or do you mean just that he is the same size?

Question: He portrayed the front visualization as larger than the one that I am visualizing as myself. And I thought that somewhere it was also being said that we are the same. So why am I portraying the front one as larger? That would create some insecurity in me that I am never quite good enough.

Translator: Larger, do you mean that his body is

To wish to practice a great deal is correct, and to be attentive to the needs of those around you, and to put them first, is also correct

bigger? You are not just talking about the retinue?

Question: No. It kind of makes me feel like he has got more power than I do.

Translator: He never said that the front visualization was larger.

Question: It is in the text, maybe.

Translator: Oh, that is where it is.

Rinpoche: Well, the author of the text must have had a specific reason for saying it at that time.

Question: I imagined it was to give me more confidence, but at some point I guess I could visualize him to be the same size as the self-visualization.

Rinpoche: You can visualize them as the same size.

Question: Rinpoche, is samaya primarily fulfilled by faith and devotion, overriding possibly

completing a practice? Say, for instance, you are doing some practices and then you encounter a practice like this one and decide you want to do this one. Is it primarily the faith and devotion as opposed to the actual steps of completing any particular practice?

Rinpoche: Yes, basically samaya is maintained by your faith and devotion. 

Medicine Buddha Sutra

The Benefits of Hearing and Recollecting the Medicine Buddha's Name



Continuing the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's teaching on the Medicine Buddha Sutra.

The *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* first explains the twelve aspirations of the Medicine Buddha,

after which the Buddha begins to talk about the benefits of recollecting or even hearing the Medicine Buddha's name. The first is that, if even those who are most avaricious hear the name of the Medicine Buddha, they will be freed from avarice and from its results. The second is that, if those who behave immorally hear the name of the Medicine Buddha, they will come to behave morally and

therefore will be freed from the karmic result of immorality. The third benefit is for those who are so intensely jealous and competitive that they always praise themselves and try to maximize in appearance their own qualities and

prestige and always deride others. Such persons devote themselves to defeating and deriding others, and to making others look bad. If they continue in this course of action, they will be reborn in one of the three lower states—the animal realm, the preta realm, or the hell realm—and will experience a great deal of suffering. But if they hear the name of the Medicine Buddha, through the blessing and inspira-

tion of that hearing, they will become much less competitive, will cease deriding others, and will thereby be freed from the karmic results of such actions.

What will happen as a result of such persons' hearing the Medicine Buddha's name is that their attitude will change. They will become more insightful, and through the development of that insight, they will become more skillful and appropriate in their choices of actions. At the same time, their minds will start to calm down and become tranquil. They will eventually become diligent in virtue and will find themselves surrounded by virtuous friends—friends that have virtuous intentions and who also behave appropriately. Without the intervening blessing of the Medicine Buddha attendant upon hearing his name, given their previous course of action, they would be most unlikely to be surrounded by virtuous friends. The virtuous friends by whom they find themselves surrounded—including teachers, but also just friends in general—are one of the conditions that influence them and cause them to change their ways. When someone is intensely and ruthlessly competitive and jealous, they harm others and accumulate a great deal of negative karma. This intense competitiveness and its attendant lifestyle is referred to as the lasso or noose of mara [Tibetan: *shakpa*]. This noose is cut when the person hears the name of the Medicine Buddha. Up to that point, the limitation in their outlook, which reinforces their active and aggressive competitiveness, is an obscuration or ignorance that is like being stuck inside an eggshell. Unable to break out of the eggshell, they are unable to grow. Their innate capacity for insight and wisdom is prevented from developing. When they hear the name of the Medicine

Buddha, they break out of the eggshell, and this causes their innate capacity for insight and wisdom to develop. This insight dries up their kleshas, especially the klesha of jealousy, which is like a wild river. This river gradually dries up. Of course, this does not happen automatically or without effort. Through the blessing of hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha, such people encounter teachers and other people who influence them in a virtuous direction, while at the same time their own insight is developing. As a result, they engage actively in methods that will eradicate or dry up the kleshas.

That is the short term benefit. In the long term, the person who hears the name of the

Medicine Buddha will be freed from the sufferings of birth, aging, and death. Birth, of course, is the beginning of aging, which always culminates in death, so birth and death are all considered one process. While the sufferings of birth, aging, and death are normal events in our lives, through hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha, one is freed eventually or ultimately from the suffering associated with them. That is the third benefit.

The fourth benefit of hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha is that it pacifies the disputatious. There are some people who just like to fight. They dispute at any opportunity. They like to cause discord. They like to slander and harm other people any way they can. They harm people physically, verbally, and sometimes by cursing them

magically. They are malevolent and can actually harm people. In this case, if either the malevolent person or the victim of that person's malevolence hears the name of the Medicine Buddha, the whole situation will calm down. If the malevolent person, the curser, hears the name of

While the sufferings of birth, aging, and death are normal events in our lives, through hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha, one is freed eventually or ultimately from the suffering associated with them

the Medicine Buddha, then their malevolence will decrease. They will lose their wish to go around fighting with people and cursing them. If the victim of their malevolence hears the name of the Medicine Buddha, the malevolent person will be unable to harm them. And if they have enlisted local [demonic] spirits in the service of their malevolent aims and ambitions, the spirits will be powerless to harm the intended object of their curse. This does not mean that through the power of the Medicine Buddha these spirits will be violently repelled. It means that the spirits will become benevolent, and eventually the person who hears the name of the Medicine Buddha and is the proposed object of the malevolence and the person acting malevolently—the magician or whatever—will also become benevolent.

To this point we have explained the alleviation of the defects, the negative conduct, and the negative results of avarice, immorality, jealousy, and malevolence. Next, the sutra states the direct benefits of the name itself, the qualities and various other benefits that the hearing and recollection of the name will bring. It says that any man or woman with faith who recollects the name of the Medicine Buddha, engages in the moral conduct of the eightfold renewal and purification commitments or vows for a month or a week or a few days—or otherwise behaves themselves properly with body and speech, and aspires to rebirth in the realm of Sukavhati, the realm of Amitabha, will be reborn there miraculously immediately after their death. Those who do not wish to be reborn in Sukavhati will be reborn in the realms of the gods and enjoy the splendors and enjoyments of those realms. And—although normally when one is born in a god realm, after the merit that has produced that rebirth is exhausted, one is then reborn in a more unpleasant form of samsara—[those who recollect the name of the Medicine Buddha and conduct themselves appropriately]

Whoever
venerates the
Medicine Buddha
should construct
or acquire an
image of the
Medicine Buddha

will not suffer a lower rebirth. Their lifetimes will continue to be pleasant. If they wish in particular to be reborn human again, they will be reborn in the most fortunate and pleasant circumstances within the human realm. They will be healthy, courageous, intelligent, and benevolent, and because of their characteristics, they will continue to behave in a positive way and inspire others to do so as well.

To this point in the sutra the Buddha has stated five benefits of the recollection of the name—the alleviation of four defects and the direct benefits. Next, Manjushri addresses the Buddha and the assembly who are listening to the teaching and describes the importance of the sutra. He says that it is important to recollect this sutra, to read the sutra, to write the sutra, to keep a copy of the sutra around you, to vener-

ate the sutra by offering flowers and incense and other offerings to it, and to proclaim the meaning of the sutra to others. If these things are done, he says, many benefits will accrue. The entire region in which these activities are occurring will be blessed and will be protected by the four great kings and other deities who are present in the mandala.

In response to what Manjushri has said, the Buddha adds that whoever venerates the Medicine Buddha should construct or acquire an image of the Medicine Buddha—a statue, a painting, or a depiction of some type—or should visualize the Medicine Buddha. Venerating that for a week or for whatever period, they should intensely supplicate the Medicine Buddha, eating pure food—which means food that is not gained through harming others—washing frequently, wearing clean clothes, and so on, and in that way venerate the sutra and the image by making physical offerings to them, including all sorts of things such as parasols and victory banners and so on.

For this veneration to be effective, the one who is venerating has to have a good intention. A

good intention here is defined as having four characteristics. The first is that the venerating mind be stainless. Stainless here means free of the stain of selfishness or competitiveness. Your intention in doing the practice must be not merely to benefit yourself, but to benefit all beings, and your intention must be free of competitiveness. The second quality of a good intention is that it be unsullied. Unsullied here means that you have unsullied faith, faith without reservation, faith that is without a feeling of antipathy towards the object of the faith, faith that is without such crippling doubt that it does not function.

The third characteristic of a good intention is the absence of malevolence. Malevolence can take many different forms. There is manifest anger, anger that is evident and will be acted on right away. There is resentment. Resentment is still malevolence, but it is something that you carry under the surface and that waits for a future time to emerge. There is spitefulness, which makes you want to say or do something nasty. And then there is wanting to harm people in a more organized way than merely being spiteful. The absence of all of these forms of malevolence is an attitude that sincerely wishes that others be happy and that they be free from suffering, which means that if you see a being that is happy, you delight in that and want that being to be even more happy and to be free from whatever suffering they are still afflicted by. If you see a being that is suffering, you want that being to be free from all the suffering that they are undergoing and to be completely happy.

The fourth characteristic of a good intention is impartiality, an attitude that directs benevolence equally to all beings without exception. There is no preference for some beings, and less concern for others. The attitude is that all beings are more or less fellow travelers on the same road.

With this kind of good intention, if the practitioner physically circumambulates the image of the Medicine Buddha, mentally recollects the twelve aspirations of the Medicine Buddha, and either recites the sutra of the Medicine Buddha or at least recollects the benefits of the name of the Medicine Buddha as stated in the sutra, then they will accomplish their wishes.

The reason that it says that they will accomplish their wishes is that people have different wishes. Some people wish for longevity, and they can accomplish longevity through engaging in these activities—through supplicating the Medicine Buddha, through circumambulating the

image, through having faith in and devotion for the Medicine Buddha, and so on. Some people do not care much how long they live; they are more interested in wealth, and so such a person would wish to achieve wealth and could do so by this method. Some people are not concerned about wealth either, but want to have children. And they can have children through this method, although obviously not through this method exclusively.* Some

Some people wish for longevity, and they can accomplish longevity through engaging in these activities

people wish for success in the secular world, in business and so on, and they can achieve such success through this method. The significance of this is that you can achieve what you wish through doing the same secular or business things, but with much less effort.

In the same way, if someone is afflicted with nightmares or bad dreams, experiences inauspicious signs, sees things that they think are unlucky, or experiences things that disturb them and produce anxiety, if they make offerings to the Medicine Buddha, pray to the Medicine Buddha, recollect the sutra and the Medicine Buddha's twelve aspirations, and so forth, then the inauspicious signs and bad dreams and so on will gradually disappear.

***Editor's note:** i.e. they can remove obstacles to having children.

And not only will inauspicious signs disappear, but if you are in a situation where you are endangered by such things as fire, water, poison, or weapons, by falling off a cliff, or falling victim to any other sort of accident, or by elephants, lions, tigers, bears, poisonous snakes, scorpions, or centipedes—if you are endangered by any of those things—then if you supplicate the Medicine Buddha, those dangers will disappear.

And also supplication to the Medicine Buddha will protect you from the dangers of war—being caught in the middle of a war—of robbery, and of banditry.

If someone who has faith in the buddhadharma, and especially in the Medicine Buddha, whether man or woman, takes some form of ordination—such as the refuge vow, the vow of an upasaka or upasika [the vows of a lay disciple], the bodhisattva vow, or monastic ordination—through the blessing of the Medicine Buddha they will be able in most cases to maintain them. But if such a person does not maintain them, then they will become depressed. They will think, “I undertook such and such a commitment and I was unable to keep it. I am obviously someone who cannot accomplish anything I set out to do. Things are not going very well, terrible things are going to happen to me in this life, and after I die I am definitely going to be reborn in the lower realms.” If this happens to you, then if you supplicate the Medicine Buddha, make offerings to the Medicine Buddha, and have devotion to the Medicine Buddha, you will be freed from the danger of those disasters and inferior rebirths.

The next thing mentioned in the sutra is actually the answer to a question that was asked earlier. It says in the sutra, when a woman is giving birth to a child, if she expects great difficulty—great agony and suffering in doing so—if she supplicates the Medicine Buddha with devotion, then the birth will occur free from

extreme difficulty. The child will be born easily, without harm to the mother or the child, and the child will be healthy, intelligent, and will be strong from birth.

At this point the Buddha has stated a number of extraordinary benefits of supplicating and making offerings to the Medicine Buddha. Next the Buddha addresses not Manjushri, but Ananda. He addresses Ananda because Ananda is not at this point a great bodhisattva. He is a shravaka, a practitioner of the hinayana path. The Buddha has taught the sutra and explained its benefits. He has talked about the extraordinary qualities of the Medicine

Buddha, his twelve aspirations and their effects, the effects of the recollection of the name of the Medicine Buddha, and so on. So addressing Ananda, the Buddha says, “Ananda, do you believe what I have said? Do you have faith in this, or do you have doubt about it?”

In response to the Buddha’s question, Ananda says, “I have no doubt of the truth of what you have said. I believe everything you have said. In fact, I believe everything you have ever said, because I have witnessed the qualities of your body, speech, and mind. I have witnessed your miracles, and I have witnessed your immersion in samadhi. So I know it is impossible for you to mislead beings, and I have no doubt of the validity of anything you say. But, there are some beings who will not believe this. There are some beings who, when they hear this, will want to think that all of this is impossible or untrue. Will they not incur tremendously negative karma through hearing about this buddha and this sutra and having antipathy for them, or disbelief?” So he ends by asking the Buddha a question.

The reason that Ananda asks this question is that in theory there could be a problem in this situation. Theoretically, if someone thinks untrue what a buddha has said about another

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buddha and their benefits and blessings, that could become an obstacle to that being's progress towards awakening. But the Buddha answers as follows: "Ananda, there is in fact no such danger in this case. It is possible that a being might initially disbelieve these things, but since they have heard the name of the Medicine Buddha, then through the blessing of having heard that name, it will be impossible for their disbelief and antipathy to last very long, which is an instance of the qualities and power of this buddha. This is something that is so profound only bodhisattvas can understand it."* But ultimately it means that one's initial disbelief will not become an

***Editor's note:** One of the characteristics of having reached the first bodhisattva bhumi or level is that, due to the bodhisattva's understanding of emptiness and interdependence, he or she begins to have and to develop the kind of vision that enables them to understand all the various approaches to spiritual development, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, and to understand the various methods or various sorts of spiritual technologies taught by the Buddha.

obstacle to one's liberation, and will not cause one to accumulate such negative karma that one will be reborn in the lower realms and so on. If someone has doubts, disbelief, or even antipathy towards this sutra, it is not going to be a big problem because of the blessing imparted by the Buddha in the way he taught the sutra and because of the aspirations of the Medicine Buddha himself.

This is important to know, because from time to time, of course, we do have doubts. We read something in a sutra such as this and we think, "But that is just impossible." And then we think, "Oh no, I have wrong views about the sutra; something terrible is going to happen to me." In any case, this is not going to be a problem here.

I am going to stop here for this afternoon. It has occurred to me that over the last few days I have been talking quite a lot, and I have not practiced with you or sat with you at all. As people often ask me to meditate with them, we are going to meditate now for a few minutes. ॐ





Medicine Buddha Sutra

Regular Supplication of the Medicine Buddha Brings Protection

Continuing the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's teaching on the Medicine Buddha Sutra.

When you receive instruction in dharma, the motivation with which you do so is extremely important. Recognize that the instructions you have received are a basis for your practice of dharma, and that your practice of dharma is of great benefit. This benefit is not limited to you alone or only to a few—yourself and a few others—but ultimately the benefit of your practice will be enjoyed by all beings who fill space. Therefore, when you receive the teachings in the beginning, do it with that recollection and with the motivation that by receiving these

instructions, by meditating on and supplicating the Medicine Buddha, by studying his sutra, and so on, you will be able to do the practice so that you can bring about the liberation of all beings.

We concluded last time with the presentation of the benefits of the sutra and of recollecting the name of the Medicine Buddha. The next event in the dialogue is that the great Bodhisattva Chagdrul, one of the sixteen bodhisattvas in the retinue of the Medicine Buddha and therefore present at this teaching by the Buddha Shakyamuni, arises from his seat, adopts the posture that Manjushri had adopted in order to request this teaching, and addresses the Buddha. In addressing the Buddha and the entire gathering here, Chagdrul is not actually asking a question. He is himself stating further benefits of the sutra. He begins by saying that it was most kind of the Buddha to teach the sutra, to explain the twelve aspirations of the Medicine Buddha and their effects, to explain the benefits of the sutra and of the name, and so on. Then he says that he has something to add, and says that through the power of the Medicine Buddha, if someone becomes extremely sick—so sick that they are in agony and are surrounded by their family and their friends, and the family also is agonized by the sickness of the person—and even if it gets to the point where the person appears to be dying—when their perception of this world is becoming more and more vague and they seem to be starting to perceive the next world, the intermediate state—if even at that time there is intense supplication to the Medicine Buddha, through the blessing of the Medicine Buddha that person may be revived.

Chagdrul continues, “Because such benefits as these are possible—benefits both for this and future lives—men and women with faith should venerate, worship, and supplicate the Medicine

Buddha. This is extremely important.”

At that point Ananda addresses the Bodhisattva Chagdrul, saying, “While you say it is important to make offerings to and to worship the Medicine Buddha, how should we do this?” In response Chagdrul says, “In order to free oneself and others from sickness and suffering, it is important to recollect the name of the Medicine Buddha seven times during the day and seven times during the night.”

Now, when it says in the sutra that there will be such and such benefits from merely hearing, recollecting, or keeping in mind the name of the Medicine Buddha, this does literally mean that to some extent there will be some benefit from merely hearing, merely remembering, or merely keeping the name in mind. But mainly, when it says the recollection of the name, it means something more than the simple recollection of the name per se. It means the recollection of the qualities of the Medicine Buddha, the recollection of the name in appreciation of the Medicine Buddha’s qualities, with an attitude of sincere faith and great enthusiasm. Furthermore, it means not simply the appreciation that

To recollect the name really means to recollect and know the Medicine Buddha’s qualities and to actually engage enthusiastically in the path leading to the attainment of those qualities

there is a buddha in a certain realm far away who has such and such qualities, but includes the actual wish to emulate the Medicine Buddha, the wish to achieve the same buddhahood, to enact the same aspirations and benefits for beings, and therefore the wish to diligently engage in the path in order to attain that same state. To recollect the name really means to recollect and know the Medicine Buddha’s qualities and to actually engage enthusiastically in the path leading to the attainment of those qualities. Now, it is not the case that there are no benefits whatsoever to simply hearing the name per se; there are. But ultimately the great benefits which arise from

the blessing of the name of the Medicine Buddha arise from practice based upon devotion to the Medicine Buddha, and not merely from simply hearing his name.

Chagdrul continues to address Ananda, saying that if the practitioner venerates and prays to the Medicine Buddha, then “the monarch will be fully empowered.” This literally means that the monarch of the country in which this veneration is occurring will be properly empowered as the monarch. But what it implies or is saying is that the whole country in which the practice occurs will become happy, which is symbolized as the proper empowerment of that country’s monarch. This means that through the practitioner’s practice, sickness, warfare, the action of malevolent spirit—such as the spirits connected with the various constellations, planets, and stars—disasters such as untimely wind, excessive rainfall, or drought, and epidemics and civil strife will all be averted. For these to be averted the practitioner must pray to and venerate the Medicine Buddha with great love and compassion.

In other words, through supplication of the Medicine Buddha disasters will be averted, sickness and the malevolent influence of spirits will diminish, and other problems or upheavals in the country in which the practice occurs will be pacified. This means that while we practice dharma and, therefore, supplicate the Medicine Buddha for the benefit of all beings, by doing so we also secure our own happiness and the benefit of the country and region in which we practice.

Ananda then asks the Bodhisattva Chagdrul another question. He asks, “How is it possible through the supplication and blessing of the Medicine Buddha for someone who is almost dead to be awakened in the manner that Chagdrul has described?” And Chagdrul says that this is possible because the person’s life and vitality are not really exhausted. A condition exists that has almost caused their death, and

that will cause their death if it is not removed. But it can be removed. He then lists nine different conditions of untimely death—untimely here meaning unnecessary—and says that through supplication of the Medicine Buddha it is sometimes possible to remove these conditions, thereby averting death and allowing the person to revive.

Then the twelve yaksha chieftains, who have been present throughout the Buddha’s teaching and have heard everything that has passed up to this point, address the Buddha as a group. They express their appreciation for having heard the sutra. They say, “We are most fortunate in this way to have heard the name of the Medicine Buddha and to have heard of his qualities and

benefits, because simply through having heard this teaching we are freed from the fear of falling into lower realms.” They say this because they are mundane gods* at that point in time, and without having heard the sutra would be in the same danger as ourselves of falling into a lower rebirth. But

they are confident that, having heard the name and the benefits of the Medicine Buddha, they are no longer in danger of being reborn in the three lower realms. Therefore, they say, “We are delighted by this and we all take refuge, therefore, in the Buddha, in the dharma, and in the sangha.” Because they have been inspired by hearing the sutra, by hearing about the Medicine Buddha’s name, and so forth, they take refuge and commit themselves to being beneficial to sentient beings and to never harming them. And so in a sense, they also generate bodhicitta and promise to protect beings.

In addition, the twelve yaksha chieftains say, “Especially, we will protect any place where there is the sutra of the Medicine Buddha and we will protect any persons and any place where there are persons who venerate the Medicine Buddha.” In that way the twelve yaksha chief-

The whole country in which the practice occurs will become happy

***Editor’s note:** Worldly deities who are unenlightened and thus still bound in samsara.

tains—and also the four great kings—vow to protect the sutra and its followers, and to free all of these beings from harm.

In response, the Buddha addresses the twelve yaksha chieftains and their followers, saying, “Excellent. As you say, having heard the name of the Medicine Buddha you are now free of the danger and fear of falling into lower states. Your delight and confidence in this, the gratitude you have expressed, and especially your commitment to the welfare of beings and of the teachings that this has inspired in you are excellent.”

Now, for this reason, whether you regard it as the blessing of the Medicine Buddha himself and of his name, or as the protection of the twelve yaksha chieftains, if you regularly supplicate the Medicine Buddha, it will protect you. I can speak of this from my own experience. Once when I was living at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, I needed to go into town. There was a car that regularly went from the monastery into town, and I knew the driver and had expressed my need to go that day. But for some reason he didn’t wait for me. He left without me. So I found another car to go to town in, and as a result I am still alive. The first car got into a terrible accident, and while the driver survived, the passengers were all killed. Especially because I am so fat, I would definitely have been squished for sure. So I regard it as the blessing of the three jewels that my life was saved, because there was no obvious reason why he should have left without me.

Now the reason that I connect this with the Medicine Buddha is that sometime before that I had gone into the presence of His Holiness Sakya Trizin Rinpoche* and had requested a divination from him as to whether or not I was facing any obstacles. He said, “If you will do the Medicine

I did this very
Medicine Buddha
practice . . . one
hundred times,
and I think that is
why I was not
killed in that
accident

Buddha practice one hundred times, then you will be free from whatever obstacles might otherwise affect you.” And so I did this very Medicine Buddha practice that we have been studying one hundred times, and I think that is why I was not killed in that accident. So when it says here that the Medicine Buddha practice will protect you from untimely death through poison and accidents, and so on, I believe it.

At this point, the Buddha has finished teaching the main body of the sutra. The Bodhisattva

Chagdrul has made his remarks and the twelve yaksha chieftains have expressed their appreciation and commitment. At that point Ananda arises once again and addresses the Buddha, thanking him for teaching the sutra and saying, “Now that you have given this teaching, what should we call it in the future? This teaching will have to have a name.”

And the Buddha says, “You can call it either *The Twelve Great Aspirations of the Medicine Buddha*, or you can call it *The Vow and Commitment of the Twelve Yaksha Chieftains*.”

Finally, after the Buddha has given the name by which the sutra is to be known in the future, all of those receiving the teaching, foremost among them Manjushri, Vajrapani, and the other bodhisattvas, as well as the twelve yaksha chieftains and so on, express their delight and rejoicing in the sutra’s having been taught and their having heard it and say, “Excellent,” and so forth.

And then, at the very end of the sutra, it says, “That is the completion of the *Sutra of the Great Aspirations of the Medicine Buddha*.” That line is present at the end to show that the sutra is complete. It is entirely possible that one could have in hand only part of a sutra without the end of it. To show that it is complete and goes all the way to the end, those words are added.

That completes our discussion of the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*, so if you have any questions, we have some time this morning.

***Editor’s note:** The head of the Sakya lineage, one of the four principal lineages of vajrayana Buddhism.

Question: Thank you Rinpoche. May I ask for a definition of a yaksha? Is it a human being? What is the Tibetan?

Translator: *Nöjin.*

Question: Is it a human being, is it other than a human being?

Rinpoche: Yakshas are not human. They are nonhuman beings who are most often perceived as gods of wealth.

Question: When they were attending this teaching of the Buddha Shakyamuni, would they have been seen by human beings who were there? I mean by ordinary human beings, not by great bodhisattvas and so forth?

Rinpoche: The way it is put in the sutra, it sounds as though everybody could see them.

Question: And do they have flesh bodies or do they have bodies of light?

Rinpoche: I do not know.

Question: And if they are worldly deities, have they gotten enlightened in the meantime? And if they have not, why are we prostrating to them?

Rinpoche: Well, I do not know if they have attained awakening, but because at that time they promised to protect the Buddha's teachings, they become dharmapalas, and we take refuge in them as mundane dharmapalas.

Question: I see, but if they show up, do we have to do what they tell us?

Rinpoche: You had probably better.

Question: Rinpoche, in the other Buddhist practices, which many of us have done—shamatha, vipashyana, the various sadhanas, and so forth—I have great confidence. Even

though I may not be a good practitioner, I have great confidence that they lead to the ultimate goal. But I am wondering if they have any effect on health as we conventionally understand it, because many times it seems they do not. Or I do not know. Sometimes I feel very sick, so I am wondering if Rinpoche would comment on that.

Translator: Which practices? Are you talking about all of them as a group or the

vajrayana practices in particular?

Question: Tonglen, shamatha, vipashyana, and the various sadhanas and that sort of thing.

Rinpoche: Well, the main yidam sadhanas like Vajrayogini and Chakrasamvara are not particularly said to have much effect on sickness, but practices such as shamatha can be very helpful for sickness.

Question: I know of many people who are not here who would be very happy and grateful if they had been here. Of course, that is not possible. But I am wondering about how to work with this in the future. For instance, if we had the tapes of the teachings from this retreat, would it be acceptable in a center like ours in Victoria or in other places to have a class in which we would play the tapes with the idea that Rinpoche would come sometime in the future to our center, maybe do a program, and give the empowerment? Those people would have to understand, they would either be Buddhist or take refuge as part of the empowerment.

Rinpoche: Sure.

Question: Rinpoche, following up on that same question, as Rinpoche knows, in the Shambala centers there has always been a great effort made to protect the teachings, especially the

vajrayana teachings, and so this is sort of a new situation for us in terms of the instruction that this can be made more available. And so there are still issues going on about how to do that properly. I am just wondering if Rinpoche could elaborate a little bit more on some other possibilities for presenting these teachings properly—so that people actually receive proper instruction and understand what is going on while at the same time making them more available.

Rinpoche: I think you can make it as freely available as possible, because there is no possibility of anyone getting into trouble with this. This is connected with the part of the sutra in which Ananda addresses the Buddha, saying, “Is there not a possibility that people hearing about this and disbelieving it might accumulate negative karma and be worse off than if they had not heard it in the first place?” And in answer to that the Buddha says, “No, even if they initially react with disbelief or even antipathy, the blessing of the Medicine Buddha itself will cause their minds to change.”

Question: Is the front visualization a mirror image of the self-visualization or is it the other way around?

Translator: By mirror image do you mean that your right hand is like that and that his left hand would be like that?

Question: Yes, mirror image.

Rinpoche: It is not literally a mirror image. In other words, in both the self- and front visualizations the right hand of the Medicine Buddha is extended holding the arura and the left hand in both cases is holding a begging bowl on the lap.

Question: Rinpoche, there have been lots of

instructions for sadhana practitioners about how to visualize, and I would just like to hear your instructions to us about how to do the self-visualization properly, given that we have all these attachments to our bodies and to ourselves and that it is difficult to work with that situation. I wanted to hear how you would instruct us to properly visualize the self as the deity.

Rinpoche: Well, here you are not trying to—and you do not have to—first get rid of the fixation on your body. The idea is that you replace the fixation on your ordinary body by adding to that the fixation on your body as the body of the Medicine Buddha.

Question: Forgive me, Rinpoche, I feel very much like the person that Ananda was talking about, though I want very much to believe. When I was a little girl in my convent in London in 1939, the nuns told me that if I prayed with great devotion and sincerity to Jesus to make Hitler a good man, the war would not happen; we would be able to prevent it and be protected from it. So, of course I felt I didn't have enough devotion, and I felt very bad about it. My heart really breaks to think of people in Tibet who are much more evolved than I was and have much more devotion, who

are doing the Medicine Buddha practice and still they have war. Would you please shed some light on this?

Rinpoche: Well, first of all, as I said, the result of dharma practice is usually not immediate. It usually does not manifest as an immediate and dramatic or miraculous transformation of the circumstances. I mentioned for example that if you pray for wealth you are not immediately going to have a shower of gold come from the sky. But there is always a benefit. The benefit manifests as an effect that emerges gradually over a

You can make this teaching as freely available as possible, because there is no possibility of anyone getting into trouble with this

long term and maybe as a transformation of circumstances, as in the story that I told you. Now, for example, I would not say that your prayers as a child just before the outbreak of the Second World War were wasted. For example, you were not killed in the London Blitz, but many other people were.* And as for Tibet, of course as everybody knows Tibet was overcome by warfare. And we simply have to accept the fact that when a very large and populous country invades a small one, they are going to win. It is very hard to escape from that. If we look at it from a political point of view, we would have to say that Tibet was lost, but from a dharmic point of view, the dharma tradition of Tibet is far from lost. In fact it is doing better than it was before. It used to be that in Tibet, if someone actually travelled from Tibet as far as Kalimpong in northern India, that was

If we look at it from a political point of view, we would have to say that Tibet was lost, but from a dharmic point of view, the dharma tradition of Tibet is far from lost

a real journey. That was really expanding, bringing the teachings across the world. But now there is almost nowhere on this planet where there are not Tibetan Buddhist dharma centers, Tibetan stupas, retreats, and so on.

Question: Could you elaborate on what is in the small picture you gave us?

Rinpoche: On the top, the red seated figure is the Buddha Amitayus, the buddha of longevity. On the bottom are the two bodhisattvas. The yellow one is Manjushri and the white one is Chagdrol.

Question: Is there an end to experience once we attain buddhahood?

Translator: From the point of view of that buddha?

***Editor's note:** Implicit in this answer is an understanding of what we might call the developmental aspect of karma. If one commits a negative act such as killing, and does not regret it, but in fact becomes first defensive about it and then rationalizes it, then one is likely gradually to come to rejoice in it, saying, "I was right in this case to kill, and faced with similar circumstances, I would do it again." Which leads of course to the notion that who it was that was killed deserved to be killed, which can lead in turn to the notion that they ought to be killed, which can in turn lead to the notion that we ought to organize a movement to kill such people. This leads to the hardening of one's attitude, and leads to an increasing small-mindedness that becomes more and more attached to a mistaken notion of what one ought to do and thus to an increasing stupidity. As this kind of development becomes widespread, it leads to hatred between groups and to warfare.

On the other hand, if instantly upon killing, or at any later time along the way in the aforesaid type of development, one recognizes the error of one's ways, regrets it deeply, vows not to engage in such action again, and engages in some sort of activity to compensate for one's negative actions, this process of the development of the negative effects of a negative action is arrested. And if one continues to engage in compensatory virtuous actions, the negative karma will gradually be purified. And though it is inescapable that a result of that negative karma will ultimately have to be experienced, the way in which it ripens can be mitigated so completely it will hardly even be experienced. Thus it is said that the Buddha

Shakyamuni in a previous life as a bodhisattva killed the being who later was reborn as Ananda because that being was planning to kill 500 arhats and rob them. The bodhisattva, realizing that he could not talk this person out of his planned mass murder, killed him, thus preventing the deaths of the 500 arhats, and preventing the prospective murderer from being born in a succession of hellish existences from which it would be extremely difficult to extricate himself. Of course, the bodhisattva continued to be reborn again and again as a bodhisattva, engaged in ever increasingly effective virtuous action, and continued to develop love and compassion for sentient beings until, according to tradition, he was finally reborn as the Buddha Shakyamuni. The prospective murderer was also reborn at that time and became Ananda, a devoted disciple of the Buddha and his personal attendant during much of his life. According to the Pali Canon, the Buddha once stepped on a sticker, and realized that that was the karmic consequence of having killed the man who later became Ananda. As a buddha, of course, he would not have suffered from the experience.

Here Rinpoche is implying that the young girl's prayers to God on behalf of Hitler were a form of compensatory action that may have been responsible for changing the way her own personal karma ripened to the extent that they actually protected her, while others, who may have had the very same type of karma, who did not pray or prayed too little too late, were killed in the bombing.

Question: Well yes, I suppose. But also, once everyone in the mahayana view is liberated, is there a cessation of experience? Or what happens exactly?

Translator: So, are there two questions? When one person attains enlightenment, do they cease to experience, and when everybody attains enlightenment, is everything going to be over?

Question: Or what happens? Yes.

Rinpoche: When someone attains full awakening, buddhahood, they do not cease to experience. What they experience is by our standards inconceivable, and all that can be said about it is that it is utterly pure. All of the appearances they undergo are pure, the environment in which they experience themselves is a pure realm, and so on.

Implicit in your second question is the question, “Will there ever come a time when all beings will have attained buddhahood?” This question has to be asked before you can ask what will happen then. And the answer is no. There will never come a specific time when samsara will be over for all beings. There will never come, it is taught, a time when all beings without a single exception will have attained buddhahood, because beings are infinite in number. And when we say, “I resolve to do this and that until samsara is completely emptied,” we do so in order to generate an open ended and unlimited aspiration and commitment. We say that, not because we think that there will come a specific time when samsara will be emptied and our contract terminated, but because we do not want to have a limited aspiration. We do not want to have an aspiration that says, “I will perform benefit for beings, but only for three years or only for this long.”

Now, returning to your first question, there are contexts in which it is taught, for example in

the common Middle Way School presentation of the awakening of a buddha, that after awakening, that buddha exists only in the perception of others, both pure and impure, and does not experience himself or herself. But in the vajrayana that is not taught. In the vajrayana it is definitely taught that the real sambhogakaya realm, the true or perfect sambhogakaya, is in fact self-experience; it is how a buddha experiences himself or herself.

Question: Rinpoche, you have gone into great detail about the sutra tradition and about how the Medicine Buddha came to be known in this world. That knowledge of the Medicine Buddha actually originated with the Buddha Shakyamuni, and that gives me great confidence in terms of the origin of this practice, because I have confidence in the Buddha Shakyamuni himself. However, a large part of the practice that you have given us is also tantric in nature, and the very detailed visualizations clearly come from somewhere else. Can you give some details about their origins so that we can have similar confidence in and knowledge about their origins?

Rinpoche: This practice is a combination of sutra and tantra. I have explained its sutra origin. Basically it doesn't have a tantric origin going back to the Buddha Shakyamuni independent of its origin in the sutras. It is basically a sutra practice connected with tantra. In other words, it is a practice according to the sutras that adopts and adapts the methods of the tantras, specifically some of the methods of anuttarayoga tantra. This became a tantric practice after the Buddha's time through the realization and teachings of the bodhisattvas who received it from the Buddha and the various mahasiddhas who received it from them. In that sense it is different from a primarily tantric practice like Chakrasamvara or Kalachakra, the

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origins of which are one or more specific tantras taught by the Buddha, belonging to a specific class of tantra such as some form of anuttarayoga and so on. And in that sense it is also unlike the various lower tantras—the yoga, carya and kriya tantras—which also go back originally to the Buddha Shakyamuni. Here it is basically a sutra practice that makes use of the methods of anuttarayoga tantra, and there is no specific tantra that is a scriptural basis for it as is the sutra.

Question: What about all of the detail, all of the richness of the visualization. Is that contained in the longer sutras? The palace and its various colors, etc. Is there a specific being even after the Buddha's time from whom this originates?

Rinpoche: Well, the palace is based upon the description in the sutra of the Medicine Buddha, which says that the Medicine Buddha's realm is called such and such, it is like this, and it has such and such a palace, and so on. The retinue is based also upon the sutra. In the sutra all eight medicine buddhas and the sixteen bodhisattvas are mentioned as being present at the teaching, and the twelve yaksha chieftains, the ten protectors of the directions, and the four great kings are also described as being present at the teaching. By visualizing them surrounding the buddhas and bodhisattvas, you insure the receipt of their protection and blessing.

Question: For fear of totally beating a dead horse, you know all of the lights and the medicine buddhas raining down, are these based on other tantric practices?

Rinpoche: Yes.

Question: Rinpoche, when I go home and talk to my family and friends and say I have been at the

Medicine Buddha retreat and they ask me who or what is the Medicine Buddha, I do not know what to tell them. I want to create a definition that is going to bring them benefit, and although I know that hearing about the Medicine Buddha will help them, I do not want to initially turn them away. So could you give sort of a short answer in layman's terms? I do not know if that is possible. And also, we have a new cat and I want to expose him to the Medicine Buddha, but he might not stay at the shrine with us when we are practicing. So, is it appropriate to put a picture of the Medicine Buddha near his food bowls or by his bed? Or is that not appropriate? Will simply living with dharma practitioners be helpful for an animal when he hears us just sort of talking dharma?

Rinpoche: To answer your first question, probably the most convenient thing to say to your family is that you were taught and practiced a form of meditation designed to lead to physical health and freedom from sickness, and leave it at that. As for putting an image of the Medicine Buddha near where your cat eats and sleeps, that is fine.

So the time is up. The rest of you could ask your questions this afternoon. I was asked a question yesterday about how to defend oneself against sexual attack or rape, and I was asked to give an answer that is in accordance with the dharma. Basically, the dharmic answer to this would be prevention as much as possible, which would basically fall into two categories. First of all, through mindfulness avoid situations where you are likely to be a victim of that kind of attack. And the second approach is to discourage anyone who seems to be capable of that kind of attack or behavior by being a little bit tough, so that they do not ever get the idea that they can get that close to you.

So, we will dedicate the merit. ㊦

Medicine Buddha Sutra

The Correct View Regarding Both Deities and Maras



Continuing the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's teaching on the Medicine Buddha Sutra.

We have completed the explanation of the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*. There is another sutra connected to this, called the *Sutra of the Aspirations of the Eight Medicine Buddhas*, which refers to the principal Medicine Buddha of the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* and the other seven medicine buddhas in his retinue. These are distinct buddhas, but their aspirations are fundamentally the same, so I am not going to explain that sutra separately.

In the sutra that we have been studying there is a great deal of

presentation of the idea of veneration, even worship of this deity, the Medicine Buddha, and through veneration and worship, achieving what is called cutting the noose of mara. So we have the idea of some sort of external mara that is somewhere down there and some sort of external deity that is somewhere up there. Given this type of presentation we may come to the conclusion that the deity being supplicated, such as the Medicine Buddha, has the omnipotence and the external existence of a creator, as though he or she actually causes us to experience the pleasant and unpleasant things that we undergo. It may seem that since, if you pray to the Medicine Buddha, you will somehow receive the two attainments—the common and supreme attainments—that if you do not pray to the Medicine Buddha, you will get into trouble. But the vajrayana view of the effect or effectiveness of the supplication of deities is fundamentally different from this idea. The idea in the vajrayana is that the blessing associated with the deity, the attainment you gain through this type of practice, is a result of your practice of the path.* Your accomplishment of the path leads to its result, which fundamentally is caused by your own meditative state or samadhi, cultivated by yourself within yourself. The capacity you have to cultivate such a samadhi and thereby attain these results is your own fundamental nature, which is referred to as buddha nature. This potential is something that each and every being has. It is usually obscured by the presence of temporary stains or obscurations. These stains are removed by the practice of the path, by the practice of meditation, by the practice of the generation and completion stages. And when these obscurations

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have been removed and the innate qualities of this buddha nature are revealed, that is the result. So this practice is not really the worship of an external deity. It is primarily a way of gaining access to your own inherent or innate wisdom.

Because this is the view of the vajrayana with regard to the nature of deities, the uncommon method of the vajrayana is to visualize oneself as the deity. Thus, in this practice you visualize yourself as the Medicine Buddha. But in the common vehicle, the basic teachings of the buddha, [the hinayana teachings], it appears as though it is taught that the ultimate result of the path is what is called arhat without remainder. There it is taught that when someone completes the path—which means that they remove or

abandon all of the causes of samsara, all karma, and all kleshas—then they naturally attain the result of that removal, which is the cessation of the results of those causes, which means the total cessation of samsaric existence for that individual. Since they have abandoned the causes and therefore experience the cessation of the results, according to the common vehicle, there is nothing whatsoever left—which is called arhat without remainder. So from the point of view of the

common vehicle, one's own liberation depends entirely, without any exception whatsoever, upon one's attainment through meditation, and there is no point whatsoever in supplication or prayer to anyone or anything outside oneself, because there is simply no one to pray to.

The vajrayana view is different from that. According to the vajrayana, as according to the mahayana, there have appeared innumerable buddhas and bodhisattvas. All of them have entered the path by generating bodhicitta, have traversed [or are in the process of traversing] the path by gathering the accumulations of merit and wisdom for three periods of innumerable

***Editor's note:** i.e., not a reward arbitrarily bestowed by a deity pleased by one's praises, promises, obedience, or other means of currying favor.

kalpas [according to the mahayana], and finally have completed [or will complete] the path by attaining full awakening or buddhahood. Having attained buddhahood, they actually have the capacity to grant their blessing, and it is for that reason that we make offerings, that we perform prostrations, that we supplicate, and so on. So in the vajrayana we not only visualize ourselves as the yidam, but we also visualize the yidam, such as the Medicine Buddha, in front of us as well. Focusing on the front visualization, we make offerings and so forth in order to gather the accumulations, and we supplicate the deity and receive its blessing. So from the vajrayana point of view, there is in fact something to pray to, and doing so does facilitate one's attainment of the result.

Connected with this is one's understanding of the aim of practice. Sometimes, in the way dharma is presented, it seems as though the only acceptable goal of doing dharma practice is the attainment of perfect awakening in order to liberate others, and it seems to be said that it is utterly inappropriate to think of any benefit for this life at all, which implies there exist no methods in dharma for benefiting oneself in this life. In fact, this is not the case. Especially in the vajrayana tradition we talk about the attainment of the two siddhis or two attainments. One of them is the supreme siddhi or supreme attainment. Through the practice of meditation—through the practice of the generation and completion stages—you gradually remove the two obscurations—the mental/emotional afflictions and the cognitive obscurations—and you eventually attain buddhahood. The attainment of buddhahood is the supreme attainment. But if you think that this is the only benefit or only reason for practice, that is not entirely the case. In the vajrayana we also speak of the common siddhis or common attainments. Through meditating

upon a yidam you can also attain longevity, freedom from sickness, wealth and so on, and it is because of this emphasis in vajrayana on the common attainments that there are so many different deities. For example, in order to attain wealth you would practice a wealth deity such as Jambhala. In order to attain physical well-being and freedom from sickness you might practice a deity such as the Medicine Buddha. In order to increase your insight into the meaning of the teachings you might practice Manjushri. Doing practices for these reasons is not regarded as inappropriate in any way. Since these practices exist, it is obviously not impossible to attain these things by doing them.

That is the view with regard to the deities that are meditated upon and supplicated. Then there is the other side of things, mara or the maras, which we might think of as being down there, in the same way that deities might be thought of as being up there somewhere. There are two ways in which we generally think of mara. One way is to think that mara refers to one's own mental afflictions, one's own kleshas alone, and not as any kind of external being that is trying to tempt one or interfere with one's spiritual progress. And sometimes we think that maras are completely external, and we think

that everything that goes wrong is caused by some kind of external malevolent force that is attempting to victimize us. Both of these views are somewhat extreme.

Mara is most commonly presented in the Buddhist tradition as four different types of maras, called devaputramara, the mara that is the child of the gods; kleshamara, the mara that is the mental afflictions; skandhamara, the mara that is the aggregates; and finally mrtyumara, the mara that is the lord of death. These are primarily internal. The first of these, devaputramara, the mara that is

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the child of the gods, refers not to some kind of external demonic force but primarily to your own great attachment and great craving. Therefore, it is given the name of child of the gods, because when this mara is depicted iconographically—because it is craving or wanting something so much—it is not depicted as something ugly and threatening, but as something attractive, because that is the feeling-tone of attachment. It is liking things so much that it interferes with your dharma practice and your attainment of awakening. The second mara, kleshamara, the mara that is mental afflictions, is your mental afflictions themselves. These become a mara because, due to the beginningless habit of maintaining and cultivating them, they keep on popping up again and again. They are very hard to abandon or even to suppress, and when they are momentarily absent, they come up again, and in that way they interfere with your practice of dharma.

The third mara is skandamara, the mara of the aggregates. The aggregates here refer to the five aggregates that make up samsaric existence—forms, sensations, perceptions, thoughts,* and consciousness. Now, these aggregates are themselves mara, because being aggregates or composite, they are impermanent. Being impermanent they are constantly changing, and therefore they are always a cause, directly or indirectly, of suffering. In order to attain permanent happiness, in order to transcend the suffering of samsara, we must transcend the five aggregates. There is simply no way to attain a state of permanent happiness within the bondage of these aggregates.

***Editor's note:** Usually referred to as samskaras or mental formations.

Victory over the four maras requires the practice of dharma, the practice of meditation. Specifically, it requires the realization of the selflessness of persons and the selflessness or emptiness of things in general

The fourth of the four maras is death itself, which is depicted iconographically as wrathful or unpleasant. Death, of course, is what we are most afraid of. Death is what comes with great agony and fear and pain.

These four maras are fundamentally internal; they are not external beings. Victory over the four maras requires the practice of dharma, the practice of meditation. Specifically, it requires the realization of the selflessness of persons and the selflessness or emptiness of things in general. In order to realize these two aspects of selflessness or emptiness, one meditates on emptiness, and, especially according to the vajrayana tradition, one meditates upon the nature of one's own mind, since this is an evident emptiness, an obvious or directly experienceable emptiness.** Therefore, the practice of shamatha and vipashyana, tranquillity and insight medita-

tion, that takes as its basis the recognition of the nature of one's own mind, is a direct method that leads to the realization of the emptiness of one's own nature, and on the basis of that realization, one can gradually attain the ultimate fruition, final awakening, at which point one has conquered all four maras once and for all. And that is how one conquers the mara that is internal.

Vajrayana practice therefore includes the practices of both shamatha and vipashyana. But the typical practices of the vajrayana are not limited to those practices; they also include the two broad and inclusive categories of the genera-

****Editor's note:** It is not difficult to establish through the use of reason the lack of true—i.e., singular, uncompounded, permanent—existence of external physical things, but it is very difficult to “see” or experience such lack of true existence of things directly. See editor's note, page 20, *Shenpen Ösel*, Volume 2, Number 2.

tion stage and the completion stage. According to the vajrayana, the four maras are considered to be impure appearances, the projections of bewilderment and the presence in one's mind of those tendencies—the kleshas and the cognitive obscurations—that cause those projections. The four maras consist of impure appearances and the reification of them, and this includes impure or negative karma as well.* The attainment of victory over the four maras according to the vajrayana tradition comes about from transcending these impure appearances and coming to experience pure appearances. One attains the experience of pure appearances by meditating upon appearances as pure, by meditating upon one's environment as a pure realm, one's body as a pure form, and so forth. Now if this were a meditation upon things as other than what they truly or fundamentally are, it would never work. But because our basic nature is buddha nature, and because the temporary obscurations that cause us to perceive things as impure are secondary to that nature—and by temporary or secondary we mean that they can be removed, that they are empty, that they are not intrinsic to the nature—

***Editor's note:** To reify is to regard something abstract as being material or concrete. This is another way of referring to the phenomenon of solidification that Chögyam Trungpa introduced into our vocabulary. To think of ourselves as being small, insignificant, fundamentally flawed beings who are fundamentally angry, needy, or dimwitted is to reify or take as real and solid and unchangeable that which is in fact merely the ever-changing ripening and exhaustion of causes and conditions. And though this karmic process exists as mere appearance, it is empty in its essential nature. The manifestations of the ripening of karma appear, but are not truly real or solid. They have no true existence, and recognizing their emptiness or lack of true existence liberates one from the suffering associated with them. If one's recognition of the essential empty nature of the ripening of karma is profound and continuous enough, impure appearances cease, and the appearance of oneself as deity and one's environment as buddha realm spontaneously arises. This process is jump-started and fast-forwarded through the profound methods of the generation and completion stages, as Rinpoche continues to explain.

According to the vajrayana, the four maras are considered to be impure appearances, the projections of bewilderment

because our basic or true nature is buddha nature and those obscurations that hide it are not intrinsic to it and can be removed, therefore, just as our true nature is pure, appearances are also fundamentally pure. It is in order to reveal this basic nature and reveal these pure appearances that we practice the generation stage.

Initially, generation stage practice is extremely difficult, because it goes directly against the grain or the current of our habit of impure projections, which causes the impure appearances we experience. But eventually [with effort] the habit of regarding things as pure is cultivated to the point where one generates a clear appearance or a clear perception of things as pure. From that point onward, gradually, the actual, pure nature of phenomena or appearances begins to be revealed, and it is for that reason that we practice the generation stage meditation upon yidams. It is also in order to reveal this pure nature of appearances that we regard things not as the ordinary solid things that they appear to be—ordinary earth, ordinary stones and so on—but as the embodiment of emptiness manifesting as vivid pure appearances. In this way, through practicing the generation and completion stages, we attain the ultimate result.**

Sometimes when we are practicing, we experience adverse conditions, obstacles of various kinds—such as physical illness or mental depression, or various external setbacks in whatever we are trying to do. These come from one of two causes—from previous actions or karmas, or from present, suddenly arising conditions. Although normally we regard the maturation of our previous actions as something that, once it arises, is very difficult to change, never-

****Editor's note:** In the end, the vision of everything that arises as vivid pure appearance is the generation stage, and the recognition of its emptiness is the completion stage.

theless, if you supplicate the buddhas and bodhisattvas, make offerings, gather the accumulations, and so on, you can purify your karma. Purifying your karma also purifies some of your kleshas at the same time.* We all have kleshas for sure, but they can be defeated by the appropriate remedies, if the remedies are sincerely and consistently applied. With the application of the appropriate remedies—especially with the blessings of buddhas and bodhisattvas—one can alter one’s karma and reduce the power of one’s kleshas, [thereby eliminating or reducing one’s obstacles and adverse conditions].

The other cause of obstacles is what is called “sudden conditions.” One type of sudden condition is a karmic debt, a situation in which what is happening is not the direct result of your immediately previous actions, but is being imposed upon you by another being because of a negative karmic connection you made with that being [in a previous life]—for example, a being whom in previous lives you have beaten up, killed, or stolen from, and so on. Sometimes this is a human being who for no apparent reason takes such dislike to you that they start persecuting you. Sometimes it is a nonhuman being, a spirit with no apparent physical form, who, because of your having harmed it in a previous life, takes every opportunity to cause you obstacles in this life. These things are quite possible; they happen to us. In such a situation, if you supplicate the Medicine Buddha, make offerings, make virtuous aspirations and so forth, this being’s aggression will be pacified, and you can free yourself from the obstacle.

I am going to stop there for this afternoon. Some of you didn’t get a chance to ask your

***Editor’s note:** The results of any particular action include not simply the “payback,” but also the perpetuation and reinforcement in the mind of the klesha or kleshas that existed as the motivation for the action.

questions this morning, so if you’d like to ask them now, please go ahead.

Question: Rinpoche, it seems as though in the West many of the teachings that have been provided to us have put a great amount of emphasis on our mental afflictions or kleshas, and there has not really been much teaching on physical afflictions, which is in a sense what we have been talking about this week, some of the ways of working with physical afflictions. I wonder if Rinpoche would comment a little bit more about the view to take—both from the relative and the absolute standpoint—when physical afflictions and physical difficulties and sicknesses occur, as well as ways of working with physical afflictions in the post-meditation experience. That is part one of the question.

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Rinpoche: Well, of course, physical difficulties, physical suffering, and sickness are always happening in one way or another for us. These are relative truths, relative phenomena. As relative phenomena they are interdependent, which is to say, each and every aspect of these situations is in fact the coming together of many conditions that depend on one another in order to appear as what they appear to be, as for

example sickness or physical pain. Therefore, because they are interdependent, because they are not true [immutable] units, there is always a remedy of one kind or another. For example, in the context of the Medicine Buddha practice, visualizing the body of the Medicine Buddha, reciting the mantra of the Medicine Buddha, requesting the blessing of the Medicine Buddha—all of which are primarily mental, primarily acts of meditation and visualization—initially pacify your mind, but by pacifying your mind, because of the interdependence of mind and body, these acts start also to pacify your physical illness. If you are ill, they will help to

pacify the illness. And if you are not ill, they will help to prevent the advent of illness.

At the same time, we also make use of physical remedies, medicines, for sickness. But as we know from experience, sometimes a medicine will work and sometimes, for some reason that is not necessarily apparent, something interferes with the proper functioning of the medicine, and it does not effectively treat even an illness for which it is appropriately prescribed. Supplication of the Medicine Buddha will help prevent that interference with or ineffectiveness of medicine, and will help the medicine take its proper effect.

Question: May I continue? There are here this weekend many health care practitioners and/or educators who often work with people who are not practitioners but who certainly have some quality of openness. Could Rinpoche comment a bit on how we, as medical practitioners and as educators in medical schools—as we begin to practice and study and understand the Medicine Buddha and what you have talked about—how we can apply all of this as we work with our patients and with our students in medical schools?

Rinpoche: Well, the most important thing to have in working with a patient and to communicate in teaching physicians is that the fundamental ground of the alleviation of sickness, which must be common to all health care practitioners, is the sincere and committed wish to help others, the sincere wish to remove suffering and at least the proximate causes of suffering. And so the four-fold unsullied and stainless attitude that was described yesterday in the sutra is very important. Freedom from aggression and the wish to benefit the patient are the most important things, and these need to be communicated and to be present.

Question: Rinpoche, I want to confirm my understanding that it has been okayed by Rinpoche to share the tapes from this week and the practice text that we have used with others, and that those with whom we are sharing it do not have to have taken the refuge vow. Is that correct? Because I have people waiting back in Portland and I just wanted to be absolutely sure.

Rinpoche: Yes.

Question: Thank you.

Question: I may just be asking Rinpoche to repeat himself, but I think I need to hear it. The first question is about faith and devotion. When we supplicate intensely, I am trying to understand better what exactly we're supplicating. What have we faith in and what do we have devotion to? Is it faith that the practice will actually work or that the deity actually exists, or a combination?

The fundamental ground of the alleviation of sickness . . . is the sincere and committed wish to help others

Rinpoche: It is both. The point is that faith and devotion bring the accomplishment of whatever you are trying to do. If you have faith, you will accomplish whatever it is, and if you do not have faith, you won't. This is simply how things work. If you have faith, then you will do it. You will do something properly, and doing it properly will cause it to work. You

will achieve the result. And if you do not have that much faith in something, you will do it halfheartedly or not at all, and therefore you will not achieve the result. So having faith really means fundamentally trusting and believing in the process. With respect to the Medicine Buddha practice, it means believing first and foremost that it will work. Trusting in the process will automatically entail—and therefore produce—faith in and devotion to the deities involved, the lama who taught you the practice, and so on.

Question: And does devotion have to do with just the recognition of the superior qualities of whatever it is you are devoted to?

Rinpoche: In Tibetan, the word that gets translated as devotion is usually expressed in English in two words that have distinct meanings. The first word means enthusiasm, and of course enthusiasm is simply being really interested in something. But this specific type of enthusiasm, as is indicated by the second word, which literally means respect, is an enthusiasm founded upon, as you indicated, a recognition of the extraordinary qualities of someone or something.

Question: Could you talk about the relationship between purification and blessing?

Rinpoche: These two—purification and receiving blessings—are distinct. They are not exactly the same. Purification means that the obscurations—the cognitive obscuration, which is ignorance, and the afflictive obscurations, which are the mental afflictions and the karmic obscurations or the negative karma that you have accumulated—are gradually purified, which means removed from you. And receiving blessing means that through your supplication of the buddha or of the dharma, you receive their blessing. For example, when you supplicate the Medicine Buddha, through the power of your own supplication combined with the power of the twelve aspirations made by the Medicine Buddha, something happens, and that is called blessing. On the other hand, while purification and blessing are distinct, either one can cause the other. The removal of obscurations allows you to receive the blessings [more fully] and receiving blessings brings about the removal of obscurations.

The buddha nature that is present in our nature is like a bird in its eggshell . . . And a buddha is like that bird flying in the sky

Question: Thank you very much Rinpoche.

Question: I have two questions and one challenge. But you may escape the challenge depending on how you answer the first question. The first question is, can you explain the difference between our buddha nature and a buddha in particular with regard to the notions of omniscience and the inseparability of samsara and nirvana?

Translator: The question is, can you explain the difference between our buddha nature and a buddha, someone who has attained buddhahood, and particularly in regard to the issue of omniscience and the inseparability of samsara and nirvana. Is that the question or the challenge?

Question: That is the question. There is an adjunct actually to that. How can one be realized without consciousness? I think they are connected, those two.

Translator: By consciousness what do you mean?

Question: The aggregate that is impure that you talked about before.

Rinpoche: The buddha nature that is present in our nature as the ground of being is like a bird in its eggshell, a bird that has not yet emerged from the egg. And a buddha is like that bird flying in the sky, having broken out of the eggshell. We each and everyone have the innate potential that manifests as the qualities of buddhahood. But this potential, which is our essence, is hidden by our obscurations, and therefore, as long as it is hidden, we call it a seed. We use the term buddha to refer to someone in whom this previously hidden essence has become revealed. So there are basically two situations: a being whose basic nature is still hidden and a being whose basic nature has been

revealed. When that basic nature is hidden, we call it a potential, a kernel or seed, an essence, or buddha nature. And when that basic nature has been revealed, then we call that being a buddha.

Question: You didn't answer the question about how you can be realized without consciousness.

Translator: Oh yes, I am sorry.

Rinpoche: You do not "lose consciousness" when you attain buddhahood. You transform consciousness. The function of consciousness is transformed into wisdom. In our present state, consciousness functions somewhat haphazardly and imperfectly. Sometimes our consciousnesses are so intense that they are overwhelming and sometimes they are so obscure or dim that they do not really function properly.

Question: This is quite quick. Is it within mara's ability to convince a person that they are a realized buddha when they are not, or that they are a lineage holder or a bodhisattva when they are not? And if it is, how does a person protect himself or herself against that illusion, particularly given that to be a realized buddha and/or lineage holder and/or a bodhisattva is what one aspires to be?

Rinpoche: It sounds possible.

Question: Well how do you protect yourself against it?

Rinpoche: Basically by preserving a good motivation and cultivating a lot of love and compassion.

Question: I'll leave my challenge for another time because there are so many people.

Question: Thank you, Rinpoche, and thank you, Lama, for your translations. My question is regarding sangha. Most of us do not have any trouble taking refuge in the buddha or taking refuge in the dharma, but when it comes to taking refuge in the sangha, we roll our eyes and nervously giggle. Here this whole week, we have been together as a sangha, all working cooperatively together, but when we leave here we'll go to our different cities and our different groups and get into situations where we have come from many different schools—Nyingma, Kagyu, Geluk, Sakya, and others—and many different teachers, many different ways of doing things.

And what I have seen happen in Seattle is one group thinking that their way is the best, this teacher over here is said to have some shady past, some other teacher does not teach at all in Tibetan, with all their various differences, and even within individual groups, the various concepts: well, this person has taken refuge, so they are sangha, even though maybe they do not practice very often; this person practices all the time, but has not taken refuge; that person practices all the time but does not come to the center. So there are all these various ideas about what sangha is and how to behave towards sangha members, and I would like it if Rinpoche could address what sangha is, what a practitioner is, and what the correct view and behavior towards those would be.

Rinpoche: Our attitude towards the sangha is indicated by the definition of taking refuge in the sangha. Taking refuge in the sangha is accepting the sangha or the community as companions on the path. So the basic view you have of other practitioners is that they are fellow travelers on the same path. That being the case, you do not particularly have to examine whether or not someone is what either you or someone else might consider a full-fledged bona fide member

Taking refuge in the sangha is accepting the sangha or community as companions on the path

of the sangha. You do not need to worry about what the criteria are for making that appraisal. It does not matter whether someone is of the same particular lineage or not, whether their approach in practice is exactly the same as yours or not, whether they have taken the vow of refuge or not. They are on the same path, trying to reach the same goal. The fundamental function of the sangha is—by being on the same path and having the same goal—to encourage one another to practice dharma, to cause one another to remain involved and to become more involved in dharma and its practice, rather than to lead one another farther and farther away from the path.

Question: In that respect then, Rinpoche, would one expect sangha to get larger rather than to become more and more narrow?

Translator: As a community you mean?

Question: Yes.

Rinpoche: Well, it is good if it does, because the greater the number, then the greater the momentum of the practice of that specific sangha. And the greater the momentum, the more courage and the more deeply involved people tend to get.

Question: Thank you, Rinpoche. My question concerns care of people who are terminally ill, people who are dying of something like cancer, and the relief of pain. I have been told that it is better not to relieve pain too much because it is karma coming to fruition, that if you do not feel it now, you are going to feel it later, in the next life or whenever, which seems to me not the most compassionate view, particularly if the person who is dying in pain is not a dharma practitioner. Could you speak to that please?

Rinpoche: It is possible that the agony of a

dying person is a result of their previous karma, but your giving them medicine that reduces that pain does not remove the working out of that karma. It affects how bad the pain is, but the karma itself is still ripening. So by alleviating the pain of a dying person, you are not dooming them to a worse fate later on. So by all means they should be given pain medication.

Question: Thank you.

Question: You have been talking a lot about impure and pure perceptions. I am having a hard time understanding or thinking what might constitute something that is pure in its perception. Is it bright or light? On the other hand what is an impure perception?

Rinpoche: It has more to do with the mind that is perceiving than it does with the actual physical characteristics of what is perceived. A simple example of this is that if the same person looks at the same thing in two different emotional states, they will see them differently. The effect of what they see will be very different. For example, if someone looks at something while they are very angry, while they are feeling really spiteful and mean, they will see it as irritating or as unpleasant, and if the same person looks at the same thing when their emotional state is one of love and compassion, something very positive, they will see the same thing as having a positive nature or quality. That basically is what is meant by impure perception or appearances and pure perception or appearances, but the difference between those two states—the same person in basically two different moods—is very slight. While that is the principle on which it operates, it can go much further than that. If you can imagine a mind that is completely pure of any kind of negativity whatsoever, what that person would experience is what we would call true, pure appearances. And a mind that is filled with

By alleviating the pain of a dying person, you are not dooming them to a worse fate later on

various sorts of negativity experiences impure appearances.

Question: Thank you for the teachings, Rinpoche. I have a couple of questions. I am wondering, in the subtle level of the judging mind, when one is aware of judgments coming up—not when one is angry, but when these judgmental tendencies arise—how can one work to antidote these in the present moment?

Rinpoche: Are you talking about meditation or post-meditation?

Question: Post-meditation in interaction with others or even in simple observation in daily life.

Rinpoche: The first step is to recognize the tendency. If you are in the habit of recognizing these sorts of subtle judgmental thoughts as what they are, then the habit of recognizing them and not wishing to invest in them will accrue, and they will occur less and less often.

Question: So how is that really happening?

Rinpoche: If you are not interested in cultivating those thoughts and you apply mindfulness and alertness, they will automatically happen less and less and disappear.

Question: You mentioned the two main bodhisattvas of the Medicine Buddha, Luminous Like The Sun and Luminous Like The Moon. I was wondering if you could expand on that some.

Rinpoche: I think that they are other names for Manjushri and Chagdrul. Luminous Like The Sun would be Manjushri, and Luminous Like The

Moon would be Chagdrul.

Question: You spoke a little bit about spirits and not wanting to get them angry or to offend them. I am increasing my faith in the Medicine Buddha and I am sure that its practice is great, but I wonder if you have more guidance for one who does healing work where actual spirit possession may happen, and what perhaps to do or to focus on after doing such a session?

Translator: Do you mean, if you are trying to heal someone who is possessed by a spirit, or if you the healer get attacked by the spirit?

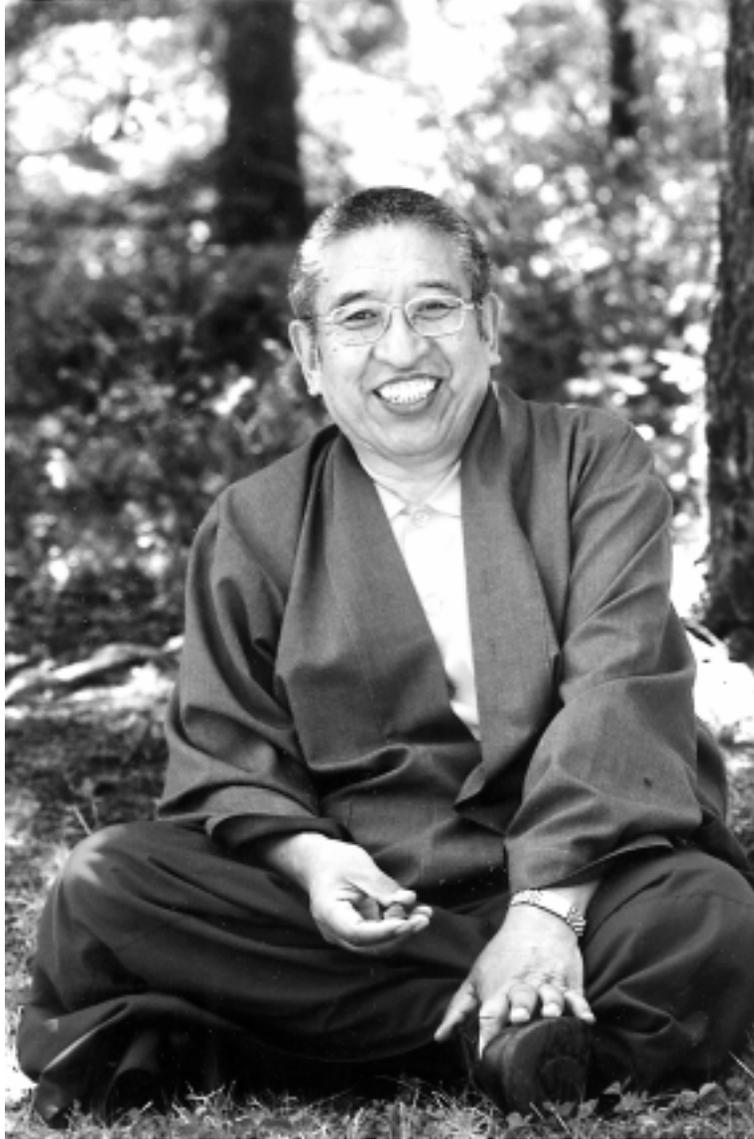
Question: Well, both perhaps. You are working with somebody, and a spirit deposal happens, and they kind of reclaim their body. Generally what I have experienced is just staying really

strong and clear, but sometimes there is fatigue or other things that may happen afterwards. So both.

Rinpoche: The most important thing in that situation is that the practitioner have compassion not only for the possessed person but for the possessing spirit as well. Of course, we normally have compassion for the possessed, but we may not have that much compassion for the possessor. The possessed person deserves our compassion, because they are suffering. But the possessor—equally or perhaps even more so—deserves our compassion, because they are doing what will become the cause of great suffering for themselves in the future. If you have that attitude of compassion for the spirit, it will facilitate the extrication of the spirit, and also will not leave that sort of staleness, and so forth, that will otherwise ensue. (15)

Medicine Buddha Sutra

Somehow Our Buddha Nature Has Been Awakened, and We Are Very Fortunate Indeed



Continuing the Very Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's teaching on the Medicine Buddha Sutra.

All of you are no doubt extremely busy, but in spite of that, you all decided to come here, and for that, in and of itself, I thank you. Beyond that, having come here, you have all practiced and listened to the teachings with great diligence and attentiveness, and I thank you especially for that as well. As it says in the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, "While all sentient beings without exception possess buddha nature, this buddha nature is hidden by our obscurations," as in the analogy I gave yesterday of a bird in an egg shell. There are different ways that buddha

nature can be present in a person. While it is equally present per se in everyone, it can either emerge and be somehow awakened, or not. When buddha nature is dormant, when there is no evidence in the person's life of the presence of it, that person has no immediate opportunity for liberation. On the other hand, when the qualities of buddha nature emerge, when it becomes awakened or aroused, then its qualities are revealed and the person can begin to attain liberation. Now in the case of all of you, your having decided to come here, your having done so, and your having practiced diligently is ample evidence of the awakening or emergence of your buddha nature, and I consider this evidence further that your practice of dharma will continue to progress until you attain liberation. So that is why I thank you for coming here and practicing.

While you have been here, you have been listening to and practicing specifically the dharma connected with the Medicine Buddha, which in the long term will be a cause of your complete liberation and in the short term a cause of physical and mental well-being. So you are extremely fortunate, because this practice is extremely beneficial. Now as you go on with your lives and attempt to integrate practice into your daily life, you will find that sometimes you will have what will seem like a more or less perfect opportunity. It will fit right into your life without any contradiction or problem, and there will not seem to be any impediments or obstacles that interfere with your practice. And sometimes you will find that there will seem to be any number of obstacles impeding or obstructing your practice, time constraints and so forth, and it may get to the point that you feel you have no opportunity to practice, at least not as much as you would like. In such situations, do not be discouraged. Do not think, "I have obstacles, I have real problems, I am never going to be able to practice. No matter what I do, things always go wrong," and so on.

Whatever contact
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be lost

Do not allow yourself to become depressed by the temporary obstruction of your practice, and always remember that even merely encountering such dharma, even hearing it, is something that is extremely fortunate, extremely beneficial in and of itself. Whatever contact you have made and whatever practice of dharma you have done will never be lost. The benefits of it can never be destroyed or removed and will lead you sooner or later to complete liberation.

It says in the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* that in one of the sutras the Buddha discusses the benefit of having less than complete faith. Now obviously there are some people who have intense and complete, unquestioning faith in the three jewels, and especially in the dharma, and

of course that is wonderful. But there are other people who have less faith in the dharma, which is to say that they have some faith in it, but they also have some questions and doubts. The image that the Buddha uses to describe these situations is that if someone has complete faith, they are going to join both palms together in front of their heart in a gesture of utter devotion and trust. But someone with less faith might just

put one hand up in front of their chest. So what the Buddha is describing is a situation in which someone has what we could call "half faith." They have faith but they also have a lot of doubt. And the Buddha poses the question, "Is there going to be any benefit, is there going to be any result to putting one hand up in a gesture of half faith or half devotion?" And his answer is, "Yes, there will definitely be a great result; there will be great benefit, and the benefit of this will never be lost." It will eventually lead to that being's perfect awakening. So in that way the Buddha praises an attitude of faith even if it is what we might consider half-hearted.

A second analogy the Buddha gives begins with imagining a place of practice such as this one. Initially, in order to come here, one generates the intention to do so. So someone might

think, “I need to go to such and such place and practice intensively.” Now obviously, if you actually get there and practice, there will be great benefit, but suppose someone, having decided, “I want to go there and practice,” takes a few steps in order to get there, and after merely a few steps something gets in their way, a situation comes up that prevents them from actually ever reaching the place and practicing. And the Buddha asks, “In such a situation would there be a result?” And the answer is yes, there would be a tremendous result, great benefit; even having taken a few steps towards a place of practice with the intention of practicing, even though you never get there and never practice, will ultimately still be a cause of perfect happiness. So as you go on with your lives and you go on with the process that has included listening to dharma and practicing dharma, sometimes you will find that you are free of impediments and obstacles that interfere with your practice, and other times you will find that things just get in the way of your practice. But when things get in the way, do not be too discouraged; remember that all of this is always beneficial, and that it is not an abnormal situation for sometimes there to be the freedom to practice and other times not. So never think ill of yourself when you experience impediments.

That is the way this is explained in the teachings of the Buddha, as quoted and expounded by Lord Gampopa. And if we simply think about it ourselves, we can arrive at the same conclusion. If we consider appearances, this world as we experience it, we normally

experience things as being very lustrous and colorful and powerful and distracting, even seductive. And our minds are very easily pulled around, fooled, and seduced. Our minds are very naive. Especially because we have lots of thoughts about what we experience. We think

that things are going to stay the same. We think that things are stable and so on. And we usually fool ourselves with all of these thoughts based on appearances. But somehow we have all generated the idea, the thought, that practicing dharma and specifically coming here and participating in this retreat would be worthwhile, that it would be important enough to make room for it in our lives. Most beings simply do not come up with this idea. Most beings would not choose to come here. The reason we did is that somehow our buddha nature has become awakened a little bit, and the blessings of buddhas and bodhisattvas have somehow entered into us and affected us. So

The process that has begun with the awakening of our buddha nature and our making the choices we've already made is unstoppable. Ultimately, it will lead to our liberation

while obstacles will arise from time to time, these are not as important as they may seem at the time. They are ultimately temporary and really unimportant. The process that has begun with the awakening of our buddha nature and our making the choices we have already made is unstoppable. Ultimately it will lead to our liberation. So we are really very fortunate indeed. When you can, when you have the necessary conditions or resources to do so, by all means practice. And when you cannot, when things just get in the way of practice and make it impossible, then do not feel too sad, and recognize how extremely fortunate you are. ㊦



The Twelve Great Aspirations of the Medicine Buddha

Excerpted from the Mahayana Sutra:
*The Vast Attributes of the Previous Aspiration Prayers of the Noble Victor,
The Deity of Medicine, Light of Lapis Lazuli*

The first great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, then may the light of my body make brilliant, stable, and especially radiant the realms of this universe that are numberless, immeasurable, and beyond any count. May all sentient beings be adorned with the thirty-two marks and the eighty characteristics of a great, noble being. Thus, may all sentient beings become just as I am.” So he prayed.

The second great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, may my body resemble precious lapis lazuli, and be fully adorned with utter purity within and without, a radiant clarity free of stains, a great agility in all things, blazing glory and brilliance, physical symmetry, and a filigree of light rays brighter than the sun and moon. For those born within this world and for those who have gone their separate ways into the dark of the dead of night, may my light come in all directions bringing happiness and contentment. May it also bring about virtuous activity.” So he prayed.

The third great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, through my wisdom and immeasurable skillful means, may countless realms of sentient beings have inexhaustible wealth. May no one be deprived of anything.” So he prayed.

The fourth great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, I will place on the path to awakening any sentient being who has entered a negative path. All those who have entered the shravaka path or the pratyekabuddha path, I will guide into the mahayana.” So he prayed.

The fifth great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, may any sentient being near to me maintain celibacy.* Likewise, through my power, may other innumerable sentient beings beyond measure, having heard my name, hold their three vows and may their discipline not deteriorate. May those whose discipline has been corrupted, not enter into the lower realms.” So he prayed.

The sixth great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, may any sentient being who has an inferior body, incomplete faculties, an unpleasant color, a virulent, epidemic disease, impaired limbs, a hunchback, splotchy skin, may any being who is lame, blind, deaf, insane, or struck by illness, upon hearing my name, for each one, may their faculties become whole and their limbs be made perfect.” So he prayed.

The seventh great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, for any sentient being whose body is riddled with the pain of various illnesses, who has no refuge nor protector, no material goods nor medicine, no throng of relatives, and who is poor and suffering, when my name comes to their ears, may all their diseases be pacified. Until awakening, may they be free of illness and remain unharmed.” So he prayed.

***Editor’s note:** The idea of praying to be reborn in a realm where everyone is celibate is inimical to most Westerners, indeed, probably to most people, and these people will be happy to know that celibacy does not figure in as a necessary feature in a great many of the realms of tantric deities. But the opportunity to be reborn in a realm where celibacy is the norm is important to those whose obsession with sex is so great that it always involves them in perpetual emotional conflict and mental and social degeneration. Living and practicing in such a safe environment gives them the much-needed chance to break through the cycle of emotional, physical, and social degeneration.

In addition, for individuals who have *no other aim in life* but the attainment of liberation or buddhahood, the pratimoksha vows of a monk or a nun, including the vow of celibacy, are considered the best—though not the only—foundation for the path until one has

reached at least the first bodhisattva bhumi. (A commitment to moral living that includes sexual fidelity is also considered a good foundation.) Under ordinary circumstances, killing, stealing, lying, sexual intercourse, the use of intoxicants, etc., grow out of the kleshas of passion, aggression, and ignorance, which in turn are based on the very dualistic clinging that one is seeking to undermine through one’s practice. Thus these actions reinforce the kleshas and the confusion in one’s mind. In addition, sexual intercourse generally leads to families, which then drastically reduce the amount of time and energy that one can devote to formal meditation, which is the backbone of the path. Under such circumstances, it is more difficult, if not impossible, for beginners on the path to develop the profound vipashyana insight—the view of emptiness—which is the path to liberation and buddhahood.

The eighth great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, if some people are intensely afflicted by the faults of a negative birth, despised for having it, and wish to be free of that place of birth, may they be liberated from taking this negative birth again. Until they attain ultimate awakening, may a positive rebirth always arise for them.” So he prayed.

The ninth great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, I will free all sentient beings from the maras’ noose. I will establish in the correct view all those in disharmony due to various views and the problems of discord. Ultimately, I will teach them the practice of bodhisattvas.” So he prayed.

The tenth great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, may the power of my merit completely liberate [beings] from all harm: those who are terrorized by the fear of a ruler, who are in bondage and beaten, who have fallen into a trap, who are sentenced to death, who are under the heel of deception, who are not successful, and whose body, speech, and mind are afflicted by suffering.” So he prayed.

The eleventh great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, for those who are burning with hunger and thirst, and who commit negative actions in their continuous efforts to search for food, may I satisfy them physically with food that has [a pleasing] color, smell, and taste. Later, I will bring them to the most blissful taste of the dharma.” So he prayed.

The twelfth great aspiration:

“At a future time when I have attained unsurpassable, ultimate, and perfectly complete enlightenment, having come to full awakening, for those who experience suffering day and night, being naked with no clothes to wear, poor and miserable, [too] cold or hot, afflicted by flies and maggots, I will give generously whatever they can enjoy, [such as] clothes that have been dyed many colors. I will fulfill all their wishes just as they desire with a variety of precious ornaments and decorations, necklaces, incense, ointments, the sound of music, musical instruments, and hand cymbals.” So he prayed.

Manjushri, these are the twelve aspirations made by the Victor, the Tathagata, the Arhant, the Perfect Buddha, the Lapis Lazuli Light of Medicine, when he was practicing the conduct of a bodhisattva.

Translated by Michele Martin © March 2000.



The Venerable Lama Tashi Namgyal

Without Concentration There Is No Spiritual Progress

This is an edited transcript of a teaching given by The Venerable Lama Tashi Namgyal at Kagyu Shenpen Ösel Chöling in August 2000.

Without concentration there can be no spiritual progress. Gaining the ability to concentrate—to meditate single-pointedly without distraction—is like sharpening a drill, and then learning to hold it in one place as you apply it. If you try to use a power drill while holding it loosely, it will bounce and skip wildly all over the place. In the same way, if you try to apply the powerful vehicle of tantra without the ability to concentrate—or at least without an ongoing commitment to improving your focus and concentration—then when you say mantras your mind will jump all over the place—here, there, and everywhere. Just like a poorly held power drill, your mind will never get a grip, and then, just as a power drill without a steady grip will not produce a hole, noth-

ing much will happen in your meditation. There will be no penetrating insight. This is not to say that there is utterly no virtue in practice done with less than perfect concentration. But the ability to penetrate into the nature of reality, which is what liberates from suffering and confusion, requires sustained single-pointed concentration.

Whether you learn to concentrate through practicing the methods of shamatha from the sutra and tantra traditions, or through practicing very scrupulously and carefully the stages of creation in tantric practice, you need to develop unwavering concentration that you can eventually sustain for hours at a time. Without concentration you have no chance of fruition.

If your motive for practicing concentration is to develop personal sanity, then you are practicing the hinayana path. If your motive also includes the aspiration to attain buddhahood in order to liberate beings from suffering, then you are practicing the mahayana path. In either case, you must learn to concentrate. One must skillfully undermine the wandering mind and learn to concentrate if one wants to develop penetrating insight and primordial awareness.

Because you must work for a living, you cannot devote yourself exclusively to practicing concentration and awareness. But if, in your everyday life, you will see very clearly where you are and what you are doing, and notice very clearly what you are experiencing, you can use your daily life to practice these values. To see very clearly what you are doing is to practice concentration, and to see very clearly where you are while you are doing it and to notice very clearly what you are experiencing is the practice of awareness.

In order to do this you must slow down and relax a bit. Mind and energy are inseparable. If you slow down and relax a bit you will have energy to spare, which will automatically mani-

fest as greater awareness and a greater ability to concentrate.

You may think that you are overworked and may worry that slowing down and relaxing will make you less efficient. But you will find that this is not the case. In the late fifties the fastest sprinter in the world was Ray Norton. When he first started training at San Jose State College, his coach took him out onto the track and had him run ten successive 220-yard dashes. The first one he was told to run as fast as he could; the second one he was told to run at 5/6 speed and with his hands and jaw relaxed, so relaxed that his lower lip would bounce up and down as he ran. The third one he was told to run at full speed and the fourth one again at 5/6 speed. In

this way he alternated the ten sprints. The coach timed and recorded each sprint, and when Ray Norton had finished, all of the races he had run at “5/6 speed” he had actually run faster than the ones he had run “full speed.” Thinking to slow down and relax a bit, the sprinter actually became more efficient.

Thus, if you slow down a bit, relax a bit, and make sure that you see very clearly where you are and what you are doing, your concentration and awareness will develop; you will cease to make so many mistakes and false starts, and you will find that you actually become more efficient.

So please, in all of your activities, see very clearly where you are and what you are doing, and notice very clearly—without suppressing or acting out—what you are experiencing. When you walk, walk; when you eat, eat; when you clean house and wash the dishes, just concentrate on those activities. You do not have to solve the world’s problems at the same time, and you do not have to waste your precious energy complaining about having to engage in such activities or complaining to yourself about the way you are treated. Be simple and use your life to learn

If you slow down and relax a bit you will have energy to spare, which will automatically manifest as greater awareness and a greater ability to concentrate

to concentrate. Without concentration there is no hope for spiritual progress.

If when you walk, you are not all there; if you are absorbed in day dreams and personal “crises,” or if you are thinking “profound thoughts;” or if your mind is wandering, complaining about this and complaining about that; if while you are walking, your mind is constantly full of *sturm und drang* and melodramas of all kinds, then that is difficult, because you are lost and unconcentrated. If that is your situation, what can you do? Just concentrate on your walking. When you wash the dishes, concentrate on washing the dishes. When you wash your body, concentrate on washing your body. Do things very simply, straightforwardly, and with concentration and awareness. Be aware of the *sturm und drang* if it is there; you do not want to ignore it. But concentrate on what you are doing, simply, straightforwardly, and precisely. And make yourself aware of the total environment. See very clearly where you are and what you are doing, and remember that it is all like a dream.

Do not always wish to be somewhere other than where you are. Do not always wish your situation to be other than what it is. Your personal situation is actually quite a marvelous training ground. You won't be able to apply the tremendous mental powers that are inherent in your mind anyway until all of the confusion in your mind subsides. And that confusion cannot subside until you incorporate concentration and awareness into your daily life—until you use your daily life in such a way that you develop a kind of peacefulness and contentment about being where you are exactly in the situation in which you find yourself, until you see each situation as

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your training ground, the school of your mind. Exactly where you are you have the opportunity to practice and attain awareness. You can actually open up into your situation on the spot, right where you are. If you can develop the contentment that arises out of seeing whatever happens in whatever situation as an opportunity to practice, and then you practice mindfulness of what you are doing and awareness of the environment in which you are doing it; then by so doing you will be able to bring all the little tasks that you have to perform in your life to the path and utilize them.

Then you will see that there is the possibility of practicing shamatha and vipashyana in everything we do. When I am editing, and when I am typing, then being mindful and focused on the movement of my fingers is shamatha; I am practicing concentration. When one's typing becomes a little sloppy, as we have all noticed, if we simply slow down, relax, and concentrate a little more carefully, we eliminate a great deal, if not all, of the error. Being aware of the environment in which the editing and typing is going on, remembering that it is like an illusion, or looking directly at the process to discover its nature is the practice of awareness.

When you talk to your friend, there is always the possibility of concentration and awareness. If you understand that, and if you then develop mindful concentration and a kind of spacious awareness in your daily life, then gradually all of the mental perturbation that typifies our minds will subside. And then it will be easy for you to do formal practice. It will be easy for you to sit in formal situations. Which will in turn make it increasingly easy for you to bring shamatha and vipashyana, mindfulness and awareness into your daily life. Which will then

in turn make it easier for you to sit again with even better concentration. In this way you will gradually develop some kind of ability to focus your mind and concentrate, and to do that with spacious awareness and openness.

And then, if you can do that, if you *will* do that, then seeing and taking the next step on your path will always be easy. It will be easy to see how to intensify your practice and how to take the next step towards improving your situation in your world. Further opportunities for more intensive practice will naturally suggest themselves to you. Opportunities will become apparent, and you will be able to take advantage of these

Remember that it is all just like a dream or an illusion. That will help you to cut through the attachment that turns everything into such a big deal

opportunities and be able to succeed in taking advantage of these opportunities because you have concentration and awareness.

So the situation that one finds oneself in is actually quite useful—if we are willing to see it that way, if we are willing to change the way we see it, if we are willing to see it as an opportunity rather than as a drag or a curse.

The key point is to learn to concentrate and be aware. So please do that. And remember that it is all just like a dream or an illusion. That will help you to cut through the attachment that turns everything into such a big deal. ⑤



The Very Venerable
Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche

The Sky-Dragon's Profound Roar

Up in the sky's expanse, true being, unborn, forever pure,
Beautiful is the world below me—how many colors do I see.
But when I look, I can't find anything that's born or has a root.
So the time has come to meditate on true reality, of ego-clinging free.

All my possessions, all that I enjoy, are like rainbows in the sky.
Even their smallest parts have no essence—they don't exist at all.
So when I enjoy illusory pleasures, empty/appearing tea and beer,
It's time to rest in mind's full moon—empty awareness, radiant clarity.

The stages of practice of the Tathagata's view and meditation
Are skillful methods that clear away ordinary thoughts.
So I train in appearance and mind's being without base or root—
When sickness and death suddenly strike, I'll be ready, without regret.

In the pattern that this world and life's appearances weave,
Visions of parents, relatives, and friends are like illusions and dreams.
Like morning mist, they are fleeting, and at the time they dissolve,
That's the time to search for unborn confused mind's basic reality.

In the baseless, rootless, and empty confused appearances of life
We suffer from heat and from cold and from so many other things.
But diligence in Secret Yana's practices, so powerful,
Makes fox-like cowardice be free all by itself—the time has come!

To what we beautify with hats and clothes, to this heap of elements
We offer tasty food and many other things—whatever we may find pleasing.
But the carelessness and craziness of this life will end one day.
So be ready to be fearless of the judgment of the mighty Lord of Death.

From the country of great snow mountains, a realm of dharma,
Having crossed many hills and valleys and now flying through the sky,
I purify illusory flesh and blood into empty/appearing deity.
Paths and bhumis' realizations self-liberated—in this I train.

Ha Ha! Dechen Rangdrol's* conduct that's attachment-free.
Ah Ho! It's time to fly in the expanse of sky of spacious Mother.

*This was spoken extemporaneously by Dechen Rangdrol while travelling in the
expanse of sky from Los Angeles to Honolulu. October 29, 1998, and was later
translated by Ari Goldfield with the help of George Eudy.*

***Editor's note:** Dechen Rangdrol, one of Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche's names, means
"Great Bliss, Self-Liberating" or "The Great Bliss of Spontaneous Self-Liberation."

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10 a.m. White Tara practice
1 p.m. 3-hour sit

Sundays

9:30 a.m. Chenrezig practice
11:30 a.m. Chants, formless meditation, and teachings by Lama Tashi Namgyal

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Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche's
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'If the view you take of things is basically correct, then it will be a strong cause of your liberation. And by causing your liberation it will be an indirect cause of the liberation of others. In short, a correct view of how things are produces all manner of happiness. On the other hand, if your view is sufficiently incorrect and actually becomes a perverted or misguided use of your intelligence, then it will obstruct your path to liberation, thereby preventing you from liberating others and becoming an obstacle to happiness.'

— from Thrangu Rinpoche's teaching
on the Medicine Buddha Sutra

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